



CHILDREN COME FIRST

The role of approved childminding
networks in changing practice



Executive Summary

A report of a study undertaken by the Early Childhood Unit of the
National Children's Bureau

Author: Sue Owen, Director of Early Years, National Children's Bureau

1. About the study

This study was undertaken by the Early Childhood Unit of the National Children's Bureau (NCB) between 2003 and 2004 and was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation following an application to them by the National Childminding Association (NCMA).

NCMA is the national professional membership organisation for all involved in home-based childcare, including childminders¹ and nannies. It has been instrumental in the development of childminding networks² since 1988 and, since 1999, in a national model of "approved" quality assured networks and "accredited" networks which meet government requirements for the provision of funded, early education. This model includes the employment of a dedicated coordinator for each network or cluster of networks and these coordinators are required to make annual reports to NCMA.

The aims of the study were to:

- evaluate the coordinators' reports to see what information they provide about the role of networks in improving the practice of individual childminders and the standards and status of childminding in general
- identify which aspects of network organisation had the greatest impact on childminding practice
- make some practical recommendations which networks could concentrate on to maximise their effectiveness.

The methods used were as follows:

- literature review on quality in childminding
- analysis of approximately 100 coordinator reports (from approved networks which had been running for at least two years)
- discussion groups with NCMA staff, local authority managers and network childminders in two contrasting regions in order to check the validity of findings
- postal survey of 200 network childminders.

The information obtained throws light on the differences which networks have made to traditional childminding practice and to those aspects of network activities which childminders and coordinators feel make the greatest improvements in quality. Many of the themes which have emerged in the study are reflected in the government's 10-year childcare strategy and can inform its development.

The childminders and childminding workers who have talked to us have been overwhelmingly in agreement about the aspects of network organisation which make a difference to their childcare practice and provide a valuable insight into quality improvement.

2. Background

At the time of the study there were 150 networks approved to the Children Come First (CCF) quality assurance model³. These included 61 directly managed on a contract by NCMA and 89 managed by other organisations or in-house by local authorities. Approximately 100 of these had been in existence for more than two years and had, therefore, two annual reports from coordinators. Between them, these networks covered approximately 1,500 childminders.

3. Key findings

3.1 Raising confidence

The study revealed that the status and profile of childminding had been raised by the development of approved networks but there were still strongly expressed feelings about low status and patronising attitudes arising both from the continued existence of bad practice and a lack of understanding about home-based provision.

30 per cent of childminders in the survey mentioned that greater confidence or self-esteem had resulted from network membership and that this was an aspect which helped them to become better childminders.

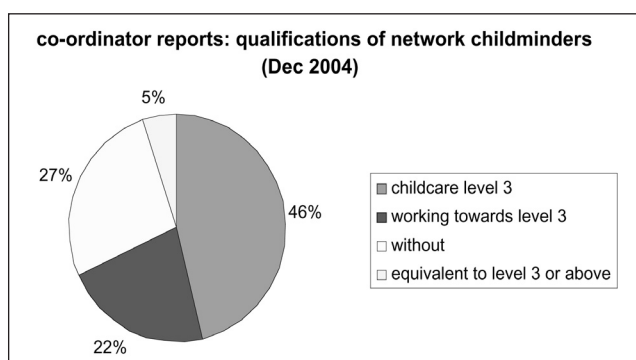
This was echoed in the coordinator reports where the raised profile of childminding and issues of confidence and self-esteem took the second and third places in the list of advantages to childminders of network membership.

Professionalism featured strongly for the survey childminders, not just in terms of their own practice but also in the sense of belonging to a wider professional grouping, growing in confidence and striving for higher standards.

Survey childminders also said that network membership had made a difference to the attitude of parents to them. Two thirds thought that parents appreciated the higher quality and were now more understanding about the work. However, the remaining third, who felt it had made no difference, often sounded quite bitter about what they felt to be a lack of interest on the part of parents.

3.2 Training

Nearly half the childminders in these networks already had a level 3 childcare qualification, a further 22% were working towards one and 5% had a related qualification at the same or a higher level e.g. early childhood studies degrees, foundation degrees, teaching, nursing or social work. So in this respect at least there is a big difference between networked childminders and those not in networks. The specific requirements and support within networks have made a difference to the workforce profile.



