

Newmarket nursery gains Platinum status

A Cambridgeshire nursery has confirmed its reputation as a leader in people management by gaining the ultimate in accolades – the Investors in People Platinum status. We find out more

The Platinum accreditation given by Investors in People (IIP) is the highest internationally recognised standard for people management. Only 10 of more than 14,000 IIP accredited organisations worldwide have attained the prestigious Platinum level.

Not surprisingly then, The Old School House in Newmarket is the first and so far only nursery to gain the coveted award, which defines what it takes to lead, support and manage people effectively to achieve sustainable results. The Old School House was assessed as being 'high-performing' across all nine of the IIP assessment areas.

Among the activities singled out for praise was the way in which the nursery used positive psychology to enhance supportive leadership practices. All the staff were passionate about seeking continuous improvement, and were keen, active self learners focused on their long-term career development. The Old School House undertakes six-weekly supervisions to discuss individual successes and identify ways in which staff can develop skills further at their own pace. This constantly evolving development advice and guidance combines with support to put learning into practice, whether through individual mentoring, projects or taking on more senior responsibilities, and has enabled staff to take ownership for their own learning and to stretch themselves to support improvements that benefit the nursery.

The assessors felt that staff "felt valued as individuals and for team

and whole nursery successes. The team were enthusiastically involved in planning new initiatives that could be implemented."

Staff training is regarded as a crucial part of The Old School House management practice. Employees are encouraged to gain qualifications, especially using E-learning, and high performing staff members are pushed to coach and mentor others. The IIP assessors pointed out that "the nursery actively supports, nurtures and cultivates strong teams and leaders by offering people a blend of different learning experiences and resources that have helped to build networks of peer support. This includes, for example, bite-sized learning and shadowing to developing as a qualified mentor and physical nutrition co-ordinator (PANCo)".

The result of this policy has been to create a transparent, supportive culture, with high levels of autonomy among staff. Change is seen as normal, with a constant influx of new initiatives such as Eco schools and shared learning events with other organisations.

Among the initiatives championed by The Old School House has been the IIP Health & Wellbeing project in which it acted as the pilot scheme for the industry. This initiative involved developing a holistic approach to health and wellbeing, setting standards against which the IIP Health & Wellbeing award could be measured. Linda Baston-Pitt, managing director of the Old School House says: "It was a catalyst for creating a structured approach to embedding health and wellbeing factors into the nursery, acting as a tool to monitor



and improve the nursery's approach to keeping employees healthy and well."

As a result, a staff café was set up, providing free fruit and healthy drinks and a mind gym for children, parents and staff. Awareness raising sessions are held frequently. New recipes using different flavours are trialled in a bid to reduce salt and sugar intake. A recent initiative was the creation of a Swedish style buffet lunch inspired by a senior management educational visit to Sweden. Initially it was just for older children, but now it is being rolled out to other age groups with modifications for different ages following feedback from everyone involved. Nothing is imposed by management; instead staff decide which initiatives they want to introduce, stop or start. A typical decision was the creation of a health and wellbeing co-ordinator to evaluate existing activities, gather feedback and suggestions.

"At The Old School House we believe that supporting staff wellbeing is a necessity not a luxury and the key to ensuring a positive work culture within our organisation," Baston-Pitt says. "Working on the award has enabled the whole team to embrace the concept of staff wellbeing by demonstrating that it is possible, practical and beneficial to everyone. Using the IIP framework has helped us to be much more proactive by integrating a truly holistic approach to health and wellbeing in all aspects of our organisation."

She believes this is not a matter of telling people how to live their

lives, or increasing focus on or scrutinising health and safety policies. She points out that a healthy workforce reduces staff turnover and absence rates, while raising morale and productivity. It also enables them to attract a higher calibre of employee. As a result, operational costs can be reduced as fewer funds have to be spent on recruitment, agency cover and health insurance.

Adopting such management, training, health and wellbeing policies have also created a very positive environment for the children, Baston-Pitt adds. "The IIP framework enables us to weave together all of the critical elements of leading a strength-based organisation that makes a positive difference to children, families and staff. IIP supports us in creating a positive learning culture where high quality runs through every element of the nursery. We have embedded the values of continuous improvements by engaging our people in the process of change, which has led to consistent exemplary practice.

"The commitment of our staff to undertake further training and development directly contributes to giving our children the best possible opportunities to learn, grow and flourish," she says. The Platinum Award assessors noted that there is an average staff retention rate of over seven years and sickness levels maintained below 1.5%.

The Old School House has taken a proactive stance to developing its staff for many years. It regards training, staff development and



wellbeing as the key to its success as a business and a provider of high quality early-years care. The company aims to provide the best possible care and standards for children, families, staff and students. It has been an active participant in the Investors in People programme for many years, and was also one of the first organisations to achieve Gold status in 2009.

“To have an informed outside pair of eyes look at our organisation has always been a great opportunity for the whole team to reflect and learn. All of the team felt that the process was of great value as [doing a review cycle] supports our plan with an external view of leadership beyond that of the Ofsted framework, and it ensures we remain people focused. Even small improvements can make a huge difference,” says Baston-Pitt.

“Investors in People estimates that only 0.01% of businesses could achieve Platinum status, so we’re all incredibly proud of the award, which represents the culmination of many years of hard work. It also serves to inspire us to continue challenging our thinking and ways of working within the early years sector about what really matters to, and for, children.”

She urges other nurseries to apply for IIP status. There are four levels of award: bronze, silver, gold and Platinum. The Old School House achieved all four over the years. “There is actually very little

paperwork,” she explains. “The new IIP sixth generation standard offers a practical, flexible and easy-to-use business tool designed to help organisations and their people achieve their objectives through good practice in people strategy: www.investorsinpeople.com/”

Seeking this form of accreditation has major advantages for the operation of a nursery. It is not just a matter of gaining an award which can look good on business plans – making the effort to achieve accreditation impacts on the way in which a business operates, and its staff procedures thus improving the long term business prospects. The IIP offers organisations a method for improving staff management, employee satisfaction, motivation and access to training and development. It helps address the people-related issues involved, such as recruitment and retention of staff by drawing on extensive research into best practice across all sectors. The detailed final assessment is designed to help organisations move forward and evaluate practice.

“Working with the IIP specialist who acts as an external ‘critical friend’ pre- and post-assessment was extremely valuable. It not only gave us the opportunity to gain insightful feedback but we were able to tap into their knowledge and experience, Baston-Pitt says.

“Working with Investors in People gives you the chance to stop, reflect and strive to move forward,” Baston-Pitt says.