

Case Study: Orchid 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 also register 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 Orchid nursery (name changed) in London, established around 2000 under the national Sure Start local programme. Orchid undergoes two separate inspections: one under the Early Years Register for children under two years and another as part of the school inspection covering nursery and Reception classes.

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 Orchid:

School type:	Maintained
Delivery model:	Direct Delivery
Age groups:	Six months to five years
Timings:	8am to 6pm; year-round.

1. Background and development of Orchid's school-based nursery

Orchid Primary School opened in 1906. In the early 2000s, recognising the opportunities presented by the national Sure Start Local programme, the school established an on-site Children's Centre. This proactive step enabled the school to expand its early years provision significantly

Currently the Centre accepts children from as young as six months old up until the start of Reception. They offer a traditional school day place and an extended day place, providing families with much-needed flexibility. The extended day place is from 8am to 6pm with a breakfast and after-school club. In addition, they have holiday provision throughout school

breaks for children from six months through to Reception. They felt that the holiday provision, delivered by the Centre's dedicated early years team, ensures continuity of care for both children and working families and supports strong, trusting relationships between children and practitioners.

Orchid highlighted that the principal enabler for the Children's Centre was clear local demand for flexible, year-round childcare and capital investment from the local council to construct and equip the new facility. In addition, sustaining the quality of the provision has required ongoing investment in a skilled workforce, in line with statutory early years ratios and qualification requirements. They felt that this commitment to quality care ensures children receive consistent and developmentally-appropriate support throughout the year.

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

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

While progression from the nursery to Orchid Primary's Reception classes is not automatic, the team has intentionally aligned their early years curriculum with the school's overarching approach and the EYFS framework. Approximately, 50% of the children from the nursery progress to Reception. They begin by mapping key Reception objectives and reviewing Year 1 goals to understand the trajectory of learning. The school uses a text-based literacy programme across all year groups, which they feel creates a coherent approach from early years onwards.

In practice, this progression is thoughtfully scaffolded. This means that infants might engage with board books featuring one or two simple words, toddlers explore slightly longer stories with repeated refrains, and nursery children encounter full-length picture books that develop comprehension and vocabulary. By gradually increasing text complexity and embedding the same pedagogical principle, Orchid believes it provides a seamless progression that readies children for formal schooling.

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

Running an all-year-round service means Orchid makes full use of its early years spaces throughout the calendar year, which naturally requires careful planning when undertaking improvement. While they do see lower numbers during school holidays, the space remains in use, so any reconfiguration needs meticulous planning to avoid disrupting care. Retrofitting walls, moving toilets or installing new windows requires working around live sessions, coordinating staff cover, and often hiring external contractors for out-of-hours work. Their advice to anyone designing a nursery adjacent to a school is to take the time up-front to firm up their ideal room layouts, plumbing routes and wiring plans. This ensures that straightforward alterations do not become more complex and costly later on, after the walls, flooring and cubicles are in place.

Whilst it may be tempting to opt for low-cost options, Orchid strongly advised investing in high-quality tables, chairs, shelving and play frames from the outset. In addition, they noted the need for regular replenishment of consumables such as crayons, pencils, glue sticks, paint, because infants inevitably go through them far more quickly than older children. Regular resupply is a small but important aspect of maintaining a rich, engaging learning environment.

- **Do you have a space or facility within the Centre that has proven particularly effective?**

Orchid are hugely proud of their new wildlife garden and treehouse. They are planting native shrubs, installing a small pond and building a low-level treehouse on stilts to give children a sense of exploration and immersion in nature. For many of their London families, access to genuine green space is limited, so creating a little forest school nook onsite allows babies, toddlers and pre-school children to benefit from sensory experiences such as mud, water, wood, leaves, in a way that concrete playgrounds cannot match.

They also highlighted their indoor “nest” room, which includes a sensory light area and was described as a calm, protected environment where children with additional needs can receive one-to-one support or small-group work away from the main playrooms. As they see a growing number of children with a range of needs, having a dedicated, quiet space has become indispensable.

