Popular Q & A: Childminder Agencies

General questions

Q1. What are childminder agencies?

Agencies will be ‘one-stop-shop’ organisations that will help childminders with training, business support, advice and finding parents. They will also provide a valuable service for parents who want to find a high quality childminder.

By enabling the establishment of childminder agencies, the government hopes to attract new childminders to the profession who want support to work as a childminder. Agencies will also provide a range of services for childminders such as marketing, administrative support, and training and development opportunities to help them to further raise the quality of their provision.

Q2. How might agencies work in practice?

The government has set out in legislation the minimum requirements that all agencies will have to meet. Agencies will work with childminders who choose to register with them, train and guide them. They will carry out monitoring visits to childminders more frequently than is possible under the current Ofsted inspection regime. The government has also issued ‘departmental advice’ for those wanting to set up agencies, which provides more detail on how agencies are expected to work in practice – this can be accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/improving-the-quality-and-range-of-education-and-childcare-from-birth-to-5-years/supporting-pages/childminder-agencies. The Government is not seeking to determine or be prescriptive about the agency business model, as it wants to encourage innovation.

Q3. How will childminder agencies help parents?

Many parents struggle to find the right local childminder, so agencies can help by providing a matching service for parents. They can maintain lists of local childminders, the services and hours they provide and offer assurance that that the childminder is high quality and subject to a robust quality assurance regime. Some agencies may provide blended packages of early education and childcare for parents, helping to ensure that childminder and daycare provision work together. Agencies may also be able to step in and find an alternative childminder for parents, if that is their wish, where a childminder falls ill.

Q4. Will childminders have to join a childminder agency?

No. The Government is clear that joining an agency will be voluntary, and understands that many childminders like the way they work – it is simply offering a choice to stay independent and register with Ofsted or to register with an agency. The Government is committed to ensuring that working as an independent childminder remains an affordable option and has no wish to jeopardise successful businesses. The aim is to see a rise in independent and agency childminders, increasing local childcare choices for parents.

Q5. Will agencies replace registration for childminders with Ofsted?
A. No. Currently, anyone wishing to offer childcare provision must register with Ofsted unless they are exempt from registration. After the introduction of childminder agencies, childminders will be able to choose between registering with Ofsted or a childminder agency.

**Q6. Who can operate an agency?**

Childminder agencies will have to register and be inspected by Ofsted. It will be open to anyone who meets the necessary requirements for registration to become an agency. It is likely agencies could include private businesses, but could also include organisations like nurseries, children’s centres, existing childminder networks, schools or local authorities.

People applying to register as childminder agencies will be required to demonstrate to Ofsted their suitability to run an agency. These ‘registration requirements’ will include basic information (such as details of the name and address of the agency) and more specific information about the nature of the services offered by the agency and the childminders they work with.

Further information is available on the Ofsted website at: http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/early-years-and-childcare/become-childminder-agency-childcare-provider-or-childminder/register-childminder-agency.

**Q7. How will you make sure that only suitable people run agencies?**

People applying to register as childminder agencies will be required to demonstrate to Ofsted their suitability to run an agency. These ‘registration requirements’ will include basic information (such as details of the name and address of the agency), and more specific information about the nature of the services offered by the agency and how they will work with childminders.

**Q8. Will the Government support agencies financially?**

A. No. Agencies will be self-financing organisations (private and voluntary sector) and independent of government. They will offer a range of services to meet the needs of childminders and the families they support. They will be funded either through the charging of fees to childminders or parents, or through deductions from parental payments to childminders if that is what agreed locally.

**Q9. How will agencies reduce costs for childminders and childcare fees for parents – surely they will increase?**

The cost of setting up as a childminder can be high. We estimate the total costs to be at least £800. The government believes agencies will help childminders to spread the costs of set-up and will be able to offer financial savings for childminders in areas such as training, group activities and shared resources. To be sustainable, agencies will need to be conscious in setting their own fees that these will need to be affordable for both childminders and parents, whilst also providing value for money.

**Q10. Will parents be able to use childcare vouchers and claim tax credits for using an agency childminder?**
Yes. Parents will be able to use childcare vouchers and claim tax credits for using agency childminders as well as with childminders directly registered with Ofsted.

