

Changing times

Although the top of the table remains the same, this year's top 25 ranking reveals evidence elsewhere of the shifting early years landscape. **Catherine Gaunt** reports

In *Nursery Chains'* 20th year, nursery groups across the country are meeting the demands and challenges of an uncertain political landscape head-on.

In 1998, a new Labour Government was embarking on an expansion drive to provide universal childcare, with hundreds of Sure Start Children's Centres soon to emerge and the introduction and expansion of the free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds.

Twenty years on, the UK faces its most unpredictable future for decades, with the possibility of a no-deal Brexit looming and another general election next year more than likely.

Two decades ago, the 1998 issue of *Nursery Chains* contained the details of just 70 nursery groups. In 2018, our directory contains 179 names.

We published our first league table listing the 20 largest groups in the UK in 2001, providing a combined total of 33,506 places. The directory listed the names of around 140 nursery groups.

In 2018, the groups in our league table of the 25 largest nursery chains in the UK own or manage 1,433 settings, providing 110,271 childcare places.

Busy Bees remains at the top for the 11th year running with 353 settings, offering 31,514 places.

Outside the UK the group is continuing to expand globally, announcing plans in February to open 32 nurseries in China over the next five years.

Closer to home, Busy Bees has continued its run of acquiring medium-sized groups, buying the Mace Montessori group of nine nurseries and one school, all in London, in May. This was followed two months later with the purchase of Daisy and Jake's six Wirral-based nurseries in July.

The largest nursery group in the

25 largest Nursery Chains in the UK

POSITION		NURSERY	SETTINGS	PLACES
2018*	2017^			
1	(1)	The Busy Bees Group	353	31,514
2	(2)	Bright Horizons	308	24,805
3	(5)	Monkey Puzzle Day Nurseries	63	4,516
4	(4)	Childbase Partnership	41	3,899
5	(6)	The Co-operative Childcare	44	3,486
6	(3)	Pre-school Learning Alliance	80	3,425
7	(7)	Kiddi Caru	36	3,206
8	(9)	Banana Moon	47	3,159
9	(11)	Just Childcare	40	2,931
10	(8)	Bertram Nursery Group	37	2,923
11	(13)	Kids Planet	31	2,812
12	(16)	All About Children	30	2,507
13	(10)	Spring by Action for Children	45	2,377
14	(12)	Children 1st	24	2,264
15	(14)	YMCA	45	2,241
16	(17)	London Early Years Foundation	38	2,004
17	(15)	Tops Day Nurseries	27	2,000
18	(19)	Mama Bear's Day Nursery	24	1,611
19	(18)	Happy Days	21	1,569
20	NEW	ICP Nurseries	20	1,420
21	(23)	Kids Allowed	8	1,334
22	NEW	Chestnut Nursery Schools	17	1,129
23	(24)	Alpha Nurseries	26	1,088
24	(22)	Toad Hall Nursery Group	13	1,054
25	(21)	Tiny Toez	15	997

*Figures as of 30 November 2018 ^Figures as of 30 November 2017

UK also rebranded in August for the first time in 35 years with a new logo featuring a reimagined version of its original character, Buzz.

Meanwhile, Bright Horizons, which remains the second-biggest group in the country, has also been busy with deals this year. The group has acquired the Yellow Dot group of 12 nurseries, based in Hampshire, and Zoom's five London nurseries, between them adding more than 1,100 childcare places.

Bright Horizons has also entered

The groups in our league table own or manage 1,433 settings, providing 110,271 childcare places

into a partnership with investment bank Morgan Stanley, which is offering its employees workplace nursery places at the group's settings in London and Glasgow. It also runs workplace nurseries and other care services for more than 100 corporate clients.

Monkey Puzzle, which operates as a franchise, has jumped to third place in the table, adding ten more nurseries and more than 700 places in the past 12 months.

The group allows local owners to buy the right to run the setting ➤

making the grade: How do the Chains measure up?

