

“Inclusive, open and positive”

Children of all abilities and backgrounds are welcome at Chadwell St Mary Day Nursery, and all are receiving ‘outstanding’ care and education, as *TN* explains...

“It’s really hard work, but it’s very rewarding,” Anne-Marie Paul, director of Abbs Cross and Chadwell St Mary Day Nurseries – a group of four settings located in the London Borough of Havering and neighbouring Thurrock – tells us of life in her corner of the early years sector. “You have to be positive; if you start looking at the negatives, how hard something is going to make things for you, it will be hard – anybody who isn’t positive doesn’t tend to last here!”

A positive approach and can-do attitude lie at the very heart of Anne-Marie and her team’s provision; challenges are embraced, standards are set high, and compromises on the quality of the care and education their children are receiving are considered unacceptable. Nowhere within the quartet of settings is this better illustrated than at three-times-‘outstanding’ Chadwell St Mary Day Nursery, where *TN* speaks to Anne-Marie and operational manager (also setting manager), Anita Donnelly, one half of the group’s senior management team.

The commitment to quality isn’t hard to spot at Chadwell St Mary – most obviously, the setting employs two members of staff with QTS qualifications to work with its preschoolers; then there’s the fantastic outdoor area, transformed at considerable expense from a square of patchy grass to a feature-packed space full of learning opportunities. The can-do attitude becomes apparent as Anne-Marie and Anita explain how this is being achieved while catering for all families, not only the well-to-do: 55 per



For each child to be **happy**, the **environment** has to be happy; we spend a lot of **time** working on **supporting** everybody, to **create** a happy **atmosphere**

ANNE-MARIE PAUL, DIRECTOR



a homely childcare setting following a six-year battle for planning permission. Seven years later, a conversation with a primary school headteacher led to her being invited to take on a similar project in the grounds of Chadwell St Mary Primary School – helpfully, this time planning permission had been taken care of, and funding was available in the form of the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative.

“I didn’t plan to have more than a single nursery,” Anne-Marie admits. “I started the first one and thought, let’s see how this goes – but when this opportunity came up, I wanted to go for it. It was a considerable financial investment; the NNI funding covered less than half of the initial amount necessary, because of the way I like things to be done, but I’m very passionate about children from lower socio-economic groups having access to quality provision, so it was something that really appealed.”

Six months of renovations were necessary to extend and refurbish the former residence, but in November 2003 66-place Chadwell St Mary Day Nursery opened to the public; today 138 children are on roll. It took time for the setting to develop: Anita, originally a room practitioner at Anne-Marie’s first setting, stepped up from her deputy position to the manager’s role following a ‘satisfactory’ Ofsted inspection, and in 2007, when the inspectors returned, the nursery received the first of its three consecutive ‘outstandings’.

It was in 2007, too, that Anne-Marie successfully tendered for another setting, within a children’s centre in Havering, and elected to take over a failing nursery nearby. Her third and fourth nurseries, in Collier Row (also ‘outstanding’) and Rainham (‘good’), opened in January and March that year respectively. “Hopefully we will expand beyond four,” Anne-Marie reflects. “We’ve spent the last few years developing our senior management team, which will enable us to go on if the opportunity arises. We have a structure in place now that is very secure.”

1. Building quality

“My vision was to offer a family-friendly environment on a larger scale.”

“You have to be very flexible when you’re setting up a nursery. I could draw you the perfect premises, but you’ve very rarely got that luxury,” Anne-Marie says as she talks about the the early days of her business and Chadwell St Mary setting. A former nanny and childminder, Anne-Marie opened her first nursery, currently rated ‘good’ by Ofsted, in 1996, transforming a derelict school house into

cent of the nursery’s intake comprises funded two-, three-, and four-year-olds, while costs are kept down for those in need of more than the 15 free hours. “Our fees are at the lower end of the scale, whereas our services and the quality of our provision are at the upper end,” Anne-Marie says. “It’s a very fine balance to strike, to have the highly qualified practitioners and teachers, our senior management team and the additional support around that, while staying affordable.”

Difficult it may be, but to do anything less, Anne-Marie tells us, is to set children up to fail.

2. Aiming high

“I think all children deserve a privileged start.”

While the family-friendly ethos remains, Anne-Marie’s business has come a long way since she set up her first nursery. Over time, the group has honed its offering and developed its focus on providing quality for those without the financial means to access more expensive early years provision. “If you look in areas of disadvantage, very often the provision is of a lower quality – the staff have fewer qualifications, they don’t have quality resources, it’s just not there,” Anne-Marie says. “I think all children deserve a privileged start, so when we look at other nurseries – which we do – we look at privileged nurseries, the affluent nurseries, and what they offer, and we emulate that, rather than what’s just local to us.”