Previous studies have found specialist childcare training to be one of the factors most likely to be related to improved quality of care for children (Owen 2000), so it is extremely important that networks have managed to make such a profound difference to the profile of the childminding population. Childminders in both the survey and the discussion groups highlighted active strategies which had impacted on their ability to take this training including funding, to make it cheap or free, and peer support, training being provided as part of a supportive group within a culture of learning and change. Of those surveyed, 76 per cent felt greater accessibility of training and qualifications make a big difference to the quality of the service provided for children.

The existence of an accreditation training programme (for the delivery of funded, early years education) was the second most frequently mentioned quality aspect in the coordinators' reports and was top of the list of network activities which the coordinators felt benefited childminders.

91 per cent said that network membership increased their motivation to do training and qualifications.

The requirement to be at least working towards a level 3 qualification is one of the most recognised features of CCF approved networks and has succeeded in changing the profile of childminding.

3.3 Benefits to recruitment and retention

71 per cent of the childminders said that they would be more likely to continue as a childminder because of network membership. One of the network focus groups discussed this issue and felt that, even if networks don't have any features which specifically address sustainability, they do offer high levels of general support which will help see people through difficult times. They argued that networks work on people's attitude to the job: taking people who want to do the job well and then fostering that attitude, providing lots of opportunities and making sure standards stay high.

3.4 Improvements in quality

Networks support improvements in quality, with childminders more outcome focussed and providing a mix of child-led and adult-led activities.

In the coordinator reports "higher quality" and the reassurance of quality assurance were top of the list of advantages for families in the reports, being mentioned in over a third. In the survey, childminders were asked to consider ways network membership had enabled them to be a "better childminder". Here, as elsewhere, a large number of the statements related to training and qualifications or confidence and increased self-esteem.

Although not all the childminders had taken up accreditation for early years education, those who had felt their knowledge and understanding of how children learn, and of how to support that learning, had been improved.

There were suggestions that similar approaches to the support of children's learning should form the basis for all childminder support and training even if they were not going to become accredited.

The childminders felt they provide a model of integrated working because they have to provide the total service for all the children attending, whatever their ages. They felt that the accreditation training, especially when twinned with Birth to Three Matters, had given them a good grounding in support for children’s learning from birth and that they could therefore provide care and education, seamlessly, for all the children and throughout the day.

The quality-related aspects of the coordinator’s role were also discussed. They were felt to provide what was described as “an effective chain of support behind the coordinator” which is sometimes lacking for non-NCMA networks.

A few childminders felt there was an elitist attitude about networks and that quality childminding was not the prerogative of networks. Some coordinator reports mentioned that the network had been able to improve services for all childminders in their area and that this was a spin-off benefit of network organisation.

The concern over what has been called “two tier” childminding is, again, something which local authority planners will have to take seriously as new patterns of services are developed.

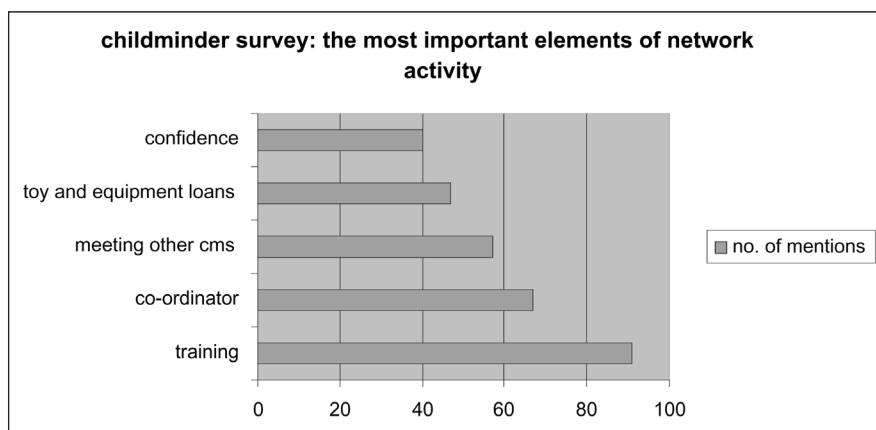
Discussions also mentioned the usefulness of the network approach for new childminders. A recent report from the Sure Start Unit on the evaluation of the “Support Childminder” pathfinders would also seem to bear this out. One in five of the new childminders said they had considered dropping out during the registration process and over half of these felt that the support offered had made them change their minds (Sure Start Unit 2005).

