

“We pride ourselves on supporting families”

Buttons and Bows Nursery, and the Bows and Arrows group of which it is a part, is providing ‘outstanding’ early education in close partnership with parents, as *TN* discovered...

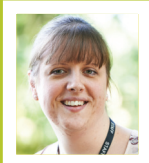
Ipswich’s Bows and Arrows Group has come a long way in the last decade. While its means remain modest – “We’re soon to get a head office Portakabin, because we’re all working from home and out the back of our cars at the moment, which isn’t great!” group manager, Anne Denny, tells us – it can lay proud claim to three ‘outstanding’ nurseries and a fourth rated as ‘good’, while further expansion is on the horizon. Life as a not-for-profit charity may not always be glamorous, but in this case it does at least mean making a real difference to children and their families’ lives.

TN is at Buttons and Bows, one of the ‘outstanding’ trio, to hear about the workings of group and setting, following in the footsteps, incidentally, of recently reshuffled minister Liz Truss, who visited in April. With Anne is nursery manager, Stephanie Moss, and up for discussion are topics as diverse as the value of strong parent-practitioner partnerships, the importance of flexible childcare, and why a fresh coat of paint really can make a difference to your provision...

1. Putting children first

“We focus our finances, our thoughts and priorities on what’s right for the children.”

Set up by the Ipswich Council for Voluntary Service in 2004 following a successful application for lottery funding



You’ve got to have **high expectations** of staff, right from their **induction**. I’m quite to-the-point: I **tell** them, “This is what I **expect**”, and they do go away and **deliver**

STEPHANIE MOSS, MANAGER



under the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative, Bows and Arrows started its life with two new, purpose-built settings and the intention to support families living in areas of deprivation. Its charity status is at the heart of its ethos: "Everything that we earn gets ploughed back into the settings," Anne explains. "Luckily we don't have shareholders, or anything like that, so we can really focus our finances, our thoughts and priorities – even our hopes and dreams sometimes – on what's right for the children. That's the thread that runs through everything we

do here. What each individual child needs is at the heart of our organisation; every decision is made based on what's best for them. It might sound simplistic, but often in childcare this can be in conflict with other, competing demands."

While the group has expanded – it outgrew its ICVS origins and broke away as an independent organisation in 2010, before adding two more settings in recent years – its motivation has remained the same, ably guided by a board of parent and community trustees, and Anne herself. Its focus on what is best for children extends

to a strong emphasis on working with and supporting parents, and that approach is in clear evidence at Buttons and Bows.

2. Family values

"It's quite daunting to leave your child with someone you don't know."

One of Bows and Arrows' two original settings, though it has existed in various forms for around 25 years, Buttons and Bows Nursery offers 72 places for funded – including two-year-olds – and non-funded children. It was rated 'outstanding' in all areas in 2013, having been judged 'good' at its previous inspection in 2009. This achievement came under the stewardship of manager, Stephanie, who joined the group as a nursery assistant and rose swiftly through the ranks, becoming manager in 2011. Asked about what she feels lies behind her setting's success, she points at once to the strength of her practitioners' planning, which is carefully tailored to each child's unique needs, and the close relationships that are cultivated between key persons and parents.

The two points are related. "As soon as you've got the family working with you with the child, everything progresses very quickly and very positively," she says. "Every child has a home visit when they start here. That gives us time to get to know the family and vice versa. It's quite informal, but it helps us to see what the child enjoys doing at home, so we can settle them better at nursery. Later, I expect key persons and families to meet regularly, to plan for children together, so we and the parents are always on the same page."

"The visits are the start of the relationship with families," Anne stresses. "The whole induction process for a child is incredibly important for us. On top of the home visits, we ask parents to attend with their children for a week. They stay with them, they get to know the nursery sessions and see exactly what happens before they leave the child for the first time. At the end of that time, they have a really in-depth understanding of how the nursery is run. And that's warts and all – not every day is perfect! – so it's a very trusting and transparent relationship that we're trying to develop with families."

Alongside these close, ongoing partnerships, and the aforementioned parent trustees, Buttons and Bows engages with families in the form of a monthly 'Parents Getting Involved' group – an opportunity for those unable to commit to the significant responsibilities of trustees to contribute ideas and offer feedback to senior members of staff. With these meetings held at various times of the day, to suit different schedules, the nursery is making efforts to engage with as many of its parents as possible.





Some of our most **successful** team members have been our **apprentices** – people who started with us with no **experience** and have worked their way up to **senior** positions

ANNE DENNY, GROUP MANAGER

3. Pay as you go

“We pride ourselves on supporting families, as well as children.”

Bows and Arrows’ commitment to supporting parents is perhaps best illustrated by its group-wide policy to shun traditional, sessional charges in favour of a far more flexible hourly rate. “That has been in place since the very beginning,” Anne tells us. “Not all families’ needs fit regular session times. One of the first families that ever joined this nursery, for example, needed care from 11 till 3 – the dad was a postman. We could have said, ‘You’ll have to pay for the whole day’, but he didn’t need or want that; he wanted to be with his children before and after work, so it wouldn’t have been respectful or convenient for that family to have introduced sessions.

“Today we have a lot of part-time families who have all sorts of different working hours, and we feel it’s important to accommodate their needs, so that parents and children can still have family time – we don’t want to force anybody to use the nursery when it isn’t relevant or necessary. I think that’s one of the reasons people use us.

“From a business perspective, it’s not easy to manage,” Anne admits. “Having people turn up at different times can be a challenge. But, again, this goes back to putting the child first. It doesn’t matter what the business needs, it’s the child. It’s important children can have family time when it’s possible, and that’s more important to us than fitting people into neat slots.”

