

Cornerstone Nurseries

HR/People Strategy

Cheryl Standing Cmgr FCMI, CIPD Assoc Dip



*Throughout this document Cornerstone Nurseries may be referred to as "The company" or "The organisation".

HR/People Strategy 2023–2027

Cornerstone Nurseries

Prepared by Cheryl Standing, Cmgr FCMI CIPD Assoc Dip

Introduction

At Cornerstone Nurseries, we believe that our people are our greatest asset, and fostering a healthy, supportive culture is central to our success. Aligning our people with our organisational goals takes time, but we are committed to this ongoing transformation.

Our People Strategy 2023–2027 outlines how we plan to nurture and grow our workforce, ensuring they develop to their full potential. This strategy will be reviewed annually to ensure it evolves with our organisation's needs.

Vision for Culture

Our cultural goals:

- **Resilience:** Empower all employees to develop the skills needed to overcome challenges.
- **Skill Development:** Ensure each team member is equipped with the skills necessary to excel and support their colleagues in achieving collective success.
- **Employee Voice:** Foster open communication, giving employees greater autonomy and influence within the organisation.
- **Kindness & Collaboration:** Build a workplace where kindness, mutual respect, and teamwork are central to our success.

A strong, positive culture isn't just about how we do things—it's a reflection of our shared values, and at Cornerstone, we are committed to nurturing a culture that motivates, engages, and supports every employee.

At Cornerstone Nurseries, we are proud of the caring, collaborative culture we've built and remain dedicated to its continuous improvement. By focusing on wellbeing, diversity, and proactive training, we are committed to making Cornerstone a place where employees not only work but thrive.

Employee Health (2025 and Beyond)

Looking ahead to 2025, we are taking steps to further support the wellbeing and mental health of our team. As part of our ongoing commitment, we will introduce several new initiatives designed to provide holistic support to our employees:

- **Mental Health Champion:** In 2025, we will appoint a dedicated Mental Health Champion, who will facilitate monthly drop-in cafés where employees can seek support and guidance.
- **Women's Health:** With a predominantly female workforce, we are investing in women's health initiatives. A Menopause Champion will be appointed, who will run

Menopause Cafés and offer regular workshops and lunch-and-learn sessions on women's health topics.

- Employee Wellbeing: We aim to create a nurturing environment by holding coffee mornings, tea evenings, and mental health workshops, offering employees various opportunities to connect, relax, and learn in a supportive setting.

We understand that wellbeing goes beyond physical health. Our focus on mental health support, alongside broader wellness initiatives, will help create an environment where everyone can thrive.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I)

Our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) strategy is designed to foster a diverse and inclusive workplace, where every individual feels valued. While we currently have a predominantly female workforce, we are committed to encouraging more men into the childcare sector by:

- Offering targeted recruitment campaigns aimed at breaking down stereotypes surrounding childcare as a female-dominated profession.

We believe that a more diverse workforce will enhance our team's creativity, empathy, and overall effectiveness, and we remain committed to building a workforce reflective of the community we serve.

Worker Protection and Harassment Prevention

With the introduction of the Worker Protection Act in October 2024, we are committed to providing comprehensive training for all employees.

This training will include modules on harassment prevention, with a particular focus on sexual harassment. Our aim is to create a safe, respectful workplace where every individual feels protected and empowered.

Looking Ahead: The changes anticipated from the new UK Labour Government's Worker Reform/Employment Rights Bill will also influence our approach, and we will continue to update our policies to ensure full compliance and best practice in employee rights.

History

Historically, Cornerstone Nurseries has established a strong reputation for providing excellent childcare and has worked diligently to foster a culture rooted in our core values of **responsibility, curiosity, inclusion, care, respect, and security**—values that were selected collaboratively by our employees. Our leadership team remains committed to ensuring that every employee feels connected to the broader vision of the organisation.

With two nursery settings, each with distinct organisational structures, we recognise that embedding a cohesive team culture is more easily achieved in smaller settings. However, we continuously strive to maintain this culture across both nurseries. Over the past five years, our staff turnover has remained steady and within reasonable levels across both locations, reflecting our commitment to creating a supportive and engaging workplace.

Forecasting Ahead

The early years sector is currently experiencing significant challenges, particularly in the recruitment of qualified practitioners. As an organisation, we have found that the departure of a qualified practitioner creates a substantial operational impact, as replacing these individuals is increasingly difficult. To maintain a skilled workforce, Cornerstone Nurseries has invested heavily in apprenticeships and training programs, focusing on developing unqualified employees and attracting new trainees. This strategic investment has helped us maintain a balanced workforce, but further progress in this area will likely depend on government support and investment in early years education which is set to improve across 2025 and beyond.

