

### **Quality Improvement Visit**

Setting: Little Learners Montessori (Watford)

Date: Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> June 2025

Setting Grading: Outstanding

Consultant: Chris Armstrong [chris@hopscotchconsultancy.com](mailto:chris@hopscotchconsultancy.com)

#### **Areas of strength**

- Upon arrival, the sound of singing and laughter can be heard from the main entrance, creating a brilliant first impression. Visitors are warmly and professionally welcomed by both the director and trainee manager. Signing-in procedures are completed efficiently, including ID checks.
- Visitors are guided into the office where discussions take place around the professional experiences of the new manager and the most recent Ofsted inspection. A flexible timetable for the day is agreed, staffing ratios across rooms are confirmed, and daily routines are clearly explained, reflecting strong leadership and a well-organised setting.
- Management lead the Learning Walk, following the natural journey of a child through the setting. Staff are introduced, and the intent behind each learning space is clearly articulated. The curriculum is shared, with particular emphasis on the benefits of outdoor learning and the Montessori approach.
- The Montessori and EYFS curriculum intent and implementation are embedded exceptionally well across the setting. Staff demonstrate a consistent and confident understanding of how their practice aligns with the curriculum aims. High-quality, meaningful interactions across all rooms strongly support children's learning and development.
- Children benefit from a well-sequenced and thoughtfully constructed curriculum that builds cumulatively over time. As a result, they acquire secure knowledge and skills, preparing them exceptionally well for the next stage of their learning journey; whether this being transitions between rooms or when moving to primary school.
- The impact of the curriculum is outstanding. Children are highly motivated, deeply engaged, and demonstrate excellent levels of concentration. All children, including those with additional needs, make strong progress and achieve the best possible outcomes.

- Learning environments are vibrant, well-resourced, and thoughtfully planned. Age-appropriate activities are accessible to all children, promoting independence, choice, and sustained engagement, from the earliest possible stages.
- In the Infant Community Room, children benefit from a rich communication and language development opportunities. Staff skilfully use stories, singing, questioning, rhymes, and short sentences to introduce new vocabulary and support comprehension.
- In Bambini's, children explore their identity and emotion through mirror play. Staff encourage them to recognise and label feelings such as 'happy' and 'sad', fostering emotional literacy and a sense of self-awareness from an early age. Children smile and point towards the mirror as they recognise themselves.
- Young children are immersed in sensory exploration with coloured water and cornflour. Staff are highly expressive and use rich, descriptive language to enhance children's understanding and engagement. Open-ended questions and continuous praise support extended focus and curiosity.
- A variety of sensory mats and pads encourage safe exploration. Musical instruments, scarves and puppets support fine motor development, while a large climbing frame builds confidence and gross motor skills. Staff actively engage with children through playful songs and games (Peek-a-boo) as they explore the climbing frame, deepening relationships and enjoyment.
- Before lunch, children in the Infant Community enjoy a fun and structured group time where songs and rhymes promote language development, social interaction, and anticipation. Children actively participate by copying actions and dancing; smiling and laughing throughout.
- In Montessori House, baking becomes a rich, hands-on learning experience. Staff deliver clear, repeated instructions and explain ingredients well. Children independently measure, mix, and roll, developing mathematical understanding and fine motor control. Wearing chef hats and aprons adds excitement and a sense of 'real-world-learning' to the activity.
- Children explore a thoughtfully prepared 'vegetable patch' tuff tray with real vegetables (potatoes and tomatoes), natural materials, and small-world animals. Staff promote discussion around food, farming, and

healthy choices. Mathematical concepts such as counting and comparing quantities are seamlessly embedded.

