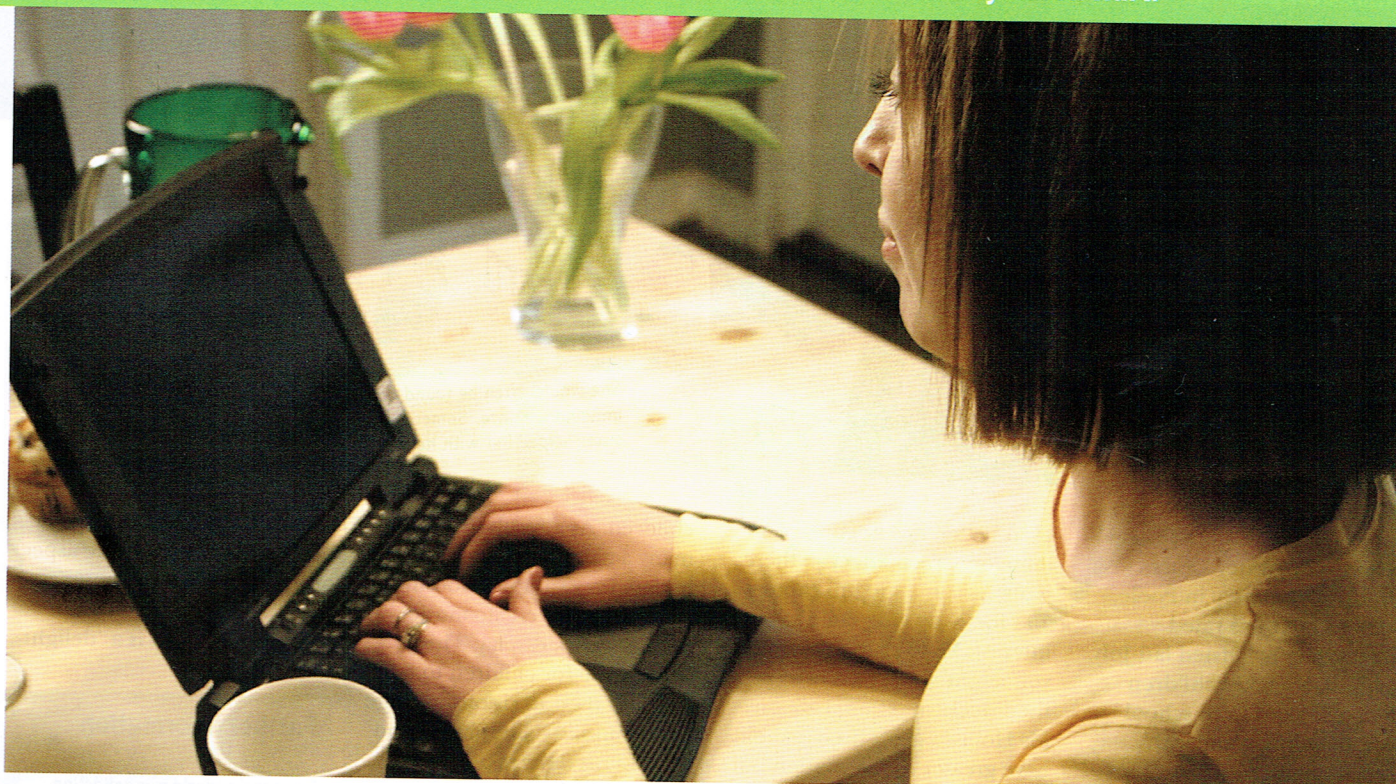


Secure a flourishing future

Do you need to hone your business skills and develop a new focus on sustainability? If so, the Childcare Business Adviser's Programme could be for you. The first in a CPD series by Karen Hart.



The Childcare Business Adviser's Programme targets owners and managers of pre-schools and other early years settings, who need to focus on the business essentials that will make their provision a success.

The programme is also aimed at business support professionals – including those who work for local authorities – who need to be confident about their ability to provide advice, guidance and support to a range of settings.

Certainly these skills now carry a high premium. With reductions in funding, the scaling up of the two-year-old offer and political uncertainties around the sector's direction of travel, many settings are identifying the need to enhance their business resources and knowledge.

On this basis the programme is worth considering for a range of individuals. Delivered by training consultancies Flourishing People and Silver Pebble, it is well established and has achieved renown.

Its approach is flexible and is tailored to the individual requirements of those taking part. It incorporates the use of a range of business support techniques, such as participation in workshops led by specialist early years trainers, along with case-study activities, and access to website support. The programme can also lead to a Level 5 Award in Business Support (see key points).

All materials and a core textbook are included in the fee, and there are opportunities for virtual and face-to-face networking, which

many say is a great opportunity to share information and ideas

Supporting business skills

Jacqui Burke, director of Flourishing People, is an established early years specialist. Originally she delivered the Business Adviser's Programme in collaboration with training company Silver Pebble, on behalf of charity 4Children in 2012. This resulted in almost a hundred Business Champions being created across the country in 2012-2013.

