

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: CHILDMINDER AGENCIES

What are childminder agencies?

Childminder agencies are organisations that provide childminders with a range of services, including continuous professional development, training, quality assurance checks, brokerage with parents and business support. They also provide a valuable service for parents looking for high quality flexible childcare, by matching them with a suitable childminder in their community.

How will childminder agencies help parents?

Agencies represent numerous childminders, so they can offer parents a 'one-stop shop' to find a qualified childminder that fits their needs. Agencies can also provide holiday and sickness cover, ensuring parents have reliable and flexible childcare throughout the year.

Who runs childminder agencies?

Childminder agencies can be run by a number of different organisations, including schools, social enterprises, private businesses, nurseries, children's centres, existing childminder networks or local authorities.

How do I know that a childminder agency is run by qualified people?

Those applying to register as a childminder agency will be required to demonstrate to Ofsted their suitability to run an agency. These registration requirements will include specific information about the nature of the services offered by the agency and the childminders they work with.

Are childminders required to join a childminder agency?

No. Joining a childminder agency is voluntary.

Why do childminders choose to join an agency?

There are a number of reasons why a childminder may want to join an agency. Primarily, agencies provide childminders with a support network, including resources, ongoing professional development and business advice, in addition to annual quality assurance checks. This can be an attractive model, especially to new childminders who may want access to experienced childminders for advice or support. For many childminders, they prefer the agency model because they don't want the hassle of the paperwork, marketing and administration that comes along with running a business.

How much does it cost for an agency to register with Ofsted and for childminders to register with agencies?

Agencies will pay an initial fee of £220 to register, and then pay an annual fee of the same amount. There is no standard costing model for agencies – it is up to individual agencies to set their fees. Each agency will vary, depending on the overall package of support they will be providing to childminders and parents.

Will the establishment of agencies put independent childminders out of business, forcing them to join an agency?

No, this is not the case. Because joining an agency is voluntary, childminders have the option to decide what is best for them. Some will welcome the support of an agency whilst others will prefer to remain an independent operator.

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

This will vary depending on the agency. Some agencies operate by employing the childminders who register with them, whilst others ask childminders to retain their self-employed status.

Will agencies replace the Ofsted registration model?

No. Childminders have the option to register with either Ofsted or an agency.

How will the government quality assure and inspect agencies and their childminders?

Agencies are required to go through a rigorous registration process and visit by Ofsted before being approved. All childminders registered with agencies will have to meet all the same safety and quality standards as Ofsted-registered childcare providers, and must meet the same EYFS requirements.

Agencies will be inspected by Ofsted six to nine months after registering the first childminder. The focus of this inspection, as outlined in the Childminder Agency Inspection Framework, will be to judge its effectiveness by observing the agency's leadership and management, the quality of its services, and the impact on the quality of education and care provided by its childminders.

Isn't there a risk that the introduction of agencies will result in a drop in the quality of care for children?

No. In fact, agencies are expected to improve the quality of childcare. Under the existing Ofsted inspection framework, an Ofsted-registered childminder might only receive an inspection visit once every three or four years. Agencies will have much more contact with their childminders, including regular home visits and annual quality assurance checks. They will provide much more active training, inspection and quality improvement services.

If Ofsted is not individually inspecting childminders, does this pose a safeguarding risk?

No. Agencies will have to carry out the same checks that Ofsted currently undertakes in order to register potential childminders, including enhanced DBS checks as well as health and local authority suitability checks.

What happens if an agency gets a poor Ofsted grading and how will this affect childminders registered with the agency?

Ofsted grades the agency, not individual childminders, so a poor grading will not be a direct reflection on the quality of care provided by a childminder. 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.

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.

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.

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

All prospective childminders must complete pre-registration training, such as training in the EYFS and a paediatric first-aid course, before they can register. However, this training does not have to be through your local authority. Some agencies may decide to offer pre-registration training or you could get training from an independent provider. Additionally, such training does not have to be approved by local authorities.

Will agencies increase costs to parents?

Agencies will actually help offset some of the costs currently held by independent childminders. The cost of setting up as a childminder can be upwards of £800. Agencies will help childminders spread the costs of set-up and offer financial savings in areas such as training, group activities and shared resources, therefore giving childminders the opportunity to maintain current rates.

Recommended new copy: It is up to the agency to determine their business model – some may charge a fee to parents while others may not. Some parents may be open to paying a ‘finder’s fee’ to an agency if it means easy and quick access to a quality child provider.

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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.