3.5 Experience

Networks are most likely to recruit from long-standing childminders offering high quality services already and new “career” childminders attracted to the occupation because it now has a higher status and reputation.

3.6 Effectiveness

The survey of childminders produced very strong agreement on what factors had made a difference to their practice and these are shown in the table below.



These were similar to the elements identified in coordinator reports but there were differences in emphasis, for instance coordinators mentioned regular support meetings most often.

3.7 Network Coordinator support

The role of the dedicated coordinator is central to the quality improvements being made by networks. 56 per cent of survey respondents said that the coordinator's support and monitoring was one of the most important aspects of the network. This was supported by the discussions with two networks who couldn't speak highly enough of their coordinators, the "extra mile" they went for them and their reliability and expertise. In the survey some childminders also specifically mentioned the importance of the regular monitoring visits they receive.

The coordinators themselves, both in the NCMA staff group and the two networks, emphasised the range of their roles and relationships which involved supporting childminders on personal as well as childcare issues while stressing that this could be twinned with professionalism.

In the coordinator reports, support from a dedicated worker was one of the five most frequently mentioned advantages of network membership for childminders and most of the other quality related elements, such as improved links with other agencies, the production of training programmes and group meetings, also relied on the existence of a coordinator.

3.8 Peer support

Childminders value highly the opportunity to meet other childminders at network meetings and the focus of these meetings on children's learning and specific issues of practice.

48 per cent of survey respondents said that the chance to meet together with other childminders for support, social life and sharing ideas and problems was one of the most important aspects of the network.

Meeting with other childminders came first in the coordinators' list of effective quality elements, and the positive effect of networks in overcoming isolation featured prominently for the local authority managers and the NCMA staff.

3.9 Workforce composition

Networks do not seem to have been able to change the traditional profile.

Childminders in the networks studied closely followed the pattern of the rest of the childcare workforce in being overwhelmingly white and female. Nearly half fell into the age range 30-40 with a further 30 per cent being between 40 and 50. In group settings such as nurseries or out of school clubs, staff tend to be younger than this but, in other respects this makes networked childminders similar to the children's workforce as a whole

3.10 Network toy and equipment loan schemes

Nearly 40 per cent of surveyed childminders said that toy libraries and/or equipment loan schemes (especially for more expensive or large items) were some of the most important services provided by the network and it was the fourth most frequently mentioned aspect of quality in the coordinator reports.

3.11 Status and parental attitudes

Some childminders surveyed feel that national agencies and the government need a better understanding of the unique selling points of childminding and need to be more committed to promoting it as a high quality alternative to group care rather than a “wraparound” option. Greater involvement of parents in both the organisation and evaluation of networks could also have an effect on this.

3.12 Duplication of evidence

A number of respondents mentioned that there was a lot of duplication of evidence for childminders engaged in development activities such as quality assurance schemes, inspection, NVQs etc. Examples included local colleges which refused to accept any evidence prepared for another purpose, so that everything has to be done over again.

3.13 The effect of networks on fees

A majority of the survey respondents (63 per cent) felt that network membership had not affected what they could charge for their services. This was not always seen as a disappointment. Some people pointed out that they already charged at the top of the local range and wouldn't have expected this to change. Others said that, although they didn't charge more, they now felt much more justified in their prices.

Remuneration is not just about the unit price charged. The ability to fill all your places is also an important aspect and the survey asked childminders if network membership had made a difference to the number of requests they received and their ability to quickly fill vacancies. Again, a clear majority said it had made no difference but many stressed that this was because they had never had any difficulty in filling places anyway.