For further guidance, please view:

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

3. Orchid’s approach to staffing, recruitment and CPD

In recruitment, Orchid highlighted that they look beyond just required qualifications to assess interpersonal skills, adaptability and potential for growth. For example, when a highly skilled, experienced practitioner departs, they sometimes replace them with a less experienced candidate who brings enthusiasm and fresh ideas, then pair them with someone from the senior team for in-house mentoring. This, they felt, not only reduces salary expenditure but also fosters professional development within the existing staff cohort. They also continually re-evaluate the team composition each year, matching skill sets to emerging service needs rather than defaulting to like-for-like replacements. In the baby room, they have up to 12 babies with a staffing ratio of 3:1. In the toddler room they have up to 24 children with a staffing ratio of 4:1. They have two Nursery Classes taking up to 26 children each, which are headed up by a teacher and early years practitioners.

Each year the setting closes for five inset days, during which all staff participate in intensive training and collaborative planning. In addition, they hold six twilight sessions, one each half-term, extending the working day from the normal finish until 6pm on those evenings. During these twilight sessions, staff either lead workshops on priority areas or receive external training funded from the professional development budget.

Following out-of-setting courses, attendees share their learning with colleagues in structured debriefs. They embed six formal “check-ins” (supervisions) annually, aligned with the Early Years Foundation Stage requirements, and additional light-touch conversations mid-term to ensure staff wellbeing and identify training needs promptly. Parents contribute to the cost of inset days through their fees.

All staff involved in infant care must hold up-to-date food hygiene certificates, essential for safe milk preparation, and have completed training in breastfeeding support and infant weaning guidance. They also adhere strictly to health and safety standards for sleep routines and ensure that nappies are changed in spaces that respect children’s dignity without compromising on safeguarding visibility. Orchid felt that these targeted health and safety protocols, included in the EYFS safeguarding requirements, combined with robust induction, equip the team to meet the nuanced needs of six-month-olds through to the toddler years.

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. Orchid’s governance and Ofsted inspections

- **How is your nursery provision integrated into the broader school governance structure?**

Orchid Governors oversee the Children’s Centre in the same forum as the rest of the school; they do not hold separate meetings. They felt this was incredibly important to the governance of Orchid, as this raised the profile of Early Years matters within the school. They recently secured a dedicated Early Years link Governor who meets termly with the nursery leadership team, visits the rooms, and checks that they are meeting statutory requirements and the school’s own improvement plans. They felt that having a specific early years Governor responsible elevates early years on the whole Centre’s agenda and ensures accountability.

An important area of focus is ensuring that Governors fully understand EYFS statutory guidance, particularly around staffing ratios, qualifications, learning and development requirements, and safeguarding protocols which differ in key ways from those in the rest of the school. In order to help nursery staff prepare for a separate Ofsted inspection, they felt that Governors must be able to ask informed questions about learning journeys, free-flow indoor-outdoor provision, and how SEND interventions are delivered at that stage.

- **How do you manage staffing for wraparound care and holiday provision, and are there any pinch points?**

The nursery employs both all-year-round staff and term-time-only staff. Year-round children are cared for exclusively by year-round staff, and term-time children consistently engage

with term-time staff. This allows for Orchid to ensure that each child is matched with a consistent key person.

Orchid did highlight that a central operational challenge lies in managing recruitment cycles and maintaining sufficient staff cover during school holidays. This requires careful advance planning around staffing contracts, rotas and recruitment timelines to maintain continuity of care and support for both term time and year-round cohorts.

- **What has been Orchid's experience of Ofsted inspections?**

Orchid undergoes two separate inspections: one under the Early Years Register for babies and toddlers, and another as part of the school inspection covering nursery and Reception classes.

Inspectors with a background in the National Curriculum may bring a different lens to evaluating early years settings, which presents a valuable opportunity to showcase the depth and intentionality of play-based learning. When Ofsted inspectors ask how play connects to learning, sharing clear examples, such as how your book-led sessions expand children's vocabulary or how problem-solving is scaffolded through water-play activities help make the learning visible.

