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Next Step Advisory

Building the Foundational Engine Beneath a Fast-Growing Nursery Group

A done-for-you infrastructure and AI governance engagement for Old Station Nursery, with a parallel pathway for Tamsyn & Co

Prepared for Tamsyn Allington
15 July 2026



OVERVIEW

Executive summary

Old Station Nursery has built something genuinely valuable. Across seventy-nine settings and seventeen entities, the UK operation has delivered record EBIT growth over consecutive years and continues to perform strongly while the wider group moves at pace. The priority now is not to fix a broken business; it is to protect and consolidate that value by building a stable foundational engine beneath a growth programme that is running fast and running on several fronts at once.

The core challenge, in your own words, is that there are multiple different systems, not just within the people function but across the whole organisation, creating a convoluted engine underlying all activity. People HR does not connect to anything, there is no learning management capability, and a great deal of skilled head office time goes into pulling data, reporting on it, and working out what data even exists. The Family platform migration, live but unravelled, has surfaced just how tightly HR, scheduling, payroll, absence and billing are bound together. Meanwhile AI tools are already in use across the business with no consistent practice or governance around them.

With M&A resuming and several initiatives live simultaneously, the instinct to keep moving is right. What that instinct needs alongside it is a foundation that does not fall behind. This proposal sets out a fully done-for-you build: Empowrd AI constructs, connects and runs the engine so that your head office is lifted out of reactionary delivery rather than handed another initiative to manage. A secondary, lighter-touch pathway for Tamsyn & Co is addressed briefly toward the end, as a natural adjacency for when that business reactivates.

WHERE THINGS STAND

Diagnostic: current state of the people and operational engine

The current systems landscape is the product of rapid, successful growth rather than any failing. Until eighteen months ago, payroll for two thousand people across seventeen entities ran on an Excel spreadsheet; the move to Staffology was a significant step forward. That trajectory, growing faster than the infrastructure beneath it, is exactly what a business does when it is winning. The task now is to let the foundation catch up with the momentum.

The fragmented systems picture

- Seventeen separate entities operating at different maturity levels, with legacy operations still siloed despite the rebrand
- People HR in place but not connected to anything, and no learning management system at all
- Significant manual admin inside the people function: pulling data, reporting on data, and establishing what data exists
- The Family platform migration, live but unravelled, touching HR, scheduling, payroll, absence management and billing without the interdependencies having been mapped first
- AI tools already in everyday use across the business, with no consistent practice or governance

The consequence is a head office and a field management layer that are stretched thin and operating reactively. Skilled, well-paid people are working in the weeds. Nursery managers are asked to be all things to all people, delivering core childcare while also carrying marketing and HR responsibilities without the systems to support them.

The diagnostic points to a clear early opportunity. Stabilising the Family migration interdependencies and establishing a single, connected source of truth for people data produces a demonstrable, attributable result within the first phase: visible evidence of foundational progress that momentum can build on.

WHY NOW

Strategic context

This work does not sit in isolation. It sits inside a rapidly consolidating multi-entity group with an active acquisition pipeline and ambitious growth targets, moving from a projected thirteen and a half million pounds this year toward a twenty million euro ambition. That growth rests on an operating base that must stay stable as it scales.

Two features sharpen the case. First, the majority of revenue comes from government funding, with limited ability to scale fees for private parents; margin is therefore won through operational efficiency rather than pricing, which makes the cost of fragmented systems a direct drag on performance. Second, the acquisition model means every new setting inherits, and multiplies, whatever fragmentation already exists. Layering more entities onto disconnected systems raises the integration cost each time.

Foundational integration is the multiplier that makes growth safe. It is not a brake on pace; it is what allows the business to keep acquiring and expanding with confidence rather than accumulating hidden operational debt.

DESIGNING AROUND REALITY

Constraints and operating realities

Any credible solution has to respect the conditions the business is actually operating under. These are not obstacles to work against; they are the design brief.

- A lean head office of around sixty people, with no additional headcount expected, so the solution must add delivery capacity rather than management overhead
- A Head of Tech whose strength is infrastructure, with strategic AI direction being the complementary piece to add alongside that foundation
- A high, Ofsted-driven compliance load carried per entity across all seventeen
- Field and nursery management that is junior relative to other sectors, which means solutions cannot assume senior capacity in the field
- Multiple live initiatives already competing for attention, including the Family project, roughly thirty refurbishments, the career pathway, Ofsted framework embedding and a new catering system

Taken together, these realities point firmly toward a done-for-you model. A model that asks a stretched head office to co-ordinate yet another workstream would work against the constraints. A model where Empowrd AI builds, connects and runs the engine works with them, supplying capacity and strategic AI direction that sit alongside the existing infrastructure strength rather than duplicating or displacing it.

WHAT IS AT STAKE

The risk of standing still

The engine is strong, which is precisely why it is worth protecting. The risk is not that activity stops; it is that activity accelerates while the foundation stays where it is, and the gap between the two widens with every acquisition and every new system layered on top.

