

On message

When recruiting, how should early years settings word their job ads, set their incentives and treat new starters in order to attract the right people? **Annette Rawstrone** reports

Children's names on nursery waiting lists are increasing, but the numbers of qualified staff are decreasing, leading to owners and managers throughout the country trying a wide range of strategies to attract and keep practitioners.

'I don't know what I'm going to do, and it's not just me,' says Charlotte Butterfill, director at The Butterfly Pre-school. She owns two settings in Wandsworth, south west London, and is concerned that she will have a full nursery in September but not enough staff to run it. 'We're spending thousands of pounds on employment websites, and the numbers of candidates being sent through by recruitment agents is minimal and very poor,' she says.

'I'm looking to recruit from abroad and am offering visas, but that's proving difficult too because I'm attracting very-well-qualified people from international schools teaching the EYFS, but a lot of their qualifications are not being recognised.'

LOOK AT THE DETAIL

Eloise Bishop, manager and director of recruitment agency Quint Education, recommends using job portals that are directed at childcare so that the correct people are being targeted.

'It is important to be clear in your advertisement about what the job role involves, the hours and what benefits there may be,' she says. Obviously, if it is possible to increase the salary a little, that always helps.'

Bishop suggests thinking about the hours that staff are expected to work. Some people prefer to work part-time or shifts rather than 8am to 6pm every day, so it is

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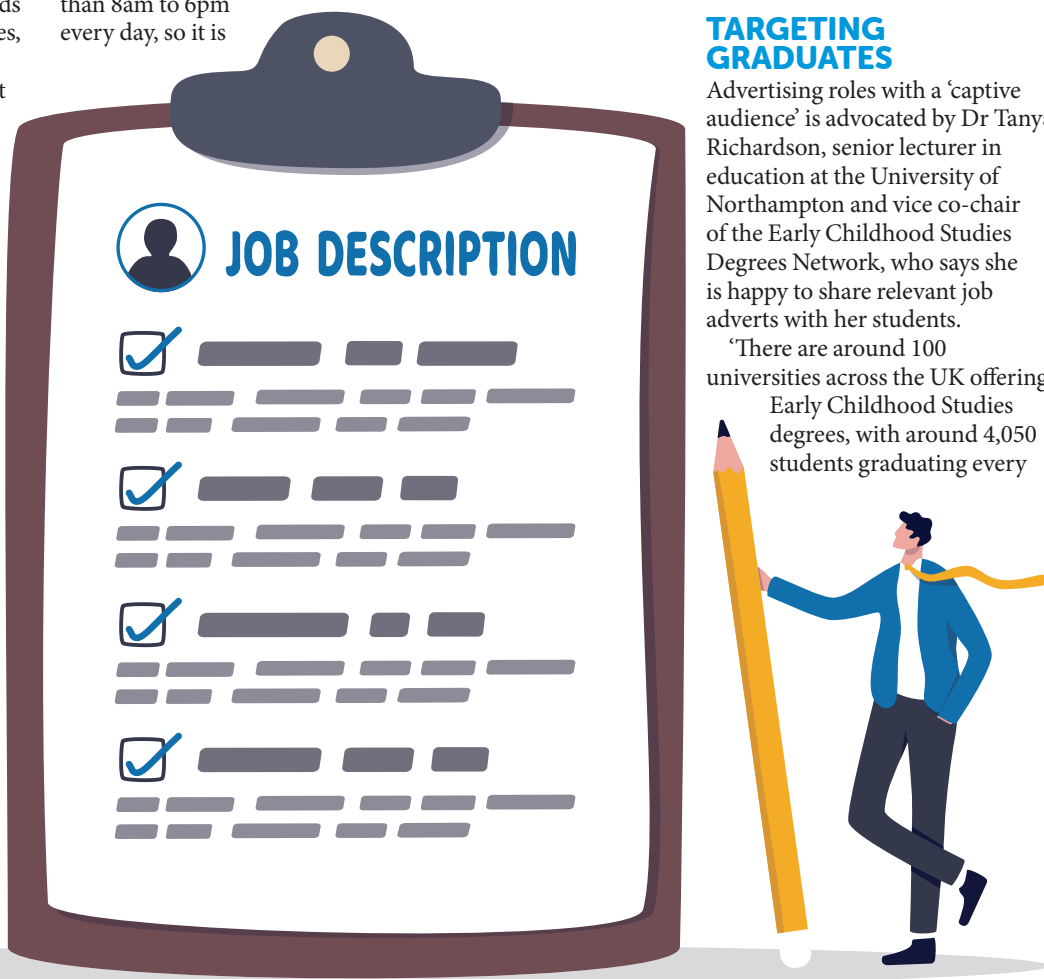
important to be explicit on job adverts about whether this is possible at your setting.

Carefully tweaking the wording and expectations listed in job adverts can make a big difference. After six months of unsuccessfully advertising for nursery assistants, a manager recently shared their recruitment success on social media. They altered the job advert to working school hours only and opened it up to unqualified staff with experience. It led to 25 applicants, eight of whom had the relevant Level 3 qualifications. The setting now has three new staff as a result.