**Q11. What was the outcome of the consultation on childminder agencies?**

The government consulted on the key registration requirements for agencies between 28 March and 22 May 2014. The consultation documents including the government response to the consultation can be accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/childminder-agencies-and-changes-to-the-local-authority-role.

**Q12. What were the childminder agency trials?**

The CMA trials commenced in summer of 2013 and ran through to spring 2014. From around 100 expressions of interest in the trials, 22 trials were initially established, with two subsequently having to pull out for reasons not associated with the trials and two other trials electing to work together – leaving 19 trials. No end point was set for the trials; this was left for trialists to decide themselves, in the context of the legislative process which would enable childminder agencies to be established from September 2014.

**Q13. How have recent reforms made it easier for childminders to access early education funding and how many childminders will benefit from the change?**

Yes. Since 1st September 2013, all childminders that are rated ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ by OFSTED are able to offer early education places for two-, three- and four- year-olds, if they wish to do so. Government reforms will enable up to 70% of childminders to access funding under the early education programme when currently only 10% could do so. Making it easier for childminders to access this funding will enable them to compete more equally with other providers and increase the affordability and choice of childcare for many parents.

**Q14. How will agency childminders access early education funding?**

Generally speaking agency registered childminders should receive funding on the basis of the childminder agency’s Ofsted inspection judgement. So if an agency is judged ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted, the local authority should usually fund childminders registered with that agency to deliver places for two-, three- and four- year-olds. However, if the childminder agency notifies the local authority that, in the opinion of the agency, the provision by a particular childminder is not of a satisfactory quality, the local authority is not required to fund that childminder. This is to avoid a situation whereby a weaker childminder receives early education funding just because they are registered with a high quality agency.
Safeguarding and quality

Q15. Does the fact that Ofsted will not individually inspect childminders who are registered with agencies pose a safeguarding risk?

No. The safety of children is paramount but it is important not to confuse inspection by Ofsted and the safeguarding responsibilities of agencies. Agencies will have to carry out the same checks as Ofsted currently does in order to register potential childminders, including enhanced DBS with barred checks.

Q16. How will a childminder registering with an agency get a DBS check?

Childminders cannot get a DBS check for themselves. Therefore, mirroring current Ofsted arrangements, we would expect agencies to request DBS checks on a childminder’s behalf – using information to be provided by the childminder looking to register with the agency. Agencies will be able to do this by either seeking to register with the DBS themselves or by using an umbrella body who would act on the agency’s behalf. Further information about DBS checks can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/disclosure-barring-service-check/overview.

Q17. So what will Ofsted’s inspection of agencies and their childminders do?

Ofsted’s inspection of agencies will include careful assessment of the agency’s arrangements for registering and quality assuring its childminders. Agencies will have regular contact with childminders - including home visits and additional practice support on top of that. They will have a focus on quality and support. We expect that Ofsted will test this in their inspection of agencies.

This will include Ofsted sampling through visits to a proportion of childminders registered with the agency to ensure that the agency is providing proper support, training and guidance to their childminders. Ofsted will need to satisfy itself that the agency is making the right judgement about the quality of care provided by childminders and how they should improve.

Ofsted will, building on the consultation it ran earlier this year (details of which are on its website) will say more about its inspection of agencies in due course.

Q18. How can parents be sure that the childminders registered with an agency are high quality?

CMAs must conduct home monitoring visits to their childminders; and will have the economies of scale to provide childminders with much more active training, inspection and quality improvement services. Agency childminders will have to meet all the same safety and quality standards as any other type of childcare provision. Agencies will also be inspected by Ofsted who will also visit a number of the childminders registered with the agency as part of that inspection to assess whether agencies are providing suitable support and quality assurance.
Q19. Is there a danger that agencies will result in the creation of a two-tier system where quality is lower for those childminders who choose to join an agency?

The government is not creating a two-tier system. Agency registered childminders will have to meet all the same safety and quality standards as Ofsted registered childcare providers, including meeting EYFS requirements. Agencies are likely to be particularly attractive to new childminders. However, we expect both new and experienced childminders to register because they value the support that agencies can offer.

