

Case study

Sunbeams Day Care Nursery

Running around after dozens of young children may seem a long way from the boardroom, but Kirsty Lester has always understood the importance of operating her nursery as a business.

Sunbeams Day Care Nursery, based at Heatherlands First School in Parkstone, looks after children aged from two to four with the after-school Buddies club taking five to 12-year-olds.



Since it opened in 2006 Sunbeams has been providing a vital service for parents who have the confidence to leave their children in such professional hands.

With 13 years' experience in the childcare sector, Kirsty was well placed to open Sunbeams, especially having owned and managed First Steps and Buddies in Parkstone for 10 years previously. She now employs 10 staff.

Last year the business had its best year yet with a 20 per cent rise in turnover from the previous year and a five per cent rise in profit. This has been achieved mainly through word-of-mouth.

Kirsty's role is now predominantly managing the business, ensuring all paperwork is complete, paying the wages and monitoring the curriculum and quality of care provided by her team.

After meeting Business Link adviser Karen Cutler, Sunbeams began developing and implementing a new business plan to help it grow.

BUSINESS ISSUES

Sunbeams established itself at Heatherlands First School which provides fantastic facilities. However Kirsty wanted to make the most of the building which houses the nursery, ensure she attracted the best staff and was able to offer them the right level of training.

She was also looking for support with general business and marketing issues.

OBJECTIVE SUPPORT

Business Link adviser Karen Cutler evaluated the business and made a number of recommendations, including a complete review of Sunbeams' website. Karen discussed the best way of developing the site with the help of internet experts, to showcase the nursery and benefit the business. Business Link also identified wider marketing opportunities and assessed its recruitment needs. Kirsty was then introduced to Business Link's skills advisers who were able to provide appropriate training solutions and help her access government-funding schemes, such as Train to Gain.

Kirsty has made good use of the wide range of business seminars and training programmes run by Business Link in Dorset.

"I know exactly what I'm doing with childcare through my experience, my excellent staff and working with the Borough of Poole," said Kirsty. "Business Link has been invaluable in helping

me focus on areas which I've been less familiar with and have put me in touch with the right people to help me."

Business Link's support will continue with six and nine-month progress reviews.

Karen said: "We evaluated a number of areas which needed attention, such as marketing, improving the website and training.

"There are other issues such as administration, accounts, invoices and charging which Sunbeams is also addressing."

EVALUATING SUCCESS

When Sunbeams first opened it was registered for 26 children; in year two that number doubled to 52. Between Buddies and the nursery, there are now more than 140 children on the books.

Kirsty said: "By doubling the number of children we were able to provide a much more comprehensive service. But that also means more cost to the business, due to the staffing ratios required to work with young children.

"This year I have taken on a different role which is much less hands-on and more about making the business succeed. That has led to an improved service and more business.

"We don't tend to advertise as in our business word-of-mouth is most effective, although we have produced more detailed leaflets for parents and put up signs at the school where we are based."

FUTURE PLANS

Sunbeams is running at 85 per cent capacity with plans to develop the building to be able to take on another 12 children. The company is working closely with the Borough of Poole's Early Years team to make that happen.

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