

Rutland Early Years: For Childminders, By Childminders

Background

Childminders Mel Pitkeathly, Sam Hearth and Alison Loftus have an in-depth understanding of the support needed by their peers, gained through a combined 30 years experience. It was this first-hand knowledge which inspired the trio to set up Rutland Early Years, a childminder agency which launched on 1 February 2016.

All three were already supporting other childminders, both as part of the local authority's leading practitioner programme and on their own initiative, helping with paperwork and providing advice on inspections. The agency model seemed an obvious next step.

"We thought, who's in a better place to set up an agency than childminders themselves?" says Ms Hearth. "We understand the role and can look at what childminders really need in terms of support."

The team's personal experience has been vital in setting up the agency, as has their existing relationship with their peers. "The original reaction to agencies was quite negative, but since we have shown that we are setting up the agency very much based on their needs, we now have childminders getting in touch with us for more information," says Ms Pitkeathly. "Everything about our agency is based on what childminders need, not only from our own personal perspective but that of other childminders we have spoken to."

Local authority partnership

Rutland County Council was one of 20 organisations which took part in the government's year-long childminder agencies pilot scheme, and the Rutland Early Years team were involved from the beginning. "We got together and talked through what we wanted to do," says Ms Pitkeathly. "The council put in a bid to be part of the pilot, and we were a bit cheeky and said, 'if you are successful can we be part of it?'"

Facing budget reductions, the local authority was not able to set up and run its own agency, but has worked closely with the team in setting up Rutland Early Years. On top of the high-level support it offers to its registered childminders, the agency has also been sub-contracted by the local authority to deliver statutory support to Ofsted-registered childminders. "We are working together with the local authority," says Ms Hearth. "The support they are able to offer has diminished over the last ten years, but we are able to fill that gap."

Delivery

All three of the Rutland Early Years team continue to work as childminders, but in order to avoid a conflict of interest they must remain registered with Ofsted rather than register with their own agency. "It is important that we are not assessing ourselves as childminders, but remain regulated by an independent agency," says Ms Hearth. Now that the intense pre-launch period is over they each spend around 25 to 30 hours a week working on the agency, with the rest of their time given over to childminding.

All 26 childminders in Rutland are accessing the basic support delivered by the agency and funded by Rutland County Council. Existing childminders can choose to register with the agency for a one-off fee of £50 and then £26 per month, for which they receive a package of support including a bi-monthly newsletter, policy updates, training, email and phone support, as well as an annual visit and an inspection every three years. New childminders can sign up for ten hours of registration and set-up support for £250, and then transfer onto the ongoing support package once their business is up and running.

Childminders who have registered with the agency will continue to be self-employed, and will be assessed using the existing Ofsted categories, retaining individual grades. "We feel it's important for childminders to have an individual grading structure," says Ms Pitkeathly.

Another option allows childminders to pay £22 a month to access extra support and training but continue to be registered with Ofsted, or they can choose to "pick and mix" elements of support such as marketing or accounting assistance, paying as and when they need them.

Recruitment

Rutland Early Years currently has four childminders going through the registration process. Recruitment marketing is focusing on social media and personal interaction. The team plans to visit every childminder in the county to talk about how the agency will work, and also hopes local press coverage of its launch will build interest.

Sustainability

While the initial focus is on local childminders, the team realises that for the business to remain sustainable they must widen their focus to include those outside the county. The agency is also marketing itself to other local authorities, offering an early years support package to help councils meet their statutory obligations to childminders.

"We will take our model to other areas, but we are very conscious of not wanting to run before we can walk," says Ms Pitkeathly. "We are very excited about the future - this has been a long time in the planning, but forefront in our minds is making sure there are high-quality childcare places available for everyone who needs them."

For more information, visit www.rutlandearlyyears.co.uk.