



Childcare and the conference crèche

As one venue launches a crèche for the children of conference delegates, *CN* investigates the issue of childcare at conferences

A prime concern for any conference organiser is ensuring that the event is well attended. Without the right number of people in the room, all other factors are null and void. Poor attendance could mean a breakdown of relationships with sponsors, not to mention a low return for commercial events.

Even before compelling content is created to try and pull in the delegates and before the exciting incentives are outlined, there is one simple factor that could really make or break the event: accessibility. While it is commonplace for

venues to have established accessibility statements covering disability access (and quite rightly so), the issue of accessibility for parents and guardians is often overlooked.

UniSpace Sunderland recently developed a Conference Crèche service to attempt to tackle this issue. Comprised of a nursery and crèche, the Ofsted-registered centre is managed by the University Childcare Service with professionally qualified staff. Sharon Olver, Commercial Services Manager at UniSpace, says: "The University of Sunderland had initially developed a

“ It is increasingly common for workplaces to offer flexible working for parents and guardians and it seems only natural that this flexibility should be reflected in conferencing ”

March 2013 • www.conference-news.co.uk •

crèche to be used during its graduation ceremonies. We felt this was a service that should also be developed as an offering to the conferences and events that we host at UniSpace.

"We take accessibility seriously and with the Conference Crèche we aim to open our events up to parents and carers that may otherwise either not be able to attend or be faced with costly childcare arrangements," she says.

The 'Happy Homes and Productive Workplaces' report commissioned by the Working Families charity revealed that almost two-thirds of UK employees have access to flexible working hours in order to help with childcare. While statistics on the number of venues offering childcare packages are limited, some form of flexibility regarding childcare is becoming expected in the workplace and there is a distinct possibility that this expectation will extend to off-site activities, meetings and conferences.

The National Union of Students (NUS), a voluntary membership organisation and confederation of 600 students unions, provides a comprehensive childcare package at all its events. NUS Group Events Manager Davina Keen says: "NUS prides itself on being an organisation that is at the forefront of equality, diversity and accessibility for our membership and that includes all our members."



UniSpace's Sharon Olver says offering childcare facilities for delegates means events are more easily accessible for parents and carers



practical issues associated with offering childcare. "We have worked hard to ensure that the practicalities are dealt with, meaning that we can offer childcare as part of our package," says Sharon Olver of UniSpace. While UniSpace Sunderland is fortunate enough to have the space and provisions to offer on-site childcare, this is not practical or realistic for all venues.



INDUSTRY VIEW

Chris Parnham, Chair of the HBAA and MD of Zibrant: "This is just a gimmick to attract interest or comment. If I can't get to Sainsbury's because I don't have a car, or I can't get away from home, I don't relocate to be next door to Sainsbury's. I go online, and I order groceries to go. The real answer to this problem is 'virtual events'. Don't take the problem with you: work around it and bring the experience to you."

Samme Allen, President of MPI UK and Ireland Chapter: "We should be flexible to the needs of all delegates. We already accommodate dietary requirements and religious needs and childcare should also be a part of this. Women are having babies at all stages of their career and returning to work is always a balance of childcare and finance."

ABPCO Chair Jennifer Jenkins: "Not that many conferences take place close to home. In the majority of cases, both delegate plus small child will be travelling some distance to the venue. That adds time and cost. Most families have childcare provision close to home so as not to inflict the horrors of rush hour commuting on small children."

Top Banana MD Nick Terry: "If a client wants a high level of attendance and childcare is cited as a major deterrent for delegates, an onsite solution has some attraction. But we tend to find that most working parents have sorted their day care cover for 'normal working hours', it's the non-working week or out of working hours cover that becomes the larger issue. The liability and duty of care issues are massive though, plus it has to be well managed and delivered. Is it a deal breaker? Less so for the corporate market, but for some of the larger, direct to public events, it may pull in a few extra visitors."