Chadwell St Mary’s teachers are a case in point, and a resource that many nurseries





We're **flexible** with **families**, the children's needs, our **planning** – we're very **quick** to identify if something's not working, and to **resolve** that

ANITA DONNELLY, OPERATIONAL MANAGER

across the country would be delighted to be able to call upon. But significant amounts of time and money are being put into ensuring high standards are consistently maintained across the nursery and group, at all levels. Curriculum and training manager, Stephanie Seacombe, another member of the senior management team, heads up efforts to up-skill Anne-Marie's practitioners, identifying gaps in staff members' knowledge and working with individuals or groups to fill them. Meanwhile, Anita's operational manager role involves, amongst other things, conducting inspections of all four nurseries' provision to help maintain and improve standards, as well as supporting her fellow setting managers on a daily basis. With Anne-Marie a regular visitor to all four settings too, there is a continual focus on delivering high standards.

Few investments have been more substantial, though, than Chadwell St Mary's outdoor area. Having applied for, and secured, £97,000 through the Quality and Access Capital Grant Scheme, Anne-Marie matched the funding to create a garden that, again, any setting would be proud to call its own. "Its impact on the children is huge," she says of the space. "Before, the garden was just a patio, grass and a shed in the corner – as a child, you're supposed to go out into the environment and explore, but what exploration did they have? We even had issues with the grass because the soil is so sandy here. I'm very proud of what we have now."

3. Equal opportunities

"Every child who walks through the door is unique."

Over the course of our conversation, Anne-Marie makes it clear that ensuring equality

of opportunity is near the very top of her list of priorities. Practice at her nurseries is built upon the understanding that individuals have different needs and learn in different ways, but that all are equally important. "Every child who comes to us has a unique set of circumstances that we have to take on board – and that's as true for a child with affluent, working parents as it is for a child on the two-year-old offer," Anne-Marie says. "We like to think that we have a bespoke provision for each family – and within the constraints of what we can offer, we will adapt to suit a family; we'll evolve."

At the same time, considerable effort is made to give all attending the setting – whatever their nationality, socio-economic group or level of educational need – the same experience: "A lot of nurseries will have a preschool room, where the funded children are, and a separate nursery room," Anne-Marie tells us. "Here we don't segregate funded children and paying children in any way – all of them are together, because they all learn from each other."

"I'm very conscious that nothing should have a monetary value that could exclude a child, too," she continues. "We don't make additional charges for food: all of our children, funded or otherwise, have a cooked meal at lunchtime with the morning session, or tea in the afternoon with the afternoon session. Some might say, 'Bring a pack lunch or pay for the meal', but to me that's discriminating against that child – they should be able to come into nursery and have what every other child is having, and if that's the cost of a meal, it's incorporated into our expenses. Similarly, any trips that we offer – and at every nursery the children go out for every topic at least once – there's no cost to the parent. If the nursery can't afford it, we don't do it"

Anne-Marie's inclusive outlook extends to



those children with special educational needs, a growing number of whom are attending her settings, as their reputation for supporting one and all grows – despite the financial challenges this poses. "We have never turned a child away, because it goes against everything I believe in, but we do have to manage it very carefully," Anne-Marie admits. "In Thurrock we get funding to provide each child in this situation with one-to-one support, but in Havering there is only a termly fee, which doesn't stretch as far; so, for example, we might use our students as extra persons in the rooms, extra pairs of eyes. It's about being inventive with what you've got, and making what you've got stretch as far as possible."

4. Learning & development

"There's no point trying to do something they're not interested in!"

"We want our children to leave us with a joy and enthusiasm for learning," Anne-Marie tells us as we discuss practice in her nurseries' rooms. At Chadwell St Mary and across the group, this joy and enthusiasm is fostered through affording children considerable freedom over what they want to do, and the skilful way in which staff extend the activities they engage in. Interests are seized upon and successful ideas are left to benefit children for as long as they hold the attention – as the

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

What's the key to consistent Ofsted success at Chadwell St Mary? Constant reflection, we're told, and a desire to keep improving – but having a strategy to impress the inspectors helps too! "We've always reflected on our practice, tweaked it, changed it, to bring in new ideas – not just for an 'outstanding' Ofsted, but for the families and children who attend," Anita tells us, "but I think we're more

evidence-based now. We have written long-term plans and written action plans each term."

