

'Co' operation

Dragonflies at Oru, a new nursery in a co-working and wellness space in Sutton, is nurturing a community where children and families thrive, writes **Nicole Weinstein**

Three-year-old James (name changed) proudly shows his dad the home-grown cucumber he has been carefully nurturing every day for the past three months. 'It's ready to pick today!' he enthuses. 'Wow, that's amazing,' his dad says, kissing him on the head, 'I can't wait to hear how it tastes.' Waving goodbye, James's dad leaves the nursery, heads upstairs and settles at a hot desk in Oru's co-working space. Other parents go about their day, some fitting in a yoga class before work at the wellness quarter, while others enjoy a coffee and chat at Trinco, the on-site café.

Oru is a co-working and wellness space in the heart of Sutton high street in south London. It prides itself on being 'environmentally obsessed' and 'community driven', offering paid club memberships and free health and wellness activities for the general public. The rooftop bar hosts Saturday night live DJ events and has a spa with hot tubs, while during the day the space transforms into a community garden hub. There are free drop-in mother-and-baby groups, and new parents can sign up for workshops on birth preparation, or mother and baby sound bath sessions. And older adults come to the 'town hall' lecture theatre for chair-based yoga.



On the third floor of the building sits Dragonflies at Oru nursery, a 63-place setting that opened in May, a year after Oru Sutton officially launched. Through thoughtful design, the nursery building has been carefully interwoven into the fabric of the centre, allowing children to share moments of interconnectivity with the local community. The distant chatter of voices can be heard from the nursery garden which overlooks Oru's courtyard café. Music from buskers in the central square drifts up to the toddler and pre-school room, where excited children peer through floor-to-ceiling windows

Left to right: the building's rooftop garden, which includes a chicken coop; the co-working space; and at the nursery

onto the high street below. And, during quiet moments of reflection, children's gaze often turns upward to the rooftop chicken coop, where the movements of the hens become part of their daily view.

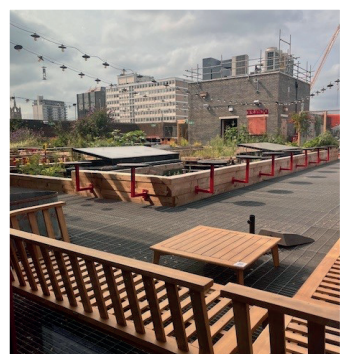
FRANCHISE MODEL

The site was identified by franchise operator Toddleworld, which worked with its existing partner, Ditcham Park School, to open its second nursery here.

'It was hard-hat territory and a building site when we first laid eyes on it,' explains Toddleworld's commercial director, Eamonn O'Connor. 'But it's in an area of regeneration with its own eco-community – and plenty of footfall from working parents.'

While the original nursery at Ditcham Park School in Petersfield serves as a feeder for the independent school, the Oru site marks the first in a planned chain of standalone business ventures.

Six months from opening its doors, the nursery is 50 per cent full and it is on track for 75 per cent occupancy by Christmas and 100



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHN WARREN



per cent by Easter. While word of mouth has been the most powerful driver, the nursery has also had success reaching out to the local community through social media posts and dropping leaflets at mother-and-baby groups, and inviting them in to see the space first-hand.

‘The nursery attracts affluent but eco-conscious working parents who want to give something back to the local community,’ says John Warren, Toddleworld’s quality lead.

INSIDE THE NURSERY

The shabby-chic design in the toddler and pre-school room is in keeping with the rest of the building: stripped-back walls, exposed brickwork and sandblasted wooden beams interspersed with walls and units in tones of dusty pink, Oru’s brand colours.

Learning areas are separated by built-in divider ‘walls’ just below waist height and are filled with rich, authentic resources.

‘There’s a pasta machine, real scales for measuring and an old-fashioned broom for sweeping,’ explains nursery manager Emma Jordan. ‘We have china in the kitchen and teach children gentleness and safety, while authentic resources spark more curiosity and imaginative play than plastic alternatives.’

The baby room, which has up to 11 children, has a ‘white box finish’ with white walls and wipe-clean floor to give it a fresh, clean look.

There is a focus on sensory-rich resources – soft fluffy rugs, large pillows to climb onto, fabrics draped around cosy areas for children to climb through, wooden glitter panels and sensory blocks filled with coloured gel.

The two rooms are linked by a



sheltered outdoor corridor, topped with a clear polycarbonate roof that allows in natural light while keeping the space protected. This free-flow space, which contains wooden planters with raspberry, cucumber and courgette plants, leads onto the nursery garden where children are building roads with real mini bricks and pushing balls down bamboo guttering into tuff trays.

The doors are open throughout the day and children love to ‘dance in the rain in their waterproofs,’ explains baby room leader Lucy Abbott. ‘Parents love seeing these moments of joy on the Family app.’

BENEFITS FOR STAFF

The ‘uniqueness’ of the Oru Centre was one of the factors that drew Jordan to the role of nursery manager at Dragonflies.

‘We have access to unique spaces, such as the rooftop garden and the wellbeing centre. We’re in the middle of the town and we can watch the chickens come up to the fence from the nursery garden. The children love visiting the chickens, which is a great addition to nursery life,’ she says.

For Abbott, coming to work is ‘so enjoyable that it doesn’t feel like work’.

She says, ‘It’s a great environment to work in for mental health and wellbeing. We can book a gym class in our lunch hour. If we have paperwork or children’s reports to do, we go upstairs into the workspaces. We’re like a big family, with a strong team supported by our senior manager, manager, and Toddleworld.’

‘Staff feel valued, no job is too big, and in this new nursery, everyone’s ideas are listened to,’ she adds.



As well as traditional materials, the setting has authentic resources, such as china in the kitchen area (inset)

HIGH QUALITY

As a small franchise operator, Toddleworld works ‘selectively’ with schools and individual investors that align with its ethos. ‘Our model is two-fold,’ explains O’Connor. ‘We work for independent schools on long-term management contracts to build and run nurseries for them, and we also have a franchise operation for individuals that might want to get into the nursery sector but may lack the experience, either business-wise or early-years-wise.’

The model is underpinned by high-quality childcare and early years education. ‘We work on the ground with our settings, providing a personalised, hands-on, face-to-face service,’ O’Connor adds.

Unlike traditional franchisors, Toddleworld encourages clients to create their own brands.

John Warren says, ‘We cover every aspect needed for the nursery’s success – from design, marketing and social media to attract parents, to recruiting the right staff, providing ongoing training, curriculum design and managing safeguarding and regulatory requirements. We also support financial management, ensuring monthly accounts stay on track with business objectives.’

He adds, ‘I carry out a nursery audit at least once a term. This involves producing a detailed report that supports the manager in running the business effectively and provides a clear oversight of what is working well and where improvements may be needed.’

At Dragonflies Oru, the impact of high-quality early education is already beginning to show.

On a home visit last month, Warren visited a family who moved their neurodivergent child from another nursery to join them. Although verbal and able to sign the alphabet, when her mum first visited the setting, the child stayed by her side, sat in the corner and showed signs of regression. But over the months since starting at Oru, she has found her safe space.

‘She began to sing again and has since flourished as she prepares to move on to school,’ Warren says. ‘It was clear to see just how happy and confident she has become.’ ■

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Dragonflies: www.ditchamdragonflies.com/sutton
- Toddleworld: www.toddleworld.co.uk/about-toddleworld
- Oru Space: <https://oru.space.co>