

# **Children Come First**

## **The Role of Approved Childminding Networks in Changing Practice**

Report of a study undertaken by the Early  
Childhood Unit of the National Children's  
Bureau in 2004

Commissioned by the National Childminding Association  
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## **Acknowledgements**

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NCMA's network support team of Chris Evans and Ann Sawyer gave hands-on help throughout the process. Despite their growing workload they were always considerate and patient with my many requests and they willingly let me share their office space while I was studying the co-ordinator reports.

Along with everyone who knew her, I was shocked and saddened when Chris Evans died suddenly at Christmas 2004. This study and report owes more to her than to almost anyone else and is dedicated to her in fond remembrance. Thanks are also due to Liz Bayram and Kay Lyons at NCMA who helped with the arrangements for the policy seminar held on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2004.

At the National Children's Bureau I would like to thank, as always, the small team in the Early Childhood Unit: Ann-Marie McAuliffe, Ann Robinson and Patricia Thomas. The Research department also supported this work and I am particularly grateful to Catherine Shaw for help with the questionnaire design and Nicola Ryder for support with the analysis of its results. I would also like to thank my friend Stephanie Petrie of the University of Liverpool without whom this report would be far less readable.

Finally, thanks to all the childminders and NCMA staff who gave me their time during this study, time to fill in survey forms and to answer seemingly endless and similar questions at focus groups. I hope this report can reflect their thoughtfulness about and passion for the network initiative.

**Sue Owen**

## **Contents:**

- 1 Executive Summary**
  - 2 About the study**
  - 3 About childminding networks**
    - 3a Networks and quality**
    - 3b Networks and numbers**
    - 3c Current context**
  - 4 Basic information on the approved networks**
  - 5 The findings of the study: What differences do approved networks make to childminding practice?**
    - 5a Training and qualifications**
    - 5b The co-ordinator**
    - 5c Meeting other childminders**
    - 5d Toy and equipment loans**
    - 5e Status/profile of childminding**
    - 5f Recruitment and retention**
    - 5g Quality improvements**
  - 6 The findings of the study: What has not changed?**
    - 6a Pay**
    - 6b Workforce profile**
  - 7 Reporting on networks**
  - 8 Issues and recommendations**
- Notes**
- References**
- Annexes:**
- A The methods used in the study**
  - B Pro formas used by co-ordinators for their reports**
  - C List of questions comprising the focus group discussion sheet**
  - D List of questions comprising the childminder postal survey**
  - E Full tables of issues mentioned in co-ordinator reports**

**Contact details for further information**

## **1 Executive summary**

### **1.1 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 Esmee 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 childminders<sup>1</sup> and nannies. It has been instrumental in the development of childminding networks<sup>2</sup> 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 model<sup>3</sup>. 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.

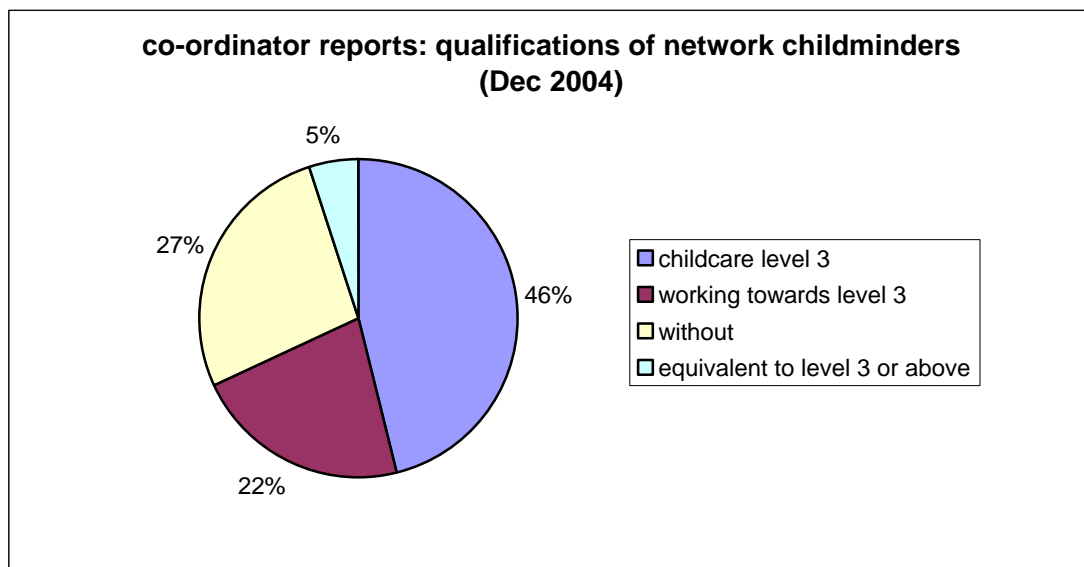
This was echoed in the coordinator reports where the raised profile of childminding and issues of confidence and self-esteem took the second and third places in the list of advantages to childminders of network membership.

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.

