



Diary of a New Operator

Rather than listing or telling you how to set up an indoor play centre we thought it would be more useful to see how Surrey business woman Carol White embarked on a life-changing new venture by opening an indoor play area in Farnham.

Month 1

This month I've decided to do something that can definitely be described as life changing and this diary is my way of recording the process for posterity.

My name's Carol White and – in agreement with my husband Jason – I've taken the decision to give up my job at the local anaesthetists and open a soft play area in Farnham, Surrey. Jason has his own construction business and we've decided to invest all our savings into this new venture, which I will run. Obviously we discussed it at length and we recognise that there are risks involved, but I've put a lot of thought into this and I am sure I can make a success of it.

I have my 4-year old granddaughter Isabel (pictured) to thank for the inspiration. Soon after Isabel was born, my daughter went back to work and I reduced my working days from three to two in order to look after her. About 18 months ago, I began to take her to one of the four indoor play centres within a 10-mile radius of Farnham. Very quickly, I realised that although I was achieving the primary objective of giving Isabel the chance to play, have fun and get some healthy exercise, our local centres, in my view could make improvements in some areas. I intend to address those issues and implement the improvements in my centre.

Before I seriously considered the option of doing something myself, I had already begun the research process – taking notes while I was in the centres, picking up on the things that I felt I could do better, counting the numbers of children that came into the centre while Isabel was playing etc...

I am convinced that the customer base is out there and this will work. Farnham is an affluent town and there are several private schools around. We'll be totally self-funded, with no borrowings and I've already started drafting the business plan – the next stage is to find premises and get the ball rolling.

Month 2

I started to look for premises at the beginning of this month. I looked on the internet for agents in Farnham that let commercial properties, found four and went straight in to see them.

I told them what I was trying to achieve and at first they tended to show me large industrial units on the edge of town. The properties were big enough, but parking was always an issue and I don't really want children coming out of my centre into an industrial estate.

Eventually Ian Steele at Park Steele struck gold. He had a town centre retail unit, which had been empty for a year. It is in the East Street precinct, next to Sainsbury's. It was the supermarket's off license until they moved that in-store in mid-2009 and at 2,301 square feet, it's the perfect size and height for a reception area, two-storey playframe, café and toilets and an office.

I said yes straight away. The rent is £35,000 a year, which is a lot higher than in an industrial estate, but the location makes it worth it. Not only is it next to Sainsbury's, which generates a lot of passing custom, on the other side of Sainsbury's is a childrens' bed shop and opposite, planning permission has just been granted for a 300- apartment development. If only half of the people have children, that would be a huge boost for my business.

It will take a few weeks to sort out the heads of agreement with Sainsbury's, which is sub-letting the premises to me, but I really feel like we're onto a winner. We need to get our change of use application passed, of course, but what a perfect location.

Despite the fact that I'm not looking for funding at this stage, I went to meet the bank manager at Barclays and I have to say, he was brilliant. I showed him my budget and business plan and he said it knocked spots off most business plans people bring to him when they are looking for a loan. He offered a few helpful suggestions and also gave me the option of a free consultation with the business manager and marketing manager. I don't feel like I need that right now, but it's good to know it's available.

Month 3

One thing I have rapidly learnt is – if you need something, you have to ask for it. Sainsbury's agreed to everything I asked for in the terms and that is a big help.

It gives me an additional three parking spaces for staff and a deferment in rent payments until we open, as well as some concessions because we will be redeveloping the building. At the moment, it's a shell and the old tills, shelves and shopping trolleys are in it.

In terms of the application for change of use, I spoke to the agent and he looked into all of that for us. The premises have an A1 Retail licence at the moment, and we needed to apply for an A2 Leisure licence. Jason has used a surveyor for his business for years and we got him involved to apply to the council, ensure we complied with building regulations and liaise with all the relevant parties. That process will take a while, as local businesses and residents' associations have to be consulted as well as council planners, but fingers crossed we'll sail through.

Month 4

We put in the planning application to brand the outside of the unit the name as a limited company. We're going to be called Stay & Play and I spent a few hours with a designer to come up with the logo.

We have time to tweak that before we open – hopefully in April, but it's exciting to see the identity of my centre begin to take shape. Again this is a process that takes a while, but it's pretty much a formality, once we have permission to change the use of the premises.

I also got a quote for insurance through Morton Michel. I was expecting to compare and contrast two or three insurance providers, but they came up first on the internet search (insurance for soft play) and Janet Hooper was so thorough, helpful and professional during our phone call I decided there and then that this was the broker I wanted to work with. Their policy also came in a fair way below what I had budgeted for, which was another bonus!

Month 5

Another big decision to make – when should I hand my notice in? If everything goes to plan and our application is granted by February, our aim is to open in time for the Easter school holidays.

Because of the nature of the business where I have worked for the last seven years, I have to give three months' notice, which leaves me with a dilemma.

We decided that I will hand in my notice on January 1 and leave on March 31, which leaves me with the minimum amount of time I could have to make the final preparations to open Stay & Play. If things don't happen in the timeframe we want them too, then it could prove an expensive move, but weighing everything up, I don't think we have any other choice really.

Month 6

My view, based very much on my own experiences, is that first and foremost, I want to look after the parents and grandparents.

We have ordered nine lovely leather sofas and comfortable tables and chairs for the café, and we'll be putting in a big screen to show terrestrial channels. There will be a heavy emphasis on home-made food in the café, with a wide selection of paninis, baguettes and sandwiches as well as oven-baked dishes and the full range of coffees and teas from an all-singing, all dancing espresso machine.

For the children, we'll have things like breaded chicken fillets, not nuggets, and oven baked chips, rather than fried. I'll also be making mashed potato, and for dessert, a range of homemade cakes and puddings. There will be plenty of healthy options.

I want to give parents a choice that they just don't have elsewhere in this area - if they are happy, the kids will play anywhere and when I combine that with a high-quality playframe, my offer will definitely stand out from the rest.

Month 7

We got the letter on February 16 telling us that our application for change of use had been granted – fantastic news! We received some very positive feedback on our plans from some of the groups who were consulted.

It was generally agreed that we will be contributing to the reinvigoration of the local business community, and to have that sort of support means a lot. Now we need to find out when we can get the keys and Jason can get in there and begin the construction job.