The 2023 budget introduced economic measures to support working parents, such as the extension of "free" childcare hours for children as young as nine months.

While we expected minimal impact on enrolment numbers, as both nurseries consistently operate with occupancy rates above 86%, we are closely monitoring how government funding rates evolve. Low funding rates could strain our financial model. However, following the February 2024 funding announcement, we are pleased that funding rates have improved. In response to these funding changes, in August/September 2024, we expanded our 3+ provision and increased the occupancy at our Priestley Road setting to 189 children, allowing us to better serve the growing needs of our community while enhancing our overall capacity.

Recruitment Strategy

Our recruitment aim is to ensure that each nursery setting is fully staffed with a team that not only meets operational needs but also includes additional capacity to support non-childcare tasks and give staff necessary time away from direct care responsibilities.

Currently, Cornerstone Nurseries utilises a combination of Indeed.com and social media marketing strategies to attract candidates. In the past, we have hosted recruitment open evenings, which initially saw success but have experienced a decline in attendance due to broader sector-wide recruitment challenges. The last two events saw no attendance, underscoring the current difficulties in attracting talent.

Despite these challenges, we continue to receive strong interest from school leavers, unqualified parents returning to work after career breaks, and work experience students. To further build on this, we employ an Apprenticeship & Training Manager who regularly attends events at local colleges. In 2023 and beyond, we plan to expand these efforts by partnering with the Consortium to participate in more local school and career events aimed at individuals aged 14+. Our goal is to position Cornerstone Nurseries as the leading name in the community for careers in childcare - ensuring that when people think of childcare, they think of Cornerstone.

From 2023 onward, our Marketing Manager will play a more strategic role in leveraging social media platforms to enhance our recruitment efforts. In addition to this, Cornerstone Nurseries frequently works with temporary staffing agencies to cover absences. The

Nursery Management team continuously evaluates temporary staff, and where potential is identified, we proactively offer them permanent positions, paying agency fees when necessary. A key objective for 2024 was to reduce reliance on temporary agencies by developing an internal pool of cover staff who can be used to manage absences and holiday cover and this has been successfully implemented with a current pool of 8 cover staff employed.

Cornerstone Nurseries generally does not engage with external recruitment agencies, as they face the same challenges in sourcing qualified practitioners. However, we remain open to considering all recruitment avenues on a case-by-case basis. We have also decided not to use Glassdoor, but we continue to explore new media and recruitment strategies to attract top talent.

The interview process at Cornerstone Nurseries is managed by the Nursery Managers, who ensure a consistent and fair approach. Application forms are sent to candidates in advance, and interviews are scheduled for shortlisted applicants. Each candidate is asked the same set of questions, ensuring a fair evaluation process. Candidates who proceed are given the opportunity for a "Stay and Play" session in a relevant class, after which the room manager provides feedback. Job offers are initially communicated verbally and confirmed in writing.

By maintaining a strategic and flexible approach to recruitment, Cornerstone Nurseries aims to attract and retain high-quality staff that will support the ongoing success and growth of the organisation.

As mentioned in our DE&I strategy, we plan to offer targeted recruitment campaigns aimed at breaking down stereotypes surrounding childcare as a female-dominated profession in order to attract more male practitioners in 2025.

Pay & Reward Strategy

Employee pay at Cornerstone Nurseries is reviewed annually, typically in March, to align with any government-mandated changes to minimum wage laws, which take effect on April 1st.

We have implemented a structured reward policy, with clearly defined pay scales that guide remuneration. Employees generally start at the entry level of their respective pay scale and progress based on experience and performance. There are, however, exceptions to this standard. For instance, room managers overseeing larger class sizes (up to 48 children) may start at a higher salary compared to those managing smaller rooms (with up to 12 children), reflecting the increased workload and responsibilities.

To attract and retain talent, we have introduced several incentive-based strategies. Employees start with 28 days of annual leave, which increases to a maximum of 33 days over time. Additionally, we offer employees a day off on their birthday to encourage work-life balance. After one year of service, employees are also eligible for 5 days of organisational sickness pay (OSP). We have introduced a bonus scheme where unused OSP is converted into a cash bonus at the end of each financial year, rewarding employees with up to 5 days' pay in April. Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) is provided as standard.

In 2024, we introduced a "Model of Reward", which was shared with the entire team to highlight the comprehensive package available to all employees. Staff members are encouraged to make full use of these benefits and seek guidance if needed.

In late 2023 we also introduced a healthcare cashback scheme, virtual perkbox and employee assistance programme offering 24/7 GP and counselling services.