How the cost compounds

- Overheating: too many initiatives running at once without foundational support raises the odds that something is delivered poorly or not at all
- Compliance and data risk: manual data handling across seventeen entities, each carrying its own Ofsted obligations, becomes harder to keep accurate and defensible as scale grows
- Ungoverned AI exposure: tools already in use across the business, with no consistent practice, create real questions of safety, legality and exposure that will need mapping against the evolving regulatory picture, including the EU AI Act, for your legal specialists to validate
- Erosion of head office: an already stretched team pulled deeper into reactionary work has less capacity for the strategic contribution the business is paying well for

The Family migration is the clearest illustration. A system touching HR, scheduling, payroll, absence and billing, implemented before its interdependencies were mapped, shows how quickly complexity compounds when the foundation is not built first. Every future initiative carries the same risk if the underlying engine is left unaddressed.

Building the foundations while activity accelerates is an act of stewardship. It protects a valuable, high-performing engine and keeps the pace sustainable, rather than trading long-term resilience for short-term speed.

HOW DELIVERY WORKS

Phased roadmap

The build is fully done-for-you and delivered in three phases. Empowrd AI constructs, connects and runs each stage so that delivery is systemised into the business rather than resting on any one individual. Foundational support begins arriving in the early months; a realistic change curve for two thousand people is respected honestly, while AI-enabled delivery moves considerably faster than a traditional programme would.

Phase one: stabilise and map

- Map the Family platform interdependencies across HR, scheduling, payroll, absence and billing, and stabilise the migration
- Establish a single, connected source of truth for people data
- Deliver a quick, attributable early integration win that demonstrates foundational progress

Phase two: connect and govern

- Build the HR data flows so systems connect and manual data pulling is automated
- Introduce learning management capability where none currently exists
- Establish an AI governance framework and consistent, safe practice across the business

Phase three: systemise and standardise

- Extend connected systems and consistent practice across all seventeen entities
- Bring the different maturity levels toward a common standard
- Embed processes so delivery runs independently of any single person remaining in post

At every phase, Empowrd AI carries the build and implementation load. The intended outcome is a head office lifted out of reactionary delivery and a growth programme running on a foundation that keeps pace with it.

A NATURAL ADJACENCY

A parallel pathway for Tamsyn & Co

Alongside the primary engagement, there is a lighter-touch pathway to consider for Tamsyn & Co when the time comes to reactivate it. It is set out here not as a competing priority but as care for the wider ambition behind the work you do.

- Rebuilding sustainable delivery capacity so the business runs without you having to be the generalist doing everything, easing the feast-or-famine cycle that comes with that model
- Sharpening positioning toward niched organisational development and leadership strategy, rather than broad generalist people work
- Using technology to build a delivery structure that supports the business rather than recreating the constraints of employment inside it

The aim is freedom, sustainability and quality of work: a consultancy shaped around the mission of reshaping how work is done, delivered in a way that lasts. This pathway remains firmly secondary to the Old Station Nursery engagement and can be picked up when the moment is right.

Why Empowrd AI

Empowrd AI is built to construct and run this kind of engine end to end. The combination that matters here is strategic AI direction paired with genuine hands-on delivery capacity, so the thinking and the building come from the same partner rather than being handed back to a stretched team to implement.

- A fully done-for-you model that removes burden rather than adding another initiative to manage
- Strategic AI direction that complements existing infrastructure strength instead of competing with it
- Delivery systemised into the business, so value does not depend on any one person remaining in post
- A way of working matched to how you and the team make decisions, grounded in partnership, energy and genuine fit

The feasibility study now underway will confirm scope and sequencing before anything is committed. That reflects how we prefer to work: giving the thinking fertile ground rather than presuming the outcome. The intention set out here is readiness to proceed on that basis, with the shape of delivery matched to what the study surfaces.

INVESTMENT

Investment

The engagement is structured as a fully done-for-you build, where Empowrd AI supplies both the strategic AI direction and the hands-on delivery capacity to construct, connect and run the operational engine on your behalf. It is phased so that foundational support arrives early and value lands quickly, without depending on any single individual remaining in post or asking your head office to absorb further co-ordination. A lighter secondary pathway is set out for Tamsyn & Co, sized to sit alongside the primary programme rather than compete with it.

Engagement	GBP	USD
Magnetic Marketing (DWY)	£2.1–2.6k/mo	\$2.8–3.5k/mo
Capacity Accelerator (delivery only)	£3.5–4k/mo	\$4.6–5.1k/mo

Scope and sequencing will be confirmed following the feasibility study currently in progress, so the shape of delivery can be matched precisely to the priorities that surface.

THE TEAM

Your founders

EMPOWRD AI | CO-FOUNDER

Zoë Walters

Strategy, Transformation & Client Insight

Zoë leads strategy, change management and client insight at Empowrd AI. With a background in HR, organisational design and commercial leadership, she translates business complexity into clear people, process and transformation roadmaps.

EMPOWRD AI | CO-FOUNDER

Aman Singh

Technology, Marketing, Systems & Commercial Discipline

Aman leads technology and automation architecture and commercial discipline at Empowrd AI. He brings deep experience in revenue operations, architecture and commercial cadence, and is focused on building the operational backbone that supports optimisation, process discipline and organisational efficiency.

A stable foundation for the next stage of growth

Old Station Nursery has built a valuable, high-performing engine. The work set out here protects it, connects it and lets it keep pace with an ambitious growth programme, without asking a lean head office to carry more. Once the feasibility study is complete, we will confirm scope and sequencing together and move forward on that basis.

Let us reconvene after the feasibility study to agree the shape of the build and the first phase.