

case study - partnership working and surviving challenging economic times

the background

Nursery group Busy Bees managed the 'Mini Rovers' nursery at Longbridge on behalf of MG Rover, caring for the children of staff who worked for the company. Naturally, most of the children were those of MG Rover staff with **80% of all childcare places taken up by their employees**. Following the sudden collapse of MG Rover in 2005, the nursery was left in the position of being unable to cover staff wages due to nursery fees taken from MG Rover's payroll not being passed on to the nursery.

Rather than think that this was the end for the nursery, **Busy Bees embarked on a survival plan**, accessing funding to help parents without a job to keep their childcare place, rebranding the site, and producing a five-year business plan to attract new parents and ensure a sustainable setting.

surviving disasters

Keelie Leahy, Regional Director for Busy Bees admits "**it was a shock**" when MG Rover collapsed. Like many workplace nurseries, the setting relied on parents at MG Rover to survive. With MG Rover subsidising the on-site childcare, employees had their nursery fees deducted at source. When the company collapsed, Mini Rovers, as the Busy Bees site was known as at the time, saw its income collapse to virtually zero.

It would have been the easy option to simply close down. But because of the past success of the nursery, Busy Bees decided to embark on a survival plan that would see the nursery **reach out to new parents**, and provide support for existing ones.

The Busy Bees team approached Birmingham City Council for **sustainability funding**. Within two days of the news of the MG Rover collapse, Busy Bees had submitted its bid and was subsequently awarded in the region of £100,000 of funding over five years.

how they did it

Keelie admits that it wasn't easy. "We were working day and night to get the bid in, and we had actively to demonstrate both what the funding would achieve, and how it would be spent," shares Keelie.

Much of the funding during the first year was used to support staff at the nursery and parents who had lost their jobs and ensure continuity for children. for MG Rover staff. Not only did parents need childcare to look for alternative employment, they were really keen to **keep their children settled**," shares Keelie.

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The next step was to produce a **five-year business plan** for the site, which detailed how the funding would be a good investment for the local authority by providing childcare to the wider community. Keelie shares she built up a good relationship with the council to support them during the early “frantic” days of completing the initial 25 page application form!

Although Keelie would recommend that any nursery facing economic issues does seek support in terms of sustainability funding, she does caution that it is important any nursery is clear **how the funding will be used**. “We put together an action plan showing how we would use the funding for things like keeping staff and marketing ourselves to new parents. As part of this, we provided projections of occupancy to show it was an **investment**,” she shares.

a new nursery?

Busy Bees recognised that it could be viewed by some parents negatively due to its location and history as a nursery for MG Rover employees. Mini Rovers therefore **completely re-branded** itself as a Busy Bees site, investing in new signage, equipment and décor.

A high profile marketing campaign was undertaken, under the new ‘Busy Bees Longbridge’ banner. This stressed that despite its location the nursery was **highly accessible** to any parent with it being just off the main road into the city centre.

“We got our name everywhere and anywhere,” reveals Keelie. “There was no real ‘secret formula’ to attracting parents to the rebranded nursery. We really pushed both our accessibility, and how **we had heavily invested in it**. We also kept our ‘factory’ opening hours of 7am until 6pm, giving parents flexibility,” she adds.

As part of this, Busy Bees also looked for **relevant links** with other organisations such as Advantage West Midlands, the region’s development agency which was looking to support businesses regionally following the collapse of MG Rover.

the picture today

The Busy Bees Longbridge site is **thriving**, running at an average 86% occupancy and it is meeting all the targets outlined in its business plan and continuing to provide high quality childcare for families across the area. Keelie believes the future for the site is **very positive**, and demonstrates why funding to help a nursery through a ‘blip’ can have ongoing benefits for the wider community well into the future.

And what advice would Keelie give to other settings who might face similar circumstances? “**Don’t despair and move quickly**, make sure you approach your local authority as soon as you think there could be a problem. It is of course a lot of hard work at the beginning but I am really proud of all we have achieved at this site, and how we supported parents during a really difficult time. **Develop a strong relationship with your local authority**, and ensure you can demonstrate how any funding will secure a successful future,” she concludes.

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