Looking ahead, in 2025, we will be launching an Ambassador Programme to recognise and reward employees who consistently go above and beyond in their roles. Those selected as ambassadors will serve as role models to their peers, further reinforcing our culture of excellence and commitment to employee development.

This Pay & Reward Strategy reflects our dedication to providing a competitive and supportive work environment, where effort and loyalty are recognised and rewarded.

Retention Strategy

Our goal is to retain our talented workforce by creating an environment that is seen as preferential and supportive. This environment must be diverse, collaborative, communicative, transparent, and fair, with equal rewards for equal work. We also ensure

that employees are recognised for their discretionary efforts through a rewards system that motivates and fosters commitment.

Ensuring that employees have a strong voice within the organisation is central to our retention strategy. We actively encourage leadership to empower employees with greater autonomy and provide frequent opportunities for staff to contribute their ideas and perspectives.

At Cornerstone Nurseries, we place high importance on Employee Voice Initiatives to maintain a culture of engagement and continuous improvement. Historically, we conducted an annual employee survey each January; however, starting in 2023, we now conduct surveys twice a year. This allows us to gather data more regularly, which is then reviewed strategically by the Head of People & Operations to identify areas for improvement and celebrate successes. The surveys cover topics such as:

- Job satisfaction
- Problem resolution
- Equality and fairness
- Employee culture and morale
- Pay and reward
- Sense of value
- Team spirit
- Autonomy
- Personal growth and development
- Access to tools and resources
- Workload management

Although we've previously used paper-based surveys, in 2024, we moved to an anonymous digital survey format to assess engagement in line with evolving technological trends. This was successful in improving our response rate. We plan to continue this into 2025.

We also maintain a suggestions box in staff areas to collect employee feedback, questions, and concerns. To improve the practicality of suggestions, a new form was introduced in

2023 that encourages employees to consider any potential barriers and propose solutions for their ideas.

To further support engagement, we revitalised the Employee of the Month initiative in 2023. Voting is now more structured, requiring detailed reasoning for nominations, making the process more meaningful. In 2024, we introduced a "Spin the Wheel" feature, offering small rewards—ranging from a chocolate bar to a free day's annual leave—to all nominees, as well as a larger prize of a bonus for the successful employee of the month.

At the end of 2024 we have introduced "Employee of the Year" as an award which can be won at each setting and will be announced at the annual end of year staff party. Employees are given 1 digital vote and the winners will receive a trophy, prizes, bonus and extra time off over the Christmas period.

We maintain a robust schedule of meetings to foster communication and collaboration across all levels of the organisation. These include:

- Full team meetings (monthly), with a focus on training.
- Room meetings (monthly).
- Room manager meetings (monthly).
- Management meetings (bi-monthly), involving the full leadership team and Head of People & Operations.
- Senior leadership meetings (bi-annually) for Nursery Managers and the Head of People & Operations.
- Marketing meetings (quarterly) between nursery management and the Marketing Manager.
- Apprenticeship and training discussions (non formal) between Nursery Managers and the Apprenticeship & Training Manager.

At Cornerstone Nurseries, we uphold an open-door policy, ensuring that employees have easy access to senior management for discussions and feedback.

The Head of People & Operations is consistently available to staff at all levels to provide additional opportunities for communication. If employees are unsatisfied with a resolution,

they are aware of the formal HR structure and their right to escalate issues, including using the whistleblowing policy for critical concerns.

In 2024, we introduced a newly designed Performance Management System. Traditional annual appraisals have been replaced with "Career Conversations", which focus on employee development and are supported by regular catch-ups with line managers. All performance discussions are documented online, replacing previous paperwork-based systems. While Performance Improvement Plans (PIPs) remain in place for managing underperformance, they are part of a separate strategy aimed at employee development.

When an employee submits a resignation, their Nursery Manager will conduct an initial meeting to explore options for retaining them. For those who decide to leave, we conduct exit interviews through an online form, providing valuable insights to continuously improve our retention efforts.

Marketing Strategy

At Cornerstone Nurseries, our marketing strategy emphasises a robust social media presence to engage with current and prospective families.

In late 2024, we launched an exciting new and refreshed company website designed with collaboration and parent partnerships in mind, enhancing communication and accessibility.

Additionally, we started to utilise TikTok as a platform to showcase our vibrant working environment, supporting our recruitment efforts while highlighting the creativity and enthusiasm of our staff. We actively encourage employee input to ensure that their ideas and experiences are reflected in our marketing initiatives, fostering a genuine connection with our community.

