

STORES

The maternity specialist's latest store remodelling shows improvements under way. **John Ryan** visits

Mothercare takes

Solihull and Gateshead may not necessarily be the biggest destinations in the UK, but for Mothercare they are key locations after last year it unveiled new-look stores in both towns.

Now that honour has passed to the Sprucefield retail park on the outskirts of Lisburn in Northern Ireland.

Mark Newton-Jones, Mothercare's chief executive who took the reins in 2014 and instituted a turnaround plan for what was an embattled organisation, says that Lisburn is where the new direction of the chain can be seen: "If Solihull and Gateshead were seven and a half out of 10, then Sprucefield would be a nine.

"We've tried to create the idea of a department store in a shed and we might need to tone that up a bit further still, but this is the design that we'll be going forward with," he adds.

Newton-Jones says that the 17,000 sq ft shop, which was a JJB store in a previous life, represents the future for Mothercare and, although there is still work to be done, it is its best store so far. "The results so far have been ahead of what we expected," he observes.

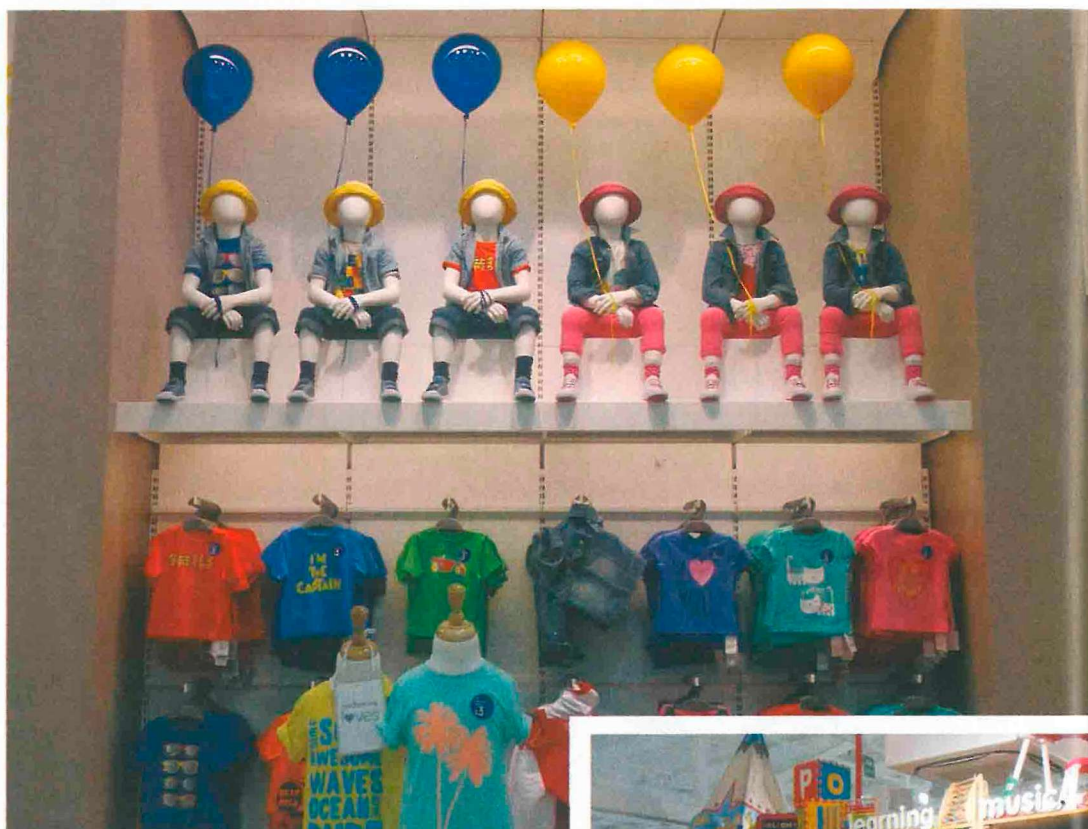
It is a good example of walking the talk inasmuch as Newton-Jones has said that two of his priorities are to make Mothercare a digitally-led business and for it to be a retailer with a modern estate.

Stand at the entrance to the Lisburn store and the first part of this aspiration is easily discerned. On the right is the cash desk, which has a big screen as its backdrop. There is also a click-and-collect area at the back of the store, beneath the mezzanine.

Large screens with white surrounds are dotted around the perimeter, six of them on the ground floor and one up on the mezzanine level towards the back. And there is a lot more than that to admire.

Contemporary design

What has been done with the space is quite straightforward. To the left, it is buggyland and to the right of the central walkway it is clothing. The



MOTHERCARE, SPRUCEFIELD

Opened May

Size 17,000 sq ft

Initial concept 20.20

Ambience Light and welcoming

Highlight The perimeter display modules

latter is organised by age and gender, making it child's play for shoppers to find the appropriate merchandise for their nearest and dearest.

All of which would be what might be expected of a retailer of this kind in a location such as Sprucefield. What really sets it apart is the visual merchandising.

The perimeter wall has a floor-to-ceiling module that says 'look at me',

thanks to a row of seated, faceless, white mannequins, male and female, each attached to a balloon.

Above that, a graphic shows happy children and in the space beneath the mannequins and reaching down to the floor, the clothes are presented face-on to shoppers.

