

# A perfect BEGINNING

Ofsted wasted no time in paying newly opened Northumberland Heath Day Nursery a visit, but as *TN* found out, its staff were reading and waiting...

**A**nybody in the early years sector who has faced the scrutiny of Her Majesty's Inspectors will appreciate the amount of effort that is required to achieve Ofsted's top mark. 'Outstanding' is not a word that is bandied about by those in charge of assessing the quality of England's early years provision, and for those settings which do earn it, it is often the product of years of hard work and improvement. Seen in this context, Northumberland Heath Day Nursery's flawless 'outstanding', which its team earned just three months after its doors opened to the public, seems even more impressive.

Situated within a children's centre in the London Borough of Bexley, with space to take 34 babies, toddlers and preschoolers, Northumberland Heath is run by charity 4Children and a staff team of 14. Back in October it celebrated its first birthday having passed its initial inspection with flying colours. The question is, of course, how do you go from nought to 'outstanding' in all areas in just three months? The bad, if unsurprising, news is that there's no trick to it – at least according to Northumberland Heath's manager, Joanne Hammond. "It was really down to hard work!" she explains, when asked how she and her team



We're proud to be part of a company that's going places, and which is working high up with government to change things for children

JOANNE HAMMOND, MANAGER

succeeded in impressing the inspectors with so little time to prepare. "The nursery opened on October 4th, 2010, but when I started on October 18th everything was still in the very early stages of development – our pre-school room wasn't open, nor was our babies room. We really had to start from scratch.

"It took a massive team effort from all of the staff," she continues, "We were in at weekends to get things done – but it was all off of our own backs. We wanted to do the best we could. Once we'd started and we could see we were making improvements, and the rooms were beginning to come



## 1. Personal approach

While 4Children's settings draw on the Reggio Emilia approach, Joanne's primary consideration in shaping her nursery has been the needs of the children in her care. "We've deviated from the Reggio approach in certain aspects," she confirms. "I think all of 4Children's settings are different and do things their own way, and it's not something that is imposed upon us in any way. We're allowed to respond to our own children's and parents' needs."

together and displays were going up, we all felt like we were achieving and that gave us a boost to do that little bit more.

"There were only eight of us at the time, but we'd all had really good experiences in the nurseries we'd worked in previously – so we had a background knowledge of what was necessary," she adds. "Having said that, while we'd all come from good nurseries, many of us hadn't been at settings that had 'outstanding' status, so the motivation was there to go that little bit further. We all really wanted it, but at the same time we said to ourselves that we'd be really happy if we got a 'good'. We were over the moon when we got 'outstanding'."

Hard work and motivation are, of course, only two of the necessary ingredients in the recipe for Ofsted success. Speaking to Joanne, and reading the report on her team's efforts, it is clear that much careful consideration has also gone into creating a safe and stimulating environment at Northumberland Heath. The nursery regularly employs a free-flow approach, allowing children to move between indoor and outdoor areas at will, and there is plenty in both to occupy young learners. Inside, rooms are





## 2 Cultural diversity

bright, well-resourced and set-up to make activities for children of all ages irresistible – from the use of treasure baskets and low easels for babies to experiment with paint, to the book areas for older children, which are full of comfy cushions and chairs to encourage fledgling readers to engage with their favourite stories. The outside space includes an eco garden area, shared with the children’s centre, which offers children the chance to view the natural world up close and exercise their green fingers. Opportunities to participate in role-play abound both inside and out.

Behind the scenes, stringent self-evaluation and planning procedures earned the team high praise too. “One of the things the inspector commented on in particular,” says Joanne, “were the systems we’d managed to put in place for recording – we had thought of every possible thing we needed to record in regards to safeguarding, health and safety, and planning. She was particularly pleased with our planning and observation, and said that it meant that no child would slip through the net.”

Amongst the numerous examples of good practice occurring at Northumberland Heath, the partnerships Joanne and her team have forged with parents also stand out. “We’re happy for parents to come in at any time of the day, whether they want to speak to their child’s key person, me, or Paula in admin,” Joanne explains. “We do to and fro books every day – covering eating, sleeping, play, any accidents or incidents, and any other information we need to tell parents. Every child also has a pouch, which we use to give out newsletters, notes and reminders. Of

2. “We have a lot of additional language children, but I wouldn’t say that has proven a particular challenge,” says Joanne. “That might be because all of us live locally, so we’re well aware that it’s quite a multicultural area. We and the children’s centre have a pool of parents who can translate from English to various other languages, too, which is really useful.”



3. Joanne is keen to be flexible to meet children’s individual needs: “Take an example from our SEF,” she says. “There was a child who was really distraught for a long time, which was making his mum upset too. He’d had two half-day sessions a week, but we cut that down to two, two-and-a-half-hour sessions, then gradually built them up. Now he comes for three half-days and he’s absolutely fine. It’s a system we’ve used several times – and we’re happy for parents to be in the rooms with their children until they and the child feel comfortable.”