- Interactions in Children's House are consistently strong and purposeful. Staff use stories, rhymes, and songs to sustain engagement. Older children participate in discussions that deepen understanding through targeted questioning and meaningful back-and-forth exchanges.
- A tangible buzz of purposeful activity fills Children's house. Children are engrossed in learning, sustained by stimulating provocations and skilful adult questioning. The atmosphere is simply fantastic with imagination, curiosity, and deep engagement evident throughout.
- Relationships between staff and children are consistently warm and respectful. Staff respond attentively to children's emotional needs, offering reassurance and praise. Communication is calm, nurturing, and always delivered at the child's level, promoting trust and security.
- Independence is a clear strength and focus of Children's House. Children confidently pour liquids, thread fruit, explore textures, and share books (both indoors and outdoors). These activities nurture collaboration, perseverance, resilience, and problem-solving skills.
- During a creative exploration of skin tones (using paints), children engage in thoughtful conversations about differences and similarities between themselves and their peers. They use mirrors and paint to create self-portraits, with staff challenging children to look carefully at their faces to create more detailed images.
- The Playdough station in Children's House is a multi-sensory experience, offering herbs, spices, and natural materials that stimulate curiosity and creativity. This richly resourced area invites children into immersive, imaginative play.
- In an exciting 'Antarctica' activity, children use globes to locate continents and discuss polar environments. Staff expertly guide discussions around penguins, ice and snow, sparking children's imagination and early geographical awareness.
- When drawing vehicles, staff extend learning through open-ended questioning. Children study road signs and symbols, developing early literacy and understanding of the world. Concepts like "red means stop" are embedded through real-life context and continuous praise.

- The outdoor environment is strong. It is purposefully designed to promote exploration and discovery. Features such as mud kitchens, climbing frames, water play, and greenhouses offer rich, real-world learning experiences that inspire children's natural curiosity.
- Staff work alongside children at their level in the garden, promoting language, modelling vocabulary, and encouraging communication skills. Communication and language are woven seamlessly into play.
- Outdoor play actively supports gross motor development. From scooping water and leaves to climbing and ball play, children strengthen their cardiovascular systems, coordination, and control appropriate to their developmental stage.
- Children's House fruit kebab activity is immersive and meaningful. Children wear chef hats and aprons, and independently use tongs and knives with increasing skill. Staff support where needed and guide conversations around healthy eating, linking the experience to children's own lives, such as recent family BBQs. This was an exceptionally strong experience today.
- Children consistently demonstrate exceptional levels of respect for others. They display increasing confidence as they interact with others and complete activities presented to them.
- Children are highly motivated, enthusiastic learners who eagerly participate, share, and cooperate with their peers – this is consistent across every room. Their consistently positive attitudes to both play and learning helps to create a fantastic atmosphere that helps to encourage curiosity and imagination.
- Children demonstrate remarkable self-control and perseverance, even when faced with challenges; for example, as babies climb over a bridge, using railings to help them steady their walk and, as Pre-School persevere as they attempt to build the 'tallest tower in the world' that keeps falling down.
- Staff place great importance on building strong, trusting relationships with parents. The 'All About Me' forms, which gather and record vital information about each child's routines, interests, and needs, are used thoughtfully to plan smooth, personalised transitions into the Bambini Room; ensuring strong settling-in process. The FAMILY app is used as an effective communication tool, enabling regular updates and meaningful two-way partnerships with families.

