

## market view



### NEW SCORES

**Leah Turner,**  
co-founder of  
*Owen Froebel,*  
which offers day  
nursery brokerage,  
valuations and sales, on changes  
to Ofsted gradings and the impact  
on the day nursery market.

The exciting news of a shift by Ofsted from using one-word ratings to a more detailed scorecard system has been met with positivity from the sector overall. There has been much conversation as to how it will allow parents to have greater transparency and granularity in assessing the quality of the setting they choose.

With the introduction of the scorecard system, settings will now be assessed across multiple criteria, such as the quality of teaching, learning outcomes, safety, and leadership. The change will allow investors and potential buyers to have access to detailed data, enabling them to make more informed decisions and be confident in their purchases.

Any seller who has found themselves on the receiving end of an inspection during marketing or a sale transaction will know the impact that a possible change of rating could have on their valuation, and level of buyer engagement.

Any buyer who has ever tried to finance a purchase of a Requires Improvement setting will know that lenders do not consider that this could be an easy step back up to Good.

The vast leap between ratings, along with the long periods between a reinspection, can make or break a sale with no allowance for the often small changes that could be the difference between ratings. It is partly for this reason that many sellers I speak to actively avoid achieving an Outstanding as it is gained with the knowledge it will likely be lost again and that there is no recognition that Good is outstanding in its own right!

The scorecard will allow for buyers and lenders to understand the uniqueness of the target settings, what is being done well and what needs to be addressed by a new owner, making for a much easier transition into ownership. It will also allow them to look at any risks presented by those weaker areas. Ultimately, this should make things a bit easier for buyers and sellers alike.

## making ends meet – part 5

# Old for new

In part 5 of our series, we look at ways to reduce the cost of resources.

By **Leah Jones**

**W**ith costs mounting and funds dwindling, early years settings are having to get creative when it comes to providing resources.

At SCRAP Centre of Creative Reuse, Art and Play in Leeds, director Louise Lucas says she has seen a significant uptake in settings using scrap for resources in the last five years as funding challenges have bitten.

The scrap store has over 17,000 members, of which a third are early years settings. Products there are generally priced cheaper than in a shop thanks to being sourced from waste products or ends of lines. Victoria Lungu, atelierista at Manor Wood Primary School in Leeds, uses the scrap store to find many of her resources.

‘The increase in costs is, of course, a massive challenge for all settings,’ she says. ‘We have found that when placing orders for things like art resources, prices have crept up year on year.’

She adds that the ‘multiple benefits for society’ of scrap stores are obvious, but specifically for her setting they offer children a ‘really interesting, unique set of resources and possibilities.’



### Something from nothing

This is a common refrain from practitioners pushed to their limits by funding challenges – that in fact cheaper resources can be the most beneficial for children.

At Partou’s Alexandra Day Nursery in Redditch, nursery manager Holly Browning says most resources are secondhand since the setting has gone fully plastic-free.

‘Using secondhand items provides a more authentic experience,’ she says. ‘Things like china plates rather than plastic help children realise you can’t just replace things straight away, so they need to look after them.’

Marta Bialy, nursery teacher at Elmgrove Primary School and Nursery in Harrow, says her motto is ‘less is more.’

‘When children are given expensive resources that do everything for them, they tend to fight over them for a week, play with them for ten minutes, and then the novelty dies,’ she says. ‘But when they are given something open-ended and have to think



Manor Wood Primary School in Leeds gets its resources from a scrap store



about what to do with it, it creates conversation, brings them together and encourages them to use their initiative.'

She adds that using cheaper, or even free, resources allows staff as well as children to stretch their creativity. 'When you open a catalogue, you want everything in it, but it is always much better to get yourself a bunch of something that looks like nothing. You get to see what children do with it and it gives you a good challenge as a practitioner, too.'

### Junk modelling

Elmgrove champions junk modelling as a way to use cheap resources and stimulate children's imaginations at the same time.

'You don't want to be too "Blue Peter" and tell them what to make,' says Bialy. 'They are much better off taking their own route.' As a school nursery, Elmgrove is able to

share resources across year groups, which Bialy says is particularly helpful as budgets are kept across subjects rather than year groups, meaning the nursery has to apply to individual subject co-ordinators in the school to make requests for funding.

The setting writes to local supermarkets for donations and has signed up to Tesco's Bags of Help community grant scheme to raise money for outdoor equipment.

### Natural resources

An even easier place to find low-cost resources is just outside the door. Natural materials such as conkers, sticks, pebbles and leaves can be the foundation of all sorts of play and activities.

Alexandra Day Nursery uses nature brushes, made with feathers and leaves taped to twigs, to paint with, rather than

buying packs of paintbrushes. Meanwhile, Elmgrove has repurposed an old sandpit with wheels as a growing area after grassy outdoor space was lost in a rebuild.

### Parental contributions

Looking further afield, Alexandra Day Nursery issues a wishlist for parents to contribute handy resources once or twice a year. It shares this on social media to allow parents to share it more widely.

'You have to involve the whole community to make it possible,' says Browning. 'You need staff, children, parents and everyone they know to get involved. It's nice, because families then feel more invested in the setting. It feels better than charging extra fees. Sometimes we go big. We're after a boat to use in the garden!'

### Staff buy-in

At Manor Wood, staff look out for bargains on local Freecycle or Facebook Marketplace groups.

'It requires some creativity but also commitment on the part of our team,' Lungu acknowledges.

Meanwhile, Browning has cultivated a keen interest among her staff in snapping up bargains.

'We're a bunch of magpies,' she says. 'Going to charity shops and jumble sales has become like a hobby for us.'

Not all feedback on secondhand items is positive, however.

'You do have some people who are a bit unsure,' says Browning. 'They think it looks like their nan's house. I worry that people sometimes focus on how things look rather than how they will be used.'

'But once you see how engaged the children are in these items, especially if you really follow their interests and set things up attractively, you realise how good it can be and how much freedom it allows you.' ■

## case study: Robin's Nest

When Melanie Newman took over Robin's Nest Community Pre-School in Eastleigh three years ago, she tried to renew all the setting's resources.

'I spent all my profit and then some in my first year,' she says. 'I wanted to get everything up to date and so I really didn't make any money.'

In the end, the owner-manager decided she would have to be more thrifty.

Now, staff will put suggestions for parental donations on a whiteboard outside the nursery rather than charge for extras.

'We don't ask for a lot, just a contribution from any parents who are able,' Newman says. 'We always

explain it's to avoid further charges, so they are usually happy to help.'

Paper and paint are the things the nursery goes through quickest.

'They are the biggest things I spend, and therefore try to save, on,' Newman explains. 'A parent who works at B&Q recently donated wallpaper, which was fantastic as we could cut it up into different sizes and make it last a long time.'

Newman uses car boot sales, charity shops and Facebook Marketplace ('my favourite place!' she says of the latter) to source items.

Robin's Nest also uses some natural resources to keep costs down, screwing some logs together

'like a tiered cake' to make a small-world environment for animal toys, for example.

She also scours the tip to find broken resources like balance bikes which she brings back to the nursery and fixes up.

The setting has replaced a lot of plastic with real-world items such as metal or china crockery. Local businesses have also provided it with resources, including real cups and plates from Costa Coffee when the local branch was replacing its stock.

'It has been a slow process but we've really built up what we have,' Newman says. 'We have been able to massively improve all our areas with a mixture of secondhand resources and donations.'