

Lessons learned from registered Childminder Agencies

Background

The opportunity to establish Childminder Agencies launched by the Government in 2014 opened the doors to organisations to create bespoke childcare models that met the needs of local communities. In the first eighteen months eight innovative models of Childminder Agencies have been established. The journey that each organisation has taken has been varied but with all Agencies sharing the common goal of providing a high quality childcare service.

Lessons learned throughout the process of establishing a Childminder Agency (CMA):

Timescale for completing the Childminder Agency registration process.

All existing Agencies commented that the registration process to become a CMA was much longer than they had expected. Although completing the Statement of Purpose was time consuming, all the Agencies considered this to be a very useful exercise as it clarified the aims of each Agency. It also provided a focus for the Agency and guided their action / development plans. The main issue raised by Agencies in relation to the registration process was the time it took from submitting the completed application form to Ofsted and the allocation of a date for the Ofsted registration visit.

All Agencies agreed that the “Childminder Agencies: A Step-by-Step Guide” was a very useful and informative document that provided all the necessary information for registering as a Childminder Agency.

The CMAs commented that the registration visit by Ofsted inspectors was very thorough. It was important that prospective agencies clearly understood and could articulate the responsibilities and requirements of running an Agency.

Recruitment:

Recruitment has been slow for most Agencies. Most CMAs experienced difficulties in recruiting existing childminders. This was an unexpected drawback as the expectation had been that existing childminders would welcome an alternative to registering with Ofsted. Agencies considered that the increased local support that they could offer would be a selling point to potential and existing childminders. With prospective and existing childminders being cautious about the new initiative, Agencies responded by undertaking extensive marketing strategies to ensure that CMAs were considered as an attractive option to registering with Ofsted.

Further work [or investigation] identified the following barriers to recruiting existing childminders:

- The value they placed on their Ofsted inspection grading. They considered it to be a good selling point to parents and that it highlighted the quality of their provision.
- In many areas registered childminders were already full so did not see any advantage for marketing their business by being part of an agency.

- In some areas, existing childminders were able to access high quality support through their Local Authority via a Service Level Agreement.
- Some had already established good relationships with Local Authority Childcare teams and did not regard being part of an agency as being of benefit to them.
- The popular misconceptions and suspicions about agencies and their role meant that some existing childminders saw agencies as a threat.

CMA's have developed solutions to these barriers by implementing the following:

- Marketing the concept of an agency – CMA's recognised the need for greater marketing of what an Agency is and the benefits they could offer.
- Using a similar grading system to Ofsted - Prospective childminders have been reassured that the majority of existing Agencies will not only use a similar grading system to that of Ofsted but will publish the grades.
- Filling the gap caused by lack of local support – the restructure and cuts in Local Authority services in some areas have resulted in reduced support for childminders which has highlighted the benefits of joining an Agency.

Recruitment is increasing as there is now a greater understanding of Childminder Agencies.

Registering childminders:

Agencies need to be aware that it can take much longer to register childminders than might be expected. Agencies recognised the seriousness of decision and the checks that have to be undertaken are extensive. The first CMA's devised their own documentation and constructed flow charts that outlined the systematic approach that is required to ensure all checks are completed.

CMA's experienced significant difficulties with completing the Local Authority checks. In some cases this was because it was difficult to establish who to contact within Local Authorities to authorise the check. In others, authorities were reluctant to engage. Further delays were caused because many Local Authorities had not shared information about the establishment of agencies with the relevant departments. This meant agencies had explain and justify CMA's before personal information could be shared.

One further point is that some Local Authorities only provided prospective childminders with full information on how to register with Ofsted. This emphasises the need for CMA's to build strong relationships with local authority staff in their area – despite the difficulties and time this can take.

However, the briefing sessions that were delivered by 4children for Local Authorities has raised the profile of CMA's which has helped in the process of applying for Local Authority checks.

Agency Fees and Costs:

The cost of registering with a CMA varies.

In areas where the Local Authority provides effective support through a Service Level Agreement or where two Agencies exist in close proximity, charges must be realistic and affordable to prospective

childminders. Some Agencies have introduced a pay-back system where childminders pay Agencies in monthly instalments once they have started their service.

All Agencies agreed that the true costs of the services and support offered when establishing the Agency were rarely covered by the fees charged until a significant number of childminders have been recruited. This must be seen as a loss leader in the first few months of establishing the Agency. So, as with any new business there has to be an expectation that it will not move into profit for at least 2 years, therefore anyone setting up an agency has to be able to absorb the initial losses or take out a start-up loan.

However, setting up an agency as an additional service provides the opportunity to offset some of the costs for example sharing back office costs. In some cases the organisations that have set up their own CMA have combined this with their existing provision, for example the two Academies see their Childminder Agencies as a mechanism for enhancing or extending their [educational] provision. They see the CMA as extending flexible childcare options to the community and the parents that they serve. This is especially so given the introduction of the 30 hour entitlement. To employ someone to provide the training and support for childminders may only become cost effective when the Agency has a number of registered childminders.

Network support / Partnership working:

All existing Childminder Agencies benefited from the opportunity facilitated by 4Children to meet together on a regular basis. The Network provided support as agencies were becoming established, providing a forum for sharing concerns and offering solutions. It also enabled other professionals to hear the concerns from Agencies. The presence of the DfE and Ofsted at the meetings also proved to be very valuable, with their expertise being shared. All the organisations involved were very willing to share ideas and experiences, with each Agency adding a different dimension to the group. The group allowed experiences and advice to be shared on quality assurance, on-line training and recruitment ideas. One very useful aspect was the opportunity to discuss how to overcome barriers that were being experienced by most Agencies whilst getting established. It provided the opportunity to meet together and have in depth discussions was invaluable and found to be very beneficial to all Agencies at whatever stage they were at with either the registration process or as an established Agency.

The Network has also proved welcoming to new members, Mallardswood Agency joined the Network meetings six months after the group had been established. They found the support and advice invaluable:

“Based upon our plans and strategy we have learned so much from the group it has been an invaluable support and guidance network that we have even been discussing continuing to be 'critical friends - it has been exceptional that we are all so unique in our offerings yet similar in our objectives as childminder agencies at key points in our delivery this group has enhanced what will be differing child-minding services.”

Louise Felstead. Mallardswood Group.

Next steps:

In order that Childminder Agencies become recognised partners and providers of childcare services, 4children believe the following actions should be undertaken:

- Extensive marketing and publicity of what a Childminder Agency is. This needs to be shared with Local Authorities; other professionals, parents and schools.
- The recognition that Childminder Agencies are not in competition with Ofsted but that they are an alternative option for childminders to choose for registration.
- The continuation of Network events for existing Agencies with the opportunity to provide support and guidance to new Childminder Agencies.
- Continuation of support for the start up of Childminder Agencies in the short term.
- Celebration of existing good practice of Childminder Agencies.

Registered Childminder Agencies have found the process of establishing their service to be an interesting experience. They will continue to raise the profile of Childminder Agencies as a valuable contributor to the childcare market.