

# A commitment to quality

Despite having been adjudged outstanding in every aspect of their provision, the team at Christchurch Kindergarten in Harrow aren't resting on their laurels, as *TN* found out...

**I**n an industry whose business is the care and nurturing of young children – whose primary goal is to offer those who are entrusted to its practitioners the best possible start in life, regardless of their background or individual needs – it should come as no surprise to find many for whom the pursuit of excellence is of paramount importance. For those early years settings that achieve Ofsted's most favourable rating, to be 'good enough' is simply not enough, with the 'outstanding' label a recognition a nursery's team has gone above and beyond in the planning and instigation of a particular aspect of its



# 1. Equal opportunities

“Our children come from quite diverse backgrounds – from the houses nearby and from Harrow-on-the-Hill, which is quite an affluent area,” Divya says. “But we don’t look at background, and we don’t pick the children who attend. Some of our children have difficulties, but we work with their parents – and because we’ve had so much training, and because the staff are confident with what they’re doing, we feel we can work with any child.”



provision or, indeed, the provision in its entirety.

Leading the way by their example are those nurseries which achieve an ‘outstanding’ assessment for every aspect of their service, and it is these settings in which the commitment to providing the best possible start is clearest of all. Christchurch Kindergarten, located in the London Borough of Harrow, is one such setting, having achieved the coveted clean sweep following an inspection at the end of last year. For its owner and principal, Divya Vaghela, and deputy managers Robyn Zealey and Flutura Tase, success was a consequence of a team-wide focus on self-evaluation and improvement – a process that is ongoing – and has resulted not only in the highest standards of education for their children but also a welcome boost to the business.

Having been taken over by Divya in 1998, Christchurch Kindergarten today is in demand. Its single room, situated in a community hall, and accompanying outdoor area has space to accommodate 30 primarily 2–5-year-olds at any one time, whilst its five-strong team offer services to local parents for 51 weeks of the year, with the setting open from 8am to 6pm; it is also oversubscribed. “We’ve got 80 children on our books now,” Divya explains. “When Ofsted carried out the inspection it was about 50, but the report has led to a fresh influx of children. All of our main sessions are full now, and there’s a waiting list. Usually demand picks up after Easter, but

this year it’s been full from January! We were in the local papers,” she continues, “and word of mouth has played its part – our parents like to be able to say that their children go to an outstanding nursery.”

But of course, while recognition, and any associated upturn in demand, is welcome for any nursery, it is only brought about through the skill and hard work of its staff. In the case of Christchurch, Divya and her team made a conscious decision to aim for the top. Divya explains: “The nursery has always been good – it’s never been at only a ‘satisfactory’ level, in Ofsted terms; but after we made the change to opening for longer hours [in spring 2010] we thought, ‘now we’re opening longer hours let’s get ‘outstanding’”. That was our vision, our goal.”

That they succeeded is in no small part down to the solid foundations built up in the preceding years. A settled team, the majority of whom have been at the nursery for at least two years and who work with each other and the children every day, is at the heart of its success – as is an emphasis on continuing professional development. “We’re all involved in ongoing training,” confirms Divya; “it’s something I actively encourage – be it courses on behaviour management, SEN, safeguarding, or leadership or ideas for things to do with the children. It’s going on the whole time.”

With all members of staff also engaged in improving their respective NVQ levels and Divya studying for her Childcare Foundation degree there is never a shortage of new ideas and approaches at Christchurch, with team



One of our **strengths** is that we’re **willing** to take **new** things on board – we’re **flexible** and not **scared** of change

**DIVYA VAGHELA, PRINCIPAL**

## 2. Open all hours



3. As you'll be able to see from the photos, the children at Christchurch are required to wear a uniform when they attend. "It means there's no issues of some children having nicer clothes than others, and prevents nice, new clothes getting dirty or painted on," says Divya. "It's less hassle for the parents, too – they don't have to wait for their children to decide what they want to wear!"



## 3. A uniform approach

members sharing freshly acquired knowledge and integrating what works into their practice while discarding that which doesn't have the desired impact. There is, Divya explains, a team-based ethos which both supports the sharing of new ideas and ensures that every team member can have a say about suggested changes: "We have a staff meeting each Monday where we will discuss everything," she says; "whether it's meals, outdoor activities, resources, outings, it's always a joint decision."