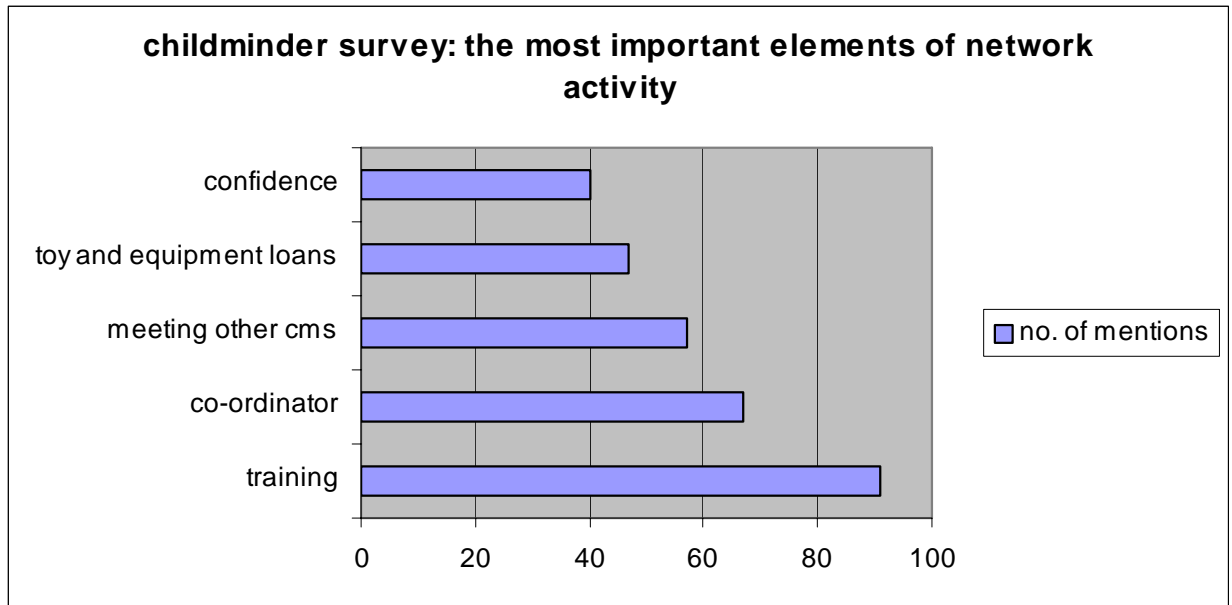
Discussions also mentioned the usefulness of the network approach for new childminders. A recent report from the Sure Start Unit on the evaluation of the “Support Childminder” pathfinders would also seem to bear this out. One in five of the new childminders said they had considered dropping out during 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 “intentional” 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.*

**“I’ve always thought childminding was a good job but it’s very responsible, hard work and there isn’t much appreciation for it. I think networks try to help with those problems, I suppose they try to make the best of a good job!”**

**(network childminder in discussion group)**

## **2 About the study**

This is the report of a study on childminding networks undertaken by the Early Childhood Unit of the National Children's Bureau (NCB) between 2003 and 2004. The study was funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation following an application to them by the National Childminding Association (NCMA).

The NCMA is the national professional membership organisation for all involved in childminding. It has been instrumental in the development of childminding networks 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 nursery education (see About Childminding Networks below)

This model (Children Come First quality assured networks) includes the employment of a dedicated co-ordinator for each network or cluster of networks and these co-ordinators are required to make annual reports to NCMA. The reports form the basis of the Association's statistics on networks and of their reports to government on network development. However, they also contain a great deal of qualitative information on network operation which NCMA had not had the capacity to analyse fully.

This study was designed to make use of this existing resource by looking in greater depth at a selection of these reports and evaluating what information they could provide about the role of networks in improving the practice of the individual childminders in them and the standards and status of childminding in general. It also aimed to identify which aspects of network organisation had the greatest impact on childminding practice, to make some practical recommendations about aspects on which networks could concentrate in order to maximise their effectiveness and what types and form of data collection would be most useful for researchers and evaluators in the future. The information obtained was then shared with childminders and childminding workers through face-to-face discussions and a postal questionnaire in order

both to check validity and to give greater depth to the analysis. The methods used were as follows:

- Literature review on quality in childminding (available separately)
- Analysis of approx. 100 co-ordinator reports (from approved networks which have been running for at least two years)
- Discussion groups with NCMA staff
- Discussion groups with local authority managers
- Discussion groups with networked childminders in 2 contrasting regions
- Postal survey of 200 networked childminders

A fuller description of the methods used in the study can be found in Annex A.

As the study aimed to discover and exploit the potential of existing reporting mechanisms it has been able to feed recommendations into a review of the administration of the Children Come First (CCF) network scheme which was taking place in NCMA in 2004-5. However, most importantly, 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 co-ordinators feel make the greatest improvements in quality. Consequently, findings are also being shared with central government and with local authority early years services in order to inform local and national policy and practice in the following ways:

- To provide general information on the changes which networks have made to childminding practice
- To identify those aspects of the NCMA model of approved networks which have the greatest effect on practice
- To highlight gaps or areas which need improvement
- To target networks onto areas and activities in which they can make the greatest difference
- To refine the reporting systems used within networks to improve information gathering in the future

- To disseminate findings more widely in order to encourage a debate and further research into quality in childminding.

