

Why I Joined a Childminder Agency **By Barbara Tilley**

Background

I have been a childminder for more than 20 years, and in that time I have seen a lot of changes. When I first started, it was the local authority I was registered with, then Ofsted took over, and now childminder agencies have come along. I was the first childminder in the country to register with a childminder agency when I joined Leap Ahead in Richmond and Kingston last year, and I currently have eight children on my books.

When the government launched the childminder agency model I weighed up the idea for a while before deciding to register with Leap Ahead. Barbara Morton and Helen Swan, who run the agency, were our childminding network area co-ordinators in Richmond and Kingston before they joined together to form Leap Ahead. Since I already knew them, I was aware they had a lot of experience in supporting childminders. They informed us about Leap Ahead at various meetings and forums in the district. The main reasons I decided to join the agency were the training opportunities and the support that it offers.

Inspection

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. I like the idea of an annual inspection because if you have any problems they will be picked up earlier. I think it will definitely make me keep my paperwork up to date.

An agency like Leap Ahead has a double role – they are inspectors, but they are also childminder agency officers, so they don't just come and pick fault. They have to support you to reach the right standard.

I was the first childminder on Leap Ahead's books to go through their inspection process. Barbara and Helen carried out the inspection, and it was much less intimidating than an Ofsted visit because I am familiar with them. It was easier on the children as well. When Ofsted come, the inspector tends to sit at a table with a laptop and doesn't interact with the children, but this was not the case with the Leap Ahead team.

Grading

Leap Ahead uses the same grading system as Ofsted. I received a "good" rating, with "outstanding" in one area. I have always had a good rating from Ofsted. There were no actions that needed to be taken, although they gave a few suggestions, such as seeking parents' input into the children's development journals, which no-one had ever brought up before. It is valuable to get that kind of insight.

The parents of the children I look after have never been that bothered about my grade, although they like to have a look and make sure I am not failing. They are more interested in whether they feel comfortable with me than in looking at my paperwork. I told them I was changing to an agency but they have not noticed any difference.

Support and training

In the past I have found childminder networks to be very useful, but local authorities can no longer fund support for childminders like myself who are rated good or outstanding. Now that I am part of the agency there are a lot of forums and meetings with other childminders who have joined where we can share opinions and information, and I find that helpful. The agency is at the end of the line if I need anything, or I can arrange a visit or email. I had a question about safeguarding the other day, for example, and they were able to guide me to someone who sorted it out. In terms of training, the agency is currently helping me to find a relevant safeguarding course. We can make suggestions about the kind of training which would be of interest, and they are happy to listen to us.

Business support

I have not had to use the agency to find new clients, as I am fortunate that most of mine come through word-of-mouth, but I will if I need to. I have just been given a profile on the agency web site which I can use to promote myself. I also have access to agency paperwork templates, which you can download for free.

Cost

When you look at the annual fee it seems a lot compared to Ofsted. But when you take out the cost of the training, the paperwork and so on, it does not seem so expensive. It is certainly cost-effective for me. If another childminder was asking for my advice on whether to register with an agency, I would say do it!