

Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Report

Pre School

TUSLA Identifier:	TU2015CN056
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Name of Service:	Stepping Stones Pre School Ltd
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Address of Service:	River Street, Cavan, Co. Cavan
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Eircode:	H12 H5F6
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Name of Registered Provider:	Gail Empey
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Service type:	Part Time
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Date of Inspection:	15/01/2026
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No of pre-school children:	AM	64	PM	14
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Address of the Early Years Inspectorate:	Early Years Inspectorate, Hampton Court, Cootehill Road, Drumalee, Co Cavan. H12 YY84
Inspection undertaken by:	S Mc Kenna & M Mc Donnell
Title:	Early Years Inspectors

Authority to Inspect

The Tusla Early Years Inspectorate carries out inspections of Early Years Services under Section 58(J) of the Child Care Act 1991 (as inserted by Section 92 of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013).

Conditions if applicable	Not Applicable
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Description of service

Stepping Stones Pre-school is a non-profit community-based childcare facility in operation since 1997. The service is located within Cavan town. The service provides part-time and sessional education and care to pre-school children aged 2 years to 6 years. The service participates in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme from 9am to 1pm Monday to Friday and is registered to cater for a maximum of 79 children.

Staffing

There are fourteen staff employed in the service, including a manager, eleven childcare staff of whom two three are employed under the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), one staff member is employed under a Community Employment scheme, and one relief childcare staff member. All staff work directly with pre-school children. The registered provider is not involved in the day-to-day running of the service.

Methodology

Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate is the independent statutory regulator of early years services in Ireland. The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 define the duty of a registered provider to ensure the safety and well-being of children and to comply with these regulations. This Act also gives Tusla the authority to assess compliance with the regulations. The purpose of regulation in relation to early years services is to ensure that the care, safety, and well-being of children attending such services is upheld. Inspections of early years services are planned based on the following:

- Previous inspection history
- Any information received in relation to the service

The findings on inspection are based on:

- Information obtained through examination of documentation
- Direct observation
- Discussion with relevant staff

This inspection was unannounced and focused on the area of governance/ health, welfare and development of child and safety. The inspection may also focus on other areas as required.

Inspection findings are documented in the inspection report which is first issued in draft format to the service with an opportunity to respond to any findings. Where statutory requirements are identified as not being met, the registered provider must demonstrate how they have rectified the non-compliance and will prevent any non -

compliance from re occurring. The Corrective Action and Preventive Action plan (CAPA) will be used to inform decisions about compliance with regulatory requirements. Where the registered provider fails to meet the statutory requirements an escalation process may be commenced.

The inspectorate reserves the right to edit responses received for reasons including clarity, completeness and compliance with administrative and legal processes.

The contents of the report are compiled by the inspectorate body.

Acknowledgments

The inspectors wish to acknowledge the cooperation of the person in charge, staff and children who were present on the day of the inspection.

Part III – Management and Staff

Regulation 9 – Management and recruitment

(1) A registered provider shall ensure that-

- (a) the service has a designated person in charge and a named person who is able to deputise as required,
- (b) at all times during the period when the pre-school service is being carried on, the designated person in charge or the named person referred to in subparagraph (a) is on the premises, and
- (c) there is a clear management structure in the service that identifies the lines of authority and accountability in the service and the specific roles and responsibilities of each employee and unpaid worker.

(2) A registered provider shall ensure that each employee, unpaid worker and contractor is suitable and competent taking into consideration the nature of the needs of children, including by-

- (a) consideration of references from the person's past employers, if any, and in particular the most recent employer, if any,
- (b) consideration of references from reputable sources in the case of a person who has no past employers,
- (c) consideration of the vetting disclosure received from the National Vetting Bureau of the Garda Síochána in accordance with the Act of 2012 in respect of the person, and
- (d) ensuring, insofar as is practicable, that where a person has lived in a state other than the State for a period of longer than 6 consecutive months, he or she provides police vetting from the police authorities in that state.

(4) A registered provider shall ensure that, without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (2) and subject to paragraphs (5) and (6), each employee working directly with children attending the service holds at least a major award in Early Childhood Care and Education at Level 5 on the National Qualifications Framework or a qualification deemed by the Minister to be equivalent.

