

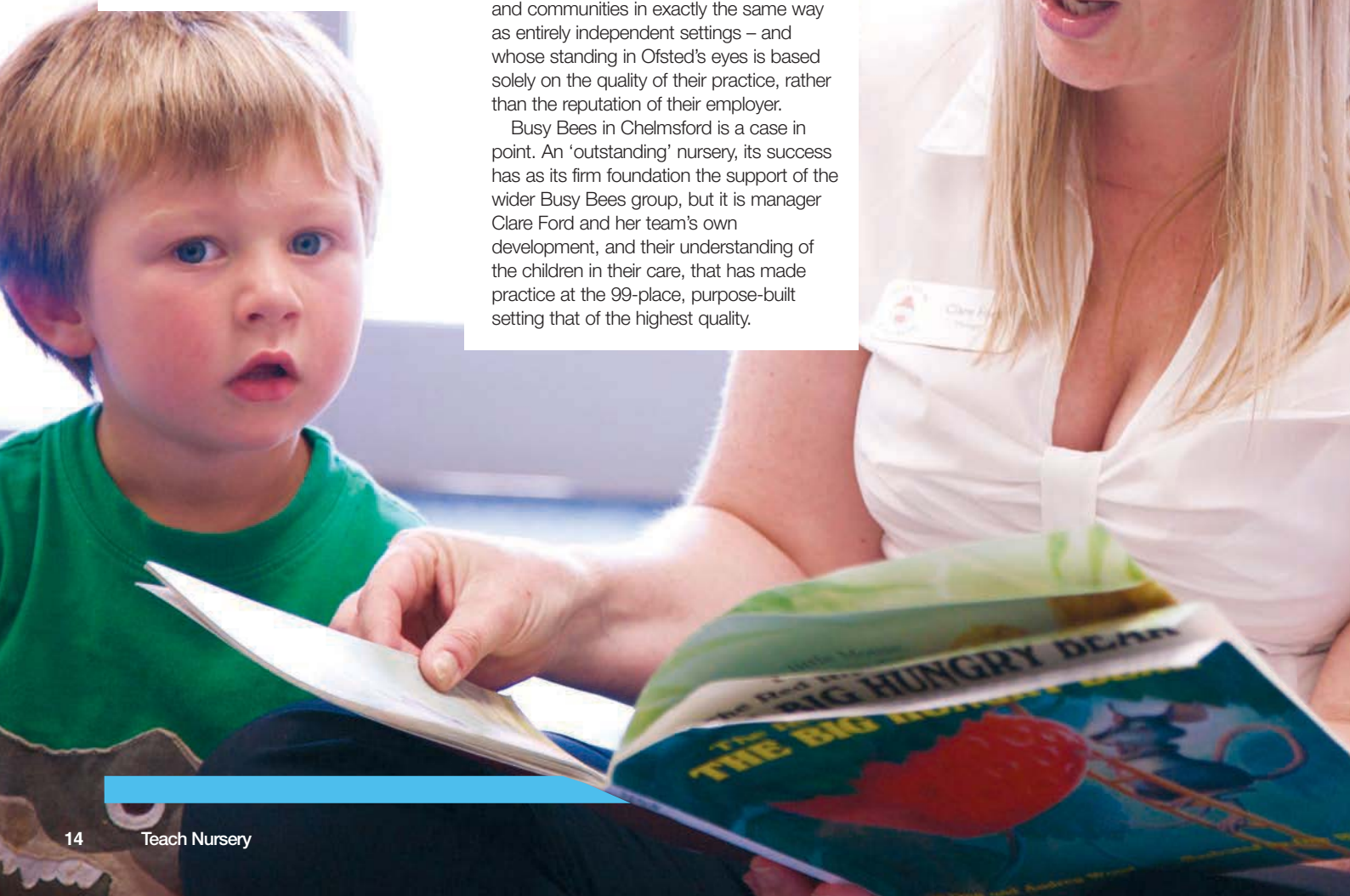
Onwards UP and wards

Staff at Busy Bees in Chelmsford had their hard work rewarded earlier this year when Ofsted rated every aspect of their provision as 'outstanding'. *TN* spoke to manager Clare Ford about the nursery's success...

Anybody with an interest in the early years sector knows the name Busy Bees. A business which started life as a single nursery, The Rocklands, at Lichfield in Staffordshire, way back in 1984, has grown into the largest provider of childcare in the UK, today offering places to over 11,500 children across no fewer than 137 settings.

