

## training talk



**WORKING TOGETHER**  
A coaching course enabled Lisa Fern and her team to overcome differences in

opinion. By Gabriella Jozwiak

Communication between busy senior leaders is challenging at any large nursery. At Grandpont Nursery School and Childcare in Oxford, this is one area staff have improved following personalised coaching sessions delivered by Linden Learning.

Head teacher Lisa Fern felt the four members of her senior team needed help to problem-solve and work together. 'We've been involved in a lot of change over the past couple of years,' she explains. 'There'd been some instability.'

Linden Learning early years director Tamsin Grimmer delivered a day of in-house coaching. They spent a morning tackling issues on which they had been unable to agree. In the afternoon, Ms Grimmer took each employee aside for an hour of one-to-one coaching.

'At the beginning she laid down some basic ground rules around listening to each other and taking it in turns to speak,' says Ms Fern. 'She helped us come to solutions ourselves by using open-ended questions and recapping things we'd said.'

She adds, 'We shared different ways we'd like to communicate with each other.' This led them to agree on introducing a new email and calendar system. 'It was a very practical outcome,' Ms Fern says.

The one-to-one sessions gave staff the opportunity to speak confidentially. Ms Fern says Ms Grimmer helped her take issues in turn, consider barriers, then agree actions to resolve them. 'We put deadlines down to make sure I would do things by a certain date,' she says.

The nursery is now introducing similar formats for supervisions between senior management and its other 24 staff members.

'As a leadership team we're listening to each other more now and are more open-minded,' says Ms Fern. 'Coaching is a great way of learning and I'd definitely want to repeat it.'

→ Further information: [www.lindenlearning.org](http://www.lindenlearning.org)

## market roundup: 2019

# How the market

A busy year saw both the first Icelandic group enter the UK and Busy Bees expand into Italy. **Mark Traynor**, of TLT Solicitors, has a roundup

## UK DEALS BY LOCATION

### England:

Yorkshire 4  
Hampshire 1  
Sussex 3  
London 8  
Nottinghamshire 3  
Bristol 2  
Surrey 1  
Essex 3  
Hertfordshire 1  
Staffordshire 3  
Derbyshire 2  
Bedfordshire 1  
Hampshire 2  
Gloucestershire 2  
Leicestershire 2  
Wiltshire 2  
Kent 1

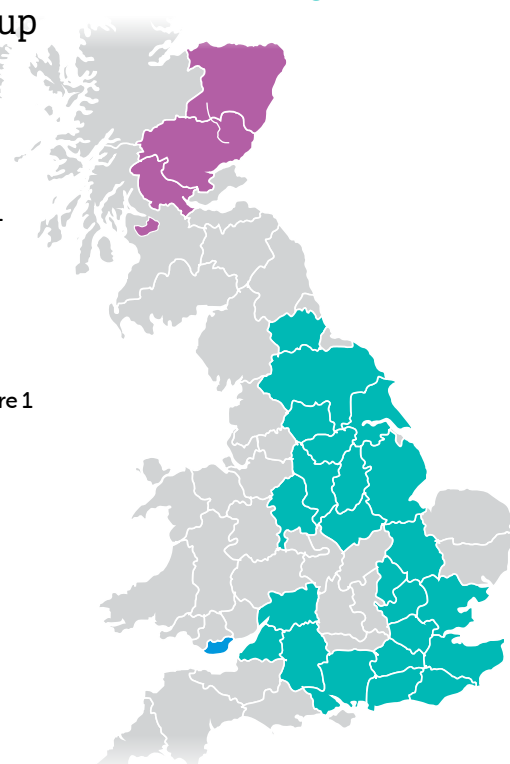
Cambridgeshire 1  
Lincolnshire 1  
Durham 1

### Scotland:

Aberdeenshire 1  
Perthshire 1  
East Ayrshire 1  
Dundee 3

### Wales:

Glamorgan 2



## Overview

A massive 72 nursery deals have been reported in the UK press in 2019. The larger operators dominated the headlines by hoovering up smaller settings as part of their aggressive expansion plans – a trend that we have seen emerging over the past five years. However, there was still space for a number of first-time buyers (five reported deals) and also an increase in the number of new settings being built by existing operators (six deals reported).

Big foreign players have had an interest in the UK for some time now, but have often failed in their attempts to gain a foothold. We feel that this has regularly been down to the competitive market driving up prices beyond that which they are willing to pay. However, in 2019, Icelandic group Hjalli Model and French giant La Maison Bleue acquired their first UK settings. They both follow Les Petits Chaperons Rouges, which was the first European operator to enter the UK in 2017 with its acquisition of the 16-setting group Magic Nurseries. Perhaps this latest activity signals an acceptance by these foreign nursery groups that premium prices are worth paying in the UK.

In other international activity, UK-based

Busy Bees made acquisitions in both the US and Italy, and Childbase Partnership expanded into China.

## 72 Number of deals

- The map shows the 52 deals where the nursery location was reported.
- London and the North West led the way with eight deals each.
- There was also much more activity in Scotland, with six reported deals.