Additional questions for childminders considering joining agencies

Q20. Will a childminder be forced to give up their self-employed status if they choose to register with an agency?

No. This will be a matter for the childminder and the agency to agree, as part of any contract an agency and childminder want to put in place alongside the registration. However, we believe that many childminders who join agencies will remain self-employed.

Q21. How much will it cost to register with an agency?

This will be for each agency to decide, consulting and agreeing with childminders as appropriate. This will depend on a number of things, including the context of the overall package of support on offer. Given that joining an agency will be voluntary, it is unlikely that agencies will be able to attract childminders if they do not offer value for money. Agencies will also need to demonstrate to childminders and parents that they can offer them services which they are willing to pay for.

Q22. How much will it cost to remain independently registered with Ofsted?

On 28th March 2014 the Government announced a freeze on the fees that childminders pay to Ofsted for the fifth year in a row, keeping them at £35 per year for 2014/15.

Q23. What happens if an agency gets a bad Ofsted rating and how will this affect childminders registered with the agency?

Ofsted will give its rating to the agency — this will not be a direct reflection on the quality of care provided by any one childminder registered with that agency. Childminders are free to choose which agency they join and if they are unhappy with an agency they will be able to leave and join another or Ofsted. This will provide a strong incentive for agencies to maintain high quality.

Q24. If an agency gets an inadequate rating, will this affect early education funding for childminders registered with that agency?

If an agency is judged ‘inadequate’ by Ofsted, the local authority should secure alternative provision for children receiving funded early education places with childminders registered with that agency and withdraw funding, as soon as
reasonably practicable. It is for local authorities to decide on an appropriate timeframe for withdrawing funding from a setting. Those childminders that wish to are free to use this time to register with another agency or Ofsted.

**Q25. If I want to train as a childminder do I need to have training through my local authority before I register with an agency?**

No. All prospective childminders have to complete pre-registration training, such as training in the EYFS and a paediatric first-aid course, before they can register with an agency or Ofsted but this does not have to be through your local authority. For example, some agencies may decide to offer pre-registration training themselves or you could get training from an independent provider. In addition, from September 2014 such training does not have to approved by local authorities.

**Q.26 If I register with an agency how can I register for working tax credits – I need individual Ofsted registration number?**

A childminder registered with a CMA can register for tax credits purposes on the basis of the CMA’s Ofsted unique registration number (URN). Regulations relating to CMAs also provide that the certificate that agencies must issue childminders they register must include the agency’s Ofsted URN alongside details of the childminder. This will help childminders and parents in discussions with HMRC.

**Community Childcare Hubs**

**Q27. Why have the Department for Education contracted 4children through the VCS grant scheme to deliver community childcare hubs when CMAs are being introduced?**

Community childcare hubs and childminder agencies are two different things, being set up in different ways, to different timescales and with slightly different aims. Community Childcare hubs is a specific programme to support childcare provision in a local area. Further details are available at: [http://www.4children.org.uk/Programmes/Detail/Community-Childcare-and-Early-Learning-Hubs](http://www.4children.org.uk/Programmes/Detail/Community-Childcare-and-Early-Learning-Hubs).

**Q28. What’s the difference between a community childcare hub and a childminder agency?**

The key difference between community childcare hubs and childminder agencies is that the hubs will work with and be based in a range of early years settings (such as schools, private nurseries or children’s centres) whilst agencies will work with childminders as their main priority. That said, we do expect that agencies will want to work with other providers and with hubs to help increase the choice and quality of provision. Providers involved in hubs will retain their individual Ofsted registration.

In addition, one of the key roles of hubs will be to improve the quality of all forms of local childcare provision, including within private, voluntary and independent nurseries, maintained nurseries and childminders, through peer-to-peer
mentoring and sharing best practice. Agencies will have more of a focus on childminders registered with them, and who they will be responsible for inspecting and ensuring quality.

**Q29. How will you ensure that there is no duplication of effort and work?**

The Community Childcare Hubs is a discrete programme with a focus on shared learning. We hope that this learning will be beneficial to childminder agencies and likewise emerging learning from the trials of agencies will be helpful to the community childcare hubs. Childminder agency trials and the Hub programme of work have been designed to avoid duplication.