

@Home Childcare Childminder Agency: The Social Enterprise

Background

Yvette Oliver-Mighten founded @Home Childcare 11 years ago, offering parents flexible and affordable childcare in their own homes. “Our model is to recruit, train and employ home childcarers and match them to families,” she explains. Adding childminding to the menu of current childcare options was a natural progression, and the company has now established @Home Childcare Childminder Agency.

“We offer a blended model – parents can use a childminder during standard hours or, if they need out-of-hours childcare, they can blend it with home childcare in their own homes in the evenings or at weekends, which is useful for shift workers.”

@Home, which also has a training arm, has been training childminders since 2007. Ms Oliver-Mighten noticed that the support childminders had been able to access from local authorities was dwindling. “We realised there was a gap in support when some of our childminder learners said they were feeling lost without regular training and professional development.”

Membership package

Childminders who register with @Home remain self-employed. Both new and experienced childminders registering with the agency pay an application fee of £55, which is a contribution to the registration costs. They then move to a monthly fee of £25, which gives them full access to ongoing support, guidance and training, as well as an annual inspection.

For Ms Oliver-Mighten, regular quality assurance is key. “Rather than being seen by Ofsted every five to seven years, parents know our childminders will be continually supported and inspected annually.” The agency uses the same grading system as Ofsted and its inspectors have experience as Ofsted inspectors, early years professionals and childminders.

Mentoring

Each childminder is matched with a personal mentor who they can call on to help them improve the quality of their work. The mentors are known as SAMs, which stands for Support, Advice and Monitoring. All @Home childminders use an online early years software, which allows them to plan activities and track the progress of their children. Their mentor can also follow their planning and observations, and offer suggestions. The tool costs £50, which can be paid in instalments, and childminders have the option of passing that cost on to parents directly or indirectly.

Social enterprise

While trading as @Home Childminder Agency, the agency has been registered under the name Orange Moon Childcare, a social enterprise in which profits will be fed back into the agency. The social enterprise model will allow the agency to offer bursaries to encourage those on low incomes to train as childminders.

“Start-up costs can be a barrier to registering as a childminder,” says Ms Oliver-Mighten. “The current business grant of £500, available after successful registration, is a great incentive but some people struggle to raise the funds required to start up their home-based business.”

Recruitment

The agency has had no problems recruiting childminders through its pre-registration courses. “For new childminders, it’s a no-brainer,” says Ms Oliver-Mighten. “Once they realise how little support there is, it’s easy for them to recognise the value of being registered with an agency.”

There are currently two childminders registered with the agency, and another 21 going through the registration process. “At least two or three would have dropped out by now if it hadn’t been for the support we offer.” In the future, @Home plans to recruit parents from local schools to train as childminders. “These childminders would then be linked to a particular school and the school will have a network that parents can draw on.”

So far the agency has concentrated on reaching out to new childminders, but recruitment is beginning to focus on those with more experience. “There has been a lack of information about agencies over the past few years which explains the confusion. However, I think the perception of agencies is starting to change now that childminders realise the benefits,” explains Ms Oliver-Mighten.

One benefit childminders particularly appreciate is the ongoing quality improvement, support and monitoring, which culminates in the quality assurance inspection. “They recognise the continual self-improvement process which enables them to appreciate the annual inspection as an opportunity to validate their quality as opposed to fearing it.”

Career progression

One aspect of agency registration which is of particular interest to experienced childminders is the opportunity to progress their career. @Home offers part-time and full-time job opportunities within the agency as SAMs, assessors, tutors and network co-ordinators.

Funded hours

@Home is working closely with Nottinghamshire County Council as part of the local authority’s plan to deliver the 30 hours of government-funded childcare. “The idea is to work with the local authority to recruit more childminders in key areas and to work jointly with schools to provide the 30 hours through a blended model of childcare provided by schools and childminders,” says Ms Oliver-Mighten.

“I anticipate most of our work will be with schools but some PVI nurseries might be interested too, especially if they wish to offer parents extended childcare to cover shift work. It represents a real opportunity for the sector to work in a more joined-up way.”