

# “This is our life”

For a quarter of a century Justine and Johnny Watts have been providing outstanding childcare for families in North Norfolk. *TN* visited their setting, Little Owls Day Nursery, to find out about the hard work behind the success...

It's a quirk - some might say flaw - of the Ofsted inspection process that an early years setting may be judged 'outstanding' on the strength of a single inspection lasting just a few hours, and carry that label for years afterwards, regardless of whether it consistently meets the same high standards when out of the regulator's gimlet gaze. Of course Ofsted's grades carry weight, but when judging the worth of a nursery or preschool it's important to look beyond them too, to other measures of quality - measures that may reveal far more than the inspector's snapshot.

Take Little Owls Day Nursery in Toftwood, Norfolk. Whatever criteria you wish to judge the setting by, it is deserving of its 'outstanding' label. Its children start school confident and able, and it boasts an enviable reputation in its local community, attracting families from all walks of life (past alumni have included the children of a professional footballer, while demand for the setting's funded two-year-old places exceeds capacity). In March last year came the icing on the cake, when Little Owls earned Ofsted's top mark too. Success has been hard earned. Owners, wife and husband Justine and Johnny Watts, have spent their 25 years of married life growing the business from a small pack-away setting to the present 84-place nursery and accompanying breakfast, after-school and holiday clubs. There have been hurdles to overcome along the way, but their passion for the job is undimmed - as Justine tells us, "The day that we don't feel passionate about what we do is the day we say enough is enough!"



Ablly supported by their managers, Debbie Kemp and Holly Parnell, both of whom have worked their way up within the organisation, Justine and Johnny are running a flourishing daycare business that is meeting the needs of both children and parents, and, in many cases, exceeding the expectations mums and dads might reasonably have of early years provision. *TN* spoke to them all to find out more...

## 1. From humble beginnings...

***“We've had lots of challenges, but it has all been worth fighting for.”***

'Nothing ventured, nothing gained' the old saying goes, and Justine and Johnny's journey

through the early years sector is a case in point. "In June 1989 we got married, and in the October we opened our first nursery - I had no experience of running a business, and had to give up work as a nanny to do it, so it was a really big gamble," Justine tells us. "This was in the days of social services, before Ofsted. We rented a social centre - Johnny used to drop me off in the morning and get all the equipment out, then come and pick me up at six in the evening and put all the equipment back."

They were humble beginnings, but the opening of Dereham Day Nursery, as it was dubbed, had been timed perfectly. "We were the only day nursery in Dereham at the time, and we found a niche in the market that allowed us to grow," Johnny explains. "These



All aspects of **practice** are closely **monitored** to ensure continuous **improvements** are made, leading to **outstanding** practice that is **worthy** of dissemination to other settings

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## MEET THE TEAM



### **Justine Watts, Owner**

"We're proud of our children - how confident they are when they go to school; we're proud of our staff - they work very long days and are as committed in the evening as they are first thing; and we're proud of the reputation that we've achieved."



### **Johnny Watts, Owner**

"There is always the temptation to get bigger and better; but when we had two nurseries, we felt we weren't able to give them both our personal touch. Here, we still know all of our parents, all of the children - we don't want to lose that."



### **Debbie Kemp, Manager**

"As managers we like to spend time in all the rooms - we'll do lunch covers, run special activities or just go and have a play. It helps us to know what's going on, and it's nice to escape from the telephone sometimes!"



### **Holly Parnell, Manager**

"We attended a course recently all about school readiness, looking at children's attainment when starting school from across Norfolk, and we were delighted to see that Toftwood's scores were absolutely fantastic - I feel we have a lot of impact on that."

days there are five or six other nurseries in the town, so it would be that much harder to get started."

It took a year for Justine and Johnny's first setting to outgrow its rented accommodation: in 1990 they purchased a domestic residence and converted it into a nursery. "Originally we were just based downstairs," Justine says. "Then we moved upstairs as well, then we converted outbuildings, set up a baby room, set up an after-school club - we just grew and grew."

