



“We built this together”

Twice ‘outstanding’ Harpenden Pre-school & Nursery is succeeding thanks to an experienced manager, a committed team and the investment of its owner, Asquith Day Nurseries, as *TN* discovered...

I love it here. I love the building, the surroundings, and I’m so grateful for the staff I have. I consider myself very lucky to have this as my nursery - it’s why I’ve been here for so long!” Sandra Harvey has been manager at Asquith Day Nurseries’ Harpenden Pre-school & Nursery since 2005, and was Head of Care at the Asquith Court School that occupied the

site prior to its opening long before that. Such a part of the fabric of the setting is she, she’s even had a building - the nursery’s brand new log cabin - named after her, and how many managers can say that?

Consistency of leadership has brought consistent success at 93-place Harpenden, and Sandra has plenty to be happy about beyond the spacious, converted Victorian residence the nursery calls home, and its

newly refurbished grounds. Her time in charge has seen two consecutive ‘outstanding’ Ofsted inspections (viewable at ow.ly/sYJbV) - the most recent awarded in June last year - and continuing expansion. It has also resulted in the stable, well-qualified and highly motivated team with whom she’s quick to share the credit for the successes the nursery has enjoyed.

Step inside and you’ll find a warm and welcoming atmosphere throughout, and it’s soon clear that both Sandra and her team are well supported by the Asquith family and comfortable in their roles. But, as Sandra makes clear, ‘comfortable’ doesn’t mean ‘complacent’. On the



The staff are very **committed**; they’re **dedicated** to the nursery, and that’s where the warm, **welcome** feeling comes from. Because we have that, the **children** settle well, grow and develop

SANDRA HARVEY, MANAGER



contrary, Harpenden is excelling because manager and staff are always working hard together to maintain and improve their high standards. Good communication is the secret, Sandra tells us, ensuring that all members of staff – from new recruits to those who were there at the beginning – have the help they need and are working towards the same goal...

1 From the beginning

"I did some childminding as my own children were growing up, and joined a small group; we used to do different activities with the children together, and it was nice being part of a bigger team rather than only having the children at home," Sandra recalls of her first experiences of working in the early years sector. "I decided to get a qualification – a Level 3 BTEC – and it went from there, really. I had placements in a playgroup, in schools – nursery class, Reception and Year 1 – to find out where I wanted to be, and I came out wanting to work in a nursery."

Following 10 months spent as a nursery nurse, Sandra moved to the Asquith Court School that became Harpenden Pre-school & Nursery in 1995 and never looked back. "I oversaw the school's nursery provision, which took 2-5-year-olds. Then, when the school closed, I applied for the nursery manager position here, and I've been manager ever since – I set it up and built from there," she explains. "It was quite daunting taking on the manager's role, but fortunately because we were small, and already established, it meant that we could grow together. It wasn't like taking over a nursery where everything was already in place; we built it up step by step."

From just eight staff members and two open rooms in 2005, the setting has grown to a team of 38 working across eight rooms and three buildings, including the aforementioned log cabin (Harvey House, to give it its proper name). "We already had quite a good reputation, and there's always a bit of interest when a new nursery opens, so it built quite quickly, especially in the first two years," Sandra says. "We've grown more over time, and we're about to expand again. But a lot of the staff members we started with are still here, and that's been really important."

2 Teamwork

Nurseries come in all shapes and sizes, and each presents its own unique challenges. For Sandra, Harpenden's scale makes the job unpredictable. "It's a big site and a lot can happen while I'm walking down the stairs – I might be aiming to go over there and end up somewhere else!" she jokes. "There isn't a typical day – there's a plan. But I do visit the rooms every day, sometimes several times. If I'm doing a bit of paperwork I might just go and sit in with the children while I do it, so I can observe what's happening. Luckily, I have a brilliant admin and my assistant manager, who is supernumerary, who do a lot of paperwork for me. That means I can mingle, if you like, and provide support where it's needed."

That support might entail providing feedback on activities being planned for children or ideas for expanding a room's displays – "They always check that I'm happy with their displays because they know I'm a bit fussy when it comes to things like that!" – or simple encouragement: "As a manager you need to praise and encourage your staff as much as possible, recognise the hard work that they've done. I remind them that I am aware of how hard their day can be sometimes," Sandra says.

Of course, no manager can be everywhere at once; but if you have staff you can trust, that needn't be a problem: "I've got very strong room leaders, who take their responsibilities very seriously," Sandra says. "I tell them, 'Your room is your nursery, so you're responsible for having everything in place, to make sure you're doing what you should be doing; and if you need any support with anything, I'm always here.' It's a case of empowering them. It's a reflection of them and the standards they want. You need to rely on your staff with a nursery of this size – especially with three separate buildings."

