

Rethinking recruitment and retention

With four out of five nursery care providers struggling to recruit, nurseries are being urged to try out new initiatives to encourage applicants to come forward. Here, one of the fastest growing groups in the UK, Family First, share their approach to tackling the problem.



With 54 nurseries and over 1300 staff, Family First is on a mission to attract and retain the best quality nursery staff in each of the areas they operate. But, like most other businesses across the sector, it hasn't been easy.

Dianne Lumsden-Earle, Chief Childcare Operations Officer, explained: "After the pandemic, some people chose not to return to the early years sector as their situation and attitude to work had changed. With the challenging staffing landscape, we had to look at how we do things and adapt for the changing times."

Family First began by recruiting a new Head of Talent, Ben Lowe, who is responsible for recruitment and brings a wealth of experience and ideas from working across Academy Trusts.

Ben said: "There are similar staffing issues across the education and nursery sectors – pay, flexibility and attracting the right people, but the difference is that in schools teachers have a long notice period, so you have enough time to fill your vacancies, whereas in the nursery sector you are often recruiting for yesterday and not tomorrow."

"At Family First we take a hybrid approach to recruitment. Our centralised recruitment team deal with the processes including the checks to ensure safe recruitment – taking the hard work away from the managers but still ensuring they

are accountable for their own nursery setting."

Taking a long-term approach

The Family First philosophy is that short term recruitment is not the way forward. Their approach is to promote what the business can offer the employee rather than the other way round. It is important to get ahead of the game, retain your people rather than poach from competitors.

Ben continues: "Recruitment can be a long and passive process. We can run a recruitment event one month with 10-15 people attending and only receive one application sometimes months later. 90% of candidates are passive and look out of interest but that doesn't necessarily turn into an application. Top level candidates are often content where they are so we need to take a different approach."

"Our strategy is to let people know we are here and what we can offer them, promote our business ethos and the benefits of working for us so when they decide to look for a new role they will remember us."

Back to basics

Family First has changed the recruitment journey and interview process, so it isn't one sided and stacked in favour of the employer. Job adverts are changing so they don't just replicate the job

description but emphasise what is different about the company – including its ethos and benefits.

Ben continues: "It might sound simple but job adverts should be 70 per cent about attracting the candidate and 30 per cent about what the employer needs from them – many are the other way round which is why we are changing ours. Most job roles within nursery settings are similar but what is different is the company and what we offer. This needs to come across in the job advert which must be appealing and interesting."

Family First use different ways of attracting candidates including social media campaigns. The demographic of many nursery staff is an ideal match for those who regularly use social media. Family First are building a strong social media strategy that promotes their brand, what they stand for and what they offer staff.

Ben adds: "We can get stuck in doing what worked four years ago when the world and early years sector were very different, but we need to move with the times. Using social media is just one channel we can use to help with our recruitment and retention."

Changing the way people are recruited is another change that Family First are making. "The pandemic has taught us to make greater use of technology, so we are holding more virtual recruitment events."



This is the way forward for recruiting staff; you can attract many candidates as they can connect from the comfort of their own home.” Ben adds.

Other initiatives that Family First have invested heavily in include their apprenticeship scheme. Dianne adds: “Our apprentices are our shining stars of the future and are very important to our business. Most of our settings have two or more apprentices. We provide them with a thorough training programme and equip them for a career in childcare whilst moulding them to our own beliefs and ways of working – it’s a win, win for both.”

Family First believes that getting to potential candidates early is the way forward. They go into schools to speak to pupils at 16 about a potential career in childcare. Dianne continues: “We have a responsibility to tell the story about what a career in childcare can offer a person whatever their age as at some point they might want to work for us. If we sow the seeds early that could pay off further down the road.”

Retaining staff is key

Equally, if not more important than a good recruitment strategy, it is vital to have a sound retention and engagement strategy. Raj Grewal is Head of HR at

Family First and has worked on improving terms and conditions of employment and enhancing company benefits including staff wellbeing, recognition, reward and engagement initiatives.

Raj said: “At Family First, we invest in home grown talent. We have growth plans so that our people can develop in specialist areas and enjoy new opportunities - this can be a sideways or upward move or development in their existing role.

“Training is a big part of Family First and investing more in face-to-face training is really important and more impactful especially post pandemic where training has started to shift to other inexpensive online or virtual sessions. We have tailored internal and external training programmes help our people to flourish and fulfil their potential.”

When it comes to rewards and recognition Raj says: “We ask our staff if we are getting it right and how we are doing via our staff surveys. We offer a range of benefits including more annual leave than the industry norm, recognition incentives, an Employee Assistance Programme that includes face-to-face counselling and staff wellbeing champions in our nurseries. More recently we have introduced free life



assurance which has been well received by many staff.”

Recognition can really help with staff retention, and it doesn’t have to involve an elaborate benefits package. Raj adds: “We find it is the simple things that are most effective, for example a ‘thank you’ gift, a paid day off on birthdays or if it has been a particularly good or challenging week, our teams are treated to lunch. Our managers do a lot to reward and recognise their teams each month and small gestures really do go a long way.”

Dianne adds: “The priority is keeping our staff by providing a positive and supportive culture and a strong benefits package. Money is not the always the top priority – it’s not why people choose a career in childcare. We recruit people who are passionate about what they do.”

As CEO Ollie Humphries says: “Recruitment and retention is a top priority for us, to ensure we continue to build a strong and dedicated workforce to provide high level childcare in all our nursery settings whilst embracing their philosophy of everyone enjoying their work and having fun.” ■

If you are interested in finding out more about Family First group, please visit: www.familyfirstnurseries.com