This was a time limited study which depended on analysis of existing documentation. It was an attempt to take advantage, as quickly as possible, of the documentation coming out of the first approved networks. However, recommendations are made for further work on this subject such as more extensive original research into quality in childminding networks which could be taken on by the government as part of the evidence base for Sure Start. For instance, no original observation of childminding practice was possible in this study, nor was discussion with parents or analysis of statutory inspection reports or network validation reports. 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.

### 3 About childminding networks

Since the early 1970s there have been attempts by childminders themselves and by childminding workers to develop groups in which childminders could work together for mutual support and the development of improved practice. This was partly in response to a widely held perception of childminding as a low cost, low quality service which was not the first choice of parents, a view which had been fuelled by media scandal stories in the 1970s. However, it also arose from a genuine need on the part of childminders to break down the isolation of home working through regular engagement with others in their profession.

By the 1980s informal, local groups meeting regularly and with toy and equipment loans or playgroups attached were available in most areas. They were usually members of the National Childminding Association (NCMA) which had been established in 1977. An enhanced version of these groups were the more organised networks which trained and supported childminders to provide services for specific groups of children such as those referred by social workers, those whose parents worked for a particular company or children with disabilities. These 'sponsored' or 'retained' groups of childminders were often run by social services departments or voluntary organisations. Two previous studies have looked at the operation of such sponsored schemes and have highlighted some shortcomings in the way in which they were able to address the needs of children (Novak, Owen, Petrie and Sennett 1997 and Dillon and Statham 1998)

In 1988, with support from the Department of Health, NCMA developed a 'Community Childminding' model which aimed to codify some of the best principles of the range of existing sponsored childminding schemes and they employed development workers to support local authorities who wished to work to this new national model (Owen 2002). Following this, in 1989, NCMA developed *Childminding in Business* a charitable company which allowed the organisation to market the same type of network model to employers at a time

when there was increasing interest from companies in supporting childcare for their employees.

These original NCMA network models were developed largely to tap the only two sources of subsidy for the costs of places and of support, namely social work budgets and employer subsidies.

However, in 1995 the Conservative Government announced a voucher scheme to pay for nursery education for all four-year-olds. The vouchers were to be redeemable at a range of settings offering nursery education which met government criteria including a new system of nursery education inspection carried out by Ofsted and applied to all settings receiving this public funding. The inspection would assess the setting's ability to provide a curriculum which would enable children to meet a set of specific learning outcomes (the Desirable Learning Outcomes) on entering formal schooling, usually at the age of five.

Childminding was initially excluded from this list of nursery education providers but NCMA very quickly produced a guide to the Desirable Learning Outcomes (NCMA 1998a) which explained how they could be met within a home setting and, by the time the scheme was due to commence full operation in 1996, it was accepted that childminders could be funded. However, a mechanism had to be found to make it feasible for individual childminders to be inspected and quality-assured for nursery education and networks were the obvious choice. This development resulted in a national model for networks called Children Come First.

By this time, the Labour Government had come to power and replaced the voucher scheme with the National Childcare Strategy, which included this nursery education initiative within a planning model for local childcare services. Under the government's agreement with NCMA only childminders who were part of an 'approved' network which could be inspected by Ofsted, were eligible for government funding to provide nursery education.

NCMA's two original models, *Community Childminding* and *Childminding in Business*, were incorporated in *Children Come First* into a system of support designed to provide quality assurance for anyone funding childcare places with childminders, be they individual parents, employers, social workers or central government (NCMA 1998b). Today networks may adopt one of three models:

- Core (a network with its own co-ordinator),
- Cluster (a group of networks with a co-ordinator for a geographical area)
- Attached (a core network linked to a group setting).

Approved networks can then also include 'accredited' childminders who are inspected against additional criteria in order to draw down the nursery education funding for specific children. As this funding has now been extended to three year olds (and there is a pilot project to extend it to two year olds) it is of even greater significance for childminders. Becoming accredited through an approved network is the only way in which childminders can receive funding for nursery education. However government guidance does not stipulate that other networks have to be NCMA approved. This is because the government has indicated that it does not want to limit the traditional flexibility of childminding and its responsiveness to local circumstances by prescribing a particular network model or requiring childminders to be part of such a network before they can operate.

### **3a Networks and quality**

Research evidence (Owen 2000) shows that involvement in professional organisations and organised networks are factors which tend to indicate a higher quality of care for children. However there has been no evaluation of the effect on standards of the NCMA network model. There has been monitoring of the ease of setting up networks, the numbers of providers attracted and the number of additional places created (Sauve 2001, DfES 2004) and on the effectiveness of the establishment of childminding networks

through the National Childcare Strategy (Dawson, Berry and Gillard 2003). The latter concluded that networks were providing a route to higher quality childcare, particularly in their support for greater professionalism and career opportunities. They had increased the status of childminding for both childminders and parents and showed signs of being able to improve retention rates. The NCMA Children Come First model was supported for its high standards and NCMA managed networks tended to have fewer support and management problems than those managed in-house by local authorities. Childminders reported being happy that they had joined networks and particularly valued the social interaction and support from other childminders; they felt more valued since joining and that they had a deeper understanding of good practice. However, there was some reported concern over the levels of paperwork and the frequency of support and monitoring visits. The present study looked to see if these findings could be replicated.

