

Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Report

Pre School

TUSLA Identifier:	TU2019DL005
--------------------------	-------------

Name of Service:	Little Twigs & Forest Friends
-------------------------	-------------------------------

Address of Service:	Meenagory, Bunrana, Co. Donegal
----------------------------	---------------------------------

Eircode:	n/a
-----------------	-----

Name of Registered Provider:	Ursula McLaughlin
-------------------------------------	-------------------

Service type:	Part Time, Sessional
----------------------	----------------------

Date of Inspection:	27/11/2025
----------------------------	------------

No of pre-school children:	AM	30	PM	12
-----------------------------------	----	----	----	----

Address of the Early Years Inspectorate:	Early Years Inspectorate, Hampton Court, Cootehill Road, Drumalee, Co Cavan. H12 YY84
Inspection undertaken by:	S Mc Kenna
Title:	Early Years Inspector

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.
---------------------------------	-----------------

Description of service

Little Twigs and Forest Friends is an outdoor-based preschool located in a forest setting on the outskirts of Buncrana in Co. Donegal. The service operates 38 weeks of the year, between the hours of 9am to 2pm Monday to Friday. The service participates in the Early Childhood Care and Education programme which operates from 9.30am to 12.30pm. Children attending the service range in age from 2 to 6 years and avail of an outdoor-based early years curriculum.

The service operates from a sectioned-off area of a dense pine forest, which is secured by boundary fencing, and divided into 4 main areas, along with some shelters for each area. The service operates in 3 groups named: Pre ECCE, Junior ECCE and Senior ECCE. On the day of inspection, the Junior ECCE and Pre ECCE were joined. Three prefabricated units provide additional indoor play areas, a small kitchenette, an office and a small storage area are also provided. Sanitary accommodation for staff and children is located within the forest area and housed in purpose-built wooden shelters.

Staffing

There are six staff employed in the service to include the registered provider. One student on placement from a secondary school was present on the day of inspection.

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 & Recruitment, Regulation 11 Staffing Levels, Regulation 19 Health, Welfare & Development of Child, Regulation 23 Safeguarding Health, Safety and Welfare of Child, Regulation 25 First Aid, Regulation 26 Fire Safety Measures and Regulation 28 Insurance.

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 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 named person in charge. A second person was named to deputise in their absence.
- (b) Following discussion with the person in charge, 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 records and discussion with the staff team.

(2) The files for 6 staff and 1 student on placement was reviewed.

(a) (b)

A total of 12 written and validated references from a previous employer were on file for the 6 staff members.

(c) Garda vetting disclosures had been obtained for 6 staff. The service demonstrated compliance with the Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Notice requiring services to renew Garda vetting every three years for 3 of the 6 employed staff. The registered provider did not adhere to the re-vetting timeframes as outlined in the Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Notice for 3 staff, which requires services to renew Garda vetting every three years.

Please refer to the information outlined under Regulation 23 of this report.

Garda vetting is not required for the secondary school student on work experience.

(d) A review of the employment history for 6 staff, demonstrated that 1 adult had lived outside the State for a period of longer than 6 consecutive months. The required police vetting for the 1 staff member was available on file.

(4) Documentary evidence was available to confirm that the 6 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 secondary school student on work experience was not required.

Non-Compliance Information

(2) (a) (b)

There were no written references available on file for the student.

Corrective & Preventive Action submitted by the Registered Provider

Corrective and Preventive Action

Student has provided two written references which have been verified and filed. We will ensure any student joining us for work experience has provided two written references which we will verify before they begin.

Supporting documentation submitted

Two written and validated references submitted.

Summary Comment

The response from the registered provider and supporting documentation submitted has adequately addressed the non-compliance in Regulation 9 (2) (a) (b).

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 inspector arrived unannounced and remained so throughout the inspection. The following adult to child ratios were observed when the service was operating at maximum attendance

Three adults cared for 19 children aged 2 years 8 months to 3 years 11 months in the Pre ECCE and Junior ECCE groups, of whom 14 attended on a sessional basis, and 5 attended on a part-time basis.