My hunt for an equipment supplier, which as always began on the internet, ended with me placing an order with Soft Brick Company. I dealt with Nicole Warriner and she was so helpful. I gave them the dimensions of the site and my own design ideas, and once I had chosen the equipment that I wanted to buy, they sent me a computergenerated 3D drawing of what it would look like. I've paid the 30 per cent deposit and now they will send me the swatches and themes, so I can colour match and get a precise idea of what we'll end up with. It's starting to feel very real now – the next few weeks will be hectic, but I can't wait to get cracking.

Month 8

4th - I spent this morning on the phone to Waverley Borough Council, checking that I am complying with environmental health standards.

Sill things like whether the music we play at parties will breach any licensing or noise pollution laws or whether the flat screen TV that will play C-Beebies all day for the toddlers is legal. I'm learning new stuff every time I make a phone call, and even when you are 99% certain that you know you're within the law, it's worth making sure – a fine after you've opened could be a crippling blow.

I also checked about the need for CRB checks for my staff and was surprised to find out that, due to the nature of their duties, there is no legal obligation for them to be CRB registered. I've decided, however, that whether it's a legal obligation or not, ethically I think it's better to pay for them to get CRB clearance. It will give us protection when a parent inevitably asks the question at some point and as with inspections, I feel it is a small price to pay for my own peace of mind, as well as that of the parents.

I've included it in the contracts of employment, which I have now completed. I pieced them together over time, as I thought about things, rather than going for the standard downloadable contract off the internet, as I feel this is a very specific sector and needs well-thought out clauses. I've met with the accountant that Jason uses and he's sorted out all the National Insurance and PAYE details for me, so we're pretty much ready to go staff-wise.

8th - I've been formulating plans in my head for some of the key aspects of Stay & Play for months; now, with opening day approaching quickly, it's been time to put them into action. This is a key month for us.

The marketing plan seems pretty straightforward to me. I've had another couple of meetings with the printer and he's come up with a great flier that details everything about us and what we offer as a soft play centre and also features a competition that we hope will attract more people through the doors in the early weeks.

Anyone who comes in with the flier will be entered into a prize draw, with the chance to win a free party for up to 12 children. That's worth around £150 to the winning parents, but obviously won't cost me as much as that. The flier also includes details of how people can pre-book a party from April 15th (our expected opening date) onwards, so hopefully we'll be able to open with some orders already on the books.

14th - I've had 5,000 fliers printed and they will be distributed in a number of ways. My daughter has a large circle of friends who are mums and that will be a good starting point. I've also been contacting the local primary schools to ask about promoting the centre to parents and the sheer weight of the word of mouth in Farnham will undoubtedly be useful. Because we haven't got the keys yet – we should have had them at the end of February and its now mid-March – I have had to hedge our bets a bit on an opening date, although we still want to open before Easter.

On top of that, I'm also going to put leaflets in the Farnham Herald and I'm considering a £300 half-page advert in the local free newspaper, which goes out to 33,000 readers. There will be a voucher in there for a free cup of coffee and a slice of cake for the parents. I'll also put leaflets next door in Sainsbury's, where a big portion of my target customer base shop.

17th - I've considered long and hard the subject of age profile and entrance prices and this is what I've ended up with:

- There will be no charge for adults or children between 0-12 months. As I've said before, I want parents to feel comfortable in my environment and I'd rather benefit from the spend in the café from a contented adult than annoy them before they have even stepped foot in Stay & Play
- Children will be charged on a sliding scale, depending on their age. Between 1-3, they will pay £3.80, that will rise to £4.20 for 3-5 year olds, and then again to £4.80 for over 5s. We have designed the centre so that it is suitable for children up to the age of 10, but I'm conscious that children grow at different speeds and we may put a height restriction in if bigger children become an issue

Basically, my view is that it's volume of people through the door that I'm looking for and I don't want to introduce anything that jeopardises that. If you have happy people coming through the door and then give them what they want once they're inside, you're going to do alright.

I'm also going to pay staff to run the place for eight hours, so I want it to be busy for as much of that time as possible. I've got most of the staff in place already. I'm going to be running four separate part-time shifts. Opening hours will be 9.30-6 and two people will do the 9.30-2.30 shift each weekday and two more will do the 12-6 shift. I'll be there obviously and my daughter is also going to put in some shifts and help out more when I'm away for any reason. We'll put together the rota on a monthly basis. As long as we always have three people available, we'll be able to run the reception, the play area and the café smoothly, as well as keep up a rigid cleaning regime for the equipment and the loos.

21st - Hygiene and cleanliness are right at the top of my priority list and I'm going on a hygiene course to get a few more pointers before I start.

It's not just about our cleanliness either, I've also bought miniature stainless steel swing bins for each table and there will be a packet of baby wipes on every table too. It's the small touches that make the difference and I'm going on my own experience to select things that I would like to see if I was a customer (or that I would want Isabel to have access to as a child).

23rd - I've booked and paid for a Play Inspection Company inspection before we open. I've got no real worries - the equipment is being supplied by a very reputable manufacturer, we've got no sharp edges, no glass and we've gone for a full fitted carpet, rather than tiles. Although the parents are ultimately responsible for their children when they are in the centre, we will leave no stone unturned to fulfil our obligations. An inspection costs £450 a year, why wouldn't you do that? It's a tiny price to pay for the safety of so many children.

We've also decided that we're going to move our food sourcing from Costco, where we are members, to Booker's. We hadn't been to Booker's before, but when we went in this month, we realised how good it is and it's a lot closer than the closest Costco. The quality of what we buy is most important, of course, but the price and lack of travel costs also worked in Booker's favour.

25th - I've set up Stay & Play as a limited company, on the advice of my accountant and registered myself as the sole director. Barclays has also given me 18-months free banking. I do feel that I've received some excellent advice and that is allowing me to go into this adventure with my eyes very much wide open.

27th - Still no keys, which is putting us in a very tight position. It's all down to the solicitors - one of Sainsbury's solicitors has been ill and no-one else would look at the file - amazing. There are no problems, but a few clauses that need inserting before we can get final sign off. Very frustrating, but these things are sent to try us!

Month 9

1st - It might be April Fool's Day, but I'm sure they weren't pulling my leg when they said we could have the keys.

We were pacing up and down in the facility, with seven eager Soft Brick Co. employees who had come down to install the equipment on the 2nd when we finally got the yes. What a huge relief, but on the other hand, the really hard work starts here and we now have 12 days to do what we expected was six weeks work to turn this shell of a building into a play centre.