Compliance Information

(1) (a) The service had a designated person in charge, who is the service manager, and a named person to deputise in their absence.

(b) Following discussion with the person in charge, and review of staff rosters, it was confirmed that when the preschool service was in operation, the designated person in charge or the named person in charge was on the premises.

(c) A management structure was in place, which was clearly identifiable through review of the staff roster, staff profiles on display and through discussion with the staff team.

(2) The files for 14 staff were reviewed.

(a) (b) Two written and validated references were on file for 14 adults.

A total of 19 written and validated references from a previous employer were on file.

A total of 9 written and validated references from a reputable source were on file.

(c) Garda vetting disclosures had been obtained for 14 staff. The service also demonstrated compliance with the Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Notice requiring services to renew Garda vetting every three years for all employed staff.

(d) A review of the employment history for 14 staff demonstrated that 4 adults had lived outside the State for a period of longer than 6 consecutive months. The required police vetting for the 4 staff was available on file.

(4) Documentary evidence was available to confirm that 13 staff employed to work with children held an appropriate childcare qualification at Level 5 or above on the National Framework of Qualifications, or a qualification deemed by the Minister to be equivalent. A qualification for the staff member on the community employment scheme is not required.

Part III – Management and Staff

Regulation 11 - Staffing levels

(1) Subject to this Regulation, a registered provider shall ensure that there is at all times an adequate number of adults working directly with the children attending the pre-school service.

(2) Subject to paragraphs (4) and (5), a registered provider of a full day care service or a part-time day care service shall ensure that at all times the minimum ratio of adults to children specified in column (3) of Part 1 of Schedule 6 opposite a particular reference number specified in column (1) of that Part in respect of the age range of the children specified in column (2) thereof at that reference number is satisfied.

(8) Without prejudice to paragraphs (2) to (7)-

(a) a registered provider of a pre-school service other than a child-minding service or a sessional pre-school service shall ensure that there are at least 2 adults on the premises at all times

Compliance Information

(1) On the day of inspection, there was an adequate number of adults working directly with the children attending the pre-school service.

(2) The adult-to-child ratios were correct in the service when the inspectors arrived and remained so throughout the inspection.

The following adult-to-child ratios were observed when the service was operating at maximum attendance

- One adult cared for 10 children aged 4 years 2 months to 4 years 11 months in Room 1, of whom 7 attended on a sessional basis, and 3 attended on part time basis. A staff member on a community employment scheme was also present in this room.
- Three adults cared for 19 children aged 3 years 11 months to 4 years in Preschool Room 2, of whom 16 attended on a sessional basis and 3 on a part-time basis.
- Three adults cared for 17 children aged 2 years 11 months to 4 years in Preschool Room 3, of whom 12 attended on a sessional basis, and 3 attended on part time basis.
- Three adults cared for 18 children aged 2 years 10 months to 3 years 11 months in Room 4, of whom 13 attended on a sessional basis, and 5 attended on part time care basis.

In addition to the above, the service manager was office-based, helping in rooms if required.

(8) A review of the staff roster demonstrated that the registered provider ensured that 2 adults were present on the premises at all times.

Part V - Care of Child in Pre-school Service

Regulation 19 - Health, welfare and development of child

(1) A registered provider shall, in providing a pre-school service, ensure that-

(a) each child's learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the pre-school service through the provision of the appropriate activities, interaction, materials and equipment, having regard to the age and stage of development of the child, and

(b) appropriate and suitable care practices are in place in the pre-school service, having regard to the number of children attending the service and the nature of their needs.

Compliance Information

The following examples demonstrate how children's learning, development and well-being was facilitated in the service:

Basic Needs

Snack times were observed to be relaxed, and staff members sat with the children. Food items taken in from home included fruit, crackers and ham and cheese sandwiches. The children's drinking bottles were available to them throughout their day.

The children were observed to use the toilet independently, with staff providing support as necessary. There was spare clothing available for each child in a named container. Children had aprons available for messy play.

There were rest areas to include soft mats and child-sized seating in each of the care rooms, where children could relax and take time out from their busy day.