NEW 1 KIDS ALLOWED

5.00

6 out of 8 settings
2 new registrations



2 (1) KIDS PLANET

4.79

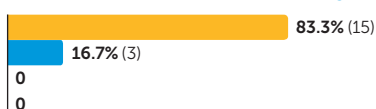
19 out of 31 settings
12 new registrations



3 (3) CHILDREN 1ST

4.67

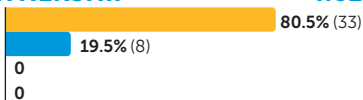
18 out of 24 settings
6 new registrations



4 (2) CHILDBASE PARTNERSHIP

4.61

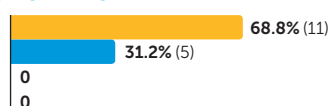
41 out of 41 settings



5 (4) HAPPY DAYS NURSERIES

4.38

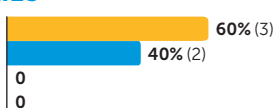
16 out of 21 settings
5 new registrations



NEW 6= ICP NURSERIES

4.20

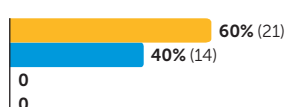
5 out of 20 settings
15 new registrations



6=(5) LEYF

4.20

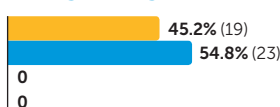
35 out of 38 settings
3 new registrations



8 (6) THE CO-OPERATIVE CHILDCARE

3.90

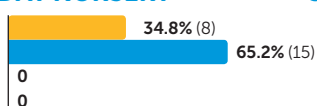
42 out of 44 settings
2 new registrations



9 (10) MAMA BEAR'S DAY NURSERY

3.70

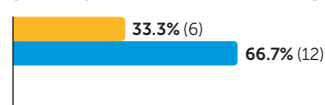
23 out of 24 settings
1 new registration



10 (9) TOPS DAY NURSERIES

3.67

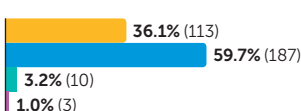
18 out of 27 settings
9 new registrations



11 (7) BUSY BEES

3.61

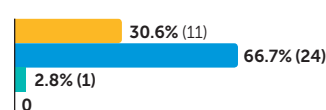
313 out of 353 settings
15 new registrations
25 in Scotland/Wales



12 (12) KIDDI CARU

3.56

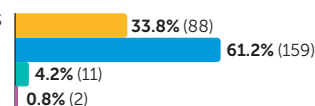
36 out of 36 settings



13 (8) BRIGHT HORIZONS

3.55

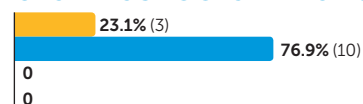
260 out of 308 settings
27 new registrations
21 in Scotland/Wales



NEW 14 CHESTNUT NURSERY SCHOOLS

3.46

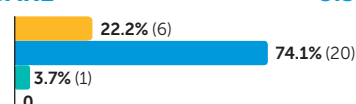
13 out of 17 settings
4 new registrations



15 (16) JUST CHILDCARE

3.37

27 out of 40 settings
13 new registrations



16= (14) BERTRAM NURSERY GROUP

3.29

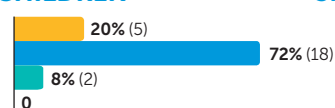
14 out of 37 settings
23 in Scotland



17= (11) ALL ABOUT CHILDREN

3.24

25 out of 30 settings
5 new registrations



NEW 18 TINY TOEZ

3.17

12 out of 15 settings
3 new registrations



19 (15) PRE-SCHOOL LEARNING ALLIANCE

3.14

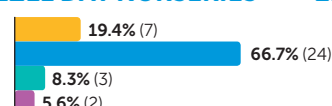
73 out of 80 settings
7 new registrations