We have signed a 15-year lease, with two five-year getout clauses, when we could pull out and retrieve our deposit money. One thing we didn't expect was that there is stamp duty on leasing a commercial property - how much money does the government want from us all? Well, in our case, it's £2,900. You can't buck the system though, we just have to grin and bear it.

2nd – Well, the playframe is now installed and it looks great. It wasn't the way round we wanted it of course, as now we have to build around the frame and we'll have to get a team of cleaners in to clear away the dust afterwards, but I suppose we can at least now see the first impressions of what the centre will be based around. Trying to be excited, but it's getting a bit stressful!

6th – I completed my health and safety and hygiene certificates, both level 2. A local lady named Pauline Murdoch was kind enough to carry the courses out at home, due to the time constraints. It was fairly straightforward, which I was advised to look into by the environmental health guy, Jamie Tomlinson. You don't have to do it, but safer food, better business is their philosophy and I couldn't agree more. 8th – Jason has been working on the centre for the last few days and we are making progress. We're still hoping to open on Friday 14th, but at this stage it's beginning to look like we'll be opening on Saturday or Sunday – we really can't afford to open before we are totally ready.

14th – The decision has been made for us – we will be opening on Sunday, as there physically wasn't the time to get everything done and – pardon the pun – dusted before today. We have shelved plans for a full-on opening party and will instead have a group of family and friends with their children to share a few bottles of champagne and nibbles with us on Sunday. It's disappointing not to hit our opening date, but so many things have been thrown at us, I don't think we can be too hard on ourselves.

Jason has been working non-stop and he is absolutely exhausted. I feel like I've pushed and pushed him, but he's been brilliant. He's also done all this work, which he estimates would have cost around £20,000, for nothing and has also paid for the plumbers and electricians. He sees it as part of the overall investment and it is certainly going to be a huge help over the first few months, giving us a bit more financial leeway when we might need it.

15th – The playframe was inspected today and the Play Inspection Company could not find anything to quibble with, so we passed with flying colours. That's another important hurdle crossed – still quite a bit more work to do, but we're going to get there, however long it takes us into the night. 16th – Opening Day!! Would you believe it, the weather has turned and our opening day was "blessed" with the unheard of temperature for Farnham in April of 27°C. We hardly noticed all that of course, having been here til midnight last night putting chairs together. The kitchen ceiling only went in yesterday, so it does feel a little like we're flying by the seats of our pants, but there has been so much meticulous preparation, that certainly isn't the case. We had a lovely get together and the kids loved the play area, so despite the fact there were maybe not as many paying customers as we had hoped for (45), it was a good day.

23rd – The end of the first week as a fully-fledged indoor play area operator and I have to say, it's not been ideal. The sun shone throughout the week and the numbers of people through the door were low as a result. It's sod's law of course that the weather breaks when you want rain, but that's not stopping me having sleepless nights and walking into work every morning filled with dread that we might have another quiet day.

30th – Week two has been no better really. The numbers through the door have not gone up, even though we have been getting great feedback from everyone who has come in. They seem to really appreciate the little touches, like free biscuits with the coffee, the wipes etc... and already we've had some return visits. I'm getting here at 7 every morning to clean the loos, Hoover, do the Sainsbury's shop and generally prepare for the day, and leaving at 7 in the evening and I must admit, it's tiring. There are four of us in the team, myself and Siobhan (pictured with me), who is also full time, another girl who covers the two days when Siobhan is off and my daughter Carly, who works on the 3-4 busiest lunchtimes of the week.

I'm beginning to question myself and whether I've done the right thing. It's easy to blame the low numbers on the weather, but have I made a big mistake?

Month 10

May 7th – Well, I feel a bit better now. After falling well short of our targets in weeks 1 and 2, we hit our target on week 3 and had a very encouraging 86 children through the door on Saturday, as well as a party for 10.

I have budgeted so that we could get by on 30 children a day, but to make a profit, which we would obviously prefer, we need to average around 40 children a day. We were also above the daily average on Friday and Sunday, so revenue wise, hopefully we are off and running.

We have had nearly 100 fliers returned to enter into our competition to win a free children's party and also started to see the first vouchers coming in from our promo in the Herald. And the repeat visits are picking up – we are beginning to attract a following and hopefully every bit of marketing we do will pay dividends over the next few weeks and months.

How could we have legislated for the hottest April on record when we were planning? It's just got to be put down to sheer bad luck. With hindsight, we would have taken the fact that keys were so delayed arriving with us and used that delay to open later I suppose. But hindsight is a wonderful thing.

I've been working every day now for five weeks, which I expected – I just didn't quite expect the levels of anxiety that came with it!

Month 11

13th – I've had some really nice calls from operators in other parts of the country. They'd all read the last issue of Indoor Play and wanted to tell me not to be too despondent.

They reassured me that my experiences were not outside the norm – one said that she has 100 people through the door most days, but it is not unusual for that to drop to 20 or 30 when it's really hot. It was a real boost to know that there is a supportive community out there and it has really cheered me up to realise I am far from alone.

20th – Since the end of May, the weather has deteriorated and apart from the odd quiet day, we have had very consistent footfall through the centre. Where we were getting 25-30 children a day coming through, our 'normal' day will now see 60-80 children coming through the door, and that's before we get into the school holidays! Our weekends are generally the busiest days – with the average numbers for a Saturday between 80 and 90, but the busiest day we have had so far was a Friday in June, when we counted 114 kids in – and counted them all out again as happy customers.

21st – It's not just the change in the weather that's made a difference – I've come to realise that people just had to get to know that we were here. There has been a gradual rise in awareness. Parents who have brought their children to parties here have then either come back to play at a later date or even booked another party for their own son or daughter. With hindsight, it was bound to take a while for the word to spread.

We have a licence for up to 60 children playing here at any given time and until now we have not had to turn anyone away. I'm not looking forward to a time when we might have to do that, but it's quite likely to happen at some stage. If it does, I'll be ready with a drink voucher or a free entry offer though, as I know it can be a hassle just getting here, parking and getting the kids in and out of the car, and I would hate for people to be upset. 25th – We are doing really well with parties – I've got at least 2-3 booked in every weekend until the end of August and what I'm finding is that parents tend to book 6-8 weeks in advance, so I'm hoping that trend will continue. I had initially projected that we would have 2- 5 parties a week and, as well as the weekend parties, we've also had quite a few booked in during the week, so all in all, we've probably exceeded that target slightly as well.

