

Why giving back has never been more important

With the world in a state of flux, Covid still rearing its head and household bills on the rise, there has never been a more important time for children's nurseries to play an increasingly active role in supporting their families, says the Family First children's nursery group



Altruism is written through Family First like a stick of rock. The desire to give back to local communities and support struggling families has never been stronger and is part of the organisation's ethos – which might come as a surprise for an investor-owned group.

Of its 47 nurseries (and rising), four are community nurseries, where most of the children are Government funded and a number have special needs. At one, in Surrey, many are from the traveller community.

But why would a privately-owned company whose mission is to turn a decent profit decide to include not-for-profit community nurseries in its portfolio?

"We are extremely passionate about giving all children, whatever their backgrounds, the best start in life and ensuring they all have equal opportunities," says Dianne Lumsden-Earle, Family First's Chief Childcare Operations Officer.

"It's an ethos that comes right from the top, through our Chairman Andy Morris, and is ingrained in all of our nurseries, across the country, from the moment we bring them into the Family First group."

Dianne's desire to ensure no-one

goes without is utterly heartfelt and her motive comes from her own start in life. "I come from a working-class background in Newcastle, with parents who worked all the hours as cleaners to ensure we had food on the table and to give us the best they could.

"When I was widowed at 26 with two young boys, life was extremely tough and they stepped in to help me again. Everyone needs a support network around them, particularly those who are struggling, and the care we give our families often goes beyond the nursery gate."

Andy Morris added: "When we look at childcare, we need to be inclusive as we grow. At Family First, I wanted to help nurseries that support communities that have special needs. Our not-for-profit community nurseries make a big difference to the outcomes of the children – and the staff love giving back."

As Family First CEO Ollie Humphries says: "We can see it's getting harder and harder for parents, with inflation spiralling and heating and food bills going up, and it means that all of us, across the nursery sector, need to think about what more we can do to help people during what is going to be a bumpy ride ahead."

Families receive additional support

Within the community nurseries, of which two are in Essex and two in Surrey, many parents are on the breadline and from areas of deprivation. They are supported to access funding, healthcare and dental treatment as well as to facilitate visits to see their children, if the parents have separated.

Childcare Specialist Pam Webber supports the two Surrey community nurseries, Tiny Tots Daycare in Ash and Tongham Daycare in Farnham, just a mile apart, which joined Family First last July. "We have 27 children on the SEN register and our SENCO, Becky Long, is simply amazing and goes over and above to support the families.

"At our Tongham nursery, there is a large traveller community and our team there, including our Deputy Manager Jade Wilkinson, has a phenomenal relationship with traveller parents and goes out of its way to support them.

"On Red Nose Day, the children all wore red but instead of being asked to donate money, the families were asked to donate food to the local food bank, to support others in need.

"It's so important that we all do what



we can to give back as more and more families are slipping into poverty and we want to give them and their children the best that we can. We hold family fun days, for example, where they can do things with the children that don't cost them anything."

Family First has also invested heavily in its new nurseries, including new flooring, play equipment, outdoor areas, staff training, parent communications, I.T. and other facilities. Each nursery tailors the Family First curriculum to meet its own community needs.

Pam's colleague Laura Hodges, also a Childcare Specialist, supports the two Essex community nurseries, in Colchester and Vange, which were acquired along with three others in the Just Imagine group in October.

"We like to encourage healthy eating and nutrition plus promote wellbeing in our nurseries. In Vange, they've just created an allotment and are growing enough veg to open their own farm shop! In Colchester, they've installed a wellbeing cabin, with a quiet space and resources to support children's emotional wellbeing.

"Colleagues have also received additional support in both locations, with a new dedicated area where they

can hold meetings and training sessions. After all, happy healthy people also means happy, healthy children."

Family First's Regional Operations Director Emily Burgess added: "For children from disadvantaged backgrounds, early intervention is crucial and we are already starting to see an increase in attendance because of the support we are giving parents."

Family First has charity at its heart

The support given by Family First also extends to charitable giving, with nurseries raising money for their own local causes, as well as supporting the Ukraine appeal.

Head of Childcare and Training, Nicola Reed, said: "Our nurseries hold cake sales, family fun days and have even sold refreshments at the nursery gates to raise money for charity. Some recycle bottle tops or support homeless charities but it's important they choose their own local causes to support."

Dan Fawcett, along with colleagues Laura Hodges and Priya Uppal, recently slept out all night to raise money for The Bridge Homelessness to Hope in Leicester, a charity that supports homeless people and where Dan's father

David, the local vicar, works.

With just a sleeping bag and a cardboard box for comfort, the trio joined a 50-strong group for a freezing cold – but thankfully dry – night out under the stars in March.

"We wanted to support The Bridge for the Big Sleep event and were delighted to raise over £1,000 in sponsorship," said Dan, who is Family First's Operations Manager.

It's one of many examples where Family First goes over and above to support others, as summed up by Dianne Lumsden-Earle. "This is not about making money; this is about giving back.

"We want to make a real difference to our children, whatever their backgrounds. No-one is better than anyone, regardless of their roots. As we continue to grow, we'll identify other community nurseries that we can also support, so we can give all children the best start in life as they take their first steps towards primary education." ■

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