

Committed to excellence

When Bertram Nursery Group won this year's Nursery Chain of the Year award, it was particularly commended for its training and career development. *Meredith Jones Russell* takes a closer look

An individual approach to each of its nurseries, motivated staff and warm relationships with parents all helped Bertram Nursery Group to scoop Nursery Chain of the Year at the 2013 Nursery World Awards.

The judges particularly commended Bertram for the quality of its training and opportunities it offers staff for career development.

The chain was formed in 2007, bringing together Happitots Day Nurseries, Strawberry Hill Edinburgh Nursery and other subsidiaries, and adding Holyrood Nursery Group to its roster in early 2008. It currently operates 32 nurseries with a total of 2,714 registered places in Scotland and north-west England.

As well as delivering modern apprenticeships and early years NVQs and management courses up to Level 5, it runs first aid, safeguarding and other professional training sessions. The company has recently invested in an online training platform, allowing staff to access reference materials and submit work as well as getting marks, feedback and support from assessors via Skype and private chat rooms. Nursery managers can also log in to track the progress of their learners. The training, which was previously in-house only, has recently been opened up to external companies.

'It has been really popular,' says commercial director Susan McGhee. 'It means that other employers don't have to arrange for their staff to be let out on day release to attend a course, which is really important.'

The group also offers a free skills gap analysis to other companies, and has pledged to support mature



learners by matching the funding that is offered to 16- to 19-year-olds.

MEETING FAMILIES' NEEDS

Within the nurseries, Bertram has established a Charter for Excellence, which aims to put people at the centre of all decisions. The charter was written with input from parents and staff when the company was first set up, and has not been changed since.

Ms McGhee says it is at the core of all Bertram's work. 'Whenever we're thinking of doing something, we revert back to it. Some things might change – for example, we used to have staff let us know their ideas through surveys whereas now we're rolling out a new staff intranet. But the commitment we're all working towards has stayed the same.'

The Charter for Excellence encourages the involvement of staff in the development of the business, so nursery budgets are negotiated in partnership with employees.

It seems to have paid off, as the chain boasts a strong record in staff

Commercial director Susan McGhee says Bertram puts people at the centre of all its decisions

retention in all its nurseries.

'Of course, we're limited with what we can do in terms of salary increases, but we can find other ways of rewarding our staff, even if it's sometimes just asking how they feel,' explains Ms McGhee. 'It's about being aware that they know the nursery better than any of us, because they're the ones that are in there. They know it would be better with this bit of kit, this extra training, or whatever it might be. That's the most important thing – everyone communicating and working together. We value everybody, from baby room to board room.'

The charter also addresses the importance of communication with parents and children. Bertram nurseries are encouraged to set up Twitter and Facebook accounts and run regular parent focus groups, and parents and children help to choose nursery menus and local charities to support.

Ms McGhee believes that Bertram's strength lies in understanding the challenges families face. 'We have a lot of working parents so we

CASE STUDY: AIMEE SENIOR



Aimee Senior, a deputy manager at Holyrood Nursery at MediaCityUK in Salford, has worked for Bertram Nursery Group since January 2012, when she was hired as a nursery nurse.

She sees its supportive atmosphere as being the key to its success.

'The staff have always been so friendly and management is really friendly too. I have to say that now that I'm one of them, but it really is true. It doesn't feel like they're far away from you. There's always someone to turn to. You feel really supported in everything here.'

'There are great incentive programmes. If you take the



PHOTO: GUZELIAN

sometimes need to open earlier. We try to make life easier for them, so things like having a hairdresser come in to the nursery mean their time off with their child can be spent on quality things. It's the same with

extra-curricular opportunities we offer, like swimming lessons.'

GROWING FAST

Bertram is committed to an individual ethos for each of its nurseries and

'Our ethos has to be tailored and tweaked to suit the needs of individual nurseries'

aims for a flexible approach to running the group as a whole. Its 32 nursery settings trade under local brands such as Holyrood, Happitots and Bright Beginnings. In most settings, the staff wear a uniform. However, when the chain took over the Dryden Street nursery on the Manchester University campus, existing parents and staff expressed resistance to the idea, so Bertram dropped the policy.

Ms McGhee explains, 'Our ethos has to be tailored and tweaked to suit the needs of each individual nursery. It's like the outdoor spaces – our Holyrood nursery at MediaCityUK in Salford has got a natural forest garden with chickens and rabbits, whereas our Liverpool setting is right in the city centre. We've built raised beds for digging in the garden, but you can't create a forest there so it can't be the same. It's about overcoming that, recognising and valuing the differences and giving them something special of their own.'

Having previously worked as a nursery nurse in local authority and then private nurseries, and later as operations director first at Happitots and then for Bertram when they merged in 2007, Ms McGhee is pleased to be able to combine business with her childcare knowledge in her role as commercial director.

'I have the chance to do something fresh and new, which was a bit of a challenge,' she explains. 'And I really do love it.'

Bertram Nursery Group was one of only nine Scottish companies to make the Investec Hot 100 fastest growing UK businesses for 2012. It is currently working on plans to open four more nurseries in the next year. ■

● www.bertramnurserygroup.com

Holyrood Nursery at Princes Dock in Liverpool has been open for two years

most bookings in a month you get extra money for resources, there's a Nursery of the Month award and £50 vouchers to be won for everyone in the nursery – that's the chef, the apprentices, the managers, everyone.'

Ms Senior believes the results of the in-house training programme reflect the company as a whole. 'It's noticeable how much higher

our apprentices' practical skills are; things like making a bottle, sterilising a bottle, and just interacting with children. It's partly because it's a modern apprenticeship, so that's more the focus, but it's also very much proof of the strengths of the company.'

Prior to working for Bertram, Ms Senior had worked for local councils, so she noticed the differences of being at a large

corporation immediately.

'Obviously it's a big company, but I think it makes the most of the benefits of being a chain, so we have good budgets and have area managers as well as nursery managers so there are extra people checking that the staff are all okay, that everything's going all right with planning, everyone's got the resources they need and things like that. But at the same time it

still manages to feel homely.

'Bertram really knows what children and staff need. Everyone is so well treated. We're all different but the ethos of the company runs throughout at the same time.

'That's what makes it so great. I'm pregnant now and I would be super happy to bring my child here. They set a high standard for their nurseries and they have love and care too.'