Orchid's leadership highlighted that because the Early Years Foundation Stage inspection framework differs from the School Inspection Handbook, it is essential for leaders to become familiar with both sets of guidance in advance.

For further guidance on Ofsted registration, please view:

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

5. **Orchid's approach to funding and financial sustainability**

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

Established with public investment through Sure Start the Centre's purpose-built facility laid the groundwork for long-term sustainability. The local authority contributed significant capital investment to erect the building, as previously no suitable structure existed. Private fees are set via a twelve-band system based on each household's gross annual income. Each band covers a £10,000 income bracket; once a family's income falls into a given band, the corresponding fee level applies. Orchid felt that this sliding-scale approach ensures that charges rise proportionally with ability to pay, promoting fairness and widening access for lower-income households. They also highlighted that recruiting a strong early years administrator who understands the unique funding and operational nuances has kept their occupancy high and processes smooth.

- **What financial strategies does Orchid currently employ?**

One of the nursery's most effective strategies involves employer-sponsored childcare schemes. At Orchid, several families pay their nursery fees through a work-based

programme called Enjoy Benefits¹, which functions as a tax-efficient voucher system. Employers register with Enjoy Benefits and contribute £110 per child per month directly to the nursery. Currently, eight to ten families participate in the scheme, generating approximately £10,000 to £12,000 in additional annual income. This funding is ring-fenced for purchasing new toys, books, and learning materials. By tapping into external income streams like this, they felt they had reduced reliance on general fee income while continually enhancing its resources without passing extra costs onto parents.

In the local borough, the authority centralises early years data collection. This aggregated data helps the authority identify which nurseries are operating at capacity, which have available places, and how demand patterns are evolving. They proactively share these insights with individual settings, including Orchid, which helps the nursery plan its own sufficiency. Internally, the Orchid team closely monitors the length of its own waiting list and supplements this information with ongoing conversations about emerging parental preferences, such as interest in later start times or extended operating hours.

- **What unique financial challenges arise from operating a nursery within a school context?**

As school run provision, there are specific child staff ratios of 1:13 led by Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) that must be applied, unlike independent nurseries which can operate with 1:13 or 1:8 ratios depending on staffing. While this ensures a high standard of pedagogy, it requires a higher salary investment. Moreover, as QTS teachers are typically contracted on a term-time basis, alternative staffing solutions must be arranged during holiday periods, often involving supply cover or internal rotation, which needs to be considered when planning and budgeting. To address this, the nursery has adopted a flexible staffing model: senior teachers rotate across both term-time and holiday periods. In addition, they blend qualified and Level 3 staff with support practitioners in each room. This enables the nursery to meet statutory ratios and qualification requirements while maintaining manageable costs,² ensuring financial sustainability remains balanced with quality provision.

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. Orchid's reflections on school-based nurseries

¹ <https://www.enjoybenefits.co.uk/staff-benefits-savings/workplace-nursery-benefit/>

² Where children in nursery classes attend school for longer than the school day or in the school holidays, in provision run directly by the governing body or the proprietor, with no teacher present, a ratio of one member of staff to every eight children can be applied if at least one member of staff holds a full and relevant level 3 qualification and at least half of all other staff hold a full and relevant level 2 qualification

- **What do you identify as your most significant success in establishing and running Orchid?**

Maintaining consistency in quality across all rooms was highlighted as Orchid's greatest achievement. From the baby room through to pre-Reception, parents and children experience the same high standards of environment, resources and staff expertise. They also invested in dedicated intervention spaces, "Nest" with a sensory light area and appointed two separate SENCOs (one for early years, one for the school) to ensure focused support. Employing a skilled early years administrator with a deep understanding of funding intricacies and operational specifics has helped maintain high occupancy and streamline processes."

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

Visiting a wide range of settings is strongly encouraged. Even after nearly twenty years in early years, senior leaders at Orchid said they still learn something valuable every time they tour another nursery or children's centre, whether it's a fresh approach to continuous provision, a clever use of space, or a novel parent-engagement strategy. No two contexts are identical, but seeing a variety of models will spark ideas and help ensure success when designing and operating your own provision.