

# Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Report

## Pre School

<b>TUSLA Identifier:</b>	TU2015WH035		
<b>Name of Service:</b>	Steps Ahead Playschool		
<b>Address of Service:</b>	Cooksboro View, Cloughan, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath		
<b>Eircode:</b>	N91DP30		
<b>Name of Registered Provider:</b>	Mary Dunne		
<b>Service type:</b>	Sessional		
<b>Date of Inspection:</b>	14/11/2025		
<b>No of pre-school children:</b>	AM	35	PM Not applicable
<b>Address of the Early Years Inspectorate:</b>	Tusla Early Years Services Church Avenue Tullamore Co Offaly R35K1W4		
<b>Inspection undertaken by:</b>	A Spain		
<b>Title:</b>	Early Years Inspector		
<b>Authority to Inspect</b>			
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).			
<b>Conditions if applicable</b>	Not applicable.		

### Description of service

Steps Ahead Playschool is a sessional service which operates between the hours of 9.30 am and 1.00pm. The service is registered to care for children between the ages of 2 and 6 years and currently cares for children in the age range 3 to 5 years. The privately run service is located on the grounds of the registered provider's family farm close to Mullingar town in Westmeath. Rooms in use in the service include four interconnecting rooms, sanitary accommodation for children and staff and a combined office and storage area. Outdoor areas are provided at both the front and back of the service. A parking area off the road is provided at the front of the service.

### Staffing

The service is staffed by four adults. The registered provider also works directly in 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.

The inspection focused on an examination of compliance under:

- Regulation 9 – Management and recruitment,
- Regulation 11 – Staffing levels,
- Regulation 15 – Records of pre-school child,

Regulation 19 – Health, welfare and development of child,  
Regulation 20 – Facilities for rest and play,  
Regulation 23 – Safeguarding health, safety and welfare of child,  
Regulation 25 – First aid,  
Regulation 26 – Fire safety measures,  
Regulation 28 – Insurance,  
Regulation 32 – Complaints,  
Regulation 33 – Furnishing of information to Agency.

The scope of the inspection included all rooms in use in the service.

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 inspector wishes to acknowledge the cooperation of the registered provider, 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.

(3) The procedures specified in paragraph (2) shall be carried out prior to any person being appointed, assigned or allowed access to or contact with a child attending the pre-school service.

(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 has a designated person in charge and a named person to deputise as required.

(b)

Both the designated person in charge and the named person to deputise as required were present in the service on the arrival of the inspector and for the duration of the inspection.

(c)

A clear management structure was evident in the service on the day of inspection. Key staff members were observed to care for children in designated rooms in the service, with an additional staff member available to assist as required.

(2)(a)(b)

Two written and validated references from past employers were held on file in respect of one staff member. Two written and validated references from reputable sources were held on file in respect of two staff members. A written and validated reference from a past employer and from a reputable source were held on file in respect of the remaining staff member.

(c)

A Garda vetting disclosure was held on file in respect of all staff members working in the service. The service also demonstrated compliance with the Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Notice requiring services to renew Garda vetting every three years for all staff members.

(d)

Police clearance was not required as none of the staff had worked outside of the state for over six consecutive months as adults.

(3)

Records confirmed that the necessary vetting procedures were conducted prior to the appointment of staff to work in the service.

(4)

Records were held on file to confirm that staff members held a major award in Early childhood Care and Education, varying from level 5 to level 8 on the National Qualifications Framework.

### 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.*
- (3) Subject to paragraph (5), a registered provider of a sessional pre-school service shall ensure that at all times the minimum ratio of adults to children specified in column (3) of Part 2 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) therefore at that reference number is satisfied.*

#### Compliance Information

- (1)  
An adequate number of adults cared for 35 children present on the day of inspection.
- (3)  
Two adults cared for a total of 18 children in the age range 3 to 4 years in Year 1 preschool room in the service.  
Two adults cared for a total of 17 children in the age range 4 to 5 years in year 2 preschool room in the service.  
The registered provider also worked directly with the children in the service, providing support to the preschool rooms as required.