28th – The equipment is brilliant and I can't say a bad word about the Soft Brick Company and everything they've done for me. The kids love it and SBC have been so helpful, to the point that when a few tags got lost of our little tag game, they replaced them for free even though I was prepared to pay for them. As I've said before, it's the little things that make all the difference. 30th – One of the more pleasing aspects so far has been the response from the parents. We have such a lot of people taking the time to comment on how much they like Stay and Play, particularly on the little extra touches like free biscuits and baby wipes. That vindicates my vision – it takes 16p off my profit every time I give a free biscuit away and I don't have to do

that, but it genuinely makes a difference to people's experience. I know from my own experience that it is relatively unusual for people to take the time to make positive comments, but I've lost count of the number of times when people have asked me if I was the owner/manager, then thanked me and told me what a lovely time they've had here.

Month 12

4th – The first quarter ends on July 16 and, against all the odds, we've made enough money for me to give all the staff a small bonus. I'm planning to give the fulltimers £150 and the part-timers £50 or £60 each.

OK, they are not going to be able to go to Las Vegas on it, but they'll be able to have a spend-up at the shops, and it's my way of telling them how much I appreciate them. They really do work non-stop.

7th – I've had some new thoughts about the menu in the café. I always thought it would be updated as we gauged the customers. The food has been going really well and it has been appreciated that we don't have any fried food. Our chicken fillets and fish fillets, with oven baked chunky chips are very popular. The best sellers are our sandwiches though, which are thick cut and served with a fresh salad and a generous serving of Kettle chips. They are £3.50 and sell very well. I've also introduced a lunch bag for the kids, which costs £3.95 for five items – sandwich, crisps, fairy cake, bag of fresh-cut fruit and a juice. We sell 10-15 of those a day on average. Everything is individually wrapped, so people know that they can take it home with them if it doesn't get finished and I think that has been a big plus point too.

I budgeted to take around £100 a day in the café, and already we are taking upwards of £250 on our busiest days. Even an average day will bring in £120-£130, so that suggests we're definitely hitting the spot with our offer. I'm very choosy with what I eat and I am the same with what I buy for other people, so the margin on our food and drink is not as high as it perhaps could be. I buy all the big stuff at Booker's, which is very competitive and a lot closer than Costco, but I buy most things fresh from Sainsbury's every morning and I'll go for Taste the Difference wherever possible. I know I could squeeze some more profit out of it if I bought cheaper food, but to my mind, there is just as much value in getting parents back through the doors because they like to eat here.

14th – We've already had all of the balls out of the ball pit for a good clean – it took hours for Siobhan to do that! – and showed us that it's not just the balls but what's underneath them that need careful monitoring. Once we have been operating a bit longer, we'll take up SBC on their offer of a maintenance contract I expect – I certainly wouldn't go anywhere else.

17th – Carley has said to me more than once that until we have gone through our first winter, we will not know exactly what we have got on our hands here. We haven't even been through our first summer yet, but I know she's right. Soft play areas can get so busy in the winter – and based on what we have experienced so far, I've already got plans in place to employ another full-time member of staff before we get to the winter peak. That will take us to 6 in total, but we're already finding that it's not just the obvious things that need more hands, it's things like maintaining the cleanliness throughout the day and clearing up behind customers when they leave, so the next set of customers can enjoy the same experience.

21st – I suppose the best way to sum up how well it has gone recently is that Jason and I are going away for 10 days in October. We're off to our favourite place in the world, Las Vegas, but I think I'll stay away from the tables - I've done enough gambling this year!

I could not have dreamt of that two months ago, when I was honestly wondering how I could ever have a holiday again – but I have people I can totally trust working for me. We booked it last week and it has taken a big weight off my shoulders. I've still not had a day off since we opened and while things have got so much better, it has still been hard. I lost over a stone in six weeks, some people would pay a fortune for that, but the holiday is the light at the end of the tunnel and I've felt so much better since it was booked.

Carley will be in charge while I'm away, with Siobhan as her wing-woman (!) and the other part-time girls will also be here. Both Carley and Siobhan have been fantastic assets for me. Siobhan came to us from a job with

a catering company in Farnborough and had wanted to do a job like this for years. She is brilliant with the parents and the children and her commitment has been amazing. Carley has been tremendously supportive too and I know if she didn't have Isabel, she'd be working here full time.

All in all, it's impossible to be anything but pleased with the way the last couple of months have gone. I wouldn't change anything, I wanted to give the parents of Farnham an alternative indoor play venue and I've done everything that I wanted to do. So far, it appears to be working, the next step is to maintain and then build on the momentum we've got going.

24th - Touch wood, we have hardly had any issues at all. Two minor accidents have been logged in our accident book - one little boy tripped while he was running and had a small carpet burn on his chin and another got a cut above his eye when he ran into a chair another customer was moving. Thankfully neither incident was serious or anything we could have foreseen or avoided, but it does keep you vigilant. We are getting a sign made to tell people they must wait for us to let them out of the doors when they leave, because there have been a couple of occasions when the door has been left open for a short while - again thankfully without any problem.

You have to be aware of all sorts of things obviously, but sometimes it takes something to happen before you realise you weren't aware in the first place. I had a full oven the other day for instance and all the electric went off in the kitchen. I had absolutely no idea what to do - there's a wall of switches to flick but I didn't know which one was which. Fortunately, one of the electricians who contracts for Jason was working nearby and he popped in to sort it out, but it was panic stations for a while! Now, we have a book with numbers for an electrician, plumber etc... and when I go away in October, I'm also going to pay the lady who gave me my health and safety training to be on hand in case the girls have any questions that need answering. Most probably, nothing will come up, but you can't be too careful.

Month 13

3rd - We have a credit card machine on rental, but increasingly it's become obvious that it's not really worth setting it up. We've only had two people asking us if they can pay on their cards so far and we politely said no. It didn't cause a problem and people are well aware that we take cash now.