"As manager I need to make sure I have staff I trust to be doing what they should be doing," she adds. "I choose my staff according to their abilities; some might need more support than others, so it's a case of making sure they're working with the right people. We all have different skills, and you need to make sure you have a variety in each room."

3 Communication counts

A key part of getting to 'outstanding' and maintaining it thereafter is, in Sandra's view,

consistency of approach. She points to the praise the Harpenden team received from Ofsted for just that following its first top mark in 2009: "Every room was doing the same paperwork, so when a child was going through transition, moving from one room to another, there were no changes in the way they were being observed; everything flowed, which is quite an achievement in a large nursery," she explains.

The difficult part is achieving this consistency – and in this regard good communication is essential. "To manage a small group of staff, to have conversations with them and train them around policies and procedures, and where you want to go, is one thing, but as a team grows, it's a real challenge to make sure everybody is doing what they should. Even now, ensuring that there's good communication – that everybody talks, that if anything is difficult for someone they've got support, that everybody is aware what our expectations of them are – is vital," Sandra says. "So we have regular room leader meetings and working lunches – weekly or fortnightly, depending on how much information there is to share; if, for example, we've introduced new policies, I'll roll those out to the room leaders and keep a record of what we've discussed, to make sure the communication is there."

"In our room leader meetings the staff are also given a copy of the SEF," she adds. "If I've made any changes we'll talk about it; if they've tried something in their rooms that perhaps didn't work very well, we'll take it out and add something else in that they're doing. We'll talk about where we are, then they'll take that into their rooms, share that with their staff."

A further aid to consistency are the group-wide policies in place across Asquith's 79 nurseries. A head office-based training team disseminate planning and procedures to all managers and assistant managers, whilst planning champions can also be nominated to help bring these to staff lower down. "When we take on a new member of staff they'll be trained by these training



champions," Sandra explains. "That way we make sure everybody's getting the same message, rather than it being word of mouth and Chinese whispers! It's an approach that works really well."

4 Building relationships

Communication is equally important when it comes to building relationships with parents, and the team at Harpenden are praised in their most recent inspection report for the various strategies they employ to get mums and dads engaged with what's going on at nursery. Stay and play sessions are organised every couple of months, some targeted at the harder-to-reach dads and grandparents, while information evenings allow the nursery to showcase some of the activities going on in the setting: "They help the parents to see that the children aren't coming in just to play, they aren't just scribbling on a piece of paper," Sandra explains. "Those evenings really do open parents' eyes. They also enable us to talk about the children's different abilities, and how parents can encourage their interests." Themed open days, held every few weeks, provide yet more opportunities for practitioners to engage with families.

When they're not inviting parents in, Sandra and her team have other ways of forging links between nursery and home. Home learning stories, which parents are asked to complete with their child, and a lending library help extend learning beyond nursery hours, while a monthly 'Snack Attack' - where parents are invited to take a sample from the nursery's menu into work with them to tuck in to - both keeps mums and dads informed about what their children are eating during the day and helps build bridges.

"It can be difficult for working parents," Sandra admits. "They're very busy and they can't always drop everything and come to spend an afternoon to stay and play with their children, but they still want to be involved. The key is to create that link between home and nursery."

Talking points



New spaces

Harpenden's 32-place log cabin represents a significant investment from Asquith, but Sandra has no doubts about the benefits it will bring. "We're using it for our two-and-a-half to three-and-a-half-year-olds," she tells us, "so it bridges the gap between nursery and preschool. I think this approach will help the children with the transition, give them more confidence when they make that step up."



A group effort

For Asquith's nurseries there's no shortage of support available. Sandra highlights the benefits of having access to the experience and settings of a host of other managers, and the work of the company's training team: "I like to grow and develop staff, and I know that's an aim of Asquith too: to give the staff as much training, and as many opportunities, as possible."

outstanding nurseries



Smart choices

Another aspect of the EYFS that has benefited from generous funding at Harpenden and its sister nurseries is ICT. SMARTboards are present in the log cabin and preschool room, the latter also boasting a touchscreen computer. "The SMARTboards are a great resource," Sandra says. "They allow the children to look at the world around them in more detail. They can be creative with them, they can experiment."



Awaiting Ofsted

Even experienced nursery managers get nervous when Ofsted are due: "In the build up to our most recent inspection I was terrified!" Sandra jokes. "I couldn't have a day off without worrying whether they were going to turn up. We were working so hard because we knew things had changed. When she knocked on the door and told me who she was, I said to her, 'Finally, I can sleep tonight!'"