

9 April 2024

Dear Members and Supporters,

Today, with great sadness, we report the closure of The Old Hospital Nursery. We are the 10th nursery to close in Suffolk since December due to a national crisis in nursery care.

When we opened the nursery in April 2022, our vision was to provide very young children with nurturing care in a home-from-home environment. When our first “class” graduated to primary school this past summer, the emotional reaction of some of our mums to the prospect of their little ones leaving told us that we had gotten it right.

From the start, however, we faced two challenges not unique to our setting. The first was financial - how to break even without raising fees so high that they would be out of reach of working families. (The government offers parents 30 hours of free childcare but the subsidy to nurseries is less than its cost.) The second and more intractable challenge was recruiting sufficient qualified staff.

Finding staff in a rural area like East Suffolk, with a high number of retired people, has always been a tricky issue for local employers. The nursery sector has special problems due to low wages, which now makes working in a supermarket more attractive than early years education. Post Covid-Brexit, the sector also suffers from a contracting labour pool. The government is now taking steps to increase the nursery work force but this long-term project comes too late for us.

For the past five months, we have left no stone unturned in our efforts to recruit sufficient qualified staff to meet the government’s statutory ratios of nursery workers to children. We’ve advertised in all media, by word of mouth, reached out to other nurseries, and even sought help from the Department of Education’s Covid Recovery Team who advise that everyone else is in the same boat.

Before Easter, we decided to close temporarily for two weeks to re-group. We took this time to consider every option to keep the nursery open including raising fees, limiting hours, and restricting intake. But no matter which way we turned, we bumped up against the hard reality that unless two recruits in the pipeline panned out (which they did not), we would not have enough staff to continue to run a safe nursery.

On 4 April, SouthGen’s Management Committee convened an extraordinary meeting. After a long and deliberative discussion, it unanimously decided that there was no option but to close the nursery. Knowing the hardship to parents caused by the sudden closure of Brambles, we considered keeping the nursery open for a month to give parents time to find another placement. But to do this would have meant knowingly operating an unsafe nursery with all the attendant ethical, legal and insurance implications.

The natural question on everyone’s lips will be “What impact will this have on the viability of the Old Hospital Project” and “How will the nursery space be used in the future.” The answer to the first question is that the financial impact will be positive as it will remove a drain on SouthGen’s resources. Because overheads are low, we can keep the space temporarily fallow until its future use is decided. To make that decision, we will consult with the community and stakeholders. We are confident that even if the path forward is not at this moment entirely clear, the right use will emerge with a bit of time.

As always, we welcome your thoughts and views. My email address is jessica@southgen.co.uk.

Kind regards,

Jessica Jeans

Chair, SouthGen Management Committee