### Part IV – Information and Records

#### Regulation 15 – Record of pre-school child

- (1) A registered provider of a pre-school service other than a pre-school service in a drop-in centre or a temporary pre-school service shall ensure that a record in writing is kept in respect of each pre-school child attending the service containing the following particulars:*
- (a) the name and date of birth of the child;*
  - (b) the date on which the child first attended the service;*
  - (c) the date on which the child ceased to attend the service;*
  - (d) the name and address of a parent or guardian of the child and a telephone number where that parent or guardian or a relative or friend of the child can be contacted during the hours of operation of the service;*
  - (e) authorisation for the collection of the child;*

*(f) details of any illness, disability, allergy or special need of the child, together with all the information relevant to the provision of special care or attention;*

*(g) the name and telephone number of the child's registered medical practitioner;*

*(h) record of immunisations, if any, received by the child;*

*(i) written parental consent for appropriate medical treatment of the child in the event of an emergency.*

*(3) A record in writing referred to in paragraph (1) or (2) shall be open to inspection on the premises by-*

*(a) a parent or guardian of a pre-school child but only in respect of the record relating to that child,*

*(b) an employee who is authorised in that behalf by the registered provider, and*

*(c) an authorised person*

## Compliance Information

(1)

The inspector reviewed a sample of 10 childrens enrolment forms for children currently in attendance at the service. The review confirmed that the necessary records in relation to (a) to (j) were held on file in respect of the enrolment forms reviewed.

(3)(a)(b)(c)

The records referred to in (1) were open to inspection by a parent in respect of their child, a staff member and an authorised officer.

### 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*

#### Compliance Information

(1)(a) The childrens basis needs were observed to be catered for in the service. Childrens hands were washed under supervision as children used the toilets and before their snack time. Children enjoyed healthy lunches provided from home, which included crackers, sandwiches, yoghurts, pasta, fresh fruit, including strawberries and oranges and beakers of water to drink. The "busy bee" in playroom 2 was allocated the important job, on a rotational basis, of handing out lunch boxes stored in the refrigerator. Children were praised for sitting and saying thanks for their lunches.

Children in year 1 and year 2 preschool rooms were observed to engage in and enjoy a variety of activities which included baking with moulding clay, playing with colourful connection chains, playing with the tractor set and puzzles in year 1 playroom. Children in year 2 playroom were observed enjoying playing in groups with building blocks and colourful balls on a spiral stand and with wooden spoons in the sand box.

The atmosphere in the service was relaxed. Staff were observed to move to different groups of children, talk to them at a low level and praise was offered to children as they shared toys and engaged in activities.

Artwork was on display in the playrooms to showcase the childrens wellbeing and development included coloured bear heads and shapes. Pictures from home settings on family trees, nature tables with leaves and animals in dried pasta, and memory walls to mark both the current and past children in the service were observed by the inspector.

Staff engaged in friendly conversation with the children throughout the inspection and were observed to allow children time to finish activities and their lunches at their individual pace while other children moved to different areas of the playroom to play with alternative toys.

Collection time from both playrooms was staggered to allow staff time to give a handover as parents and guardians arrived to collect children. An electronic communications application was in use to provide parents and guardians with weekly feedback on activities undertaken and plans for the forthcoming weeks. Children took art

work home at the end of each month and a scrap book at year end to show case the variety of learning experiences undertaken and enjoyed throughout different seasons and festive occasions.

### Part V - Care of Child in Pre-school Service

#### Regulation 20 – Facilities for rest and play

(1) Subject to this regulation, a registered provider shall ensure that-

(a) having regard to the number of pre-school children attending the service, their respective ages and the amount of time they spend on the premises, there are adequate and suitable facilities for each child to play indoors and, where required by these Regulations, outdoors, during the day, and

(b) there are adequate and suitable facilities for a pre-school child to rest during the day, and in the case of an overnight pre-school service, during the day and the night.

(4) Where outdoor space to which the pre-school children attending the service have access is provided on the premises of a sessional pre-school service other than such a service to which paragraph (2) applies, a temporary pre-school service or a pre-school service in a drop-in centre, the registered provider shall ensure that such outdoor space is suitable, safe and secure.

#### Compliance Information

(1)(a)

Equipment and play materials in the interconnecting play rooms were organised in defined areas of interest on low level shelving and in low level containers which were easily visible and accessible to promote independent access by children. Staff encouraged children to interact and engage with a range of toys and activities, including cooking with moulding clay, playing with puzzles and games, colouring during table-top activities, building with blocks and playing with a farm set and in the home corners in the playrooms. Children attending the year 1 preschool room were participating in “science week”. Staff had supported the children with activities such as making colourful rainbows using food colours, raisins, water and cardboard plates for basic ingredients. Children were presented with certificates in recognition of the work undertaken during the week.

Two separate outdoor areas were available to the children in attendance in the service. The play area at the front of the service was surfaced with a smooth concrete area for children to play on ride-on toys. The grass surfaced area had a range of toys to promote physical play and balance including wooden blocks, climbing frames, a large wooden bus, a mud kitchen with pots and pans for pretend play, tools for construction play and a sand box for messy play. Picnic tables and chairs were provided for children to sit outdoors to play and for picnics outdoors. A

shed for children to relax outdoors was provided and a separate shed provided storage for outdoor play equipment not in everyday use.