One adult cared for 11 children aged 2 years 8 months to 3 years 11 months in the Senior ECCE group, of whom 4 attended on a sessional basis, and 7 attended on part part-time basis.

In addition to the above, a student was present in the Senior ECCE group.

(8) A review of the staff rota demonstrated that the registered provider ensured that 2 adults were present on the premises while the service was in operation.

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

The children were observed to have their snack times indoors. The children take in their own food items from home, which include a selection of cheeses, crackers, yoghurts, croissants, rice cakes, and fruit. Children who attended on a part-time basis had sufficient food items with them for a second snack, and staff advised if the children had no food items left, they could provide some if required. The staff were observed to help children if needed and were observed to use morning snack time to engage in conversations with the children.

The children were observed to use the toilet independently, and the children who wore nappies had their nappy changed in line with their individual care needs.

Children's personal care needs were tended to through encouragement of cleaning their noses, washing their hands and changing clothes when required.

Rest areas were provided outdoors to include large bean bags, hammocks and mats, where children could rest and take time out from their busy day. Indoor stackable floor beds with bed linen were available if children required a sleep during their time at the service.

The preschool operates predominantly outdoors and follows an outdoor play-based curriculum, where the children spend the majority of their time outdoors. The inspector was advised that the indoor areas are used for snack time or when inclement weather or weather warnings occur. The person in charge advised the inspector that there was a wind warning in place on the day of inspection, and they had carried out a risk assessment, which was available for review. The person in charge outlined that they may spend more time indoors on that particular day due to the wind speeds. The children, while outdoors, were observed to wear appropriate outdoor clothing to include warm body suits, wellies and boots, waterproof clothing and hats. When it began to rain a little, the children were observed putting up their hoods on their coats and body suits.

Supporting Relationships

The atmosphere upon the inspector's arrival was warm and welcoming. The children in Senior Preschool were preparing for snack time indoors, and the children in Junior ECCE & Pre ECCE transitioned from playing outdoors to washing their hands before going indoors for snack. When the inspector was introduced to the children, they told the inspector about where they liked to play outdoors. The children also displayed pride while talking to and showing the inspector their preschool environment.

The staff were observed to promote and encourage positive behaviour, and praise was given to children where turn-taking and sharing among their peers was observed.

The staff were observed to show respect to children by speaking to them in gentle tones. Staff were observed to be aware of children's presence while in the outdoors and were observed to position themselves in a way to have sight of the children in the play area, while also engaging in play and learning with the children.

Communication with parents is in person at arrival and collection, and through a text messaging system. Parents are provided with information about their child's day upon collection, which was observed in practice when the ECCE session finished on the day of inspection.

Physical And Material Environment

The outdoor play and learning environment is located within a pine forest and operates from sectioned off areas to include four separate areas with a ground surfacing of the natural forest floor. Three areas are used as a base for each of the three groups, Pre ECCE, Junior ECCE and Senior ECCE, with one communal area also available.

Many interest areas were set up outdoors to include digging pits, mud kitchens, a restaurant, play hospitals, vet areas, loose play areas, circle time areas and table top areas and a sensory area with an exploration tray with pink bubbles. Other materials available but not limited to were, logs and tyres, building blocks, wheelbarrows, dolls and prams, ride-on trucks, push-along toys, swings and some sheltered areas to include a polytunnel where children could take a rest in a shaded area if required. There was a fire pit located in one of the areas, and a large boat for children to climb into and play within in another area.

The indoor areas, which consisted of three prefabricated buildings, provided for use during snack times and inclement weather. The indoors had a variety of play materials and equipment such as creative art materials, floor play toys, construction toys, table top jigsaws and peg boards, books and teddies, chalkboards and a play shop. Materials outdoors and indoor were freely available and accessible to children at all times.

Children's family photos were on display on trees throughout the forest, alongside colourful bunting and many posters and photos of letters, numbers and designated interest area signs. The children's own individual colourings, paintings and sticking collages were also on display throughout the outdoor areas.