While the funded programme came to an end in March 2013, demand for places continued. As a result Ms Burke updated the programme, and made it available as a paid-for course. She believes there is a real need for this training today.

'Early years settings are facing a big challenge in supporting expanding two-year-old places and need to know how they can remain financially sustainable,' she says. 'Many need to acquire new expertise when it come to delivering a cost effective service within funding constraints.'

The lack of Government funding for the programme going forward seems short sighted to say the least, and individuals are now either having to fund the programme themselves or, in some cases, obtain funding from their employer as part of their CPD.

But investment in the training is worthwhile, as Ms Burke reports that local authority cuts and restructuring have inevitably reduced the business support that settings receive, which has been detrimental.

She says, 'In many local authorities the dedicated business support person is now redundant, and the role has been tagged on to someone else – such as to that of welfare workers, for example. These individuals often have no business support background.'

For council executives who are being stretched, the course can help by providing specialist knowledge. At the same time, it is a valuable investment for nursery managers or practitioners. Once the programme has been accessed by a manager, support can be provided for the whole organisation.'

She adds, 'As these support-role jobs are disappearing at a local level, some local authorities are selling support on to pre-schools as a traded service – and charging for what was formerly free. This is a challenge for many settings who cannot afford the cost.'

The pre-school's view

The Business Advisers programme has certainly been of enormous value to Noak Bridge Pre-School in Basildon Essex, as manager Linsie Dare testifies.

She found the help and support she received from, Denise Brooks, early years business management consultant for Essex County Council, benefited her setting in a number of different ways. Not least was help it received in sourcing vital funds to replace its temporary building unit. Ms Brooks has also been instrumental in helping to build further, much needed play space to accommodate the pre-school's rapidly growing intake of two-year-olds.

'Our existing building has just five years of viable use left,

and as a thriving pre-school with a growing uptake we were desperate for new premises,' Ms Dare says. 'We currently have 64 two to four-and-a-half-year-olds on our register, 50 per cent of whom receive the free entitlement. We have eight children with additional needs, and nine members of staff. We also run both breakfast and after-school clubs, which are thriving – so there is a lot going on. This September we are full to capacity with our new intake of two-year-olds, with many coming to us from the traveller communities of Basildon and Billericay – with whom we've forged strong links.'

Noak Bridge aspires to supply the very best wrap-around care and support it can. Ms Dare says, 'The problem has been that our premises environment no longer matches the skills and service we believe we offer. We're simply too short of space to enable children to play and socialise in a way we feel should be available to them. However, Denise Brooks has helped us to address these issues.'

Ms Dare signposted the pre-school to capital funding, which came from Essex County Council. She advised on paperwork, such as writing business plans, and worked tirelessly with the setting's committee.

'Denise made us feel as if nothing was too much trouble, coming in to see us many times – until 10.30pm some nights,' says Ms Dare. 'And, two months ago, we found out we were successful in gaining the funding we needed – it was a very big relief to us all.'

Noak Bridge is now in the process of building its new premises, which will provide much more space. It also hopes to access match funding for an SEN room in the near

future. 'This is something we really hope to achieve as expanding our SEN provision is a priority for us,' Ms Dare says. 'It would all have been such a struggle without Denise; she helped us throughout with the business side of things. She was absolutely brilliant.'

The business adviser's view

For Denise Brooks herself, completing the course not only provides benefits to the settings she advises, but also delivers personal career benefits.

She explains, 'Although I have worked in the sector for over 20 years – including as a childminder and a development officer for the Pre-School Learning Alliance – my current role as business management consultant for Essex County Council is a relatively new post. When I took it I was seeking to consolidate my experience as well as gain new skills. The course surpassed my expectations. It has given me confidence in my knowledge as well as equipping me with new skills.'

She believes there are many challenges facing the pre-school sector currently, which test the effectiveness of her role. Of these she believes funding and the single school intake are most pressing. 'Fortunately I have been able to support settings with both sustainability as well as capital grant applications to expand their provision,' she says.

She says the skills she has learnt on the programme have been wide-ranging. These include the ability to use the business health-check tool kits, carry out market research and undertake cash flow forecasting.

'I have also gained strategies which enable me to structure meetings effectively and ensure

that pre-schools engage. It is very important that settings consider their business in a broad context, taking account of national strategies as well as local issues.'

Key points

The programme aims to improve the business adviser's effectiveness by:

- Developing a deeper understanding of childcare businesses.
- Explaining a systematic business support process.
- Increasing confidence and self-awareness.
- Promoting networking and partnerships between advisers.
- Sharing sector knowledge and best practice.
- Increasing awareness of available resources and providers.
- Enhancing communication skills.
- Knowing how to conduct and develop oneself as a professional business adviser.
- The Childcare Business Advisers Programme covers the syllabus for the Level 5 Award in Business Support, a degree-level qualification awarded by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI). The award is gained by completing a post-graduate assignment.

Further information

<http://www.flourishingpeople.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/CBAP-brochure-v6.0-London.pdf>