So successful, and ubiquitous, has the group become that it is easy to speak in generalities about its vision of early years education, the quality of its provision, and its influence on the sector; but that would be to overlook the fact that behind the familiar logo are individual nurseries whose managers and practitioners must respond to the needs of individual children, parents and communities in exactly the same way as entirely independent settings – and whose standing in Ofsted's eyes is based solely on the quality of their practice, rather than the reputation of their employer.

Busy Bees in Chelmsford is a case in point. An 'outstanding' nursery, its success has as its firm foundation the support of the wider Busy Bees group, but it is manager Clare Ford and her team's own development, and their understanding of the children in their care, that has made practice at the 99-place, purpose-built setting that of the highest quality.





When we see our **children** go to school we can see how confident they are. **Knowing** that **together** with the parents we've helped achieve that makes us very **proud**

CLARE FORD, MANAGER

Clare was appointed as manager in 2004, when the nursery was part of the Leapfrog group. Deemed 'satisfactory' in 2006, the setting was judged 'good' in 2008, a year after Busy Bees' acquisition of Leapfrog's nurseries, and completed its rise through the regulatory ranks in May this year. "When I first

arrived, the nursery was doing well," says Clare, reflecting on the improvement she has presided over. "It was busy, and the previous manager had only left to go on maternity leave and then decided not to come back. But over time I found things that I wanted to change, based on my own experiences.



1. Local needs

"If you went into another Busy Bees nursery it would be the same in the sense that both would be following certain procedures, but each would also be very individual," says Clare. "Whilst we're part of a chain, we're not blueprints. We serve the needs of the local community. Here, for example, we introduced playgroup sessions for parents who don't need full sessions, which is something you may not find in other Busy Bees nursery because the need isn't there."

"I think there are a number of things that have happened since our inspection in 2008, in particular. I decided to do an Early Years degree, for one. It completely refreshed my training, and covered a range of different theories and perspectives, which gave me a new outlook on my own practice. In turn, that enabled me to implement ideas that perhaps I wouldn't have considered before.

"We made a conscious effort to focus on equality and diversity, too, to ensure we were meeting the needs of all the families in the community and that we could support all the children coming through our doors. There isn't a great deal of diversity in the local community here in comparison to some areas," she explains. "but our goal was to make sure that we could meet the needs of any child and those of their parents. We don't have to have lots of children from different countries for us to be an inclusive setting, we make sure we value every child, their background and family.

"We also improved our teamwork by establishing what our goals, our ambitions, were," she continues, "so now everybody knows exactly what they're working towards and understands how their role contributes to





2 Unique children

our success. But perhaps the biggest factor in where we are now is that, as a team, we've developed reflective practice. We're constantly talking about where we are with our provision. 'Does what we do work?' 'Is it working towards our aims, or do we need to change it?' We have regular meetings to talk about changes we're going to make, we read articles to make sure we're aware of current thinking, and can move our practice on. We're constantly evolving."

Speaking to Clare, it is apparent how much thought and hard work has been put in by the team; happily for them, it has well and truly paid off. Their latest Ofsted report speaks in glowing terms about staff's knowledge of the EYFS and the developmental needs of their charges, their safeguarding practices and their planning and assessment. Perhaps most importantly, though, walking through the nursery's bright and spacious rooms, and around its outdoor play area, that their children are confident and happy is self-evident.

As a manager with responsibility for overseeing every aspect of the nursery's running, Clare shares her time between the children and the office, but she is clearly conscious of the importance of the 'hands-on' aspect of her role: "Fifty per cent of my time is spent doing other things – attending meetings, liaising with schools, and other admin," she confirms, "but I've always wanted to be able to walk into a room, especially with the older children, and for them to know me. I think if you go into a room and the children don't know you then you're spending too much time in the office. One advantage I do have is that I'm not

2 "We're proud that we know every child as an individual, and can plan unique activities for them," says Clare. "We can see what their interests are, build upon them and move them on to the next step. And it's also the case with those who come to us with additional needs – we work really well with them to overcome their difficulties, to make sure they can access the mainstream."



3 Taking a degree has allowed Clare to draw upon a range of early years approaches when developing her setting's practice: "It's allowed us to develop what we do, and to tackle things from a different angle. Take forest schools: we're not in a forest environment, but learning about it has meant we've been able to better utilise our outdoors and explore ways to get the children experiencing nature."