## 3 Individual needs

## 4. In demand

“Today, we have 75 children on roll,” Joanne explains. “Every week since we’ve opened we’ve had another one or two come in, and the fact that we got an ‘outstanding’ really did make a difference. Word of mouth really helped us – our Ofsted report wasn’t heavily advertised, but this area is one where everybody knows everybody, so it gets around quickly.”

course, the majority of communication with parents is verbal, so the staff will do a full handover on a daily basis too.”

Similarly impressive is the close relationship Joanne and her team have with the children’s centre, which is owned by the primary school situated next door. “I work really closely with Teresa Blackman, the centre manager,” Joanne confirms. Every week we have a meeting to discuss whatever’s going on in

our respective settings, and we work closely with parents together. Recently, as the centre has its Ofsted coming up, we’ve liaised with them on the sort of planning we do here, too; they’ve even adopted some of the signage we have, and use the same golden rules. It makes sense to make the link because the majority of the children using the centre are either here with us or are on our waiting list.

“We also have a good partnership with the school,” Joanne continues. “We work with both the nursery teachers and the Reception teachers, and meet them regularly when collecting children as part of the wraparound service we offer – as well as when it’s time for our pre-school children to step up.”

Despite the fact the school offers its own nursery service to parents, Joanne is clear that the two aren’t competing for customers. “Obviously we needed to offer a slightly



**It’s nice to have guidelines, but children in different areas are always brought up slightly differently, so you’ve got to go with what works best in your local area**

VICTORIA BAILEY, DEPUTY MANAGER



## 5. Good neighbours

**5.** “Having the school next door is nice for our children because when the time comes to move up, it doesn’t seem such a strange place,” says deputy manager, Victoria Bailey. “In the holidays we actually use the playground and the

field,” adds Joanne, “so they have that whole area – it helps to introduce them to bigger spaces, which some wouldn’t have had access to until they went to school.”

different service to the school – so, for example, we offer three five-hour sessions for our NEG children, as opposed to the five three-hour sessions available at the school – but we don’t feel like we’re in competition,” she explains. “We’ve even been asked a few times to go in when they’ve had parents evenings and open days to promote our nursery – and it’s the same with the children’s centre: they promote us, we promote them.

“It works really well,” she concludes, “and we’ve actually had people pay us a visit purely to discuss the fact that we are working so well together – the way the three separate settings have managed to gel.”

Much of the credit for Northumberland Heath’s success must, of course, go to Joanne, an EYP with a teaching degree and experience of nursery and children’s centre management. “I’ve always needed to see the

children,” she confirms when asked about her role within the nursery. “That’s what we’re here for – and if I sat here all day long staring at a screen, I might as well work in an office! My job is to manage the nursery, so there’s certain paperwork and other things that I need to do, but every day I’ll go and speak to the children in the rooms, cuddle the babies and just have that bit of bonding time. It’s important, too, because the staff can’t always get out of the rooms, so if I’m going in I can see what’s going on – and if there’s any immediate information they need to let me know, they can.”

Joanne’s hands-on approach – “I don’t ask the staff to do anything I won’t do myself” – has, she believes, helped to foster strong relationships within the nursery’s staff team, as have organised team-building times and staff’s regular involvement in decision making:

**6.** Northumberland Heath may have ticked every one of Ofsted’s boxes, but the team aren’t resting on their laurels. Long term plans include developing the setting’s outdoor area: “Our garden is the most used area in the nursery,” says Joanne. “The children are out there all day because we’re able to offer a free-flow, but we need to build it up – eventually we’d like to have everything we’ve got inside, outside too.”



## 6. Future plans

“Our staff meetings are a chance to discuss the day-to-day running of the nursery, what we do, our planning. We’ve made changes on the back of what has been discussed in meetings, so everyone gets a real input. I’ve also taken things we didn’t feel happy with as a team back to the area manager and discussed it at managers meetings. It does get fed back to 4Children, and everybody’s opinions are listened to.”

Having the support of 4Children, an organisation heavily involved in the shaping of early years policy as well as the provision of childcare, is an advantage Joanne is happy to acknowledge. The aforementioned managers meetings, quarterly audits and ‘mini Ofsted’s’ to help maintain high standards, as well as training and the provision of group-wide policies and procedures, all enable Joanne and her team to concentrate on the children in their care while continuing to improve their standards. “With 4Children, if you need support, the support’s there,” she says. “Even the really top people are contactable and happy to reply. I’ve worked in places where you haven’t been allowed to contact the top boss, so that’s really nice.

“We didn’t consciously decide to aim for ‘outstanding’,” Joanne concludes as she looks back upon a remarkably successful first year, “but we did make a conscious effort to get the nursery to a level we were happy with, and which we were happy for parents and children to enter. That hasn’t changed.” Judging by the quality of practice at Northumberland Heath, and the speed with which it was implemented, she and her team have the highest of standards.