4. Summary of recommendations

4.1 Training and qualifications

Improved training and qualifications were felt to be the most important effect of networks and they seem to have radically altered the workforce profile of childminding in this respect. Specific strategies were identified which have made this possible

It is recommended that the emphasis on this aspect of approved networks should be continued and also encouraged in non CCF networks and, as more integrated provision is developed, a way to meet the training and quality assurance needs of specific types of provision within an integrated whole is sought.

There was concern over the duplication of evidence requirements for both childminders and coordinators. **It is recommended that the Sure Start Unit work with other stakeholders to consider mechanisms whereby such duplication can be minimised and systems aligned.**

4.2 Recruitment and retention

Many study respondents mentioned how valuable this level of support was for new childminders as well as experienced ones but, currently, networks are targeted on childminders who already provide a higher than average quality of service.

It is recommended that consideration be given to linking the new “support childminder” schemes to networks so that there is a clear and supported progression within an area from prospective childminder through to network member and beyond.

There were concerns from both childminders and local authority managers about the restriction of services to network childminders who already work at a higher standard.

It is recommended that the Sure Start Unit provide some guidance to local authorities about how to maintain an appropriate balance between quality assured network practice and support for non-network childminders

This study found that the specific elements of quality assurance such as training and qualification requirements and on-going monitoring had made a big difference to the practice of networked childminders. However, currently, only 40 per cent of local authority networks are quality assured through the Children Come First scheme.

It is recommended that the Sure Start Unit and local authorities put strategies in place for quality assuring all childminding networks, that funding and other resources should be identified for this and that it should be incorporated within the Children’s Workforce Strategy.

4.3 Improvements in quality

There was considerable interest in discussions over the ways in which childminding practice differs from group-based provision and concern that more information is needed based on observation of practice. **It is recommended that agencies institute further research to look at this subject in detail. First hand observation of practice, related specifically to the quality improvements mentioned by the coordinators and childminders in this study, would provide a fuller understanding of what constitutes quality in home-based settings and, consequently, how to support and extend it.**

More information is needed on the operation of networks, on what works well, what causes problems and how these impact on quality of provision. **It is recommended that coordinator reports should have consistent categories for information gathering. They should be analysed on a regular basis for patterns of development across networks as a whole and this information used to drive further quality improvements.**

There was concern that non-NCMA managed networks would not be part of a consistent information gathering exercise and that differences could then not be identified and used to inform policy development. **It is recommended that NCMA and the Sure Start Unit should consider recommending these new reporting procedures and formats for non-NCMA managed networks as well. This would provide a coherent and consistent flow of information about organised childminding on which to base future policy decisions.**

4.4 The role of the coordinator

The workload of part time coordinators was considered to be a growing problem. It was difficult to keep up with basic network requirements such as visits, support, training and group activities and also do liaison and promotional work in their areas. **It is recommended that NCMA and the Sure Start Unit review the role and responsibilities of coordinators in the light of the role of networks within the Children's Centres initiative and the findings of this study that a dedicated and experienced full-time coordinator is key to high quality provision.**

For many different reasons the role of the dedicated coordinator was seen as central to the quality improvements being made by networks but there were fears that this was not always recognised by local authorities. **It is recommended that NCMA and the Sure Start Unit consider the findings of the study in this respect and communicate them to local authority planners. This includes the ability of a specialist organisation such as NCMA to provide what was described as "an effective chain of support behind the coordinator".**

There were fears expressed that the aspects of network organisation which make a difference cost money, particularly the dedicated coordinator, and that, without ring-fenced funding, local authorities might dispense with these. **It is recommended that NCMA and the Sure Start Unit consider the study's findings concerning the elements of network organisation which childminders and coordinators consider have the greatest impact on childminders' practice and plan how such elements can be embedded within future delivery strategies such as the attachment of networks to children's centres.**

4.5 Meeting other childminders

There was some evidence that support meetings connected to networks focussed more on child-related topics and specific issues of practice in contrast to the more general social contact provided by non-network groups. **It is recommended that planners consider the importance of this when setting up childminder support systems that are not based on approved networks.**

