JOB DESCRIPTION

HEAD OF NURSERY OPERATIONS

HARMONY HOUSE

Salary: £50,000 per annum
Hours: Full time (35 hours per week)
Contract: Permanent
Reporting to: Chief Executive Officer
Location: Harmony House Dagenham (RM9 6XN) and nursery sites
Working pattern: Three days across our nurseries (one day at each setting), one day at Head Office in Dagenham and one day working from home
Senior Leadership Team: The postholder will join the Senior Leadership Team following successful completion of probation.

About the Role
Harmony House is looking for an exceptional operational leader to take responsibility for the leadership, performance and development of our growing group of nurseries.

We currently operate three nurseries in Dagenham, Hornchurch and Castle Green. Over the next five years, we expect our early-years provision to grow significantly, with an ambition to operate approximately six nurseries.

This is therefore not simply a role overseeing our existing settings. We are looking for someone who can build the systems, culture and management capability required for a growing nursery group.

The Head of Nursery Operations will line manage our Nursery Managers and provide the senior operational leadership that sits between individual settings and the CEO. They will ensure that our nurseries are safe, well-led, financially sustainable, consistently high quality and increasingly well occupied.

We are happy to look beyond the traditional early-years career pathway for this appointment. You may have experience within early years, but you are just as likely to have developed your leadership skills in education, children's services, charities, healthcare, social care or another operational or regulated environment.
We are much more interested in how you lead, think and respond than in the sector you currently work in.

What matters is that you are an exceptional operational leader with strong safeguarding judgement, high professional standards and the ability to quickly understand a new and complex environment. You will need to be comfortable leading experienced Nursery Managers, asking the right questions, making difficult decisions and holding people accountable, while recognising and drawing upon the specialist early-years expertise already within our teams.

For someone joining us from outside early years, there will be a significant learning curve, and we see that as entirely manageable for the right person. We expect the successful candidate to immerse themselves in the EYFS, Ofsted requirements and the operational realities of nursery provision from the outset, developing the technical knowledge needed to lead the service confidently and effectively.

Key Responsibilities

Leadership of our Nurseries

- Provide senior leadership and oversight across all Harmony House nursery settings, ensuring consistently high standards of care, education, safeguarding, leadership and operational performance.
- Directly line manage the Nursery Managers, setting clear expectations, holding managers accountable for performance and providing appropriate support, challenge and development.
- Build a strong, professional management culture in which issues are addressed promptly, decisions are made at the appropriate level and managers take ownership of their settings.
- Develop the capability and confidence of Nursery Managers and their deputies, identifying future leaders and strengthening succession planning across the nursery group.
- Maintain a visible presence within each nursery, spending regular time with managers, staff and children and understanding what is happening beyond the information presented in reports and meetings.

Operational Management

- Take senior ownership of day-to-day operational performance across the nursery portfolio.
- Identify operational problems quickly, establish their underlying causes and implement practical solutions.
- Ensure appropriate systems, processes and management controls are in place across all settings, balancing consistency across the group with the needs of individual nurseries.
- Work with managers on staffing, deployment, absence, recruitment, retention, performance, premises, resources and other operational matters.
- Identify recurring problems across settings and develop organisation-wide solutions rather than allowing the same issues to be repeatedly managed at individual nursery level.

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- Ensure Nursery Managers are resolving appropriate operational matters independently while recognising when an issue requires senior escalation.

Safeguarding

- Provide strong senior leadership of safeguarding practice across the nursery portfolio.
- Ensure safeguarding is embedded in the everyday culture of each setting and is understood as everyone's responsibility rather than simply a compliance requirement.
- Provide advice, oversight and challenge in relation to complex safeguarding concerns and ensure concerns are appropriately recorded, escalated, referred and followed through.
- Regularly review safeguarding practice within settings, including the quality of recording, decision-making, referrals, chronologies and management oversight.
- Be confident challenging unsafe or inappropriate practice immediately, regardless of seniority or established custom.
- Identify patterns, emerging risks and learning across settings and ensure these inform training, policy and operational practice.
- Work closely with the CEO and wider organisational safeguarding structures on serious incidents, allegations, regulatory notifications and organisational learning.

Quality, EYFS & Ofsted

- Develop and maintain an excellent working knowledge of the EYFS statutory framework, Ofsted requirements and other legislation and guidance relevant to nursery provision.
- Ensure each nursery remains inspection-ready as a consequence of consistently strong everyday practice rather than short-term preparation for Ofsted.
- Regularly spend time observing practice and speaking with managers and staff to understand the quality of provision.
- Work with Nursery Managers to identify areas requiring improvement and ensure clear improvement plans are implemented and monitored.
- Support settings before, during and following Ofsted inspections and ensure learning is shared across the nursery group.
- Maintain oversight of compliance requirements and ensure that required actions are completed promptly.

