

Case Study: Hawthorne Nursery School

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 with Ofsted separately and be inspected independently.

This case study is one in a series exploring how schools have embedded nurseries on school sites. It focuses on Hawthorne School Nursery (name changed) in Sutton, a 26-place maintained nursery.

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

Overview of Hawthorne:

School type:	Maintained
Delivery model:	Direct Delivery; PVI run Breakfast and After School Club
Age groups:	Three to five years
Timings:	7:30am to 6pm; term time only.

1. Background and development of Hawthorne school-based nursery

Built on local authority land to serve families in Sutton, the school was established with 30 Reception places with a corresponding 26-place nursery being established some time after. As a maintained school, Hawthorne's vision is to bridge the gap between home and formal schooling, ensuring every child enters Reception confident, curious and eager to learn. The nursery accepts children from the term after their third birthday until they transition into Reception.

An external provider runs the Breakfast Club and After School Club for nursery-aged children and above. The school hold weekly liaison meetings with the clubs so routines, safeguarding and the child's and parent's experience remain consistent from 7:30am to 6pm.

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

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

Hawthorne were proud of the fact that the school leadership works closely with the school's Early Years leader and the Reception teacher to ensure the nursery curriculum is consistent with that of the school. This was said to be achieved through comprehensive co-planning and the sharing of their outdoor learning space.

In addition, each term transitional weeks are planned for children going from nursery to Reception. These weeks are scheduled for late starters in January, April and September, focusing on routines such as toileting, snack times and lining up. Nursery staff document every milestone on Tapestry - a platform to communicate with parents. The platform uses photos, videos, and written observations to create online learning journals for children in early years and primary schools. Educators record a child's development, and parents can view, comment on, and add their own media and observations. This ensures Reception staff receive a detailed, real-time handover and parents are kept informed of their child's development and transition to primary school.

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

Limited outdoor adaptations were needed for the nursery as there was already an installation of a natural mud kitchen, tiered climbing stumps, covered sand pits, water-play points positioned near taps, and power sockets to support heaters and fans.

However, when setting up the nursery's outdoor area, the school successfully bid for funding to install robust, natural-material play structures at varying heights. Hawthorne highlighted the outdoor kitchen, designed at child height to allow multiple children to engage with it at once which was said to greatly add to the children's experience. Permanent overhead covers were also added so the space remains functional in all weathers.

Hawthorne acknowledged that including kitchen facilities for hot lunches and a quiet nap area at the beginning would have been advantageous and is something they would like to add if funding became available.

They also highlighted the need to be led by practicalities in making decisions such as situating water-play units close to an external tap and installing a weather-proof socket for occasional electrical needs. This allowed for use in all weather conditions, critical in winter months. Hawthorne also highlighted the need to ensure, for safety and accessibility indoors, that toilets are low-level, enabling children to use them independently and promoting confidence and self-reliance.

Internally, the school ensured clear sightlines with no hidden nooks in toilets and play areas for safety purposes and added ramps and step-free thresholds to improve accessibility. Privacy screening was fitted to public-facing fences, and the drop-off gate was secured.

In terms of barriers, they did highlight that planning-permission negotiations over fencing extended timelines and led to unanticipated costs and recommended to others this should be factored in when converting spaces. Other challenges included the fact that underground drains and other existing services limited the placement of raised beds and sheds. As a result, Hawthorne emphasised the importance of considering additional buffer time for outdoor and indoor adaptations, and their accompanying cost before embarking on a transformation process.

For further guidance, please view:

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

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

The nursery is delivered directly by the school, including a nursery teacher role with a full qualified teacher's salary and support staff with Level 3 teaching assistant qualifications. Hawthorne was proud of the fact that they had high retention rates which they attribute to the pay parity of nursery teachers at qualified teacher level.

While staffing flexibility can be limited given the small team size, Hawthorne believe they are versatile enough to adapt to changes where senior teachers occasionally support the nursery when cover is needed. Due to fixed staff-to-child ratios, it can be challenging to remove practitioners from the room during the day. To address this, Hawthorne scheduled CPD on inset days or after school.

Alongside this, fortnightly learning walks are conducted to observe adult-child interactions, teaching delivery, and children's engagement which were believed to be very effective. Each child's progress is tracked against EYFS goals, and any identified gaps prompt a discussion on possible adjustments before targeted coaching or CPD is delivered during inset days. Training is further enriched by support from the local authority, including free courses, and visits and feedback from an early years representative. Staff are also engaged to undertake peer visits to other settings during inset days. Looking ahead, Hawthorne believe their transition into an academy trust will ensure greater access to accredited programmes and broader professional development opportunities.

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. Hawthorne's governance and Ofsted inspections

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Governance of Hawthorne's nursery is embedded within the wider school governance structure and they were proud that governors take nursery matters very seriously. Governors receive half-termly reports detailing nursery numbers, budget implications, and recruitment challenges. Notably, one governor participated in an Early Years learning walk to gain direct insight into practice, leading to a productive conversation on new equipment and investments in the nursery.

Hawthorne noted that some may be less familiar with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum. As a result, Hawthorne ensures governors receive concise briefings outlining its structure and core objectives, boosting knowledge and confidence. Additionally, governors are made aware of essential practical facility requirements, including accessible running water, designated changing areas, secure locking mechanisms on external doors, and ample free-flow space both indoors and outdoors. These elements are critical for meeting regulatory standards and safeguarding the school's youngest children as well as ensuring buy-in from the governors.

Ofsted conducted an inspection of the school in January; which was constructive overall. To maintain inspection readiness, leadership ensures that every team member understands and can clearly articulate the pedagogical rationale underpinning daily routines.

For further guidance on Ofsted registration, please view:

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

5. Hawthorne's approach to funding and financial sustainability

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

Although the nursery does not generate profit, its strategic importance is demonstrated by its contribution to whole-school pupil intake, particularly by supporting seamless sibling transitions into the reception class. This not only strengthens enrolment but also nurtures sustained engagement with families. Weekly open mornings attract strong interest, with a total of 140 parents touring the nursery for just 26 available places. A well-maintained website featuring photo galleries, along with bespoke guided tours, further boosts visibility. Plans are in place to expand outreach through flyers in GP surgeries and by promoting the forthcoming Forest School accreditation, which sets the nursery apart in an increasingly competitive local landscape. This investment reflects a long-term commitment to outdoor, experiential learning over digital alternatives such as introducing iPads in class.

To improve financial sustainability, the school has introduced paid afternoon sessions for families using their funded morning entitlement, and leaders are exploring earlier opening hours. These adaptive measures, coupled with strong family engagement and a distinctive educational ethos, position the nursery to sustain its impact well into the future.

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. Hawthorne's reflections on school-based nurseries

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

For those planning a new nursery, Hawthorne strongly recommends thorough preparation before building begins. They suggested visiting multiple settings and speaking with Early Years leaders about their successes and ways that had overcome challenges. Key facilities such as running hot and cold water, accessible changing rooms, secure indoor-outdoor flow, and precisely calculated staffing ratios should be considered essential. They also highlighted that it is important to define the daily timetable in detail. Laying this groundwork ahead of time can ensure operational success when the nursery opens its doors to children.