

# Rise and shine

Two nursery groups in this year's directory have rapidly expanded in recent years to become some of the largest in the country. *Katy Morton* discovers the stories behind their growth

## CHILDREN 1ST

New to *Nursery Chains* this year, family-owned Children 1st Day Nurseries has been operating settings across the Midlands and South Yorkshire for 27 years.

The group of 18 nurseries was established in 1988 by Margaret Mason, one of the founding members of the National Day Nurseries Association, in a bid to boost the quality of provision.

'It was when I returned to England after spending time in Scotland where I worked as a pre-school community advisor – supporting playgroups and private settings – that I saw provision wasn't at a particularly good standard,' she explains.

'At the time, a nursery in Long Eaton was up for sale. It was one of two private settings in the whole of Derbyshire. Back then it was very hard to get private settings registered, as local authorities were very suspicious. It had been run by a children's nurse, which is how she'd been able to do it.'

Ms Mason bought the 20-place nursery, increasing it to a 24-place setting, but says it wasn't without its struggles.

'During the 80s, registration of nurseries focused on space and rooms rather than opportunities for learning.

'The local authority refused to talk to us and the colleges wouldn't send their students to train at the nursery.'

It was then that Ms Mason started to challenge local authorities, and with other colleagues set up the National Day Nurseries Association.

While she acknowledges that there have been a lot of changes since then – the nursery group now trains around 100 apprentices a year at its training academy, working in partnership with schools, colleges, Job Centres and Government agencies – she says her dedication to delivering the very best care and education for children is as much a focus today.

It is this, along with the group's approach as a family-run business – three generations of Margaret's family work at Children 1st, which she believes has been pivotal to its success – many of its 18 nurseries are rated outstanding by Ofsted.

But Ms Mason says it was never her intention to own a large group of nurseries.

'I have never worked to a strategy or planned to open a specific number of nurseries. When we reached 12 settings, I thought that would be our maximum, but now we have surpassed that.



**Children 1st started in the late 80s, when local authorities were suspicious of private settings**

'I'm an opportunist. If an opportunity presents itself, it is in the right area and there is enough strength around me, I will go for it. Often we end up taking over nurseries that are in distress and turning them around. The setting in Plumtree, Nottingham was due to close following a bad Ofsted, so we took it over. The nursery is now rated good.' ➤

## CHILDREN 1ST TIMELINE

**1988** The first Children 1st nursery opens on Breedon Street in Long Eaton, Derbyshire. The nursery, called The Berries, is registered for just 24 children.

**1991** Children 1st@ Briar Lodge opens in Long Eaton.

**1993** Acquires its third setting in Long Eaton, Children 1st@ Main Street.

**1995** Children 1st@ Sheffield opens. It is the group's largest nursery to date.

**1999** Children 1st@ Newark.

**2000** The group opens a nursery located within the grounds of Chesterfield Royal Hospital.

**2001** Children 1st@ Toton opens.

**2003** Children 1st@ Derby Road opens. The very first nursery on Breedon Street closes. Children 1st@ Briar Lodge is converted into the group's new head office.

**2005** Children 1st@ Leicester opens.

**2006** The nursery group takes

over the running of a setting on a school site in Chesterfield, Children 1st@ St Peter and St Paul. The first purpose-built setting opens in Clowne.

**2007** Children 1st@ Grantham.

**2009** Children 1st@ Shepshed. The nursery is based in a 400-year-old building.

**2010** Children 1st@ Plumtree.

**2012** Children 1st@ Meir Park in Stoke and Children 1st@ Acorns Upper Tean.

**2013** Sets up a new head

office and training academy at Mayfield House in Long Eaton.

**2014** The nursery group acquires four settings from the Old Station nursery chain.





Just last year, Children 1st acquired four settings from the Old Station chain, one of which it plans to turn into a flagship setting. The acquisition, like the rest of the group's nurseries, was funded by the family business with support from banks.

For now, however, Ms Mason says her focus is on supporting children with more complex needs, particularly disadvantaged two-year-olds, rather than growing the business, although she confesses that isn't something she has ruled out.

## JUST CHILDCARE

Just Childcare has more than tripled in size in a year, growing from a group of six nurseries to 20 since last autumn, firmly placing it within the 25 largest nursery chains in the UK.

Owned by David and Jacqueline Johnson, Just Childcare, which was established 11 years ago, now provides a total of 1,174 childcare places and employs more than 300 staff.

And the group's rapid growth looks set to continue with plans to open three more nurseries by the end of December and a further 25 settings in 2016.

'Depending on how things go, we hope to have 50 nurseries by the end of next year,' says David Johnson. 'So far the nurseries we have acquired have been concentrated in the North West and Yorkshire, but we are now looking to expand into the Midlands.'

The pair's ambitious plans, which have been made possible thanks to investment from financial partner Phoenix Equity, are fuelled by their desire to operate a large nursery group and utilise their 65 years' experience working in childcare and education.

Both David and Jacqueline worked for Nord Anglia Education, which used to operate nurseries in this country, with Jacqueline overseeing the running of the settings, and David in charge of the education division.

Following this, the pair set up Just Childcare in 2004 with the aim of providing parents with reliable, friendly and high-quality provision – all of Just Childcare's nurseries (except for one just acquired) are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, which David and Jacqueline say is credit to their 'brilliant team of staff'.

However, it wasn't until the last 12 months that the group began rapidly expanding, buying a total of 15 nurseries. Of these, three were part of a small chain, the others standalone settings, all of which still retain their individual identities and features.

Currently, two of the recently acquired nurseries – Buttons and Bows in Manchester and Kapers in Blackpool, are under refurbishment.

'Our policy is to maintain the nurseries to a high standard. Refurbishment is a continuous process and all acquisitions will be brought up to our standard,' explains Mr Johnson, who

**Just Childcare now provides a total of 1,174 places and employs more than 300 staff**

says their next step is to expand upon their training offer with a modern apprenticeship scheme linked to all the nurseries.

'At present, we run a handful of training courses from our head office in Denton, Greater Manchester. However, the plan is to bring all of our training in-house, which will be overseen by a new training manager.

'Developing our own staff is an important part of our future development, as is the continuous development of our existing staff', adds Mr Johnson. ■

## JUST CHILDCARE TIMELINE

**2004** Establishes Just Childcare. Acquires Best Friends in Worsley and the Little People group of three settings in Burnley.  
**2006** Acquires Little Acorns in Atherton.  
**2014** Buys Little Manor in Runcorn.  
**2015** A year of acquisitions:  
**January** Little Stars in Glossop;  
**April** The Big Picture in Southport;  
**May** Brambley Hedge nurseries in Cheshire;  
**June** Buttons and Bows in Atherton;

**July** Playdays and Kapers in Blackpool;  
**August** Cherubs in Sale and Parkwood on the Wirral;  
**September** Willowdene in Widnes;  
**October** The Hollies in Chorley, Giggles in Lytham and Ladybirds in Leeds.

