

The Quality Assurance Process

Childminder agencies were introduced to register childminders and provide training, support and advice. As a relatively new concept, childminders have some uncertainties about how agencies will run, particularly when it comes to the inspection process. Taking a closer look at the way quality assurance really works can serve to dispel the myths surrounding the agency model.

Grading

Agency-registered childminders will be inspected by their agency rather than Ofsted, while Ofsted will inspect and grade the agency as a whole. This model has caused some childminders to fear that they will lose their individual rating, while others worry that parents will be confused by differing grading systems.

In fact, agencies are obliged to carry out a yearly inspection of all the childminders on their books. While in theory agencies can choose whether or not to grade individual childminders, in practice many of them are opting to use the same system as Ofsted, rating childminders as outstanding, good, requiring improvement, or inadequate to ensure there is no confusion

Agencies such as Leap Ahead, Trio's Childminding Agency, @Home Childcare and City Childcare all use or plan to use the Ofsted grading system.

Regular inspections

Leap Ahead agency in Richmond and Kingston has already inspected five of its childminders, who receive a quality assessment visit in their first nine months after registration, and annually after that. Additional visits will take place if concerns have been raised, or the childminder has received an inadequate rating. Childminders appreciate the frequency of assessment visits.

"With Ofsted you get an inspection, flagging up any problems, and then you are left alone for four or five years to sort out any issues which have arisen," says Barbara Tilley, a childminder registered with Leap Ahead. "I like the idea of an annual inspection – if you have any problems they will be picked up earlier."

The inspection process

"We contact the childminder the week before the inspection to find out their movements so the officers can plan their visit," explains Helen Swan, Childminder Agency Officer at Leap Ahead. At present Ms Swan and her colleague Barbara Morton carry out assessment visits together. "It is working well because we are moderating each other's judgements," says Ms Swan.

Childminders complete a self-evaluation form before the visit, allowing them to update any factual information, reflect on their service and highlight areas of strength and areas they would like to focus on to further enhance their provision. This is used as a basis for discussion during the assessment visit and the childminder's reflections are incorporated in the final report.

The agency is currently trialling a detailed quality assessment tool, covering safeguarding and welfare, high-quality environments for play and learning, supporting progress, learning and transitions, and partnerships with parents.

"We want the assessments to be objective, to counter any tendency for inspectors to look for different things," says Ms Swan. Inspectors draw on their observation of practice during the visit, and other evidence such as parents' views, to give their judgement on each area.

At the end of the visit the team gives immediate feedback on its findings and judgements to the childminder, and explains what needs to be done to improve the provision. Shortly afterwards, the childminder is sent the report to read through and check its accuracy, and the report is then published on the agency website within 10 working days.

Trio Childcare Connections, which is set to launch Trio's Childminding Agency, plans to follow a similar process. Childminders will complete self-evaluation forms covering eight areas, after which inspectors will visit them and complete an inspection report, including an individual rating.

Action plans

As part of the inspection report an agency childminder will receive an action plan of steps to take to improve provision, including training, with timescales for completion. Rather than waiting four or five years for the next inspection, they have the chance to improve their rating as soon as they have carried out steps to improve their provision.

At Leap Ahead, for example, if a childminder is judged as inadequate or requires improvement, the agency will revisit them in three months. "One of our childminders had not updated her safeguarding policy and complaints procedure since she had joined," says Ms Swan. "She was rated 'requires improvement' but updated her policies quickly and we were able to upgrade her."

Friendly faces

Childminders are enthusiastic about the supportive nature of agency inspections, which they contrast favourably with the more intimidating Ofsted process. Under the agency model the inspector and the childminder are part of the same team, working together to improve the quality of provision.

Ms Tilley was recently inspected by Leap Ahead. "I was familiar with the team who carried out the inspection," she says. "They don't just come and pick fault. They have to support you to reach the right standard."

"There won't be any surprises at the inspection because the agency is already supporting the childminder, and will know where their strengths are and where they need support," adds Julia Hinns, managing director of Trio Childcare Connections.