In 2004 Justine and Johnny decided to take the plunge again, leasing an empty nursery building in nearby Mattishall and opening Little Owls Day Nursery. Justine took the reins of the new setting while Johnny managed in Dereham, but a year on a difficult choice had to be made. "Little Owls was just growing and growing and growing, and it was stretching the two of

us too much," Justine says. "We didn't feel we had the people who could manage one setting while we concentrated on the other then, so we made the decision to sell the nursery in Dereham and concentrate on building up Little Owls."

Back in leased premises and faced with a landlord unwilling to sanction alterations to expand their provision, Justine and Johnny relocated Little Owls to Toftwood in 2007. No. 20 School Lane proved to be a prime location



The nursery is **colourful**, visually **stimulating** and **inviting**, and offers children extensive **opportunities** to make **choices** about activities and resources

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but transforming it from a residence into a day nursery proved far from straightforward. "It was a real challenge to get planning permission, and not a particularly nice experience," Johnny admits. "The local council recommended approval so we got through at a planning meeting, 10 in favour and four against." Unfortunately, further struggles were to come.

"In 2013 we'd reached the stage where we needed to expand again," Justine tells us. "The nursery had such a good reputation that we were always full a year in advance - we needed more space. We looked at various other premises, but when No. 18 next door came up for sale, we thought 'fantastic!'"

"We assumed, perhaps naively, we'd have a smoother ride getting permission," Johnny takes up the story, "but in fact it was worse second time. When we went to planning it was a split decision: six in favour and six against. It went down to the Chairman, but because the council had again recommended approval, he subsequently gave his vote to us - and here we are."

## 2. Inside Little Owls

***"It's about preparing children, giving them skills for life."***

The addition of No. 18 School Lane to Little Owls Day Nursery meant extra capacity and more space for Justine, Johnny and their team to tailor provision to different age groups. The newly converted building - which was extended and refurbished in just nine weeks, opening in March 2014 - is the Tawny Owl nursery, which offers 24-places for 0-2s. Back in No. 20 can be found the Snowy Owl and Barn Owl nurseries, catering for 28 two-year-olds and 32 three- and four-year-olds respectively.

It's clear that a lot of thought has gone into how the setting has been laid out, and improvements are ongoing (a new sensory room is opening the week after *TN's* visit). Each sub nursery is split into distinct areas/rooms designed to support a particular area of development, or facilitate certain kinds of activities, while throughout there is a focus on gradually building independence, and ultimately, school readiness. "In Tawny Owls we have a physical room with a fantastic climbing frame and a ballet bar, and all the toys are there to develop children's gross motor skills," Holly offers as an example. "Then we have a calm room - a really beautiful space



with lots of soft furnishings that looks quite like a lounge at home. Rather than plastic toys, children have access to treasure baskets of everyday objects, to help them learn about the world around them, and we have an atomiser to provide different fragrances. It's the area we take children to if they need a cuddle and a story, that bit of one-to-one time. And there's the messy room, where you'll find the paint and gloop and various other messy play activities. Children do hand and feet printing, play with straw, mud and soil - because it's all in a controlled environment, they can really engage with the experience. We have a low-level sink in there, so even for our under-twos we're able to nurture a level of independence."

"It's very similar for our two- and three- and four-year-olds," Debbie says. "We still have separate areas - places to be messy, places for role-play, places to rest - but with the older children the focus moves from adult interaction and support to getting children ready to go to school. In the Barn Owl nursery, for example, we have our curriculum room, where we do a lot of focus activities and group-time sessions, and introduce things like phonics and registers. There are also computers for the children to access."

## 3. Beyond the early years

***"It's really important to us that we can provide all-round care."***

A key part of Justine and Johnny's business is Hoots, the umbrella name for their breakfast, after-school and holiday clubs. Every morning, parents can bring their children in to Little Owls or nearby Toftwood Infant School from 7.30, where food and activities are provided before the nursery and school day proper begin. Later, Toftwood Infant and Junior school halls are the venues for after-school provision until 6pm. Both clubs also cater for children attending



Scarning and Yaxham Primary Schools, with Hoots staff picking children up and dropping them off as required. Toys, games and craft activities are all provided, as well as homework support for older children and a multitude of extra-curricular clubs, from ICT to sports and cooking.