5th - Our self-designed check-in-system works really well - I based it largely on the one I used for the 7 years I worked at the doctor's. We record the age of the children, how much they were charged, the time they arrived and then log them out. We therefore have a very simple check list that shows us in seconds precisely the number of children in the centre at any one time. We've got up to capacity three times so far, but never turned anyone away yet. But I'm not worried about having to turn people away, as we're finding that most people understand if you do things in the right way.

9th - What a mad day that was - easily the busiest we have had to date. The rain poured and we were rewarded with 160 children through the course of the day and we also had a pre-booked party of 18 this afternoon. They were fairly evenly spread out I suppose and at no time did we need to consider turning people away, although we were at capacity once. I'm really pleased that, even though we were rushed off our feet, we coped really well and it's days like this that show we are properly equipped to do this.

18th - Our play equipment has certainly been tested out on the busiest days and it has stood up to those tests very well. Even when we have been full and had kids of 7, 8 and 9 jumping all over it, we have never yet had anyone complaining that there is not enough to keep them happy. We're very stringent on cleaning - I get in early every morning and Hoover and clean everything before anyone else gets in. Then, whenever we get a quiet spell, one of the girls will run the Hoover around and clean everything with antibacterial spray.

22nd - I suppose we should have expected something like this, but today we had our first minor incident with a naughty boy! It was actually the second time the same boy had turned all the taps on in the toilet and caused a problem, but this time it was worse, because the tank overflowed and flooded the office, tripping all the electrics and soaking all my paperwork. As if that wasn't bad enough, the coffee maker broke at exactly

the same time. We got the plumber straight in and he's going to fit a restrictor valve to the taps so this shouldn't happen again. I've also decided to get a spare coffee maker and latte maker, so we don't get caught out there again either.

26th - I'm doing all of my own admin and also still doing the admin for Jason's business. So far it has not caused me too much of a headache - I get back home at 6.30, throw something in the oven for dinner and then do it all on a daily basis if I can. I hope I can continue like that, but it may be that we look for some help with the cleaning if it becomes an issue.

29th - I've now got six staff and that means there are three of us here all the time when no-one is on holiday. We can manage with two if necessary, but three makes everything that bit easier. The only time when it got a bit manic was yesterday, when I had eight orders for food and the oven was full, all the salad bags had gone and we'd run out of bread! There was no point panicking, so I got Carley to explain to people who were waiting that they would have to wait for 20 minutes to order while I cleared the backlog. We gave everyone a free cup of tea or coffee and Carley then went out to take their orders with a pad. Once again, we found that people understood and because we made the effort to treat them right and explain the situation, there were no complaints at all.

Month 14

1st - I've booked an advert in Surrey Living magazine, which is distributed free to all GU9 and GU10 postcodes.

To be honest, I don't think we need to spend fortunes on adverts at this point, as we are attracting a lot of custom through word of mouth and have already built up a strong regular following. But there's no point assuming that will last forever and a couple of Carley's friends who are customers knew the editor and got her to come down. She loved it and has written a double page article for the October issue, so we're going to advertise with our details. I've also done a deal with the army's Families magazine, which is an annual publication that is given to all existing army families and any new army families who move into the area. There is a really big army influence around this part of Surrey and I know they really appreciate and use this magazine when they move in.

5th - I think now the holidays are over, I can say they were up and down but reasonably steady overall. We had some crazy days, but there were also some very quiet days during the six weeks when we had as few as 18 or 20 kids in. More than ever before, we have been aware of the difference that the weather makes to the business. We knew of course that we'd be busier when it rains, but it has to rain consistently for it to make a major difference to our day. If it's cloudy with the odd shower, mums wait until it stops and might still go to the park. If it pours and the grass is wet, they head our way in their droves. There are also parents around here who have annual passes for places like Birdland, Chessington or Thorpe Park and although they cost a fair amount when they buy them (£95 for a family pass at Birdland for instance), once they've paid that one-off fee, going for a day out seems relatively cheap and it's understandable on a nice day if you'd put the children in the car and go to these outdoor places. Everyone is trying to entertain their kids every day and it has to be affordable. When it rains, they need an indoor alternative and in Farnham, we're top of the list.

8th - The letting agent popped in to see how we are doing and also to let me know that he had another unit available next door if we want to expand. Not yet, but you never know a few more months down the line, I told him. 9th - We've just taken our 52nd party booking in less than four months and at £9.50 a head for a minimum of 10 children, they are proving extremely successful for us. We've got one next Sunday for 38 children and when that happens, anything else on that day is a bonus. Every day we get either an enquiry or a booking and many of the parties lead to another parent booking, so it's a big boost to the cashflow.

12th - We continue to get really good comments about our food, but we're still looking at a couple of options for the winter months. People like our menu and we hear constantly that the food is very reasonably priced. Our most expensive adult option is lasagne, salad and chips and that is just £4.95, and the health-oriented kids menu seems to be going down a storm. We are thinking of investing in a jacket potato oven, which would add some nice variety to our hot offer and maybe even some soup options. Carley has suggested both and,

as a young mum herself, I have to admit she's been right on most things so far. It might also take some pressure off the rest of the hot menu.

17th - I've always been a fairly realistic person, but with the benefit of hindsight, maybe in the first few weeks after opening, I was expecting a bit too much. Four months in, I get far less disappointed when we have a quiet day, because I understand what is driving customer behaviour and can be confident that the reason they are not coming through the doors on any given day is not something we have done wrong.

22nd - I can't really believe how well things have been going. My business plan suggested we should be paid back on our investment in five years. On the good days though, we're banking a fair amount more than I budgeted for and if things continue to go as well as they have in the first quarter, I'm already revising that down to three years. That is a lot of money we have to find and there is plenty of water to pass under the bridge, but so far, I have to be really, really pleased with things.

I'm keen not to get ahead of myself of course, and to enjoy the good days and accept the bad, but the first priority will be to look at salaries, which I had originally planned to do at the end of year one. We have paid out well-deserved bonuses to the girls in the last couple of months and they have continued to be absolutely fantastic for me. Fingers crossed, we have a good end to this calendar year and we will re-evaluate the salary situation in the New Year.

27th - Not that I've been counting down the days or anything, but we're going on holiday in two weeks and my bag has already been packed on the spare bed for over a month!! We are really looking forward to some time off together and I will be going confident in the fact that the centre is in good hands while I'm away, which is testament to the amazing support I've received from all of my staff.