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:

- The premises were appropriately secured to prevent a child from exiting unsupervised and to restrict unauthorised persons from gaining access to the premises. Coded locks were fitted to gates with key codes known only by staff.
- Risk assessments were completed daily. The inspector was advised that the weather was to give 55km winds on the day of inspection, and the staff in their risk assessment outlined how they would operate on that day.
- The play equipment and resources, both indoor and outdoor, available for children's use were provided in good condition.
- Cleaning agents were stored out of reach of children.
- The children were observed to be adequately supervised by the staff while indoors and outdoors on the day of inspection.

Infection Control:

- Running water, liquid soap, paper towels and bins were provided for handwashing purposes.
- Handwashing was observed before children had their morning snack and after children played with mud outside.
- Cleaning records were available for review, detailing the cleaning carried out on a daily basis in the indoor and outdoor areas.

Non-Compliance Information

General Safety:

1. In respect of 3 out of 6 staff members, the service did not demonstrate compliance with the Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Notice requiring services to renew Garda vetting every three years, as a period in excess of 3 years had lapsed since their Garda vetting disclosures were issued.

Infection Control:

2. The bin used for disposing of soiled nappies was an open bin, and not a sealed, lidded pedal-operated bin as required, which poses a risk of cross-contamination.

3. The handwashing facilities at the children’s sanitary accommodation were not in full working order. One tap was not working, and the second tap ran at a slow trickle. The flow of water was insufficient at times, which had an impact on the temperature, increasing the risk of ineffective infection control measures.
4. The children's snack items taken in from home, which were observed to contain perishable items such as yogurts and cheeses, were stored in their bags in the outdoor area on the day of inspection. This was a non-compliance upon the service's most recent inspection on 07 April 2022, where the registered provider's corrective and preventive action response was “perishable foods are now being stored in the fridge daily”.

Action submitted by the Registered Provider

Corrective & Preventive Action

General Safety:

1. Garda vetting has been applied for three staff members whose vetting was out of date. Make note of the date. Garda vetting expires for all staff and ensure we apply as needed.

Infection Control:

2. Pedal bin purchased and set up in nappy changing area. Ensure the appropriate bin is in use at all times.
3. Taps have been re-plumbed and are both in full working order. Ensure maintenance is up to date. A water log is in place to be filled out daily, and a liquid thermometer is purchased to test the temperature of the water.
4. Perishable foods to be stored in the fridge daily. A staff member is allocated this job each morning to ensure perishable food is stored correctly. Message sent out to all parents to ask that all perishable foods be stored in a separate zip-lock bag.

Supporting documentation submitted

General Safety:

1. Copy of three staff members renewed Garda vetting certificates.

Infection Control:

2. Copy of the order for the pedal bin.
3. Video of taps mended, with adequate running water.
4. Copy of message sent to parents regarding storage of perishable items.

Summary Comment

The response from the registered provider and supporting documentation submitted has adequately addressed the non-compliances in Regulation 23.

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 available to the children attending the pre-school service. One staff member rostered from opening to closing on the day of inspection held an in-date FAR training certificate.

Non-Compliance Information

(1) (a) (b)

The first aid materials available throughout the service did not contain sufficient amounts required for the number of children in attendance. The inspector was advised that a second first aid bag had been taken on an outing and had not yet been taken back into the service.

Corrective & Preventive Action submitted by the Registered Provider

Corrective and Preventive Action

First aid kit purchased for 25-50 children and on site. Always have adequate first aid kit on site and be aware of when kit expires.

Supporting documentation submitted

Receipt of purchase for the first aid kit.

Summary Comment

The response from the registered provider and supporting documentation submitted has adequately addressed the non-compliance in Regulation 25 (1) (a) (b).

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 06 November 2025
- (b) The annual maintenance certificate for the fire extinguishers was dated 17 July 2025, and the smoke alarms was dated 21 January 2025.
- (4) The fire evacuation procedures were on display, 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 33 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 27 March 2026. The inspector could determine by review of the attendance records for the 2025 to 2026 preschool year that a maximum of 30 children were registered to attend. The registered provider advised the inspector that if the numbers of children increase above 33 children, they will increase insurance cover, to ensure they are adequately insured.