### **3b Networks and numbers**

NCMA has marketed its own network model actively with local authorities as a way in which they can improve the recruitment and retention of childminders in their areas and, consequently, meet the very high targets set by central government since 1997 for new day care places. In theory, childminding is the most easily expandable of all childcare options because it requires very little in the way of capital expenditure or planning. Until very recently it has been the largest provider of full day care and, up to 1999, had maintained a steady increase in numbers. Women with their own young children have traditionally seen childminding as an attractive employment option which allows them to stay at home, practise and extend their childcare skills and stay involved in the world of work (Mooney, Knight, Moss and Owen 2001). However, it has always been difficult to plan levels and standards for childminding services because childminders come directly from local communities and so respond closely to the patterns of demand in those communities and to other economic factors such as the availability of alternative jobs. A study of women moving into childcare, including childminders (Miles, Hall, Cordeaux and Owen 1999) showed that women stay in childcare for shorter periods than in other jobs

and that this can be related to the difficulty of balancing the rewards and the demands of the job. When other pressures intervene, such as family responsibilities, or when there are opportunities for more lucrative employment, the intrinsic satisfaction of childcare work is often not strong enough to keep them in the job. Consequently it has always been difficult to ensure a childminding service which meets the overall needs of a local authority area, especially in more disadvantaged communities where there might not be enough demand from working parents.

Networks offered a way of tackling this problem and allowing local authorities to plan where new childminding places would be located, to set higher than minimum standards for them, and to intervene in supply and demand to ensure the sustainability of services in any area. It was also stressed that sharing the same basic criteria for operation would still allow local variations to be developed. Although the government has no policy stating that networks are a future model for childminding, funding via the DfES's Sure Start Unit was focused on network development and this, twinned with NCMA's emphasis on networks has resulted in a *de facto* policy. NCMA's Business Plan for 2000-2003 stated that it should be an entitlement for all registered childminders to "have the opportunity to join an approved *Children Come First* network"

Initially, however, with the advent of the National Childcare Strategy, childminding numbers went into decline. Although there had always been a regular turnover in childminders, for the first time recruitment was not outstripping loss and in response, after lobbying from NCMA, the government introduced start-up grants for childminders. At the time of this report, numbers seem to be improving again. Mooney, Moss and Owen (2001) investigated the reasons why childminders were leaving the occupation and found that the most usual reasons were actively wanting to do something different and changes in family circumstances. Better working conditions, especially pay, greater satisfaction and the chance to interact with other adults were usually seen as the reasons for finding alternative employment. If childminding networks are to be used in the development of sustained neighbourhood

childcare services they need to be able to respond to the above issues and this study has offered the opportunity to ask network childminders directly about some of these issues.

It is also important to address the difficulty of developing services in areas of disadvantage. Although childminding originated in working class communities (Owen 1988) the demands of the job now make it difficult to sustain in areas with poor facilities and without a demand from working families with reasonable incomes. Government policy is to concentrate funding on just such disadvantaged areas but, to date, development has been patchy with some geographical areas meeting targets much more easily than others.

### **3c Current context**

At the time of writing the government has just published its 10 Year Strategy for Childcare, Choice for Parents (HM Treasury, DfES, DWP, DTI 2004) and this seems to address some of the concerns over how place targets are to be achieved. It suggests that this will not just be through centre based provision but that centres will act as neighbourhood “hubs” for a “childcare partners” model which will include more, and “more robust” childminding networks. This is a much more considered strategy for childminding than has been in place to date.

The Ten Year Strategy’s headline objectives are: “choice, availability, quality, affordability” and early in the report there are indications that childminding has found a central role in the strategy and that some of the specific and best known features of childminding are being prized for childcare and education as a whole:

“for the first year of a child’s life the priority should be to create conditions that support consistent one to one care” (p9)

“Government needs to take action to ensure childcare is sufficiently flexible to fit round parents’ working patterns” (p17)

“free part time early education...is not always joined up with childcare across the day..” (p21)

“home based childcarers can offer more flexibility than centre based care, can care for several siblings at once and can provide additional support for children with particular needs” (p22)

The government announced its intention to place a new duty on local authorities to ensure sufficient provision of childcare to meet the needs of parents in their areas and this specifically includes developing “more robust” childminder networks.

The Strategy proposed a new childcare partners model in which childcare places can wrap around the nursery education offer. This will be co-ordinated by children’s centres but provided by childminders and approved childcarers linked to (or even employed by) group based providers. This will require the growth and development of networks and the provision of training opportunities for childminders to enable more to achieve level 3 qualifications. The latter also forms part of the Government’s Children’s Workforce Strategy (DfES 2005) and a new framework of qualifications and careers which will be taken forward by the Children’s Workforce Development Council (a new Sector Skills Council).