Despite the well-established good practice at the nursery, central to Christchurch's 'outstanding' inspection was the time and effort Divya and her team put into identifying the areas in which they could improve – an assessment presented through their Self Evaluation Form. "We didn't try to glamorise anything – or simply say how wonderful we were," Divya says; "we told it as it was, and Ofsted commented on that fact; the inspector told us that she had read our SEF, and had then come in and found the nursery exactly as she had pictured it. We sieved through each and every point on the SEF, painstakingly – which did take a long time! – and said, 'this is where we're lacking, let's get this sorted'. Then we prepared action plans to go with the areas we had identified and followed that on with smart targets. It took us almost six months to get there."

The process resulted, amongst other

2. Christchurch's opening hours were extended even before Ofsted's visit, as Divya explains: "The parents kept saying "one more hour, one more hour" so we just kept increasing them. Now we find that we get a much wider group of parents than we used to. We can also offer more sessions – children can come mornings only, afternoons only, or a mixture of both, or a full day – we're always flexible."



## 4. Relaxed atmosphere

"The Ofsted inspector was a complete stranger to the children, but as she was walking round with her computer, they didn't take any notice of her – she said that was proof that they felt safe in the setting, because they didn't feel threatened. They're all relaxed, and their parents are as well." Robyn Zealey, Deputy Manager

things, in staff placing a renewed focus both on taking all of the EYFS's Areas of Learning outside – an improvement which, as the snow fell on the day the inspector arrived, they were given the perfect opportunity to show off – and on putting children's interests at the heart of everything they do. This philosophy permeates Christchurch Kindergarten, influencing everything from the way the room is organised and resourced to the approach practitioners take with the activities and topics they offer to the children.

"Whatever we do, it's got to be child's interest," says Divya. "Everything in the nursery is at the children's level, so they can help themselves to anything they like, and it's all visual – we've got photographs for everything. Or, for example, as we've got cupboards in the middle of the room, we decided that area should be just for children's display, so that they can see it and touch it."

"One corner of the room was a little bit bare really and not very inviting," Robyn adds, "so we added a big mat and put some lovely throws up and fairy lights – and of course that caused interest right away. They love sitting there now; it's a calming area. We've just made it a bit bigger and added a new bookshelf there at the children's level so they can see what books they're selecting."

Divided clearly into the six Areas of Learning, the nursery is, as you'd expect in an outstanding setting, full of things for children to



**Our children are polite and well-behaved because we all behave in a certain way: we don't shout at each other, we're not aggressive. It's a case of being good role models**

5. In transition



6. Outside of normal nursery hours, Christchurch offers extra activities in the form of the Stretch and Grow programme, which provides early education about fitness and nutrition – one aspect of a focus on healthy living that also earned the nursery commendation from the Harrow Healthy Schools Programme. A Holiday Club is also available to parents out of term-time.



6. Added extras

5. After leaving Christchurch, children might attend any one of a number of nearby private and state-run primary schools. Teachers are invited to the nursery to meet those about to

enter Reception informally, and staff visit others who can't make it to ensure every child has the best possible start wherever they're headed.



engage with; but the key is that nothing outstays its welcome. "We change what's on offer around regularly," Flutura explains; "it could be weekly, or fortnightly – depending on how interested the children are, and if they're really enjoying something, we'll leave it for longer." There's also a discernible Montessori feel to the environment, with neutral colours dominating, and it's an influence that Divya is happy to acknowledge: "We've also tried to incorporate other elements of the Montessori Method into the nursery too – for example, putting things away: once the children take something out they're encouraged to put it back before taking something else."

The excellent practice taking place at Christchurch is supported by what Ofsted describe as an "exceptional" partnership with parents: "We just talk to them," says Divya. "We have an open door policy so they can come in and talk to us informally, so they don't

have to wait to talk to us if they want to pass on any concerns they might have." At festivals, staff and families come together, with parents encouraged to offer their own time to the organisation of a meal and, at Christmas, a concert, whilst parents of various professions are frequent visitors to talk to the children about what they do.

Looking to the future, Divya and her team are determined to maintain and even improve upon their high standards whilst continuing to grow the business. "We've got 'outstanding', so now we want to maintain it, for our next inspection," confirms Divya. "We're continuing with the SEF, it's a process that needs to be maintained."

"And because there are so many new children coming in, and therefore so many new parents, there will always be different ideas for us to try," adds Robyn. "It's an ongoing process."