With community in mind we also commit to raising £5,000.00 per annum for a chosen local charity whom we partner with for events - these events also assist our team building efforts and become valued amongst employees.

Growth & Development Strategy

At Cornerstone Nurseries, we are committed to fostering a culture of continuous growth and development. Our goal is to equip every individual with the skills and opportunities they need to challenge themselves, pursue their ambitions, and develop their talents to their fullest potential.

To support this, we have invested in the Noodle Now platform, a Massive Open Online Training (MOOT) system, which allows employees to access a wide range of training modules. Employees are compensated for training, with overtime pay offered for courses completed outside of working hours and standard pay for those undertaken during regular working time. However, training is not compensated during periods of sickness absence or after an employee has resigned.

Cornerstone Nurseries places a strong emphasis on professional development, offering employees the opportunity to pursue apprenticeships relevant to their roles. We partner with local training providers and colleges to provide a broad range of higher education opportunities, including specialised training for team leaders and managers through accredited programs such as CMI and CIPD. We also offer distance learning options for employees who prefer flexible learning environments.

Training needs are carefully considered during staff meetings, ensuring that both internal managers and external providers deliver sessions tailored to the nursery's current requirements.

All employees are required to attend Paediatric First Aid Training every three years, typically completed over two Saturdays with full pay.

Essential training courses, completed during induction or within the first month of employment, include:

- Safeguarding
- Food Hygiene
- Prevent Duty
- Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Awareness

-
- British Values
 - Bullying & Harassment including Sexual Harassment

We also recognise the importance of mental health support within the workplace. As part of our ongoing development strategy, we aim to have all senior staff, from room managers upwards, trained as Mental Health First Aiders (MHFA).

In addition, Cornerstone Nurseries has invested in specialised training to foster innovative practices. In 2023, we trained one employee as a Curiosity Approach Practitioner and plan to train two more employees in this methodology starting in September 2024, with the goal of adding practitioners each year moving forward.

Our commitment to growth and development ensures that our team members are well-equipped to meet both their personal career goals and the evolving needs of the organisation, empowering them to thrive in a supportive environment.



Apprenticeships Strategy

Our objective is to provide comprehensive support to unqualified staff, enabling them to develop the skills and expertise necessary to become qualified practitioners with a robust portfolio of professional experience.

At Cornerstone Nurseries, we have a dedicated Apprenticeships and Training Manager who collaborates closely with the nursery management teams and local training providers to ensure the success of our apprenticeship programs. Employees may follow a recognised apprenticeship scheme or pursue an alternative training route, such as stand-alone

courses. Regardless of the training path, all participating staff are referred to as apprentices and have a formal apprenticeship agreement, overseen by the Apprenticeships and Training Manager.

To ensure ongoing progress and development, apprentices participate in regular meetings with the Apprenticeships and Training Manager, which include wellbeing discussions to provide holistic support throughout their learning journey. This strategy reflects our commitment to nurturing talent and providing pathways for our employees to achieve their full potential as skilled professionals in the early years sector.

Leadership Strategy

Our objective is to cultivate effective leaders through ongoing training and coaching, empowering them to serve as exemplary role models while fostering their own development as well as that of their teams. We aim to equip all practitioners with the necessary leadership skills to become mentors and role models for their colleagues.

At Cornerstone Nurseries, we firmly believe that leaders should embody the values of our organisation and make a positive, lasting impact on every employee. Our leaders are encouraged to adopt a coaching and mentoring approach, consistently striving to enhance the working lives of their team members.

Our leadership structure includes the following key roles:

- Owners/Directors - Overall Authority
- Head of People & Operations - Designated Authority
- Head Office Staff (Marketing & Training Managers)
- Nursery Managers
- Deputy Managers
- Finance & Administration Managers
- Third in Charges & SENCo's
- Room Managers
- Head Chefs

All of these roles carry varying degrees of authority and responsibility in managing teams and are all overseen by the headship of our Head of People & Operations role.

Our Directors and Management teams are committed to being visionary leaders, valuing the input and ideas of all internal and external stakeholders.

We are passionate about our work and dedicated to supporting our employees. Our aim is to foster open communication and approachability, ensuring that all staff and families visiting our nurseries feel like valued members of the Cornerstone community. We maintain an open-door policy, encouraging dialogue and feedback from everyone.

In our commitment to service excellence, we treat all users with dignity and respect, adhering to company policies and procedures to ensure fair treatment.

Cornerstone Nurseries advocates for lifelong learning and invests in development opportunities for our employees, including our leadership team. We continuously seek to enhance our knowledge and skills, striving to be the best leaders possible and serving as professional role models for our employees at all times.