"We also do things that are very visual for the inspectors, because when they come in, they only get a very brief snapshot of the nursery," Anne-Marie says. "Each year we produce what we call a 'reflection book', so that Ofsted, as well as parents and visitors, can look through and instantly see what we've done here over the course of a year."





Talking points

preschoolers' messy potions lab, originally planned for a single day but still in situ months later, proves. Restrictions on risky play are kept to a minimum - "You can't learn anything unless you're prepared to take a risk," Anne-Marie says - and opportunities for children to test themselves and build their confidence abound, particularly outdoors.

Parents, too, are invited to contribute to the learning process, as part of a system known as 'big book planning', which provides practitioners with a more visual and time-effective way to guide their charges through the EYFS. A flip chart in the hallway at Chadwell St Mary informs mums and dads about their children's current topic and invites them to note down what they would like their children to learn. These suggestions are in turn added to a book, along with ideas from the children about the direction they wish to take a given theme: "There's no point trying to do something a child's not interested in," Anne-Marie says. "When our topic was 'space' it was envisaged that the children would learn about the planets, but they wanted to learn about aliens, so we went off on a tangent!"

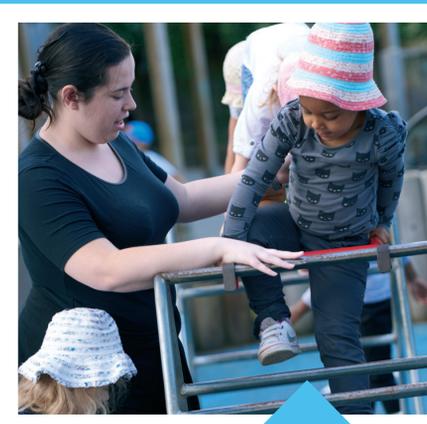
At the end of each topic, these books provide an overview of, and children's reflections on, what learning has taken place, through photographs that showcase both activities and the interactions of staff and children.

Through everything Anne-Marie and her team place an emphasis on developing self-confidence and independence, in order to achieve a 'school readiness' that they feel is essential to children's ongoing education: "For us, readiness is being able to dress yourself and use the toilet independently, to wash your hands, to have the confidence to say, 'I like to do that; I don't like to do that,'" Anne-Marie tells us. "Of all the areas of learning, PSED is the one we focus on the most, because if you don't have PSED, you're not going to achieve anything - you're not going to be able to learn because you're going to be too preoccupied with everything else around you that's stressing you out!"



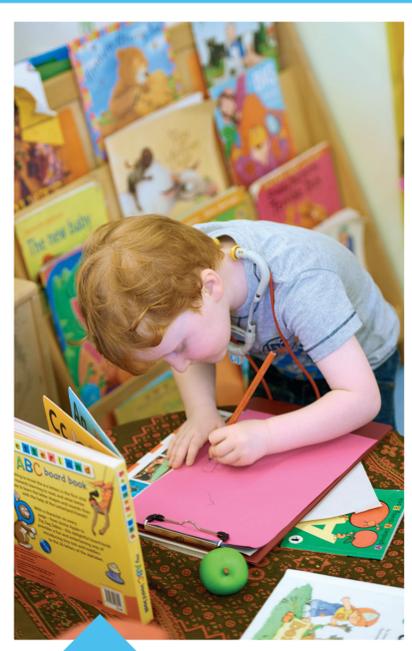
Strong teams

"We do lots of things to try to maintain a stable team - anonymous questionnaires asking staff whether they're happy, what would make their position better, whether they're intending to stay. We try to ensure that they feel appreciated in their roles; they get an extra day's holiday on their birthdays, a 'shopping day' at Christmas, and an Ofsted bonus too, if they get 'outstanding!'"



Worth the risk

From the garden stockading the children delight in running around, to the A-frames bridged by a ladder they clamber across, there are plenty of ways to take a risk at Chadwell St Mary Day Nursery. "It's essential for building their confidence and PSED," Anne-Marie says, "so children aren't restricted here. When they fall and bang their knees, we console them and send them back to try again!"



Be prepared

Carrying out some research into what your likely inspectors will want to see can pay dividends. "Ofsted would have you believe that all inspectors are made equal, but they're not - because they're human beings, and children are a very emotive subject," Anne-Marie explains. "We try to pick up on what they want to see, so we can tailor what we show them."



Sharing knowledge

If the daycare sector is to continue to improve, nurseries need to do more to share their good practice, Anne-Marie reflects: "Although we're businesses, our priorities should be the children - and if by sharing we can improve the experience of a child, even if they're attending the nursery next door to me, that's what we should be doing."