

Case Study: Brookstead Nursery, Unity Trust

School-based nurseries is a term used to describe early years provision which is based within a school site. They may operate independently from the school by a private, voluntary or independent (PVI) sector provider or be run by the school/academy or as governor-run pre-school provision in a maintained school.

If the school provides care for children under two years olds, it must register with Ofsted separately and be inspected independently of school provision. If it is run by a private, voluntary or independent (PVI) sector provider operating on school premises, the provider must register the setting with Ofsted separately and be inspected independently.

This case study is one in a series exploring how schools have embedded nurseries on their sites. It focuses on Brookstead Nursery (name changed), part of Unity Trust Primary School in Hertfordshire. The nursery operates under the primary school's single Ofsted registration.

The case study explores:

- Background and development of the SBN
- Curriculum, pedagogy and physical spaces
- Staffing, recruitment and CPD
- Governance and Ofsted
- Funding and financial sustainability
- Reflections on SBNs

School type:	Multi Academy Trust (MAT)
Delivery model:	Direct Delivery
Age groups:	Three to five years
Timings:	9am to 3pm; term-time only

1. Background and development of Brookstead school-based nursery

- **Why was the nursery established, and what is its core vision?**

After one year of the primary school's operation, the school noted through parental feedback and Reception Baseline Assessment profile data that Reception pupils lacked familiarity with some aspects of early learning such as phonics chants and daily routines such as carpet sessions, lining up and interpreting visual timetables. This gap meant teachers spent valuable weeks at the start of Reception reinforcing simple expectations instead of progressing academic learning. The decision to open a nursery for three- and four-year-olds on the same site was made with the aim that by the time these children transitioned into primary school they were ready for Reception and able to settle swiftly,

display greater independence and engage with the curriculum.

- **What were the main enablers and barriers in launching the school-based nursery?**

Brookstead feel that embedding the nursery within the primary setting brought clear advantages. Capital for refurbishment came from the school's existing budget, avoiding delays associated with external funding. Leaders repurposed an adjacent classroom area next to Reception classrooms, installing low level resources and child height storage to mirror the main school environment.

Setting up provision through direct delivery of the school had many benefits. This included the fact that the nursery is managed by the Head Teacher and Governing Board, inspected as part of the main school Ofsted inspection. As a result, delivery, policies and procedures can be applied across the whole school. In addition, a single Ofsted registration and established safeguarding procedures simplified governance. Teaching assistants were redeployed in the nursery on a 1:13 ratio with a qualified teacher present and working directly with the children. The catchment area's high incidence of special educational needs and disabilities necessitated speech and language training for all staff as well as sensory environment audits and physical adaptations.

2. Brookstead's approach to curriculum, pedagogy and physical spaces

- **How do you ensure continuity with the primary school's offer?**

The early years curriculum is thoughtfully designed to align with the EYFS learning and development requirements. Educators employ a play-based approach, carefully mapping out key milestones and essential knowledge that children need to acquire throughout the year. This framework draws inspiration from elements of the Year 1 curriculum, ensuring a seamless transition for approximately 80% of children who progress from nursery into reception.

Children are supported to enter Key Stage 1 with both the prime areas of learning and the traits of effective learners including curiosity, emotional regulation and executive functioning. These attributes are cultivated through a conscious emphasis on growth mindset, critical thinking, and emotional literacy. In the current educational climate, Brookstead's leaders believe it is crucial to support children in developing emotional awareness and the vocabulary to express and manage their feelings. By embedding these core competencies early, the school prepares to set children up for success beyond academic attainment.

- **What adaptations have been made to the physical environment of the school?**

Brookstead explained they have a focus on environmental sustainability. For example, furniture from tables to book corners was chosen for a lifespan of at least 10 years to reduce long-term replacement costs from backfilling used furniture. Open-ended resources

such as wooden blocks, dough stations and role play costumes were purchases which could be used across age ranges.

Outdoors, the team installed mud kitchens, large sand and water trays and simple climbing frames repurposed from other school areas. They also installed a robust non-slip surfacing so that children running between zones stay safe whatever the weather. All this ensured that safety is maintained, physical development was promoted and maintenance budgets kept low.

The space is divided into purposeful zones for construction, reading, creative play and imaginative activities using soft furnishing boundaries to reduce open expanses. Walls are painted in calming neutrals while children's artwork and learning prompts add visual interest. Acoustic ceiling tiles and carpeted areas cut background noise for hearing impaired and neurodiverse learners.

Transition points such as doorframes and small steps have tactile strips and contrasting tape for visibility to help children see the step clearly. A sensory corner contains weighted cushions, fibre optic lights and sensory bottles to support self-regulation. Staff use visual schedules and "now and next boards" to support routine transitions for children with SEND.

For further guidance, please view:

1. [Early years foundation stage statutory framework](#)
2. [Childcare Works HUB: SEND and inclusive practice](#)

3. Brookstead's approach to staffing, recruitment and CPD

Recruitment emphasises candidates whose values align with the school's ethos of inclusion. The nursery staff has a blend of Early Years Teacher Status holders with Level 3 practitioners and apprentices funded by the apprenticeship levy.

Fortnightly CPD sessions covering topics such as attachment theory, inclusive talk strategies and executive function support are led by the early years lead and inclusion coordinator. Staff also access bite size modules on the National College¹ platform. Performance appraisals set smart targets and peer observations followed by reflective discussions embed new practices.