Everyone grows, thrives and performs

- Everyone has the opportunity to reach their potential.
- Have good conversations.
- Set clear goals and expectations
- Give everyone the freedom, support and tools they need to do their best work.
- Play to people's strengths.



Wellbeing Strategy

At Cornerstone Nurseries, we recognise that happiness and wellbeing can vary significantly from person to person. Our primary goal is to ensure that employees find joy in their work and feel satisfied in their work environment. To support this, we have established a Wellbeing and Mental Health Support Policy that underscores our commitment to fostering robust mental health resources and providing assistance wherever feasible.

We are dedicated to investing in our employees' mental health by training Mental Health First Aiders (MHFA). As of 2023, we have trained nine MHFA staff members, and as of March 2024, this number has increased to fourteen. We are also exploring the introduction of a Mental Health Champion in 2025, either appointing one individual to oversee initiatives across both settings or designating a champion for each location.

MHFA staff meet regularly to discuss wellbeing strategies and any necessary policy updates. While MHFAs play a crucial role in supporting mental health, it is important to note that they are not mental health professionals. Their support is intended to empower employees to seek help and encourage self-care while facilitating access to professional services when needed.

To further support our employees, we implement a Wellness Action Plan (WAP) that provides tailored support where appropriate. Regular wellbeing check-ins are also organised to foster open communication about mental health. Employees can access our Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy at any time and benefit from an external confidential counselling service included within it.

At the end of 2023, we introduced a Healthcare Cashback Plan and an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), which provides free access to counselling services and a 24-hour GP advice line. Through these initiatives, we are committed to promoting a supportive and healthy work environment that prioritises the wellbeing of all employees.

A #HappyHealthyFUNWorkplace

Everyone has the chance to be heard.
Learn how we can get better by listening to our employees.
Continue to appreciate, recognise, reward and celebrate successes.
Support our people to feel good.

An illustration of ten diverse, stylized cartoon characters with various shapes and colors, standing on pink circular spots. They are holding hearts of different colors (purple, blue, pink, green) and some have their arms raised in a celebratory gesture. The background is a light blue-grey gradient.

Overall Aims and Objectives for Improvement 2023-2027



As outlined in the introduction, fostering a positive organisational culture is an ongoing journey that requires time and commitment. Our leadership team is dedicated to driving continuous improvements that align with our overarching vision and strategic objectives.

While our aims may encounter challenges that could delay specific initiatives—such as recruitment objectives hampered by the nationwide shortage of skilled staff in our sector—we remain steadfast in our commitment to progress and adaptability in achieving our goals.

Our primary aims and objectives for the 2023-2027 period are as follows:

1. **Achieve Optimal Staffing Levels:** Create a well-staffed environment that meets nursery needs while maintaining additional capacity to allow employees the opportunity to complete non-childcare-related tasks.
2. **Talent Retention:** Foster a preferential work environment that is diverse, supportive, communicative, fair, transparent, and collaborative. We are committed to ensuring equal rewards for equal work, alongside recognising discretionary effort.
3. **Individual Skill Development:** Encourage employees to challenge themselves and pursue ambitious personal and professional growth, enabling them to reach their full potential.
4. **Leadership Development:** Provide regular training and coaching for our leaders, empowering them to become exemplary role models and enhance their own development, as well as that of their teams.

-
5. **Develop Leadership Skills in Practitioners:** Equip all practitioners with essential leadership skills, enabling them to serve as role models and mentors for less experienced staff.
 6. **Support for Unqualified Staff:** Offer comprehensive support to unqualified employees, helping them develop their skills and achieve qualifications with a robust portfolio of expertise.
 7. **Instilling Resilience:** Foster resilience among employees at all levels, ensuring they possess the necessary skills and tools to effectively navigate challenges.
 8. **Excellence in Performance:** Ensure that every team member is equipped with the skills required to contribute to a workforce that strives for excellence, promoting a culture of support and collaboration. Each individual must understand their role in delivering the highest quality of service to the families and children we serve.
 9. **Empowering Employee Voice:** Create channels for employees to express their opinions and ideas, with leadership actively seeking to enhance autonomy and engagement within the organisation.
 10. **Cultivating Team Spirit:** Develop a strong sense of community within Cornerstone, where kindness and collaboration are fundamental to our success and the wellbeing of our colleagues.

Through these aims and objectives, we are committed to building a thriving organisational culture that supports the development and wellbeing of our employees while delivering exceptional care and service to our community.

Created April 2023 reviewed & updated annually - Current version 2025 - CJS
Please see also - Cornerstone Nurseries Vision & Mission Statement.