

Trio Childcare Connections – The Private Trainer

Background

Trio Childcare Connections has been supporting childminders since 1996, running quality improvement-focused networks for local authorities and training childminders and other early years providers. Julia Hinns, managing director of Trio, believes her company's experience makes the launch of a childminder agency the obvious next step.

"It feels like a natural progression, building on everything we have done for the last 20 years," she says. "We see agencies as basically self-sustaining childminder networks, with the addition of the inspection element."

Mrs Hinns herself became a registered childminder in 1990 before setting up Trio, giving her a firm grasp of the issues affecting the profession. She has also worked as an Early Years Ofsted Inspector, which involved a wealth of training around quality assurance and the regulatory requirements of early years settings.

Membership packages

Trio already offers three levels of paid membership plans to Ofsted-registered childminders to help them meet the challenges of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Benefits include a childminding helpline, online training packages, newsletters, a policy toolkit, document templates and activity ideas.

Childminders who register with Trio's Childminding Agency will remain self-employed but will benefit from these resources as well as training targeted at their specific needs, as well as annual inspections. They will pay a monthly fee of around £50.

All childminders will be supported to gain a Level 3 qualification in their first two years after registering, if they don't already have one. "Everything we ask childminders to do will be building up their portfolio of evidence for their Level 3 qualification, and at the end of two years they will be assessed," says Mrs Hinns.

Local authority partnership

Trio is currently contracted to deliver support, advice and training to Ofsted-registered childminders in Swindon, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. Mrs Hinns says there is no conflict of interest as the statutory support is limited to childminders who are in need of improvement. "What agency childminders get is far and beyond what they get from the service level agreement with the local authority," she says.

"I believe wholeheartedly in the quality improvement aspect of a childminder agency," she continues. "A lot of good or outstanding childminders want support, advice and training in order to ensure that their quality doesn't fall, but most local authorities do not have the funds to support childminders who are not in need of improvement. The agency can fill that gap for good childminders who still want to improve their quality."

Inspections

Trio will use the same grading system as Ofsted, to avoid confusion, and registered childminders will receive an inspection visit and an additional support visit every year. Childminders will complete self-evaluation audits covering eight areas, including safeguarding and observation and planning. "After we have read the childminder's self-evaluation, we visit them and see if we agree with what they are saying they are good at or need extra support with," says Mrs Hinns. "That helps us to form an action plan, including training, to take them forward."

Mrs Hinns says the inspection process will be less intimidating than Ofsted's because childminders will have already built up a relationship with the team. "Nothing is hidden," she explains. "There won't be any surprises at the inspection because the agency is already supporting the childminder, and both childminder and agency will know where their strengths are and where they need support."

Recruitment

Trio will not start registering childminders until it has launched officially, but Mrs Hinns says there has been a lot of interest already. "We have put thousands of childminders through pre-registration courses, and they are now asking to register with us," she says. "The majority of childminders we register will be new, but we have also had experienced childminders who have said they would like to join us."

Cost-effectiveness

Trio offers training nationally, but the agency will initially cover Swindon and some parts of Oxfordshire. "We are trying to keep the costs to childminders to a minimum, and if we have to travel to see them that will add to the expense," says Mrs Hinns.

The company's use of existing staff and resources adds to the cost-effectiveness. "It makes sense to use our existing staff and resources for the agency, although as numbers of registered childminders increase obviously we will need to recruit," says Mrs Hinns. "We have a pool of three or four freelance Ofsted inspectors who will be able to do inspections."

The agency plans to launch to a small number of childminders on 29 March 2016. "We want to start small, to ensure quality from the beginning," says Mrs Hinns. "We are setting up an agency to give childminders more choice."