3 Improving practice

4 Take the initiative!

Like the other nurseries in the Busy Bees group, Chelmsford offers its children a host of initiatives above and beyond what they usually get up to. Those on offer include 'Wake and Shake' – designed to energise young minds first thing; 'Cooking with Me' – a programme of cooking activities for groups of eight children; and the brand new 'Imagination Station', which uses role-play to boost language skills.

counted in the staff ratios, so I can spend time in whichever room I choose or am needed."

Supporting her are 27 other staff members, many of whom have worked together for several years. Like Clare, assistant manager, Tasha Neal, has spent over seven years at the setting while the majority of senior staff have been in place for at least three, and this stability is yet another

factor in the nursery's success.

Asked about the significance of having the support of a chain and, specifically, Busy Bees, to call upon, Clare is unequivocal: "I joined a small chain as a deputy manager in 1996 and stayed for four years, moving up to a managerial position during that time, so I got used to working as part of a wider group," she explains. "Then a position came up with Leapfrog, which I took in July 2000 – I loved the idea of working for a big company because of the support you have behind you and the way that can help you do your job better."

"And with Busy Bees, there's a really good balance," she continues. "We have a childcare team based at head office, who are responsible for organising the planning systems that we use. So, for example, in the case of children's learning and development,



As well as spending time with the children, my job does involve targets and planning strategies, but it's work that needs to go on in the background to make the nursery a success

CLARE FORD, MANAGER



5. Change for the better

6 One of the biggest challenges facing nursery managers, according to Clare, is communicating with parents: “The partnership has to be strong, they have to know what we’re doing for us to gain their trust. It’s not about getting them in the door and forgetting about them, it has to be ongoing. I think that’s a big part of our success. We rarely have any complaints because our communication systems are so good.”



6. Building trust

5 In keeping with the constant improvement that saw Busy Bees in Chelmsford achieve its ‘outstanding’, the nursery is due to have its outdoor area refurbished in the near future. “What we’ve done with the garden is fantastic, but when

the nursery was built 11 years ago, there wasn’t such a focus on outdoor play, so it doesn’t meet all today’s criteria,” explains Clare, “We’re looking forward to creating some fantastic new areas for the children to enjoy.”

they have put together a framework – how we do observations, how we plan activities – that we work to. And it’s the same case with policies and procedures.

“However, there is also the freedom for me as a manager to put my own stamp on the nursery: we have self-governed status, which gives me more autonomy and the ability to make decisions about, for example, how we spend our money, what activities we have going on, and how we market ourselves.

“We’re supported by so many different departments,” she adds, “and it’s reassuring to know that while most of the time I can deal with everything that comes up, there’s somebody to help me with any areas that I’m not trained in.”

Support from the top also manifests itself in the form of a centrally organised training provision and regular internal audits. The

former sees a range of courses, tailored according to nurseries’ input, made available at local venues, and Clare highlights the value of the opportunities she receives to discuss good practice with her colleagues too:

“Another reason it’s nice to be part of a group is that you have the support of other managers. We have regional meetings each month where we get together to share ideas – it’s a good process as it encourages us to try new things,” she says.

The latter ensure that every aspect of every Busy Bees nursery is up to scratch, but most notably include a twice-yearly quality audit, which Clare notes is the ideal preparation for a visit by Ofsted: “It really is as if they’re conducting an Ofsted inspection, and that means that there shouldn’t be any surprises when we have the real one! On top of that we can self-audit using the same criteria, which

we do on a regular basis, so we always know where we’re heading. We even involve the parents – there’s a survey they can fill in online, so we’re getting feedback from everyone.”

A combination of strong leadership, skilled staff and effective support has taken Busy Bees in Chelmsford to the top tier of early years education in the UK, and Clare is quick to praise her staff and acknowledge the importance of Busy Bees’ tried and tested infrastructure in achieving that. Drawing upon her own experiences, she also has a final piece of advice to offer to managers working to earn Ofsted’s approval: “A lot of people have asked me since the inspection ‘Why do you think you were judged outstanding?’, and apart from all the obvious factors – the systems we have in place, all the things you should be doing as a provider – for me, it was about our honesty. When you have your inspection, you should be completely upfront about what your weaknesses, and strengths, are – I think you get more credit for that than claiming to be something you’re not. When the inspector turns up at 9.00am in the morning, rather than go into panic mode, it should be a case of being yourself, selling your nursery and telling them about all the fantastic things you do, because it’s your one chance to talk about your setting. Because we are so reflective about what we do, we were able to say, ‘A year ago we were doing this *this* way, but we realised that it didn’t suit our nursery, so now we’re doing it *this* way’, and I think our honesty shone through. The inspector really liked that.”