A robust evaluation cycle includes daily learning walks with concise written feedback, weekly planning moderation meetings with scrutiny of children's progress against early years outcomes. Half-termly one to one coaching meetings with the early years lead focus on achievements and development priorities. Formal observations for staff by senior leadership each half-term are aligned with Ofsted's early years handbook and lead to action plans. The local authority school improvement adviser visits termly to evaluate any meaningful improvements that can be made. These observations are thought to be candid and helpful. Children's voices are gathered in interviews asking "What did you enjoy today?" which feeds into provision planning.

¹ <https://nationalcollege.com/institutions/london-early-years-foundation-leyf>

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For further guidance on recruitment, please view –

1. [General guides to EY recruitment: Childcare Works](#)
2. [Vodcast on recruitment and retention in Early Years](#)

4. Brookstead's governance and Ofsted inspections

Senior leaders at Brookstead talked about the value of head teachers and governors recognising the importance of early years as equal to other phases, and investing in high-quality environments and materials. At Brookstead, regular termly visits by the early years governor, alongside Ofsted and school effectiveness adviser feedback, help maintain strategic oversight.

As the nursery operates under the primary school's single Ofsted registration, it does not require a separate early years registration. Brookstead spoke about how phase leaders and curriculum leaders ensure that nursery practice is fully integrated into the school's overall curriculum strategy, demonstrating, for example, how history or music learning begins in the nursery as well as in later key stages.

Ultimately, Brookstead stated that successful navigation of Ofsted and regulatory requirements rests on day-to-day leadership. By embedding early years within the school's leadership team, with a dedicated early years governor, the nursery benefits from shared policies and strategic alignment with Year 1 expectations.

For further guidance on Ofsted registration, please view:

1. Ofsted - [Registering school based provision](#)

5. Brookstead's approach to funding and financial sustainability

- **How is the nursery funded, and what strategies support its financial sustainability?**

The initial setup of the nursery was primarily supported by the school's existing budget, rather than external grants or funding. As a result, financial planning required careful internal resource management.

In terms of financial sustainability, a core part of the financial strategy is centered around maintaining staffing ratios. For every 13 children, one qualified teacher was required, so all intake and expansion decisions were based on this ratio. The nursery only increased capacity in cohorts of 13 children to ensure staffing remained efficient and financially viable. By waiting until a cohort of 13 children had joined the waitlist, the team could either redeploy existing staff within the school or recruit appropriately, which offered more flexibility and cost-effectiveness.

Another key consideration was SEND. As some children's SEND needs are not always apparent during initial enrollment, staffing sometimes needed to be adjusted. Being part of

a school setting allowed for flexibility, staff could be redeployed from within the school to respond to emerging SEND needs while maintaining financial sustainability.

In resourcing the nursery, Brookstead emphasised the importance of investing thoughtfully and avoiding short-term cost-cutting measures that could compromise quality. Instead of relying on spare or mismatched items from other parts of the school, the nursery invested in high-quality, age-appropriate furniture and resources with long lifespans. This upfront investment reduced the need for frequent replacements, leading to better long-term financial planning.

Brookstead's success hinged on having a clear strategic vision. Before setting up the nursery, they defined what the provision aimed to achieve – including staffing, routines, physical environment, and educational outcomes – and designed a plan to meet these aims.

For further guidance on funding, please view:

1. [Early years funding: 2025 to 2026](#)
2. [Childcare Works HUB: Early Years Business Planning](#)
3. [Childcare Works HUB: Early Years Finance and Funding](#)

6. Brookstead's reflections on school-based nurseries

- **What key pieces of advice would you give to other schools hoping to establish their own school-based nursery?**

Adopting a strategy-driven approach rather than reacting to immediate needs was key. In the early days they recruited additional staff as the numbers of children increased, often backfilling costs and operating at a loss because decisions were led by demand rather than long-term planning. If doing it again, Brookstead said they would have campaigned more strongly with school leadership for investment from the outset, especially for dedicated SEND expertise and permanent adaptations to the space. By securing those resources early, they believed they could have avoided playing catch-up, made strategic choices about physical layout and staffing, and accelerated growth without compromising quality.

In addition, they would ensure that SEND provision was woven into the initial plan. Today they collaborate closely with the school SENCO, but at launch that partnership was not formalised. Setting clear agreements on roles, training and mainstream inclusion from the beginning would, they believed, have strengthened their inclusive practice and eased the path for children with additional needs.

Finally, senior leaders said, opening a school-based nursery is rewarding but demands careful long-term thinking. They suggest starting the planning process by answering three core questions:

- Why do you need a nursery?
- Who will it serve
- When will you know you have succeeded?

They suggest ensuring that governors, senior leaders, staff and parents are united around those answers before one commits to opening a school-based nursery.

They recommend being honest and clear about the funding required. Core grants typically focus on foundational set-up costs, and settings often need to seek complementary funding streams for staffing beyond minimum ratios and tailored SEND support. It's important to plan for top-up investment from school funds and explore entitlement negotiations with the local authority. Invest early in durable environments, targeted professional development and robust systems for assessment. With a clear purpose, and secure resources, a school-based nursery can deliver seamless continuity and outstanding outcomes for every child.