- Transitions between rooms are exceptionally well-managed and deeply supportive. Parents are engaged early in the process, with discussions beginning approximately one month in advance. Settling-in sessions are frequent, flexible, and tailored to the individual needs of each child, helping them build confidence and security as they move between rooms, in small groups, once they are fully prepared for this change.
- Key Persons speak proudly and knowledgeably about their children. They confidently share recent progress, celebrate achievements, and identify clear next steps, demonstrating deep knowledge of each child's unique development. This is a strength of the nursery.
- Safe sleep practices are consistently followed and carefully monitored in the Bambini room. Staff regularly complete sleep checks and discuss key safety measures, including sleep positioning, room temperature, and keeping airways clear. These high standards ensure that babies rest safely and comfortably throughout the day.
- Bambinis Lunch - Babies are nurtured with sensitive, individualised support as they develop self-feeding skills, using a spoon. Staff offer meaningful praise and encouragement as children try new foods, using rich language to describe mealtime experiences. Consistent narration and the introduction of key vocabulary such as 'carrot', 'delicious', and 'tasty' enhance early communication and language development. Mealtimes are calm, warm, and enriching experiences that promote independence and language development throughout.
- Infant Community Lunch - mealtimes are beautifully organised and promote independence and care. Tables are pre-set with metallic cups, bowls, and cutlery. Children are encouraged to self-serve from sharing bowls and pour their own drinks from small jugs, developing fine motor skills and a sense of responsibility. Staff support children in washing their hands and offer them meaningful choices, such as deciding whether they would like to wear a bib (this is a new routine).
- Community House lunch routine is exemplary. A warm sense of community radiates as children confidently engage in conversations with peers and staff. They serve themselves, pour drinks, and consistently use good manners. Children competently use forks and engage in mealtimes with enthusiasm, reflecting the strong foundations for school readiness. It is clear that a lot of time and energy has been spent on refining this learning time; clear progress is observed as children move between rooms – lunchtimes demonstrate a strong sequence of development between Bambinis through to Community House.

- School readiness is actively and successfully promoted through a range of strategies. Staff explain examples including: encouraging independence in self-care routines (for example, dressing, toileting, and serving food); promoting early literacy and numeracy through storytelling, mark-making, and number games; building confidence in communication (circle times, role play) and fostering opportunities to strengthen confidence, resilience and strong communication skills.
- Children who speak English as an Additional Language are well supported. 'All About Me' forms help staff understand home languages and communication levels. Key words, flashcards, visuals, and bilingual books are used regularly. Children's cultures and heritages are celebrated through songs, stories, and cultural activities (such as singing Portuguese butterfly songs) creating an inclusive environment where all children feel valued.
- Staff speak positively and enthusiasm about their professional development opportunities. New Room Leaders value leadership training and platforms like Noodle Now. They describe the support from managers as 'amazing'. The outstanding leadership team fosters a culture of growth and excellence, and staff express genuine happiness and pride in their roles.
- Termly supervisions are highly valued by staff, who appreciate the focused support from management. These meetings provide opportunities to discuss child development, set meaningful targets, and identify next steps, contributing to a highly reflective and effective workforce.
- The Progress Checks at Two are thorough, insightful, and highly effective. They clearly demonstrate practitioners' deep understanding of children's development, highlighting recent progress and planning appropriate, ambitious next steps. These checks ensure early identification of needs and strong partnership working with parents and other professionals.
- A comprehensive induction process is in place, underpinned by a detailed booklet that includes feedback, next steps, expectations, safeguarding, and risk assessments. This well-structured approach ensures new staff feel confident and well-supported from the outset, enabling them to settle quickly and begin making a positive impact on children's experiences.
- There are currently 40 members of staff holding current and valid PFA certificates, with any staff due to renew, know to management and



training is due to be booked. All information is correctly recorded on the SCR.

- Complaints are handled professionally and transparently. There have been no complaints made to the nursery; therefore, hypothetical scenarios are discussed. Each case will be investigated thoroughly through discussions with relevant staff and room leaders. Parents will be promptly informed and reassured, with meetings offered and next steps clearly outlined within the statutory 28-day timeframe. This approach builds trust and reinforces the setting's commitment to continuous improvement and partnership with families.
- Recruitment follows rigorous safer recruitment procedures. Advertisements on Indeed are clear and detailed, highlighting qualifications, duties, hours, and safeguarding responsibilities. Candidates undergo a multi-stage process including application review, phone/Zoom interviews, face-to-face interviews, and a working trial. References (minimum two, with a third sought where necessary) and enhanced DBS checks are mandatory. No candidate begins employment without satisfactory references. Risk assessments are completed where appropriate for those beginning work without an Enhanced DBS certificate returned (although these must be applied before commencing work). Inductions cover HR, management, and room-specific procedures.
- Probation periods are closely monitored and reviewed in detail. This ensures only the most suitable individuals work with children, promoting a safe and nurturing environment.
- Performance Plans are regularly reviewed through structured catch-up meetings. Progress is tracked using SMART targets and coaching tools such as PIPs. This reflective approach enables staff to grow professionally, resulting in improved practice and outcomes for children, through a supportive system, offered from the management team.
- Continual Professional Development (CPD) is a priority. Staff participate in dedicated training days and academy-led sessions, including specialised courses such as 'Montessori with Toddlers'. Ongoing Montessori training further enriches staff knowledge, which in turn enhances children's learning experiences. Staff, rightly, appreciate the ongoing support towards their own development.
- Staff access tailored training including SENCo development and impact-based modules. This has led to significantly improved provision and targeted support for children with additional needs. Resources have been