Occupancy, Growth & Commercial Performance

- Take senior operational responsibility for improving and maintaining nursery occupancy.
- Work with Nursery Managers, the CEO, Head of Finance and relevant colleagues to understand occupancy, enquiries, conversions, funded places, local demand and capacity at each setting.
- Identify barriers to occupancy and develop practical responses, including improvements to enquiry handling, parent experience, local partnerships, reputation, visibility and marketing activity.
- Use data to understand performance rather than relying solely on anecdotal explanations for changes in occupancy.
- Balance commercial performance with the charitable purpose, inclusive ethos and quality expectations of Harmony House.

Performance & Accountability

- Establish clear performance expectations for each nursery and each Nursery Manager.
- Use meaningful management information to monitor areas including occupancy, staffing, agency use, safeguarding, recruitment, sickness, complaints, incidents, quality and financial performance.
- Hold regular structured performance meetings with Nursery Managers.
- Recognise strong performance while being willing to address underperformance quickly and clearly.
- Work collaboratively with HR and the CEO on performance management, capability, disciplinary or other significant staffing matters where required.

Growth & Development

- Help prepare Harmony House's nursery operations for significant growth over the next five years.
- Develop operating systems and management structures that can work effectively across six or more nurseries rather than designing processes solely around our current three settings.
- Support due diligence, mobilisation and opening of future nursery settings.
- Help establish consistent Harmony House standards, expectations and culture across new and existing settings.
- Identify where additional management capacity or changes to the operating structure will be required as the nursery portfolio expands.
- Play an active role in the wider strategic development of Harmony House as a member of the Senior Leadership Team.

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The Person We Are Looking For

This role requires an unusually strong combination of operational intelligence, leadership presence, safeguarding judgement and emotional maturity.
Your current job title or sector is less important to us than what you have actually done and how you operate as a leader.

We are particularly interested in someone who:

- is an experienced operational or service leader, with a strong track record of leading people, managing performance and improving delivery;
- has excellent practical safeguarding knowledge and the judgement to manage individual concerns while also thinking strategically about safeguarding culture, systems and risk;
- is an exceptional problem-solver who thinks quickly and clearly, identifies the root of an issue and remains calm when faced with complex or unexpected situations;
- is highly professional, emotionally mature and able to establish authority and credibility quickly, while remaining warm, approachable and compassionate;
- is comfortable setting high expectations, holding managers accountable and having difficult conversations when needed;
- is commercially and analytically minded, using data and evidence to understand performance, make decisions and drive improvements in areas such as occupancy and financial sustainability; and
- is curious, adaptable and a very fast learner, able to move confidently between frontline detail and strategic thinking and excited by the opportunity to help build and shape a growing organisation.

Essential Experience & Skills

- Significant experience managing people, services or operations.
- Experience of directly managing managers or other senior staff.
- Strong practical safeguarding knowledge and experience.
- Experience of managing complex or sensitive operational situations.
- Evidence of improving the performance of a service, team or operation.
- Strong analytical and problem-solving ability.

Confidence using management information and performance data.

- Excellent written and verbal communication.
- Ability to build constructive relationships while maintaining clear professional boundaries.
- Ability to travel regularly between Harmony House nursery sites.

Desirable Experience

- Leading services within a regulated environment.
- Working with an inspection or regulatory framework.
- Managing multiple sites, services or teams.
- Improving occupancy, utilisation, customer acquisition or another comparable measure of service growth.
- Supporting the opening, acquisition or mobilisation of new services.
- Working at senior management or leadership-team level.
- Leading services for children, families or other groups where safeguarding is central to delivery.

For Candidates Without an Early-Years Background

We do not expect every strong candidate to arrive with detailed knowledge of nursery operations. However, we do expect an exceptional commitment to learning.

During the initial period in post, the successful candidate will undertake an intensive induction into early-years provision, including the EYFS statutory framework, safeguarding requirements, Ofsted's inspection approach, staffing and qualification requirements, funding, SEND and inclusion, nursery finances and the practical operation of each of our settings.

They will spend significant time within all three nurseries, observing practice and learning from Nursery Managers and frontline colleagues.

The expectation is not that this person becomes an early-years practitioner. It is that they rapidly develop sufficient technical knowledge to lead, question, challenge and support the people who are.