4. Best for babies

“When children are at such a young age, it’s very important to get the care right.”

Putting children first is a mantra that applies to every age group cared for at Buttons and Bows, including the very youngest. Babies at the setting occupy a 0–3s room, but far from being ‘lumped in’ with the older children and their care compromised as a result, particular attention is given to their needs thanks to the presence of two practitioners with ‘baby care specialist’ qualifications. Abbie Brunning and Ashton Clarke have both completed additional training provided by Suffolk County Council, and they and Stephanie are enthusiastic about the impact their expertise has had.

“The training looks a lot at attachment theory and brain development,” Abbie explains. “It covers what happens before birth and during pregnancy, and how that affects babies; what babies need to be able to develop – a bit of everything, to be honest.”

“It goes into a lot more detail than you’d get with other qualifications,” Ashton agrees. “It gives you more activities to use specifically with little babies, to help their development. Doing it has definitely changed how I am with the children; understanding attachment makes you realise how important you are, especially to children at this age, because you’re like a second parent.”

“It allow us to focus on babies a bit more,” Stephanie says of the decision to take advantage of the training. “When you have so many funded children, it can be easy to ‘forget’ about them to some extent. Having specialists does make a difference, particularly as we have an under-threes room and are



therefore juggling the two-year-olds and the babies; having someone in there with that expertise helps because they can pinpoint things that the babies need and support that.

“A key role for both Abbie and Ashton,” she explains, “is supporting other staff. I’m not a specialist with babies, so I do rely on them to make sure things are happening to the right standard – and they also allow us to offer extra support for families too.”

5. New ideas

“We try to visit lots of different nurseries; it’s one thing to hear about good practice, but it’s another thing to see it.”

If there’s one thing that’s abundantly clear talking to Anne and Stephanie, it’s that at Buttons and Bows, and the wider Bows and Arrows group, there’s a desire to learn and improve. Both group manager and manager speak positively of visits to other settings, and how the nursery has developed as a result, and it’s clear that much has changed in recent years to help make the step up from ‘good’ to ‘outstanding’.

Amongst recent additions is a creative room, inspired by a trip to Reflections Nursery: “They had an atelier and an artist in residence, and it just seemed to work really well,” Stephanie explains. “So I took it back and implemented it here and got the same effect, really. The children seem a lot more concentrated – as the resources are all in one area, they’re able to focus and work

AIMING HIGH

What does it take to get a ‘good’ early years setting to ‘outstanding’? In Anne’s view, the secret to Stephanie’s success at Buttons and Bows is in a large part down to mindset – more specifically, having high expectations of her team. “I’m lucky in that I have an overview of what goes on, and I’ve seen how Stephanie works. She has implemented so many changes, so many different ways of doing things, and I think being

able to do that comes from strong leadership and having a very uncompromising approach to standards and quality. If you pitch it very high, if you make your expectations clear and people are on board with you – and Steph has a very supportive team – I think it’s a recipe for success. That’s how Steph works: she expects standards to be up here somewhere, and if they’re even a little below that, she’s not happy!”





independently as well as in groups. We recently introduced an emphasis on mark-making in the room, which has really encouraged the boys – previously we were struggling to get them involved in that sort of thing – and we’ve tried to widen the resources, so as well as pencils, pens and paper, there are chalkboards and whiteboards.”

In the same area, children also have the opportunity to hone their woodworking skills – resources again inspired by practice observed outside the group. “We were worried about it to begin with because of health and safety,” Anne says, “but we assessed the risks and in the end we said, ‘Let’s just put it out there and see what happens.’ We did and it was fine! The children have come up with some amazing structures, using real tools.”

Stephanie is particularly enthusiastic about a far simpler change that she and her team have made, though: “The refurbishment of the nursery has made a huge difference. Absolutely huge,” she tells us. “When I started every room was a different colour – there was a purple room, a yellow room, a green room, things on the walls everywhere, bright blue sparkly floors. After a visit to Wingate Children’s Centre, we decided to use a white paint scheme throughout. We added plants and introduced new displays. Since then, we’ve found that the children are a lot calmer, more focused and engaged. Peer relationships are better, and the parents have loved it as well.”

Visit bowsandarrowsgroup.co.uk



Talking points



Hands-on management

Managers need to adopt a hands-on approach, Stephanie tells us: “I work with the under-threes all day every Tuesday. I worked my way up through the ranks, so I understand how staff are feeling, and their workload and stresses and strains. But when you’re working in the rooms, you get to see what they’re really good at, and what they need to improve. I think it’s key to practise as much as you can, really.”



Sharing knowledge

As well as benefiting from others’ practice, Bows and Arrows are keen to share their own. “We’re offering site visits,” Anne says. “Practitioners can come in and spend the day with us, hear about our perspectives on learning and then, vitally, see it in practice at the setting. We also do professional development days, when the nurseries are closed, with workshops on offer, partnership programmes and consultancy.”



Find funds

Funding ‘outstanding’ early education can be a challenge for any nursery, particularly one committed to keeping its fees below the average for its locality. “We regularly source external funding,” Anne tells us. “We’ve been very lucky to be successful with that and it’s meant we’ve been able to add to the services we provide.”



Meaningful displays

Buttons and Bows’ displays have undergone a major overhaul. “We’ve removed our old key person walls and we’re writing... almost stories now about what the children are doing,” Stephanie explains.

“They’re addressed to the child from the key person,” Anne says: “‘Today, I watched you do this... I saw how interesting it was that you did this.’ It’s really personal.”

“Parents are reading them to their children, and the children get quite excited about them,” Stephanie adds.