enhanced to ensure every child's individual learning journey is supported effectively.

- Highlighted Strengths (Management) - The setting benefits from a passionate and united team who work collaboratively to support children's development. The team is research-informed, confident, and consistently aligned with the nursery's vision. Their commitment to excellence fosters a high-quality learning environment where all children thrive.
- Areas for Development (Management) - Future priorities include enhancing outdoor learning opportunities, developing a sensory garden, and continuing to upskill (newer) staff. These initiatives are designed to further enrich children's sensory experiences and promote holistic development.
- The medication policy is explained by management, clearly describing how this maintains children's safety and security at all times.
- The insurance certificate, Ofsted registration certificate and ICO certificate are all displayed in the main entrance.
- Risk assessments are completed regularly. Sampled Opening Checks are observed; these are accurate and updated accordingly.
- Allergy procedures are explained. Staff are confident with these processes – food is prepared and served separately. Different coloured bowls are used for allergies, preferences, weaning requirements and intolerances.

### Areas of development

- Demonstrate your commitment to safeguarding, from the earliest opportunity, by clearly outlining evacuation procedures at the start of visits, identifying the Designated Safeguarding Lead/Officer(s), and communicating the setting's mobile device policy and expectations.
- Refine the Learning Walk to clearly explain the sequence and rationale behind the curriculum. Emphasise the purpose and intended impact of activities on children's development and link these to the nursery's overall vision – you explain your 'what' – now focus on your 'why'. Use this opportunity to showcase the strengths and ethos of your incredible nursery.



- Enhance sleep arrangements by positioning children in a head-to-toe formation to reduce the risk of cross-contamination (breathing directly onto faces) and promote a healthier sleep environment.
- Encourage greater use of cutlery by supporting older children in developing the confidence and skills to use knives appropriately during mealtimes. Some children demonstrate this skill well, however this was varied today.
- Ensure medical plan reviews are consistently documented, even when no changes are made, to provide clear evidence that regular monitoring and evaluation are taking place. If an email chain does exist, ensure this is evident to 'prove' the paper trail of changes.
- Confirm that all staff know where vital medication is stored (such as EpiPens), to ensure swift access in the event of an emergency. **It is noted that no EpiPens are stored on site at the current time.**
- Continue to develop staff confidence in articulating safeguarding procedures, including identifying key concerns, recognising signs and symptoms, and understanding escalation processes. Consider revising current lanyards to improve clarity and accessibility of information for staff.
- Audit all paper-based staff files to ensure that all documentation is current and relevant. If the transition to electronic records is complete, consider sharing these with Ofsted, if this is the preferred approach. Where both hard copies and electronic records are maintained, ensure consistency across both formats so that all required information is accurately reflected in both. Today, all safer recruitment documentation is located but some (Right to Work in UK, for example) are stored in one format with other information is stored in the hard copy files.

Please note: Quality Improvement Visits are designed to support settings to evaluate and reflect on their current practice. A tentative judgement may be given using the public document 180040. However, a Quality Improvement Visit offers advice, guidance and on-going support, therefore is not a mock inspection.