The holiday club runs out of term-time throughout the year - "We're closed for three days this Christmas and that's it," Holly says - offering an even greater variety of things to do. Visitors come in and children head out to a variety of destinations to learn and have fun. Projects are planned according to children's interests, much as activities are at Little Owls.

"It's really important to us as a setting that we can provide all-round care from six weeks right up to 14 years, so parents have that one-stop shop for all their children's needs," Holly says of Hoots - and parents are clearly grateful for the service. For example, since it relocated from Mattishall to Toftwood, a year after Little Owls had made the same transition, the after-school club has enjoyed rapid expansion, growing from 20 places in 2007 to 90 places today - and demand is growing all the time.

While the clubs are inspected as a separate provision because of their location - the after-school provision at Toftwood Infants is rated 'outstanding' too - staff at the nursery work across all settings, guaranteeing the same quality of care and the same ethos. "It's really successful, particularly for those children transitioning to school, because they're still accessing the same practitioners they had at nursery," Holly explains. "But that continuity is important for the parents as well - it means they don't have to familiarise themselves with a





# Talking points



whole new extended school provision.”  
“Financially, it’s really important for us,” Johnny says of Hoots’ value to the business. “While the after-school club is only three hours, we have 90 children there, which means it’s actually more profitable than our baby nursery is.”

## 4. Offering more

**“We try to create ‘magical moments.’”**

On top of the high-quality provision they offer on a day-to-day basis and the convenient wrap-around care, Justine and Johnny and their team pride themselves on going that extra mile to support families. Johnny refers to “that Disney touch” to sum up the quality of customer service they strive for: “It’s not a forced smile there, it’s meant,” he says, “and if we can do that here, it means we’ve cracked it”

“We try to create ‘magical moments,’” Justine agrees, “whether it’s accommodating a parent who might need an extra hour, or it’s somebody’s birthday and they’ve forgotten to get a card, and can we help – anything.”

“Something I think really stands out,” Holly says, “involved one of forces families – Mum was in Afghanistan and she had two daughters at the nursery full-time. She was obviously missing a lot, so we sent her daily emails, photos of what the children were doing that she could access on her computer. She was so grateful as it enabled her to have daily contact, even though she was thousands of miles away. Those extra little things can mean so much.”

It’s efforts such as these, the extended period Hoots enables them to care for children and, of course, their business’s longevity, that have earned Justine and Johnny the reputation they have for providing quality childcare. As Little Owls’ latest Ofsted report notes, its children come from a wide catchment area, as well as many walks of life, and it’s not hard to see why, despite the setting’s recent expansion, it is fully booked until the end of 2015.

“One mum used to go 15 miles out of her way just to drop her child off, before going back to work,” Justine remembers.

“And many will drive past other nurseries to access our care,” Holly says. “There are other providers closer to many of our parents, but you want the best for your children.”



## Staying sustainable

Providing high-quality daycare while keeping fees affordable is challenging, and Justine and Johnny admit that Little Owls must stay full to be sustainable. The expansion of their under-tuos provision is designed to safeguard the business in the future: “It’s about planning strategically – if we can ensure our baby room is always full, hopefully that will follow through to the rest of the nursery, and ultimately our after-school clubs,” Johnny says.

## Team work

Leadership and management at Little Owls are, in Ofsted’s words, “inspirational” and Justine and Johnny put this down to the complementary skills they and their managers possess. “Everybody has got different strengths, and it just works really, really well,” Justine explains. While she and Johnny take responsibility for developing the business, Debbie and Holly oversee the day-to-day running of the setting and a team in which every practitioner is qualified.



## Ready to learn

In their efforts to prepare children for life in Reception and beyond, staff at Little Owls have implemented the same Jolly Phonics programme as is used at nearby Toftwood Infant School. “The children follow the programme in the term before they enter Reception,” Debbie explains. Transition days are also organised to support children as they make the step up.



## Experienced practitioners

The staff team at Little Owls comprises many practitioners of long-standing experience – Justine points to the Tawny Owl nursery, where the presence of more mature staff means invaluable support for new parents, as well as a home-from-home environment for children. “Speaking to someone with that level of experience can be really reassuring,” Holly tells us; “it gives parents confidence in you as a setting.”