## 26% Increase on last year

Our 2019 market roundup shows a 26 per cent increase in activity on 2017 (our last roundup, with 57 deals). In fact, the number of deals has been largely stable over the past three years, as expanding groups were not as good as they are now in reporting their acquisitions.

Previous years have seen groups focus on acquisitions of nursery chains with four-plus settings. However, after five years of consolidation, the larger groups are also now turning their attention to quality single-setting bolt-ons. While the UK nursery market is still hugely fragmented, it feels as though supply of quality acquisition targets has plateaued at present.

# fared in 2019



## Busiest and quietest months

- May was the busiest month with ten reported deals, closely followed by February and August with nine each.
- November was the quietest with two.



## Deals of the year

In February, La Maison Bleue's first-ever UK deal saw it acquire The Old Station Nursery Group, an operator of nine settings across Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire and Warwickshire.

This acquisition was a significant step for La Maison Bleue, and demonstrated its strong ambition to become a leading player in the UK and Europe, backed by investors TowerBrook and Bpifrance. We expect to see much more from them in 2020.

Special mention also goes to Busy Bees for its first foray into America and Italy. In September, the group announced its acquisition of Educational Playcare, which operates 19 settings in the state of Connecticut, and bilingual childcare provider Doremi's seven settings across Milan. This marks a big step for Busy Bees and could be the start of some serious expansion in these two huge and previously untapped international markets.



## Provider of the year

Now the fourth-largest nursery group in the country, Just Childcare saw exceptional growth in 2019, with six reported deals. Its latest acquisition of Safehands Day Nursery in November takes it to 60 settings and 4,480 childcare places.

Kids Planet comes second with five reported deals.



## Investor profile

TowerBrook is an international private-equity firm with offices in London, New York, Madrid and Munich. It has particular expertise in healthcare, financial services, retail and telecommunications. One of its most famous previous investments was in designer footwear company Jimmy Choo.

Bpifrance is a French investment bank that regularly partners with other private-equity firms to take a minority interest in investee companies. It has a particular focus on supporting French companies, and has a specific fund to be used for overseas investments (which is where the funds are likely to have come from to support La Maison Bleue).

## Outlook for 2020

Sustained growth in the sector throughout 2020 is on the cards for the big groups. Bertram, ICP, Just Childcare, Busy Bees, Kindred Education, Kids Planet and Storal Learning have all made it clear that they have both the appetite and the funds to grow further.

We are also anticipating these groups to continue exploring other ancillary opportunities in the sector – that is, businesses such as recruitment, training, back-up care and apprenticeships, rather than just nurseries. Bright Horizons' acquisition of My Family Care (which is a nanny and childcare recruitment agency and includes the Tinies nannies franchise) could be an early indicator of this trend.

We predict there will be more inward investment into the UK from Europe, the US and the Far East.

## Brexit and funding

So far, the uncertainty around Brexit doesn't seem to have affected deal activity. However, Brexit is a concern for all UK businesses – and any resulting economic downturn will impact everyone.

Perversely, any economic downturn could actually see more foreign nursery players make acquisitions. This is because a drop in the value of sterling (likely if there is a recession) will mean that UK nurseries will become cheaper to acquire for those that are using stronger foreign currencies.

Generally, there will also be concern among nursery providers as to the impact Brexit will have on the use of overseas staff. The sector is already suffering from a skills shortage, so any new restrictions on the recruitment of European staff could be a major problem.

Meanwhile, nursery closures rattled the sector last year, with 2019 seeing closures particularly in more deprived areas. One example is the Great Yarmouth Community Trust, which ran eight nurseries, and went into liquidation after running into financial difficulties. The charity concentrated on areas of Great Yarmouth that are in the top quarter of the national deprivation leagues.

Government funding has been a hot topic for some time and, following December's General Election, a subsequent Budget announcement is looming. Regardless of political allegiances, we hope that funding of early years education is seen as a priority for the new Government. ■



## Operating a Viable Early Years Provision

**Early Years Alliance (£13.65 for members)**

This book tackles four key strands to operating

sustainably: effective leadership, financial management, marketing and communications, and quality. It sets out key analysis tools to help leaders to take stock of the current position, of both vision, strengths/weaknesses and CPD, and provides planning resources including a breakeven analysis, a competitor analysis grid and a quality improvement action plan.



## Looking for Learning Provocations

**By Laura England (Featherstone, £7.71)**

Provocations invite learning, interest and

creativity as they allow children to explore, think and use their imaginations. This dip-in-and-out book is linked to the Characteristics of Effective Learning and presents case studies, real-life images and practical pointers. Laura England, an Early Years Teacher, explores the learning that takes place when a child's play has been inspired by a provocation, including mirrors to investigate symmetry, cardboard boxes to understand shape, and sticks and pebbles to construct their own designs.



## Evaluating Early Years Practice in Your School

**By Ann Langston (Featherstone, £10.99)**

This book aims to help school teams evaluate their EYFS practice, so that they can reduce unnecessary workload and create more time for 'hands-on' teaching – all crucial with the advent of the new inspection framework, which this book is linked to. Should Reception children attend assembly? Should young children be taught to write in nursery? Should planning be based on children's interests or designed to meet the needs of individuals with language delay?