30th - It's far too early to say that Stay and Play is going to be a long-term success, but up to this point, we've done ourselves proud. There is no doubt it's the hardest thing I've ever done, but already it is the most rewarding for me personally. It also feels like I'm laying some foundations for my daughter, granddaughter and the whole family and shows that at the age of 57, if you have the right idea and the right amount of energy, you really can follow your dreams.

Month 15

4 - We've had our first review - in the October issue of the local NCT newsletter. Overall it was extremely positive and complementary, but there was a comment that non-partygoers could feel a bit overwhelmed when a party is going on around them in the centre. We've hopefully turned that into a positive though, because I have pinned the article on the notice board and thanked the anonymous mother who wrote it for her kind words, while acknowledging the small complaint and offering any parents who are in the centre when a party is ongoing something free from the café.

6 - I think things are developing as I saw in the initial plans. I always wanted Stay & Play to be the best indoor destination for the children of Farnham, but knew that would depend on making the mums and dads happy too. We really do seem to be becoming a regular part of the social calendar for the parents round here and our coffee sales have been really strong because of that. We definitely sell more lattes than anything, with cappuccinos next behind I think. It doesn't really make much difference which one we sell, but it's interesting to see the trends.

11 - It's the day before my holiday and I can honestly say I'm very calm about the whole thing. Pauline, who did all of my health and safety and hygiene training has been in for a meeting and I've paid her a retainer in case any of the girls are faced with something they need advising on in the next 10 days. Other than that, I know they'll be OK; I've got four on each shift, so they will have enough hands on deck however busy it gets and they have all been absolutely brilliant so far. Las Vegas here I come!

17 - (Postcard from Vegas!) I have not been worried at all, but I'd be lying if I said I haven't been thinking about work a lot while I've been here. I suppose, as I've only had two days off a month since we opened in April, it's pretty inevitable that it's the first thing my mind wanders to in the morning. I called Carley today to

make sure everything is running smoothly and she assured me it was. We've had good numbers through the door, no incidents have happened and they haven't had to call Pauline - back to the cocktails then.

23 - Well, now I know that it's possible to go on holiday and leave other people in charge, I'm sure it will be less of a daunting prospect next time. Pauline wasn't needed, but I'm glad that in my head, I'd put all the things in place that covered every eventuality. I'd stocked up on everything but fresh food and left a float for any extra expenses that might have been incurred. They all did very well and everything is exactly the same as before we left. I won't have any qualms doing it again, that's for sure.

25 - I thought long and hard about things to do for Halloween and for Bonfire Night and I've decided that we'll mark it, but we won't be going to town. I don't want to hang things around the place, as I'd be terrified that something would fall, or more likely be pulled down and one of the children would be hurt in some way. I'm going to get a drum of some kind and we'll fill it with sweets for the kids. There are no shortage of reminders that it's Halloween everywhere else in their lives and I'm sure no-one is going to miss it.

29 - I got a call from a man who had been given my details by Soft Brick Company as someone who had set up a new soft play operation recently. I won't say exactly where he was from, but he's looking to open a new centre in the north and we talked about a lot of things. One of the main things I suggested though was not to make a decision on an out-of-town site purely because it's cheaper. He was debating whether to go for a town centre location, but felt that it was too expensive, but my experience is that being in this location has helped me attract a large amount of passing trade that I may never have seen if I'd gone for an industrial estate outside Farnham. Of course each centre is different, but I think the difference in costs would be about one third annually, in terms of lease and rates - and I'm pretty certain that I've covered that by being in the right location.

Month 16

5 - We brought the team some jewellery from Pandora's when we came back from Vegas, to thank them all for their hard work. But they've all been asking us what it's like out there, so we've decided to give them a flavour of Las Vegas lifestyle for their Christmas party. We've booked a table for 12 at a Christmas do at a casino in Reading and we're also going to give them all £50 to play on the tables. We're already very excited!

7 - No-one said a word about the lack of Halloween or Bonfire Night stuff and the kids are always happy with sweets. So that helps with a few decisions for Christmas too. I'll obviously put banners up and make it as Christmas-y as possible, but I don't think a tree or loads of hanging decorations are going to be all that practical. Instead, Jason's going to find me a nice big tub and we'll spend some money on buying a nice gift for every child who comes into the centre in Christmas week.

12 - We got a new coffee machine today, after the last one broke. We tried to get an engineer out, but they only do calls for industrial machines, so we had to buy another one. It's a Krups latté, cappuccino and espresso maker and it makes lovely coffee. At £600 plus, it's certainly not a cheap acquisition, but I wouldn't scrimp on quality and as I've mentioned before, a good cup of coffee is very high on the priority list for a lot of the parents who come through our doors.

18 - The longer we're doing this, the more we realise that there isn't really going to be a set pattern to things. We tend to get a bit of a rush first thing, at 9.30am, when mums come in with the little ones when after they've dropped the older brothers and sisters off at school. But today for instance, no-one came in at 9.30 and then we had the rush at 10. One good thing is that once it starts it does seem to reasonably steady until a lull after lunchtime. Then it generally picks up towards the end of the day again, after school finishes. You can't necessarily rely on it, but you have to be prepared for it and I'm glad to say we haven't been caught out yet!

23 - Our party bookings continue to be very steady - 4-5 a week minimum. We always have two on a Saturday and two on a Sunday and there is a good mix of ages and numbers. We've had two parties for twins of 1 and parties for children as old as seven. We can cater for a maximum of 24 sat down in the party room, but if people hire the whole place out, we've got a capacity of 45, although health and safety says we can go as high

as 60 and we had a party for 53 on Sunday. It was my day off, so I had to change that and, although I could do with a day off at the moment, financially it was worth it and I would have only had to ask Carley to come in her day off if I didn't do it myself.

28 - Christmas is definitely looming large, now that half term has long been and gone. We stayed really busy after the summer holidays ended and have managed to maintain it pretty consistently throughout October and November. Within that time, there have been two or three bumper weeks and that will give me the leeway I need to close for three or four days over the festive period knowing my costs are still covered. I reckon on needing £350 a day to break even, which obviously includes the days we're closed. So we're going to close at 4pm on Christmas Eve, then re-open on the 27th and we'll be closed on New Year's Day. I'm sure there will be plenty of parents looking for an outlet for their kids energy on the other days and we're here to please, now I just need to get volunteers to work on those days.