TARGETING GRADUATES

Advertising roles with a 'captive audience' is advocated by Dr Tanya Richardson, senior lecturer in education at the University of Northampton and vice co-chair of the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network, who says she is happy to share relevant job adverts with her students.

'There are around 100 universities across the UK offering Early Childhood Studies degrees, with around 4,050 students graduating every



year,' she comments. 'So, when you do the maths, that's a substantial amount of people entering the workforce and wanting to work with young children.'

While these degree students are predominantly looking for graduate roles, she says quite a few are lacking in confidence and want to gain more experience before progressing. 'In an ideal world, you need to pay a graduate salary, but we know the reality of that is not always possible, so showing scope for progression within a company is also appealing,' adds Richardson.

'Don't forget that academic years are short and many students need to earn while they are studying. It makes sense for them to find part-time work in a nursery and gain relevant experience for their CVs,' she says.

Richardson also recommends managers linking with local colleges and universities to offer mentoring and work experience.

'Nurseries being proactive in offering placement opportunities to students works well,' she says. 'It helps them to recruit because they can "try before they buy". If they get good students on placement, these quite often take on bank work with that nursery, which often leads to a permanent role. Or, having a couple of bank students could probably make up a full-time member of staff.'

Little Learners Childcare in Cliftonville, Northampton (pictured below) was struggling to find qualified staff until it linked up with the University of Northampton, and has since employed students who have had placements with the setting. 'It works really well because they have come to us on placement



N Family Club (above) offers a £1,000 joining bonus for some roles, but also rewards the loyalty of long-term staff too

and are comfortable with the way that we educate,' says manager Vicky Satchell. 'We still go through the interview process, but when it comes to the practical part of the interview, we already know their skills because we've been observing and mentoring them.'

Another positive of this approach is that the candidates have already built relationships with the children.

THE BEST INCENTIVES

Increasingly, nurseries – especially but not exclusively the larger groups – are offering financial incentives

selecting a recruitment agency

Working with a recruitment agency that specialises in early years childcare and education can remove some of the burden of filling vacancies and save you time, but it does cost money, so it is important to find the correct agency for you:

- Ensure the agency has experience recruiting in the sector. Ask for testimonials from settings it has worked with and check its history and reputation.
- Confirm you can afford the fees, which are typically a percentage of the candidate's first year's basic salary, ranging from around 10-30 per cent.
- Check the turnover of recruitment agents because you will want to build a rapport with an individual so that they understand your setting's ethos and needs.
- As you would be when writing a job advertisement, be precise when communicating what you need from potential candidates, including the salary, what qualifications and prior experience are needed, what the role involves, whether it is possible to work part-time or term-time only, what benefits there may be, and what further qualification or progression opportunities there are.
- Find out which platforms they will be using and how they reach out to appropriate candidates outside of the usual forums.
- Ensure the agency will do the correct background checks on potential candidates and sift out any without appropriate qualifications.
- Ask whether it offers any guarantees if the candidate you employ does not work out (some agencies will waive their fee or replace the candidate during a set timeframe).
- For added peace of mind, check whether the agency is a member of a professional body such as the Recruitment and Employment Federation (REF) or Association of Professional Staffing Companies (APSCO).



to new recruits, often on the successful completion of a six month probationary period, and operating refer-a-friend bonus schemes. These schemes are proving controversial, with some people worried that they will exacerbate the recruitment crisis by incentivising movement and creating 'job hoppers'.

While some employers argue that paying a joining bonus attracts more quality staff and is cheaper in the long run because filling vacant positions reduces expensive agency fees, others comment that it is unfair on the committed staff who have been with the nursery for years.

N Family Club offers a £1,000 welcome bonus payable after probation for some senior roles, but also rewards loyal staff. Those who achieve five years service are awarded two weeks' additional holiday and an around-the-world ticket to go on a dream trip.

'I'm seeing more nurseries offering a lump sum when people pass their probation, but I think staff will still leave regardless if

they are not happy with the environment,' says Bishop. 'There is so much competition for staff that it is not guaranteed they'll stay.'

Ellis Forshaw, group talent advisor at Thrive Childcare and Education, says incentives are becoming the norm as nursery employers compete for staff. 'To be able to promote ourselves in the market, we need to make sure that we are offering incentives and benefits to attract candidates into our business, as all organisations in and out of childcare offer work incentives, but it's making sure that our benefits stand out from our competitors,' he says.

'Good benefit packages help attract and retain employees. However, even great packages may not be seen as "enough" if the work environment is challenging, so it's important to support and develop colleague engagement and focus on boosting colleague morale through feedback, one-to-ones and support to ensure retention.'

VIP FACTOR

Once employers have overcome the challenge of finding qualified



standing out online



N Family Club launched a dedicated careers website – www.nfamilycareers.com – in November 2022 to allow the nursery group, which has 30

settings, to bring its brand to life. 'It provides us with a platform to showcase our company culture, values and career opportunities in a focused and user-friendly manner,' comments senior talent partner Claudia Natullo.