In November 2004 the Sure Start Unit also published its latest Childminder Networks Census (DfES 2004). This gives up to date figures on the total number of networks in England, their organisation, linkages and sources of funding. There were estimated to be about 364 networks across the 150 local authorities in England with 91% of all local authorities having at least one formal childminding network. These networks are estimated to support 6,632 childminders. Two thirds of all local authorities also had at least one informal network. The networks averaged 18 childminders each and had an average cost of £27,000, which is close to the government’s network development grant of £25,000. It was shown to be cost effective to have more than one network in a local authority area, with the unit cost reducing as administrative and other support costs were shared. Three fifths of the formal networks were

NCMA approved Children Come First networks. Over half the networks were multi-purpose but a third were single priority networks, specialising in a particular type of provision, usually nursery education but also children with SEN/disabilities or teenage parents. Three fifths were managed in-house by local authorities but the NCMA approved networks were more likely to be managed by an external agency (often NCMA itself). Two thirds of the networks were linked to a local group provider, 37% to children's centres. In all the local authorities surveyed only 25 networks had closed, the majority due to lack of on-going funding. The census indicated that local authorities and networks had not been particularly pro-active in finding alternative sources of funding and tended to rely on the specific government development grants. This could have serious implications for long term sustainability if networks are to maintain the high level of support which our study found to be important to the childminders.

This is, therefore, an historic time at which to be reporting on this study's findings. Many of the themes which have emerged in the study are reflected in the 10 Year Strategy and can inform its development. The childminders and childminding workers who have talked to us as part of this enquiry have been overwhelmingly in agreement about the aspects of network organisation which make a difference to their childcare practice and it is to be hoped that their voices will be listened to.

#### **4 Basic information on the approved networks**

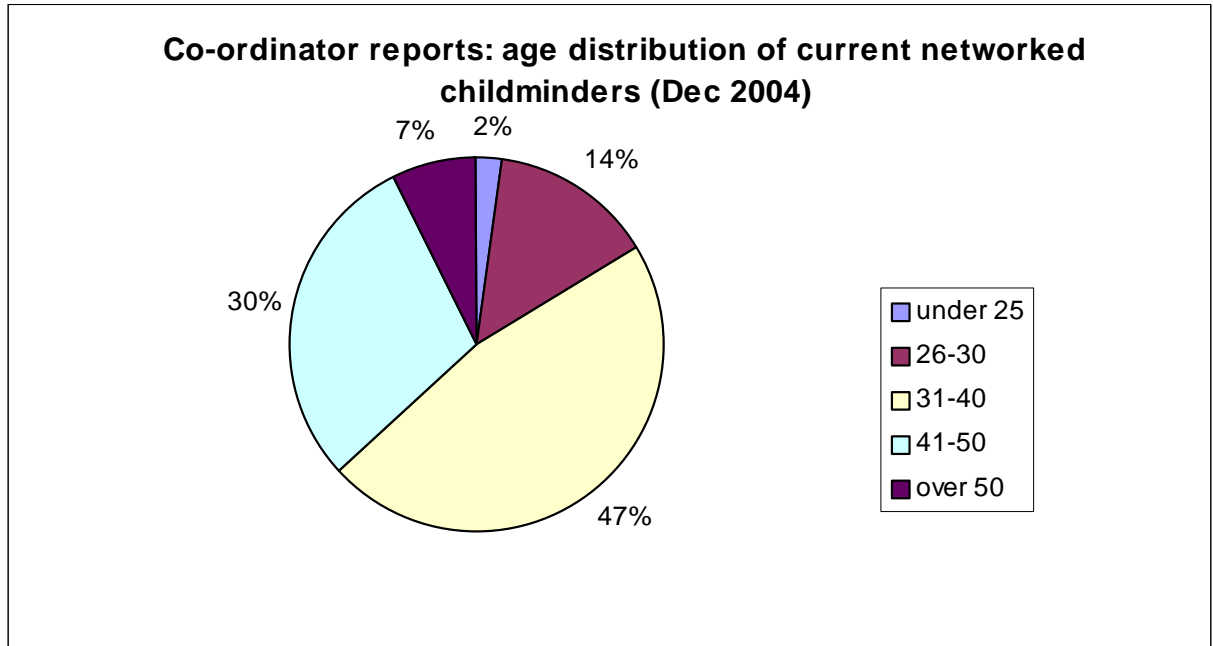
At the time of writing there are 150 networks approved to the Children Come First model, these include 61 directly managed on a contract by NCMA and 89 managed by other organisations or in-house by local authorities. At the time when this study was done there were approximately 100 which had been in existence for more than two years and had, therefore, two annual reports from co-ordinators. In total this resulted in us reading 76 annual reports from 42 networks. The lower numbers were the result of a variety of circumstances including second reports not having yet arrived with NCMA and the amalgamation of some networks. Between them these networks covered approximately 1,500 childminders.

As well as describing network activity the reports also include statistical information on the nature of the network childminders and so we have included this as context for the study. The figures come from the same networks as were used for the study i.e. those over two years old.