A sensory garden was developed at the back of the service. Natural materials used included hard plastic to provide a shelter, sand, pebbles and pipes in a construction area, a mud kitchen, water features anchored to walls and a planting area to grow vegetables and flowers.

In addition the farm based service gave the children the opportunity to go on farm walks in a safe environment and both learn about and appreciate their surroundings.

(b)

Cosy Corners comprising of soft mats, cushions and couches, were provided in the playrooms for rest and relaxation. Books on low level book stands in the rest areas provided an opportunity for children to take a break from activities and to promote an early interest in reading.

(4)

The outdoor play areas were safely and securely fenced in by timber fencing and heavy duty wire to guard against unsupervised exit by children when playing outdoors.

### 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:

Entrance to the service was secured and a door bell provided to facilitate access. Cleaning agents and chemicals were stored on high level shelves in the lobby area off the childrens sanitary accommodation and in high level presses in the playrooms. Walls hooks labelled with the childrens names and displaying pictures of the children were provided in the playrooms to allow childrens coats and bags to be safely stored off the floor area.

##### Infection Control:

Sinks were provided in both playrooms to assist with cleaning in the rooms. The washhand basins adjacent to the childrens sanitary accommodation were located at low level to facilitate hand washing and serviced with thermostatically controlled hot water, liquid soap, disposable paper towels and foot pedal-operated bins. Refrigerators were provided in all playrooms to store perishable foods and snacks provided by parents and

guardians of preschool children. The heavy duty floor lino, brightly painted walls and ceilings, toys and play equipment were clean and well maintained. Completed cleaning schedules were available in the rooms in the service.

**Administration of Medication:**

No medication was administered to children on the day of inspection. Consent to administer medication in the event of an emergency was recorded on the childrens enrolment forms. Temperature reducing medication was held in storage on a high-level shelf in year one playroom.

**Fire Safety:**

The front and back door exits from the premises were unobstructed. Fire assembly points were posted for both rooms at both the front and back of the premises.

**Outing:**

The registered provider advised that children were taken on an annual outing to a pet farm towards the year end and on supervised walks on the family farm. The service had an Outings policy to reflect practices undertaken. The inspector reviewed a risk assessment conducted prior to an outing conducted on the 20 June 2025. Risk assessments were also held on file for farm walks.

**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)

Three staff members working in the service had First Aid Responder (FAR) training with an expiry date of 8 April 2027.

(2)(a)(b)

A first aid box which was easily accessible to staff and available to the children cared for in the service was located in both playrooms and in the lobby area at the entrance to the service.

## 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.
- (2) The record referred to in paragraph (1) shall be open to inspection by-
- (a) a parent or guardian of a pre-school child attending or proposing to attend the pre-school service,
  - (b) an employee, and
  - (c) an authorised person.
- (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)

The service maintained a record of monthly fire drills as conducted in the service. The last fire drill was recorded on 15 October 2025.

(b)

The maintenance record for the firefighting equipment located in the front hallway and in both playrooms confirmed that an annual service was conducted on 21 August 2025. The maintenance record for the smoke alarm system confirmed that a service was conducted on the 19 August 2025.

(4)

A Notice of the procedure to be followed in the event of a fire was posted in the lobby in the service.

## Part VI - Safety

### Regulation 28 - Insurance

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

#### Compliance Information

The service had insurance cover for a maximum of 40 children in daily attendance in a Sessional service. Insurance was valid from the 28 March 2025 to the 27 March 2026 and included cover for organised outings.

### Regulation 32 – Complaints

*(1) A registered provider shall ensure that the complaints policy of the service specifies-*

- (a) the procedure to be followed by a person for the purposes of making a complaint in relation to the service,*
- (b) the manner in which such a complaint shall be dealt with, and*
- (c) the procedures for keeping a person who makes such a complaint informed of the manner in which it is being dealt with.*

*(2) A registered provider shall ensure that-*

- (a) a record in writing is kept of a complaint made to the provider in respect of the pre-school service.*

#### Compliance Information

(1)(a)(b)(c)

The complaints policy for the service advised that the service welcomed suggestions, comments and complaints from both children and parents. The policy indicated the procedure for a person to make a complaint, the manner in which complaints were followed up and the procedure for keeping the complainant informed of the manner of complaint follow-up.

(2)(a)

The registered provider confirmed that no complaints were received by the service to date.

## Part IX - Inspection and Enforcement

### Regulation 33 – Furnishing of information to agency

*A registered provider shall furnish the Agency with such information as the Agency may require for the purpose of enforcing and executing these Regulations and the information shall be in such form, if any, as may be specified by the Agency.*

### Compliance Information

The registered provider and staff were found to be receptive to inspection and furnished the inspector with the necessary information and documentation to conduct the inspection.