She says the site, which won Best Careers Website at The Firm Awards 2023, has had a 'significant positive impact' on recruitment and is the company's second-biggest source of applications. 'The extensive information and engaging content on our website has played a pivotal role in equipping candidates with a deeper understanding of N, leading to more informed applications and a larger pool of qualified candidates who align with our values and vision,' adds Natullo. 'This has resulted not only in increased applicants but also higher-quality hires and a more efficient recruitment process overall.'

The site is linked to from the main company website and also shared

through social media profiles and posts, as well as being included in job adverts and recruitment campaigns.

To make the careers website appealing and engaging, it includes:

- **Visual and interactive content:** High-quality, interactive images and videos to showcase the staff teams (regarded as the heart of N Family Club's brand), environments and company events, which Natullo says creates an 'immersive experience' for potential candidates.
- **Transparent content:** A full benefit and salary report outlining compensation packages by role, along with detailed descriptions of roles, including responsibilities, qualifications and career progression opportunities.
- **Personal approach:** Testimonials from current team members to offer an authentic perspective.
- **Tips and information:** Including dedicated pages about the company's international sponsorship offering, advice for interviewing at N Family Club and an FAQ section.

For settings interested in building a dedicated careers website, Natullo believes it is important to first build a

strong employer brand that can be showcased on the site. She then advises:

- **Establish your goals:** Identify the purpose and objectives of your dedicated careers website to guide its design and content.
- **Understand your target audience:** Tailor the website's messaging and content to resonate with your ideal candidates.
- **Showcase your employer brand:** Highlight your unique selling points, your company's culture, values and the benefits you offer. This will allow you to attract candidates who align with your organisational ethos.
- **Prioritise user experience and engagement:** Ensure the website is easy to navigate, visually appealing, interactive and optimised for different devices. Make it simple for candidates to search and apply for positions.
- **Make it inclusive:** Ensure the language and tone used on the website is friendly, respectful and free from implicit biases. Include images and videos that feature your diverse team.
- **Regularly update and maintain the website:** Keep the content fresh, relevant and up to date.



Left: N Family Club. Below (from top): the University of Northampton's Tanya Richardson and Redwing Solutions' Imogen Edmunds

new recruits, Imogen Edmunds, founder of HR consultancy Redwing Solutions, emphasises how important it is for settings to make new starters feel valued and welcomed.

'When you do get in a position to hire someone, you have to make it work,' she says. 'Rather than just assuming they are going to turn up on the first day, make them feel special before they arrive by reaching out to them in the days or weeks before to check whether they have any questions and find out their uniform sizes.'

She adds, 'Don't just let there be tumbleweed between the acceptance and start day, because people's anxiety can overcome them – will it be a nice place to work? Will I be able to do the job? Will I like the children? – and people are contacting their new employer on a Sunday night and saying they've changed their mind, or are just not turning up at all.'

'So, if you want to overcome the recruitment challenge, you have got to make a new starter feel like a VIP.' ■



lights, camera, action!

show the different roles available and how we offer training and progression along with caring for staff wellbeing.'

She says that the video has gained attention with potential candidates wanting to find out more about working for the company.

Linskill Nursery in North Shields, Tyne and Wear also had the idea of producing a video to attract more people to apply for job roles in their setting (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ug-Uv0HEpDg>). The three-minute video shows what a typical day working in the nursery involves, from setting up to greeting children and planning learning experiences to understanding where children are developmentally. It describes how children are supported to learn through play, and shows staff playing and interacting with children – 'Perhaps you'll be a musician for the morning or find yourself on a dragon hunt!'

The video, which cost £1,000 to film, has been shared on social media and by the local authority and early years organisations. The nursery also shows it on loop at careers fairs. 'We made the video because I felt like we'd exhausted

everything else – we've introduced comprehensive employee benefits packages and increased staff salaries to try and attract people, produced recruitment banners, attended job fairs and gone into high schools to talk about the career. Even after all those things, we're still not getting the applicants,' says children and young people's manager Louise Cervantes.

Unfortunately the video has yet to bring many tangible benefits to the nursery, which is continuing to struggle with recruitment, causing expansion plans to be put on hold. 'Initially there was a lot of interest in the video, but it hasn't quite converted into applicants yet,' says Cervantes. 'I don't think that's a failure on our part, but rather an indication of how serious the recruitment problem is.'



'Who says you can't choose your family?' questions a recruitment video produced by Jesters Childcare, which owns three settings in Essex (<https://jesterskids.org/recruitment>). In the fun eight-minute video, reminiscent of the start of the American sitcom *Friends*, five members of the staff team sit on a sofa discussing their career journeys and the unique family feeling that Jesters has.

'It took a morning to produce the video with a few hiccups because everyone was giggly at first,' says nursery manager Lillie Hart. 'We made it in October 2021 to showcase what we do at Jesters with the aim of attracting new staff while raising morale and bringing passion back to the industry. We regard ourselves as a family and wanted to