20 (18) MONKEY PUZZLE DAY NURSERIES

2.94

36 out of 63 settings
26 new registrations
1 in Scotland/Wales



NEW 21 ALPHA NURSERIES

2.89

19 out of 26 settings
7 new registrations



22 (17) YMCA

2.88

43 out of 45 settings
1 new registration
1 in Wales



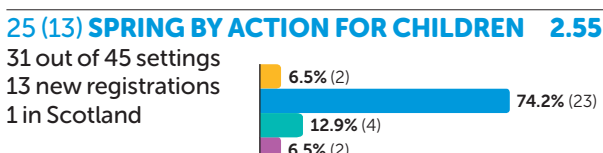
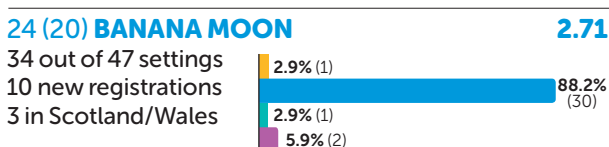
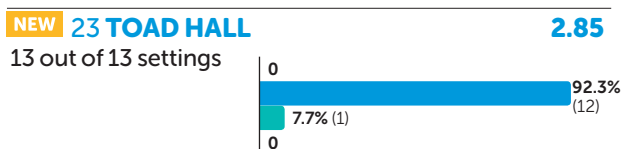
- Compiled from the latest published Ofsted reports.
- The percentages given are based on the number of published Ofsted reports.
- We have only included nurseries registered and inspected by Ofsted, and excluded nurseries in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which fall under different inspection regimes.
- We have noted where Ofsted reports are unavailable, for example if settings are new registrations because they are newly-launched or have been acquired and re-registered.

Table rankings

We allocated points to each setting on the basis of its Ofsted report. For each group, the total number of points was then divided by the number of reports to give a final score. Figures in brackets show last year's position.

Outstanding: 5 points
Good: 3 points
Requires improvement: 1 point
Inadequate: -2 points

Key



under its name with a package of ongoing support and training, enabling speedy expansion.

The Childbase Partnership has been pushed into fourth place. The group moved to full employee ownership last year, claiming to be the tenth-largest employee-owned company in the UK. In January the group paid £850,000 worth of dividends to more than 1,700 employee owners, who each received a tax-free partnership dividend payment of up to £680.

DOWNS AND UPS

If we needed evidence of the impact that 30 hours' underfunding has had on some areas of the early years sector in the past year, we need look no further than the Pre-school Learning Alliance.

Previously the third-largest group, the alliance has moved to sixth place with the loss of 28 settings and around 800 places.

As *Nursery World* revealed in September, the provider has closed 23 settings since January as a direct result of under-funding of 15- and 30-hour childcare entitlements.

Writing for *Nursery World*, alliance chief executive Neil Leitch said that 'stagnant funding levels' were forcing settings to close their doors for good.

'Some of these offered the 30 hours, some just the 15 – but all suffered from the ongoing, unsustainable lack of adequate funding, to the point that when faced with yet another year of rising rents, wages and other costs, but little to no change – and in some areas, a fall – in funding, we could simply no longer find a way to square the circle,' he said.

Further down the table, up two places to number 11, Kids Planet has opened nine new nurseries in

the past year. Since the initial £10 million investment secured by the group from Business Growth Fund (BGF) in 2016, the family-owned business has expanded rapidly, acquiring existing settings in the North-West.

This year the group received a further £6.5 million investment from BGF and plans to double the number of settings it owns over the next five years.

In September, Kids Planet celebrated its tenth birthday, marking the anniversary with the opening of its 30th nursery in Great Sankey, Warrington, and is opening a 100-place nursery in Hoylake.

In 12th position, All About Children has also expanded rapidly this year. It too has opened nine more settings and now operates 30 nurseries, with plans to acquire a further six nurseries in 2019.

We have two new entries to this year's top 25 table.

Our biggest new entry in 20th place is ICP Nurseries, founded in 2016 by Tracey Storey, who has previously been a director at Leapfrog Day Nurseries and Happy Child. She co-owns the group with private equity firm Innervation Capital Partners.

Last year, the group was awarded £8 million in funding from OakNorth Bank – which provides business loans for entrepreneurs – to fund expansion for 20 to 25 sites.

ICP says it plans 'to acquire a collection of the very best nursery settings in Greater London, the Home Counties and the South East'.

Chestnut Nursery Schools jumps into 22nd place with 17 nurseries and intends to expand in Cambridge, London and Norwich.

OFSTED RANKING

This year we have expanded our analysis of the Ofsted reports of the largest groups to include all 25.

Congratulations to Kids Allowed who are top of the table for the first time, achieving the highest score possible, with all six of their inspected nurseries graded Outstanding.

Kids Planet, which was top of our quality table last year, is now in second place, with 17 nurseries graded Outstanding and two Good, with 12 nurseries awaiting inspection after rapid recent growth.

Fast-growing ICP comes in at number six, but with only five of its 20 nurseries yet inspected.■



Jennie Johnson, chief executive of Kids Allowed