Month 17

3 - What a great Christmas party we had last night - eight of us at the casino in Reading. We had an excellent meal and then everyone had free chips from us to play the tables - no-one won unfortunately, but all the girls managed to play for a long time with their money and we had a lovely night. We are pretty close-knit here, but it is so nice to be able to get out and let our hair down together once in a while.

6 - We haven't seen it yet, and maybe I'm being a bit pessimistic, but I'm expecting a bit of a drop-off in numbers in the run up to Christmas, as people do their shopping and everything else that goes with it, but as this is our first bash at a festive period, it's hard to predict. I suppose it could depend on the weather a bit, as the more dry and bright days we get, the less likely we are to see good numbers through the door.

11 - We're not going to go to town on Christmas decorations or anything, but we are going to have a tub of presents for children to take when they come in before the 24th. I've bought a load of princess pencil and rubber sets for the girls and for the boys, I've got them the Cars version. There will also be a big tub of sweets on the reception, so no-one needs to go away empty handed.

14 - The pattern that I touched on last month does seem to be establishing itself now. The mornings are busy from 9.30 until we have a quieter period after lunch. Then it picks up again when the schools close. I don't know if it will remain like that, but it helps to have some idea how the day will pan out. We're also getting quite a lot of business from childminders, who we give a 20% discount and also a receipt so they can reclaim the money from the parents.

21 - I thought the TV monitor would get used more than it does. It sits above the tables in the café and I'm glad it's there as it accompanies my first couple of solitary hours every morning! It is on from time to time, sometimes for C-Beebies when parents want something to distract children into eating their lunch and sometimes for dads to catch up on the sports news. It's pleasantly surprising that it's not a constant though, as it suggests that customers are more than engaged with the alternative parts of our offer.

23 - I was right about being a bit pessimistic after all - we've had a really good run-up to Christmas with no fall at all in numbers. You'd have thought there would be a lull somewhere along the line, but we have consistently been getting 70-plus in. Having decided not to do it, we did talk again a few days ago about getting one of the men to dress up as Father Christmas on Christmas Eve. But it has been so busy and the time has flown so quickly, that we just haven't got round to doing it this year. Christmas Eve is on us before we expected.

27 - Well, we had a lovely Christmas and I had two days in a row off, which doesn't happen very often! We opened from 10am to 4pm today and it was very busy. More than 90 people came in, which was a lot more than we expected. We had a bit of a debate over whether we should open at 10 or 11 o'clock, but Carley convinced me 10 was the right way to go and sure enough, we had people in as soon as we opened. We made sure from the beginning of December that we displayed the opening times prominently outside and inside the centre, both on our notice board and on reception, and we also posted them on facebook, which is

beginning to be a very useful tool. So, while there were admittedly a few people who were unaware, we had definitely done everything we could do to communicate the festive changes.

30 - Every day between the 27th and New Year went a bit nuts – we had a party each day and also more than 90 people, all of whom were obviously looking for somewhere to expend some energy after Christmas at home. I must admit, I thought more people would be happy for their kids to stay at home and play with their new toys, but we're definitely not complaining and we even had to get a third person in to help out. There were plenty of parents happy to pay the entrance fee at 3.15, even though they knew they would get less than an hour of play. These few days have given us a great deal of food for thought for next Christmas – and just the fact that we are already thinking about being here next Christmas is a boost in itself.

Month 18

3 - I haven't got a New Year's Resolution for Stay & Play. I would just be happy for everything to continue in the same vein as the last six months and I'm not looking for any more than that right now. Long term, the vision is the same - if we can remain on this course, we will be able to pay the money back on our investment with plenty of time left on the lease, which would enable me to take more of a back seat and perhaps have a few more days off. I know that's some way in the distance yet though and I'm enjoying myself, so why wish the time away?

10 - I took the review down that we had on the notice board for nearly two months. It got a lot of positive comments while it was up and I really hope the lady who wrote it came in during that time, so she could see that we acted on her advice.

16 - Parties have gone through the roof lately – I'm not really sure where people get all their money from sometimes! Over the weekend just gone, we had two parties each day, three of which were exclusive hires. When we get weekends like that, everything else is a bonus and we had plenty of time on both days for other customers to come in. We generally only take party bookings in the afternoons, although we did have one in the morning yesterday and it doesn't seem to deter parents from bringing their children at different times.

Again, we are very careful to communicate what's happening to other customers. It's inevitable that the odd parent will turn up anyway, but we can only say sorry when that happens and ask them to come back later.

18 - I've had some new leaflets done for Stay & Play and I used a different supplier. I didn't exactly shop around the first time, as I was in a rush and there was so much else going on as we prepared to open up. That is totally reflected in the quality of job and the price I have got this time. The first guy made a lot of mistakes, even after the leaflets were proof-read by us, and because we were up against it, we had to go with them and it ended up costing me nearly £3,000. I found out soon enough that I could have got them far more cheaply, and this time it's been quick and easy, we've got what we wanted and also saved a substantial amount of money in comparison. You live and learn.

23 - Like every one of Indoor Play's readers I'm sure, I would be lying if I said I hadn't worried about the effects of the recession. I'm still managing to squirrel away the money I want to have as a buffer should we have a quieter time – in the summer, for instance – and I will always believe in that course of action. I know my costs pretty well now, although the heating and electricity charges are a bit higher than I envisaged in the winter, but for indoor play centres, it's important that we have some money set aside for a sunny day! There is no point looking too far ahead or taking things for granted; who knows what is round the corner? I know there is still talk of a double dip, but three weeks into the new year, I can only say if this is the trend, then we should be fine.

29 - I asked Siobhan today how many of our customers she believes are regulars and it's somewhere in the region of 60-70% - based on them coming in at least once a week. I obviously know a lot of them, but Siobhan spends more time on the front desk and playing with the children, while I'm in the kitchen, so she's a better judge of that for sure. She's playing in there so much sometimes I have to tell her to come out! I think that is a very healthy number of regulars though – if we can keep it at that level we won't go too far wrong.

In our final peak at Carol White's diary, we find out what shape Stay & Play is in as it nears its first anniversary and crosses the threshold from 'New' to 'Nearly New' operator.

Month 19

5 - As a town, Farnham doesn't seem to have been too badly hit by the recession. It is a reasonably wealthy town, so in economic terms, it had a bit of a buffer compared to other places. The high street has survived mostly, although a lovely couple who owned a kitchen store across the road had to shut down recently because they just couldn't compete with the prices of chains like B&Q. It's a sad fact of business at the moment, but it does bring it home to you that you can't lose focus.

