

on the grapevine

NETWORK WHISPERS

Nursery World and National Day Nurseries Association join forces for a behind-the-scenes column

NOT GOING VIRAL? Nurseries are thinking twice about producing guidance on the deadly coronavirus, which has so far caused more than 900 deaths worldwide. One UK nursery group was planning to bring out guidance for practitioners but changed its mind 'following legal advice'. The NDNA, however, has issued guidance to its members, including links to Government advice.

OPEN BOOK Will nurseries be publishing their accounts in full in an effort to persuade the Government and the public that they are underfunded? Speaking at a recent Ceeda conference, Tops Day Nurseries chief executive Cheryl Hadland said, 'The elephant in the room is that people think we make a lot of money in this sector. How can we get a message out? I am prepared to show my books.' Will she, and will others follow suit?

UP AND DOWN Settings in Redbridge, London have been told they will get 14p per hour per child less because of a £1.5 million council overspend in 2018/19. Nursery owner Louise Felstead of Woodford Green, who put her fees up in January, said this would mean she would have to increase her fees again or not take funded children. 'The [6 per cent] wage rises in April will push up my costs by much more than 6 per cent. It's those who can't afford it who will suffer the most,' she said. A Redbridge Council spokesman said, 'Early years providers in Redbridge can rest assured that they will not be asked to pay back the overpaid amount they received last year. In April this year, the funding will return to the correct level for the coming financial year.'

PAYBACK TIME After it was revealed that the majority of English councils underspend their three- and four-year-old funding in a recent NDNA investigation, the Champagne Nurseries campaign group has set up a closed Facebook group to help settings receive the money they should have been paid.

leadership

Age of reason

In the first of a new series on good leadership and management under the Education Inspection Framework, **Annette Rawstrone** finds staff must understand the 'why'

Know your children, keep them at the heart of everything you do and relax is the advice that nursery area manager Sue Forsyth at Top Tots in Portsmouth, Hampshire has for nursery leaders who are anticipating an inspection. Her setting received Outstanding in all areas when inspected two days after the new Education Inspection Framework (EIF) was released in September last year.

'Achieving Outstanding comes from all the effort that you put in day in and day out, and the inspector can see that,' she says. 'The change of emphasis of the inspection is on a more direct approach to staff and children. The inspectors spent a lot more time in the room, around 85 per cent, with the children and observing the staff – how they extend conversations, discussing planning for children's needs and how they support SEND children. The inspector wanted to see what we do so it was our chance to show them and to shine.'

Instead of the inspector asking to see piles of paperwork, Ms Forsyth says there was much more focus on observing in the nursery rooms, with the main points of interest being:

- How well staff are prepared for extending learning through their teaching style.
- How effective learning is supported.
- Rapid progression levels of children from starting stages.
- How gaps in learning are bridged to support all children for school-readiness.
- Cultural Capital – what opportunities are given that children may not access at home.
- How staff use their experience and knowledge to interact with children and motivate them to be eager to learn.
- Effectiveness of key worker systems.
- How confident staff were in talking about what learning was taking place and why.

A range of staff from apprentices to university graduates were spoken to during the inspection. 'The inspector was focused on investing time into talking through with staff what they were doing and why,' says Ms Forsyth.

Focus on staff

This more direct approach – asking a range of staff to talk through what they are doing – puts great emphasis on an articulate, confident and knowledgeable team who are able to translate knowledge into continuous improvement in curriculum, teaching and outcomes. Yet for a sector with historically low levels of confidence, a lack of training, and an overreliance on assessment, which this new Ofsted framework has been designed to counteract, this will be a challenge for many.

As the new early years handbook makes explicit, leaders have to ensure staff are equipped. 'Leaders ensure that they and practitioners receive focused and highly effective professional development. Practitioners' subject, pedagogical content and knowledge consistently builds and develops over time, and this consistently translates into improvements in the teaching of the curriculum,' it reads. This puts more emphasis on the 'why', according to early years consultant Penny Tassoni.

'The challenge is to make sure that those working directly with the children have a tight understanding about that child, their development but also their aims – why they are working that way. It is not enough for them to just be going through the motions. They need to have a really good understanding of what they are doing, the child's individual journey, and how that links to the setting's curriculum and the mission and vision behind it.'

Assessment

Analysis by consultancy Early Years Fundamentals of the first 250 Ofsted reports published after the new EIF finds much to be reassured about: 82 per cent of providers achieved a Good or better inspection outcome – high, although a notable drop on the 96 per cent achieved under the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) in August. However, less than a third of Outstanding settings were able to sustain their grade, with only 18 out of 63 doing so.

Managing director Pennie Akehurst says, 'We are not seeing a massive move away from the CIF but more of an intense focus on



curriculum knowledge and delivery and also behaviour management. They've always been there in the background but we're seeing more recommendations being made in those areas.' She thinks this is due to the focus on the 'Behaviour and Attitudes' judgement and on communication and language.

'It is about leaders understanding where there are weaknesses in practice through monitoring and self-evaluation and how staff are then supported to continue to develop their knowledge and understanding. Also to home in on areas where individual staff members are not as strong,' she says.

'Managers need to ensure they make time to observe and review practice on the shop floor and that they provide honest feedback to staff. Ultimately their job is to make sure that staff in the setting are competent and confident. If they are not doing that then they are doing staff a disservice.'

Ms Akehurst suggests preparing staff for the enhanced level of scrutiny on practice by inviting in a local nursery manager to provide opportunities to be observed and questioned by someone unknown in order to give them the experience and, importantly, get staff used to articulating why they are doing something and what the child's 'journey' is. Again, it comes back to staff understanding the 'why'.

'We've been asked the "what" and the "how" before but never asked the "why",' Ms Akehurst explains. 'Staff need to think about

the intent, implementation and impact. The intent is the reason why.'

Learning walk

Ms Forsyth aims to ensure her staff receive continuous training and are motivated to boost their confidence (see Tips). 'I would advise managers to invest time in their team to make them feel valued and want to do the best for their children,' she says. 'Also, there can be absolutely excellent practice, but if the manager is not willing to keep up with change then they will not get Outstanding in all areas. They need to be driven as a team and all the staff on the same page.'

She had prepared staff for the changes to inspections by 'unpicking' the framework with them in August and discussing what it meant for their setting so that all the staff understood what would be expected when they were inspected. 'We were able to tell the inspector that we had done the training ourselves and demonstrate that we had invested the time and are proactive.'

During the learning walk, 'Top Tots' deputy manager explained how the children learn and the impact. 'We use the terms "intent" and "impact" in all we do,' says Ms Forsyth. For instance, they explained they regularly go into the community to visit the fish market or go swimming because many of the children don't do so at home.

Ms Tassoni says managers should put in the groundwork for a learning walk by

tips

1. Challenge staff on their learning environments through auditing and on-the-spot questioning, including unannounced mock Ofsted audits.
2. Ask staff 'So why...?' to test knowledge but also to build confidence and give reassurance.
3. Hold knowledge refresher sessions and training on child development and how children learn.
4. Conduct peer observations and feedback.
5. Staff learn in different ways. Use a mixture of training, mentoring, modelling and narration by recasting what a staff member says, explaining it back and elaborating further.

regularly visiting each room and asking staff to tell them about the processes – the rationale. 'There isn't a you must say this or that. It will come easily if you have an understanding of why you are doing it that way,' she says. 'Talk through everything you are doing at the time, everything you have got and have planned and enjoy showing why you are so great.' ■

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