

# Meet the custodians of culture

With an ambition to be the best quality childcare provider in the UK, fast-growing **Family First** – which now has 40 nurseries – has been focusing on its team and culture. Here, we find out more ...

“Where else would you get to share a stage with an armadillo, a skunk and a python?!”

It’s an unusual question posed by Ollie Humphries, chief exec of Family First, but one that sets the scene for a company where ‘fun is in its DNA’.

As one of the fastest-growing childcare companies in the UK, Family First is on a mission to create a culture which is different to other children’s nursery groups – which led to holding its first ever annual conference at Chessington World of Adventures.

“It was great fun,” said Ollie. “The energy in the room was amazing and it gave us a really good opportunity to hear from our team as to what we’re doing well and what we can do better, in order to support them.”

## Embedding a supportive culture

The company’s growth in just two years has led to the development of a new management team and setting up offices in Beaconsfield. But all are clear on one thing. They exist to serve the nurseries and not the other way around.

As Raj Grewal, Head of HR, explains: “We don’t have a head office culture, we have a support office culture. We’re here to assist and not manage our nursery teams as they take on the most responsibility each and every day. Our people-centric culture helps us to invest in our people and have specialists from every field to support our nurseries.”

“Our culture is a ‘We’ culture, not an ‘I’ culture,” adds Dianne Lumsden-Earle, Director of Operations and Quality. “We don’t do hierarchy, whatever people’s job title. Everyone has mutual respect for each other and has a voice. Everyone has an opinion and contributes.”

But what does this mean in reality? Don’t all organisations listen to their team members and embed best practice within their groups?

“Actually no,” says Dianne. “Many of our new managers are surprised and delighted with the level of autonomy we give them, from small things like ordering their own resources to more fundamental changes like the layout of their nursery.”

“Another example is with our new nursery curriculum, which links to the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework and meets Ofsted requirements. Our nurseries tailor this to best meet the needs of their children.”

The senior leaders are constantly visiting the nurseries and are contactable and visible – but the Nursery Managers have the autonomy, with accountability, to run their nurseries. They also share ideas across the different brands and they supported each other at the height of Covid, particularly when there were staff shortages when they were pinged by the NHS.



## Investing in the nurseries and team members

As well as investing a sizeable sum in IT plus internal and external décor and furniture, there has been a significant investment in the team members themselves, from pay rises and rewards to staff training and development, and career opportunities.

Chief exec Ollie Humphries explains: “We’re acquiring single site nurseries and small groups that match our ethos for quality and childcare, but in reality it’s all about people. So we’re making sure we’ve got the best people to support the nurseries and grow the business at pace, making sure we don’t ever let ourselves down for quality and childcare. The result is that we’re achieving market-leading organic growth in nursery places.”

“As part of our acquisition process, we make sure that every nursery gets a mock Ofsted inspection, so that we can draw up an action plan to ensure they deliver on the outstanding expectation we have of all our nurseries.”

“To deliver consistency, we have a lot of work going on behind the scenes, so we use eyLog to talk to the parents and support our back-office functions, we’re updating our finance system to welcome all nurseries with one easy reporting tool and we’re focusing on health and safety. We’ve even hired in-house painters and decorators and are working alongside architects and a maintenance company to ensure the premises are the best they can be.”



“Excitingly, at the moment, we’re also doing a full review using all of our chefs from across all the nurseries to ensure we have a menu that’s fit for our children and meets all the nutritional guidelines. Plus we’re working toward getting our Soil Association Certification for organic and sustainable food.”

### Supporting the nursery teams

Regional Operations Manager Emily Burgess says: “As we grow, it’s important to have the right support structure in place and being visible is key. Embedding the right culture means everyone has the same clear values and respect as one and other.

“We’ve recently redesigned our induction processes and training packages, and there are a lot of career development opportunities plus master classes and business coaching, to develop our leaders.”

Head of Marketing Natalie Hunt adds: “Communication is just as important internally as it is externally, so we place great emphasis on showing how our teams work well together. Plus, for recruitment, it’s important to illustrate the activities that our team do with children, and the fun they have at work.”

As Lee Ibbotson, Head of Central Operations at Family First, says: “What can be better than seeing happy children at their nursery graduation ceremony knowing that you’ve done a fantastic job in preparing them for school and giving

them the best start in life? It’s such a joy seeing them, with their proud parents and nursery team, everyone having a smile on their face and tears in their eyes.”

### Making work a fun place to be

Dianne Lumsden-Earle concurs wholeheartedly. “As well as our trip to Chessington, we’ve taken our team to Bicester Shopping Village as a thank you for their hard work.”

Dianne also runs their ‘Karaoke Fridays’ where time is set aside for nursery teams to have a sing song together online. “It doesn’t matter whether you can or can’t sing. It’s all a bit of fun and there’s a lot of laughter. Seeing everyone’s happy faces is what it’s all about.

“We also recognise events and milestones in their lives such as birthdays or weddings or when people return from maternity leave, and each of the nurseries has a team member of the month plus we will give gifts to the nurseries, at random, as a thank you for things they have done well.”

As Dianne sums up: “If you don’t have the right team, people and culture, you can’t move forward. Put simply, if you don’t have the right team, you don’t have a business.” ■

If you are interested in finding out more about Family First group, please visit: [www.familyfirstnurseries.com](http://www.familyfirstnurseries.com)