4.6 A more diverse workforce

Networks appeared to have had no effect on the racial, gender or age composition of childminding. **It is recommended that consideration needs to be given to the ways in which networks are currently operating and the pools they recruit from in different geographical areas in order to understand how this might change. It is possible that childminders from traditionally under-represented groups might need extra support and encouragement in order to stay in childminding, in which case networks could offer that type of support and promote their services within the local community, thus making a difference to the overall profile. In the case of childminders from Black and minority ethnic groups, it would be valuable for NCMA to look more closely at areas where these populations are highest and see if there are networks there and, if so, how they operate to support and recruit new childminders.**

4.7 Status

Despite much change, there is still a lack of understanding of childminding practice and a feeling that it still has a lower status than forms of group provision. **It is recommended that NCMA and the Sure Start Unit should consider how to identify and promote the unique elements of organised childminding to other stakeholders and the general public.**

Many childminders felt that parents don't know about networks and don't display much interest in them. **It is recommended that the campaign suggested above should have a specific element which focuses on parents.**

The childminders in the studied networks felt very strongly about the beneficial effect of confidence and self-esteem on their practice and that they now felt like professionals. **It is recommended that the implications of this should be considered very carefully when designing the ways in which networks will be linked to children's centres. It will be challenging to find a role for organised childminding which is equal to, rather than an auxiliary to, group provision and existing models of good practice should be publicised.**

4.8 Pay and conditions

There were felt to be few financial incentives for childminders to take on the additional work involved in accreditation or community childminding for vulnerable children. **It is recommended that this should be considered as a separate aspect of the current Children's Workforce Strategy.**

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the help and support of the two other partners in this study: the National Childminding Association (NCMA) and our funders, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. This study and its report were made possible by the hard work and co-operation of Chris Evans, Childminding Networks Manager at NCMA, who died suddenly at Christmas 2004; it is dedicated to her in fond remembrance. Thanks are also due to all the childminders and NCMA staff who gave their time during this study to fill in survey forms and answer our questions.

Notes

1. Registered childminding

Throughout this report the term childminder(s) refers to a registered childminder(s). Childminders must, by law:

- be registered by Ofsted if they live in England, or the Care Standards Inspectorate for Wales (CISW) if they live in Wales
- have their home inspected regularly to make sure it is safe and suitable for young children
- be insured in case a child they are looking after has an accident or damages someone else's property
- have first aid training which covers first aid to babies and young children
- be checked by the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), as must everyone else aged over 16 who lives or works in the childminder's home and
- take introductory training within six months of registering as a childminder.

2. Childminding networks

A network is a group of registered childminders who work together, with support and guidance from a network coordinator, to provide a quality childminding service.

Networks are very adaptable and can provide a range of services to meet the needs of families and communities. This includes sharing information and resources, such as play equipment, amongst network members and offering childcare cover when childminders are sick or on holiday. Often networks are able to provide special services such as care for disabled children and weekend or overnight care. Some networks are accredited so that with training the childminders can provide early years education.

3. Children Come First (CCF) quality assurance model

NCMA Children Come First is the only nationally recognised quality assurance scheme for childminding networks. Members of NCMA CCF networks undertake a specialist quality assurance programme of assessment and continued development, based on NCMA's 10 Quality Standards. The programme has been created with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and has received official Investors in Children (IiC) endorsement.

References

Dawson, Berry and Gillard (2003) A Review of Childminding Networks and a Guide for Local Authorities and their Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships, DfES Research Brief No RB485

DfES (2004) Childminder Networks Census, London: DfES

DfES (2005) Children's Workforce Strategy, consultation paper, London: DfES

HM Treasury, DfES, DWP, DTI (2004) Choice for Parents: a ten-year strategy for childcare, London

Owen, S (2000) "Assessing Quality in Childminding" Children & Society, vol 14, no 2 (Apr) pp 147-153

Sauve E (2001) Supporting the Development and Establishment of Approved Childminding Networks Within Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships, unpublished paper prepared for the DfEE

Sure Start Unit (2005) The Support Childminder Pathfinder Scheme: evaluation report Sept 2003-Nov 2004 , London Sure Start Unit of DfES