All preschool rooms experienced a change of environment. Outdoor play was facilitated for the children in Rooms 1, 3 and 4 during allocated time called "work time", where children from Preschool 1, 3 and 4 joined together and used the Preschool rooms 3 and 4 for free-flow play, including use of the outdoor area. Room 2 took part in an outing to the local library and were dressed appropriately for the weather on the day.

Staff were aware of the individual needs of children, including those with additional needs. Plans and activities available were reflective of the needs discussed by staff members.

Supporting Relationships

The atmosphere upon the inspector's arrival was warm and welcoming, and the children were engaged in playful activities and observed to play independently in the care rooms, while also calling on staff for support where needed. The children appeared familiar with all staff who cared for them. The staff were observed to speak in warm, gentle tones to the children and were observed providing support to children when required.

Children were encouraged to take turns with clear instructions from staff and alternative activities available. For example, staff members engaged with children whilst they played with the homemade snow in the messy area. Children who were waiting their turn were happily reading or playing with other toys.

The staff were observed to treat each child with respect and address each child by name. Discussions between children and staff about the children's home life were observed, which demonstrated familiarity with the children's families.

Communication with parents and carers is in person upon arrival and collection time. The inspectors observed collection times where staff were seen to inform the children's parents and or carers of the child's day. A digital messaging service is also in place for each preschool room.

Strong teamwork was evident, and the staff in each preschool room were observed to work well together, ensuring little to no disruptions to the children's daily routines, which ensured transitions ran smoothly.

Physical And Material Environment

The indoor care rooms were comfortable, pleasant and laid out to suit the needs of the children in attendance. Clearly defined interest areas included: home corners, office role play areas, dress up, rest area with books, construction areas, tabletop toys, jigsaws, creative areas and sand and homemade sensory activities.

The indoor environments were set up to provide a range of enriching learning experiences for the children. The materials were freely available and accessible to children on low-level shelves at children's level, which nurtures children's independence to retrieve and self-care to return. Displays to include birthday charts, family walls and children's creative artwork were displayed on the preschool room walls. Following free play, children in Preschool room 3 were observed to play happily and engage in recall activities in small groups. In Preschool room 4 children celebrated a peer's birthday by singing songs and sharing cake. In Preschool room 1, children were observed dancing with the staff members.

In Preschool Room 2, when the children returned from their outing, they told the inspector that they had great fun at the library, and they listened to three stories and saw a Garda on the way back. The staff were observed to discuss with the children about people in their community who help them.

The outdoor area was pleasant and had a soft safety surface and was laid out in areas to include messy play, construction and relaxation areas. The area was covered and could be easily accessed in all weathers

Programme of Activities

A key worker system was in place in each preschool room. Creative art folders and children's portfolios to include creative work, photos and observations are compiled throughout the preschool year and presented at graduation time. The portfolios created a timeline of the child's progress during their time in the preschool rooms.

Children’s participation was observed to be child-led. Curriculum planning was available, and this reflected the children’s emerging interests. During “work time”, children had the choice of moving between two rooms and the outdoor area. Each area had a focus of activities which were in the curriculum plans and offered children a choice of role play, sensory and construction activities.

Part VI - Safety

Regulation 23 - Safeguarding health, safety and welfare of child

A registered provider shall ensure that all reasonable measures are taken to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of a pre-school child attending the service and that the environment of the service is safe.

Compliance Information

General Safety:

Upon the inspector's arrival, the premises were appropriately secured to prevent a child from exiting unsupervised and to restrict unauthorised persons from gaining access to the premises. A visitor's log was maintained, and the inspectors were requested to sign in upon arrival. The garden area was a secure internal area accessible directly from the Preschool 3 and 4 rooms. No hazards were identified in the outdoor area. Play materials, both indoors and outdoors, were observed to be maintained in good condition. Indoor and outdoor risk assessments were completed, and records were kept up to date. Storage areas, the office and the kitchen were inaccessible to the children and were observed to be locked when not in use. Floor coverings, both indoor and outdoor, were presented in good condition, and no trip hazards were observed. Cleaning materials were stored out of reach of the children. Fire exits were observed to be free from obstruction during the inspection process.