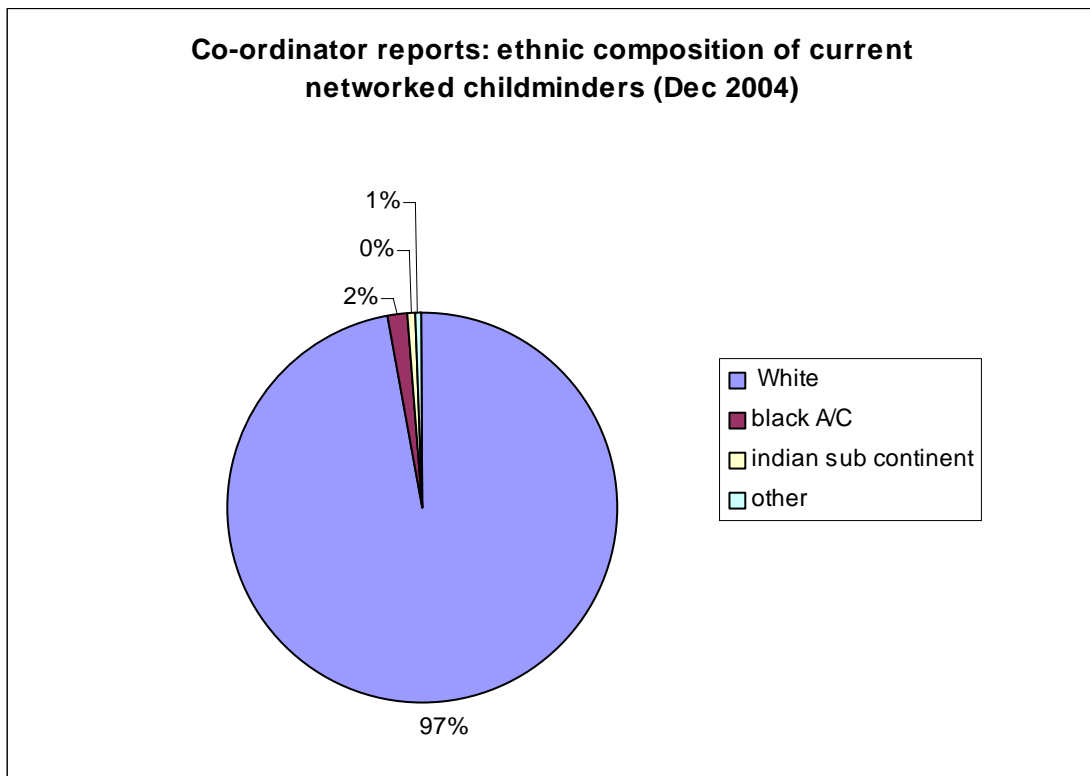
As the charts below show, networked childminders closely follow the pattern of the rest of the childcare workforce in being overwhelmingly white and female. Nearly half fell into the age range 30-40 with a further 30% being between 40 and 50 and this makes them similar to the children's workforce as a whole in which most occupations have over 50% of their workers over 40 years old. It is also similar to the findings of the Thomas Coram Research Unit study Childminding in the 1990s (Mooney, Knight, Moss and Owen 2001) in which 70% of their survey respondents were over 35. There are relatively few young women in these networks, only 16% being under 30. This does follow the traditional profile for childminding as a whole, however it might also reflect the relatively greater experience expected of childminders who join a network.

Therefore, in respect of workforce composition, networks do not seem to have been able to change the traditional profile. This is not surprising as most are recruiting from an existing pool of registered childminders. It is often assumed that networks can intervene directly in the composition of a childminding pool, and yet these had had no effect on the racial, gender or age composition of

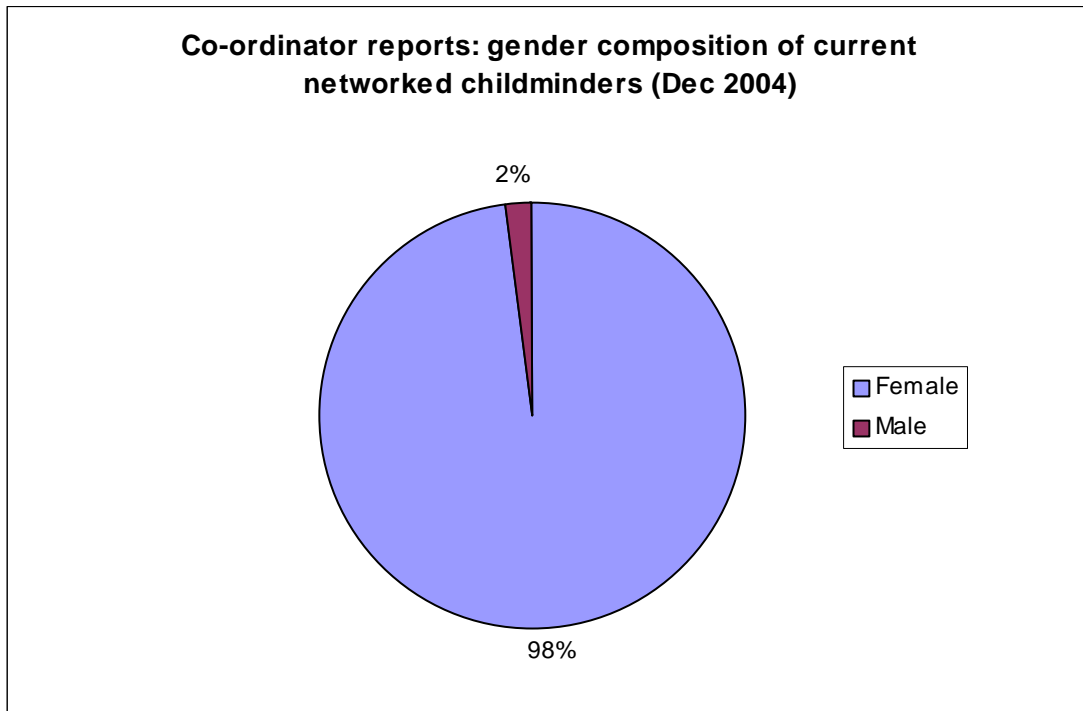
childminding, so consideration needs to be given either to the expectations of networks or to the ways in which they are currently operating.



