

Bringing it back home

A range of providers, from established chains to maintained nursery schools, have set up their own training arms. *Gabriella Jozwiak* investigates the practicalities of taking training in-house

Ask a nursery owner why they opened a training business and they are likely to say it is because they could not find quality training elsewhere.

Recent updates to early years teaching standards appear to have made little impact on the number of nurseries deciding to provide training on their own turf. But how easy is it to open your own training centre? And should more nurseries be joining in?

Bright Kids is one of the latest nursery chains to launch a training arm, MBK Training. It began training Bright Kids staff last year, and opened a training facility in June this year, from which four staff deliver continuing professional development (CPD) courses on subjects such as Early Years Foundation Stage requirements and nursery management. It has a new premises and is now offering courses to other settings.

Training director Tricia Wellings, who owns Bright Kids, says she began the enterprise because she was disappointed by local training options. 'We would send staff on local authority – and other – training and they would say they had not been taught very much,' says Ms Wellings. 'We found out they were sometimes taught by practitioners who had not been in a nursery for 20 years.'

In response, Ms Wellings and three colleagues completed the initial teacher training course 'Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector' to gain the necessary skills, such as writing lesson plans and meeting learning objectives. They then began upskilling Bright Kids' 55 practitioners across three nurseries and six out-of-school clubs.

Ms Wellings says that setting this up alongside running the business was challenging. But she hopes that marketing courses to other community organisations will bring financial benefits to the group. Quality in her settings has also improved as a result. 'Because the whole team has had the same input, their expectations has changed and they challenge each other more,' she says.

Offering accredited courses, such as Level 3 qualifications or apprenticeships, is more complicated than offering CPD courses. BNG Early Years Training, the training company connected to the Bertram Nursery Group, was set up ten years ago and is now among the largest early years training providers.

This month it will offer the new Early Years Educator qualification

from CACHE, as well as other entry-level courses.

In order to offer these courses, nurseries must register with the Skills Funding Agency (SFA). However, only organisations with a turnover of £500,000 can have a direct contract with the SFA.

BNG currently subcontracts its training to partners, such as a voluntary sector organisation called Rathbone Training, but has reached the £500,000 threshold and is considering applying for an SFA contract alone. It now serves more external nurseries than its own settings, working with 36 of its own nurseries and just under 50 external providers.

For smaller organisations, this threshold 'is a barrier' says BNG commercial director Susan McGhee. 'It is challenging to get your funding ➤



BNG Early Years Training, part of Bertram Nursery Group, will begin offering entry-level courses

contracts in place for the apprenticeships,' she explains. 'There are tenders to apply for. There is only a set time of year the register of training organisations is open for applicants – you have to go through the process of applying and the due diligence testing to get onto that framework. Once you are on there, you are not guaranteed a contract, you still have to go through the bidding process.'

Gaining accreditation from awarding bodies such as CACHE also takes time. 'There is a lot of administration and management,' adds Ms McGhee.

Puffins of Exeter is another nursery chain that has developed a partnership to gain SFA funding for apprenticeships. It is linked with seven other training providers and offers Level 2 and Level 3 courses and apprenticeships. Last year, it trained 58 learners across seven nurseries.

Training manager Sue Holding says the scheme started in 1993 because the company was unhappy with the standard of college graduates. It accommodates its students by over-staffing settings so apprentices can spend one day a week at Puffins' training centre. The building has a computer suite and space for 15 people.

Three full-time training staff and four part-time assessors and tutors carry out the training. They are all also in practice. Ms Holdings says this is a major advantage. 'CPD with us is actually working in the nurseries, whereas college-based training might not do very much hands-on stuff,' she says. 'It allows us to keep up to date with everything.'

Hadland Care Group, based in south-west England, owns Tops Day Nurseries and has been running training arm Aspire Training Team for almost ten years. The company opened a new head office near Bournemouth in July this year with six training rooms. It plans to extend the training it offers to the public.

Managing director Cheryl Hadland says growing such a large training business was only possible because she has a different team in place to run her 15 nurseries. Aspire is a separate business.

'Staff collaborate with the nursery managers and find out who needs what, then run a training course at one of our nurseries but invite the local community as well,' she says.

Ms Hadland says it took years to reach the £500,000 threshold that enables her to have a SFA contract. She advises that nurseries interested



Aspire Training Team, run by Hadland Care Group, opened a new head office earlier this year

in setting up their own training arms either work through a local college or keep the offer simple. 'Do not underestimate how difficult it is to set up something,' she says.

'You need qualified trainers, assessors and internal verifiers. But if you just want to teach first aid in your setting, all you need is a first aid trainer who is approved to offer certificates from an awarding organisation.'

Ms Hadland warns that it is difficult to make a profit from training because of the investment required. Training sessions need equipment, such as adult-sized chairs and visual aids. She suggests subcontracting trainers with their own equipment, offering them the nursery as a venue as one way to reduce costs.

Some maintained nursery schools, such as the Hungerford Nursery School, also offer training. Currently, eight of the school's practitioners deliver courses for up to 18 people several times a term. It does not run any externally assessed or supervised courses, but plans to develop these in the future.

Headteacher Suzanne Taylor says the number of courses has increased since training began in 2009, particularly after the setting became one of 16 Early Years Teaching Centres nationally, a Department for Education-funded project for outstanding centres to train and support staff in other local early years settings.

Ms Taylor says her organisation's

training arm performs a different role to a private nursery, because the aim is not to generate income. 'Our role is to serve children and parents within the community, and to some extent other settings,' she says. Financially, Hungerford's courses break even.

For other nurseries considering offering training, Ms Taylor advises staying focused on what they do best. Her setting, for example, specialises in outdoor practice.

She also warns that delivering courses should not impede the nursery. 'We will not do too much training right at the beginning of term because we have to get to know our children,' she explains. 'There should not be too many practitioners out – retaining balance is really important.'

And, she says, managers should keep trainers' skills current. 'We make sure our knowledge is up to date by attending courses ourselves here and abroad,' she says. 'Staff also do lots of reading.' ■

More information

Details of the qualifications can be found at:

- CACHE, www.cache.org.uk
- City & Guilds, www.cityandguilds.com
- NCTL, www.nationalcollege.org.uk
- TechBac, www.cityandguilds.com/courses-and-qualifications/techbac

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