9 - Ten months into its use, the equipment has been extremely robust. We still regularly give it a deep clean, as well as the every day clean that keeps it pristine. The balls are taken out of the ball pit every six weeks maximum and Jason gets the mats out and gives everything a thorough wash down with anti-bacterial spray.

One of us also sprays 2-3 times a day, to ensure that no customer has a bad experience. I have a great relationship with Nicole at Soft Brick Company and I know that if anything does go wrong, I can get straight on the phone for a replacement. Cost is not the major issue where the equipment is concerned, as nothing in the centre is more important than the standard of our kit really.

11 - It's interesting to note that we seem to be getting more dads in at weekends than mums, although it is obviously skewed far more towards mums in the week. The dads seem to love letting their kids loose while they take a chance to read the paper and have a coffee, or occasionally loiter around the TV if there's some sport on.

14 - It's the day of love, so we bought some Lindt chocolates and offered them to the mums instead of biscuits. The mums loved it, but Carley wasn't sure about handing them out!

16 - The half-term holidays have been absolutely amazing. We had 80-100 in every day, helped by the fact that it was wet and miserable outside for most of them. It's easily the busiest half term we have had to date, as the weather was fine for every one last year. We didn't do anything different, except for getting an extra person in where necessary, but the hours flew by.

23 - I was extremely glad of my own fastidious financial planning today when I got a bill for more than £12,000 from Waverley Borough Council, for a whole year of business rates. I knew when I set up Stay & Play that I would have to pay rates, of course, and contacted the council in March last year to ask them to come and assess me. I went back to them two or three times, but it wasn't until September that they came out. I had saved what I thought was roughly the right amount every month, so I wasn't particularly worried, but the bill I got today needs paying by the end of March. It really is a good job I'm experienced enough to have that money available - I can imagine lots of businesses wouldn't be able to pay with such a short notice period.

You have to be on the ball with things like this, otherwise you'll get some nasty shocks.

27 - The Soft Brick Company asked me if I'd mind a group looking to set up a similar sized play area in London come down and look at the playframe at Stay & Play. I must admit, it was nice to be held up as a good example by SBC, and the three guys who came down - I won't be too descriptive as they haven't set up yet - absolutely loved it. They had been to several and said this was the most relaxing. They also loved the equipment and the little touches we have put around the place to make it a more attractive environment to visit. It was manic when they turned up, so I couldn't give them quite as much time as I would have liked. But it was good that they saw a busy centre and we had a good chat and I think they went away happy.

Month 20

4 – I've talked about trends before, but Carley has picked up on a new one that, when I traced it backwards, appears to happen every month. Towards the end of the month, we have a few quieter days, before we see a pick up in numbers again as the new month begins. It happened again in February, when the 28th and 29th were quiet and then the start of March was noticeably busier. I record every day's figures, but it hadn't really clicked before. It's interesting that even in a relatively affluent town like Farnham, things get tight as pay day approaches. I suppose it's fair to say that going to a play area is one of the things that can be cut out when you're counting the pennies.

9 – After 11 months, we still have only three minor incidents in the accident book. One grazed chin, two heads knocked together and the other day, one girl who banged her head climbing up the slide. We were not culpable in any of the incidents and there is a well-displayed sign asking parents not to let their children climb up the slide, but I still think it's better to be safe and record it, than sorry.

13 – We are starting to create a real childrens' community in this little row of shops at the back of Sainsbury's. A party store, which supplies costumes for kids and adults, as well as a full range of stuff for childrens' parties opened next door yesterday and next door to that is a great toys and games shop, which opened last month. We have gone out of our way to be helpful, by offering advice and helping the new stores market themselves, which appears to have been very well received. It can only help us to have two neighbours with a similar target audience – hopefully we will build off the backs of each other.

20 - I have to pinch myself when I think that we have been open nearly a year, but April 16th will be 366 days (including the leap day) since we officially introduced ourselves to the Farnham public. We're going to mark the occasion by taking the girls across to the hotel on the other side of the road and give them a glass of champagne and then an afternoon tea. It'll make a nice change for them to be the ones being served tea and cakes and it's extremely fitting after all their help in making this a successful first year that we should all celebrate together.

25 – We've decided it's time for another break, so Jason and I are going to the Aphrodite Hills in Cyprus for a week. He's a keen golfer and bid for the villa in an auction. It looks lovely there and, as it's the second holiday I'll have had while running Stay & Play, I am much more relaxed about going away. I've already got everything in place, with a senior member of staff in every day and Pauline on stand by for any health and safety requirements. We didn't need her last time, but it's amazing how much better you can sleep at night when you know she's there if you need her.

29 – We're going to have a staff meeting to evaluate our performance in the first year in operation and make some decisions about things we could change or perhaps improve on in year two. I think one thing that will happen is a price rise. We set the prices right at the beginning and I knew then that whatever happened, we would not make any changes until we had experienced a whole year. I don't intend to increase anything drastically – maybe 20-30p here and there, but we need to reflect inflation and also take account for the impact VAT has on my food sales. When I put the budget together, I thought of the café as secondary to the play area in terms of income, but as it transpires, it has been anything but that. But, as everyone knows, you can't charge VAT on food, but you do pay VAT on food sales to the government and I think I might need to adjust prices to ensure that my food offer is profitable as well as popular. We'll still be exceptional value for money, but having negotiated my rent agreement to rise on a sliding scale over the first five years, I need to be sure that I'm getting the necessary value too.

31 – As this is my last entry for Indoor Play readers, I thought I'd take a look back at the year that's just flown by and ahead to year two of Stay & Play. Since you first encountered me, in September 2010, my life has been like a whirlwind. So much has happened, mostly good, and I'm sure when I get some time in years to come, I'll look back over my diary jottings and be amazed with the amount of things I have dealt with to get where we are.

All things considered, it's been a great year and I have to be happy with where we are as a business. I think, with experience behind us, we can go into another year with a slightly different mindset, certainly without the same level of worry as I inevitably had as I started out last year. I'm still apprehensive about the summer, but

my budgets are now based on real experience rather than educated guesswork. As I've said more than once before, as long as I can pay my bills, everything else is a bonus.

Thanks for reading!!