There is nothing terribly clever about what has been done here. It is not innovation, but it is certainly eye-

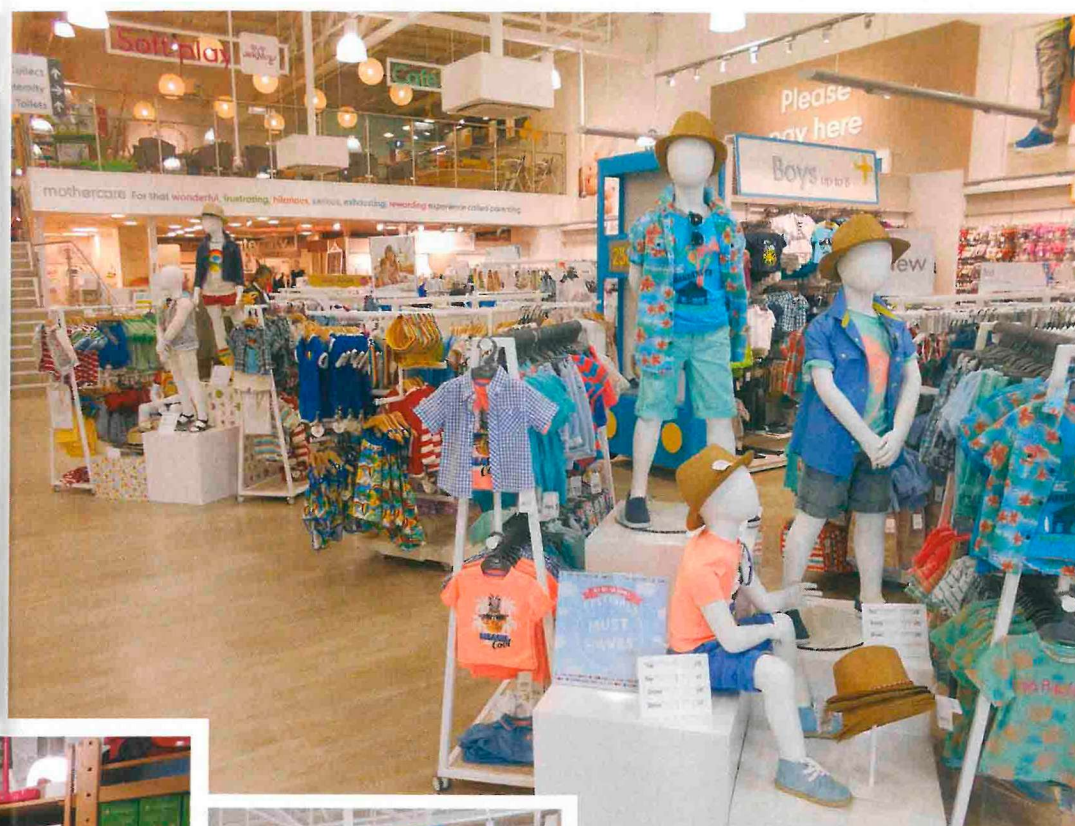
More pictures of Mothercare's Sprucefield store in Lisburn on Retail-week.com/mothercarelisburn



its next step



“What could be somewhat dull commodity items have been transformed by skilful visual merchandising”



catching and when set against a standard Mothercare it is very much better. Lighting has been integrated into the canopy above the mannequins, ensuring that nothing is missed as the shopper looks around.

That display is emblematic of the design across much of the shop. What could be somewhat dull commodity items in the wrong hands, no matter how brightly coloured, have

STORES



► been transformed by skilful visual merchandising.

On the other side of the walkway, in buggyland, the same line of thinking has been applied with everything from floor decals that take shoppers on a walk, to suppliers' mid-shop display equipment.

There is always a danger when dealing with point-of-sale material from suppliers that a sense of unity will be lost and that the outcome may be mildly jumble sale-like.

Again, it is obvious that this has been dealt with in a fairly firm manner with pride of place going to the curved wood iCandy display. These give the high-tech-looking buggies on offer a distinctly contemporary design feel.

Vignettes

Beyond the buggies are a series of mid-shop roomsets, demarcated by frames that have been built to look like houses. There is strong precedent for this kind of thing in Ikea. Mothercare manages to make each 'room' appealing and offers a complete vignette of how a child's room could be made to appear if everything were bought in this shop.

Under the mezzanine there are three areas. On the right-hand side there is a semi-standalone maternity clothing shop, which has its own entrance, a mannequin grouping at its centre and another screen showing glamorous mums-to-be.



“This is as good as most parents are likely to encounter when seeking the best for their loved ones”

Move beyond this and the click-and-collect area is cheek-by-jowl with the baby care department, offering everything from bath accessories to potties. The flooring is light wood throughout, giving the whole of the shop an uplifting feel.

And so to the mezzanine, home to a large cafe, aka the Nest, where mothers can relax with a coffee and a macaroon while their offspring are diverted in happy-land, a netted ballpark and soft gym area.

In front of this, there is Early Learning Centre – the educational toy brand and retailer that was once a fixture on almost every high street, but which now boasts few standalones, with the bulk of its

outlets being incorporated within Mothercare stores.

Another screen has a graphic next to it stating “let’s play” and the many toys and puzzles are displayed on wooden mid-shop and perimeter fixtures, helping to promote a worthy and educational sense, instead of acres of plastic waiting to be discarded.

Nest egg

It is not a very big store by the standards of neighbours such as Boots and M&S, but even for those who are not a parent, it is not difficult to see that it has a certain appeal.

Whether Newton-Jones will ever realise a perfect 10, as far as the interiors of Mothercare stores are concerned is a moot point, but it seems a fair bet that this is about as good as most parents are likely to encounter.

Mothercare last month reported it has halved pre-tax losses to £13.1m, which points to a retailer that is on the way back. Although Newton-Jones was quick to say that work remains to be done.

But it's hard not to be impressed by what has been achieved in Sprucefield. It is a good example of a store that is part of a modern retail estate. ■