**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**

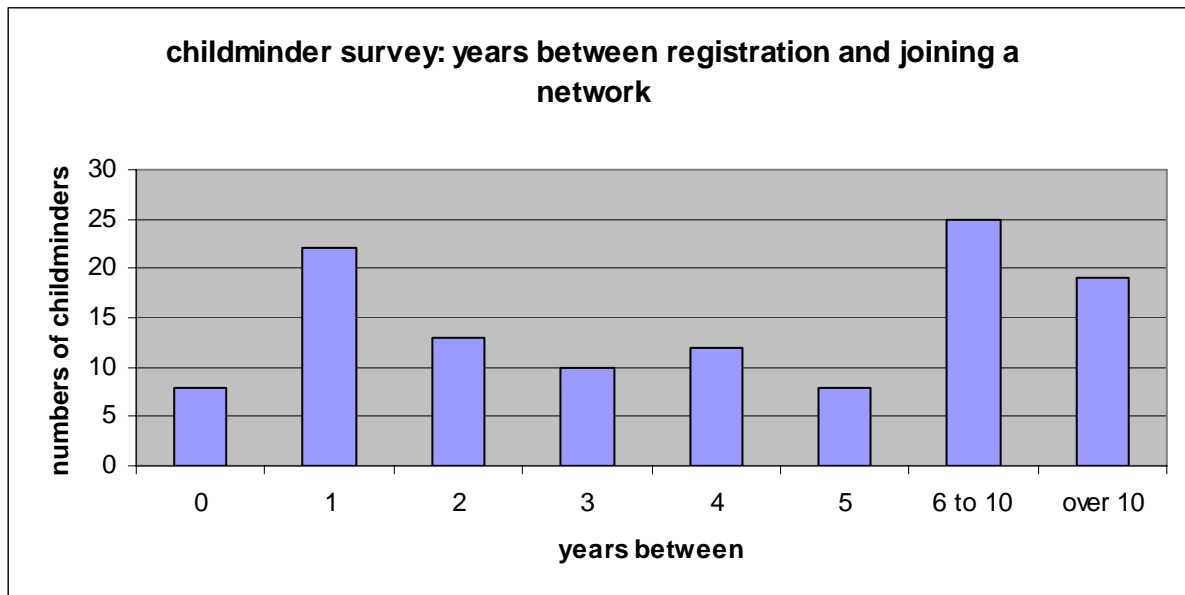


**Figure 3**

As part of the survey of childminders we asked how long it was between their initial registration and the time when they joined a network. Over a third were long-standing childminders with over 6 years experience between registration and joining a network, however 18% had joined a network soon after registration (between one and two years). One interpretation of these figures accords with a general view of networks which is that they are most likely to recruit from long-standing childminders already offering high quality services and new “intentional” childminders who have been attracted to the occupation because it now has a higher status and reputation.

Interestingly there were 8 in the survey who had joined a network almost immediately (less than a year) after registration which means that some childminders are being admitted to networks before they have experience of childminding. It has to be assumed that these new childminders have demonstrated high quality practice from the beginning and have been assessed as meeting the requirements for network membership, i.e. they are

at higher than minimum standards. However, this does raise questions about the meaning of quality assurance and will be returned to later.



**Figure 4**

We also contacted Ofsted as part of the study in order to see if it was possible to obtain any information about the relationship of quality assurance scheme membership to the grades received in Ofsted inspection or to the number of complaints received. This data is not collected at present although it is understood that involvement in an endorsed quality assurance scheme is recorded at the time of inspection and that consideration is being given to making this correlation in the future. Children Come First is a quality assurance scheme endorsed by the government's Investors in Children kitemark programme.