Infection Control:

Warm thermostatically controlled running water, liquid soap, paper towels and foot-operated bins were provided at each wash hand basin. Hand washing was observed in practise following free play and before children ate in Preschool rooms 3 and 4. Sanitary areas are ventilated through means of mechanical ventilation, and in the care rooms via openable windows. The tables were observed to be cleaned before snack times, and the children’s snacks taken in from home were stored in fridges in each of the care rooms until snack time. Cleaning schedules were in place, with daily and weekly cleaning records completed and up to date. The service was presented in a clean and hygienic manner. A colour-coded cloth system was in place outlining which colour cloth to use in specific areas and then laundered daily onsite. Mouthed toy boxes were in place in each of the care rooms.

Administration of Medication:

Staff outlined the procedure for the administration of medication required by children attending the service. The medication was easily accessible to staff members and out of reach of children. Care plans were available to support staff in the administration of the medication. Parental consent was available for the medication and administration records, which included two staff signatures.

Outing:

On the day of inspection, Room 2 took part in an outing to the local library and were tasked to look out for people who help them in their community; both activities were in line with the curriculum planning. The staff outlined to the inspector that the procedure for outings includes a pre-outing risk assessment that is carried out, and these records were available for review. First aid materials, a mobile phone, emergency contact details and recent photos of the children are taken with the staff on the walk. The children were observed to be dressed appropriately for the outing to include hats and coats, and were all observed to wear high-visibility jackets. A walking rope is also used to encourage children to stay together and to support staff in the supervision of the children. The inspector was advised by staff and the service manager that outings occur frequently within all of the preschool rooms, and the process is the same for each room. Following each outing, a post-risk assessment is conducted.

Part VI – Safety

Regulation 24 - Checking in and out and record of attendance

(1) A registered provider shall ensure that each pre-school child attending the service is checked in and out of the service by an employee or an unpaid worker.

(3) A registered provider shall ensure that-

(a) no person other than-

(i) pre-school child attending the service,

(ii) a person dropping or collecting such a child,

(iii) an employee, or

(iv) an unpaid worker, can enter the premises without his or her entry being approved by an employee, and

(b) a daily record in writing is kept of the entry on the premises of any such person.

Compliance Information

(1) The registered provider used written records which detailed each child's arrival and departure time on a daily basis.

(3) (a) The registered provider ensured that only preschool children, a person dropping off or collecting a preschool child, an employee or an unpaid worker can enter the premises upon staff members' approval.

(b) A visitor logbook is maintained.

Part VI - Safety

Regulation 25 - First aid

(1) A registered provider shall ensure that a person trained in first aid for children is, at all times, immediately available to the children attending the pre-school service.

(2) A registered provider shall ensure that a suitably equipped first aid box for children-

(a) is safely stored in an easily accessible and conspicuous position on the premises, and

(b) is available to the children attending the pre-school service at all times.

Compliance Information

(1) The registered provider ensured that a person who held in-date First Aid Response (FAR) training was at all times available to the children attending the pre-school service. Eight staff members held in-date FAR training, seven of whom were rostered to work on the day of inspection.

(2) (a) & (b) Suitably equipped first aid boxes were available on the premises and were stored in each of the care rooms in an accessible and conspicuous location out of the reach of children.

Part VI - Safety

Regulation 26 - Fire safety measures

(1) A registered provider shall ensure that a record in writing is kept of-

(a) any fire drill that takes place in the premises, and

(b) the number, type and maintenance record of fire fighting equipment and smoke alarms in the premises.

(4) A notice of the procedures to be followed in the event of fire shall be displayed in a conspicuous position in the premises.

Compliance Information

- (1) (a) A record of the fire drills that take place was available. The most recent fire drill was recorded on 14th January 2026.
- (b) The annual maintenance certificate for the fire extinguishers was dated 19th September 2025, and the smoke alarms were dated 17th November 2025.
- (4) The fire evacuation procedures were displayed on walls throughout the service, and a photo display was on display at children's level in the entrance hallway, which contained details in relation to the procedure to be followed in the event of a fire.

Part VI - Safety

Regulation 28 - Insurance

A registered provider shall ensure that the pre-school service is adequately insured.

Compliance Information

The registered provider had insurance cover in place for up to 80 pre-school children attending the service on a part-time basis. The policy showed that the service had insurance in place from 28 March 2025 to 27th March 2026.