

Joined up thinking

Patricia Hanson, director of strategic partnerships and development at the National Day Nurseries Association, explains how nurseries can make sure their voice is heard...

For a busy nursery owner or manager there's a great deal of truth in the old saying "Many hands make light work". Running a nursery is a demanding job in itself and Government legislation, local developments in areas such as early years funding and requirements set by the Local Authority can add to the workload. However, there's a simple and effective way that nurseries can manage this, keep abreast of developments and, crucially, influence what's happening locally: by joining their local nursery network.

The concept of local networks is straightforward: these are groups of nurseries who come together on a regular basis to discuss what's happening, what they need to do, and solutions to common issues. They're also an opportunity to share good practice and learn how other providers are sustaining their nursery businesses in challenging times.

But local nursery networks are not intended to work in isolation; they're also an opportunity to ensure your voice as a nursery provider is heard, especially by the Local Authority. Take the example of a setting experiencing issues with free nursery education and the cost analysis process for the Early Years Single Funding Formula (EYSFF). The nursery manager writes to the Local Authority, and receives a standard letter in response regarding contacting the local private sector representative on the Schools Forum, but the provider is unsure what this person does and how to contact them. Because they're not confident about what to say, the manager decides that it's just something they need to accept.

Now take provider number two. Following similar issues with nursery education, they

join their local network. They discover that other settings are experiencing the same issue with free nursery education, and the network has invited the local council to come along to talk to them about their plans for developing the Early Years Single Funding Formula. The nursery manager can talk through his queries about this complex area with the council directly, and other nurseries in the network. He

discovers that the Schools Forum representative is actually part of the network, and therefore he hears feedback from these meetings almost immediately. The network also writes as a group to the council to share that they believe that there should be a calculation in the EYSFF to reflect levels of staff qualifications. Following discussions the formula is adapted accordingly and results in a



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slight uplift in funding. It's easy to see which nursery you would rather be.

Have your say

At a time when Local Authorities are experiencing large cuts to their budgets, a strong voice for the early years sector is crucial. Networks are set to become even more important as the spending decisions regarding the Early Intervention Grant are made. This pot of funding is set to support key areas for the sector including the continuation of funded places for disadvantaged two-year-olds and the Graduate Leader Fund. However, it's not ring-fenced – meaning that, potentially, the Local Authority could choose to spend the money outside of early years. Being part of a network is a chance for you to become aware of how the money should be spent – and to work collectively where there are issues to show that funding must be spent on the sector to support children and families. A constructive, proactive network working with the Local Authority is hugely positive.

Some nurseries ask, "But won't I be working alongside my competitors?". Of course, as the network is local, you may find you're attending meetings with other nurseries that operate near to you. But networks are not about sharing sensitive business information – they're about resolving the issues you face collectively and ensuring that your Local Authority and other organisations you work with recognise that you play a hugely important role in the lives of local families.

Another common question is about the amount of time you need to commit – and this is entirely up to you. Networks are independent and

Ken McArthur is owner of Polly Anna's Nursery and is Chair of the NDNA network in York. The network has experienced many successes in achieving change, and secures speakers so that nurseries can build upon good practice.

Ken says:

"Being part of an NDNA network really does make a difference. We've worked closely with our Local Authority to get the cost analysis process for free nursery education right, and have regular speakers at our meetings so that everyone gets updated on key areas. The network is critical in ensuring that our Local Authority understands the challenges we face as nurseries, and we always look to share how we can best work together to overcome these by working constructively with the Local Authority. "In today's environment, nurseries

can host meetings at times to suit their members. Some meet monthly, others bi-monthly and some choose to meet more often when there are issues. Networks have a chair and a secretary to ensure they run smoothly and effectively, and you may find your workload actually reduces from being part of a network – for example, someone can read that 300-page document from the Local Authority and report back, and each member of the network agrees to go to a different event and share feedback.

Case Study: NDNA *Networks, York*

have to come together and ensure that they have a strong, powerful voice. I would definitely say that being part of one has supported my nurseries in remaining sustainable, and ensuring that the value of the services we provide are recognised. In my experience, networks are always keen to welcome new members and I would urge nurseries to find out about getting involved in their local group as it really does make a difference to you and your nursery."

Joining a network is an investment of any nursery manager or owner's time. The NDNA supports its official local nursery networks, providing ongoing advice and a financial contribution based on the number of NDNA members in the local area to help with costs.

findoutmore

The NDNA is always happy to help nurseries identify their local network or, where there isn't one, provide help to get one started. Just get in touch on 01484 407 070 or visit ndna.org.uk