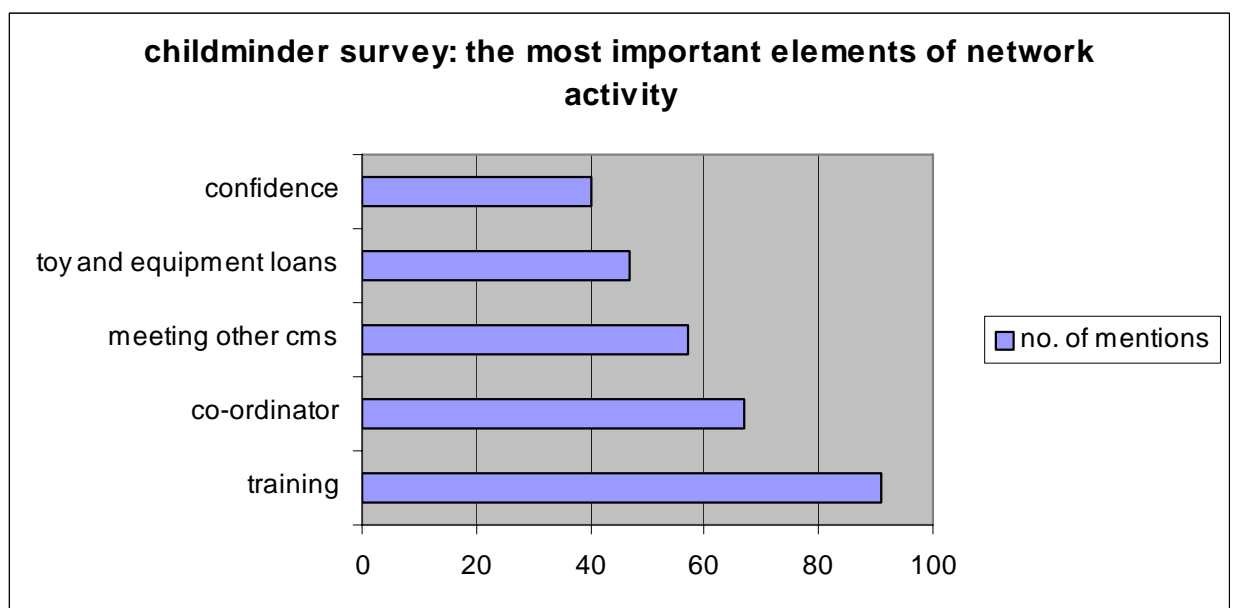
## 5 The findings of the study: What differences do approved networks make to childminding practice?

*“I feel the network has a profound effect on childminders - having that kind of support and training opportunities for a self-employed person is very rare”*

*(survey childminder)*

As explained above, this report is organised around those issues identified most frequently in the co-ordinator reports and the childminder survey as making the most difference to the quality of childminding practice in networks. These are then expanded on and informed by the discussions with networks, NCMA and network staff and local authority managers.

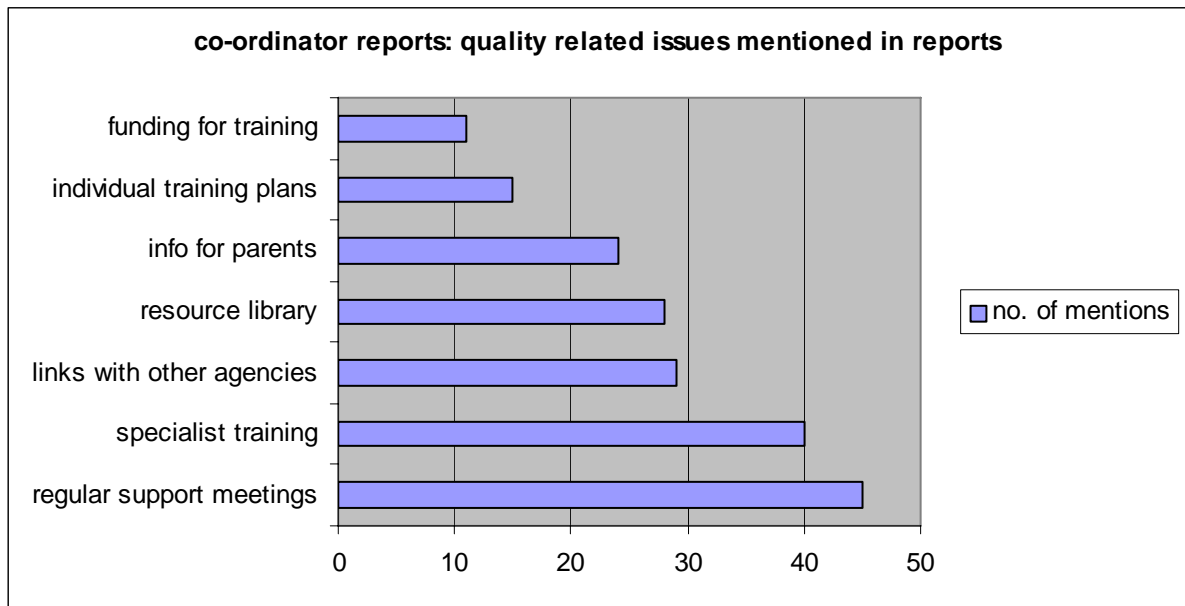
The survey produced very strong agreement amongst the childminder respondents on what had made a difference to their practice and these are shown in Fig 5 below.



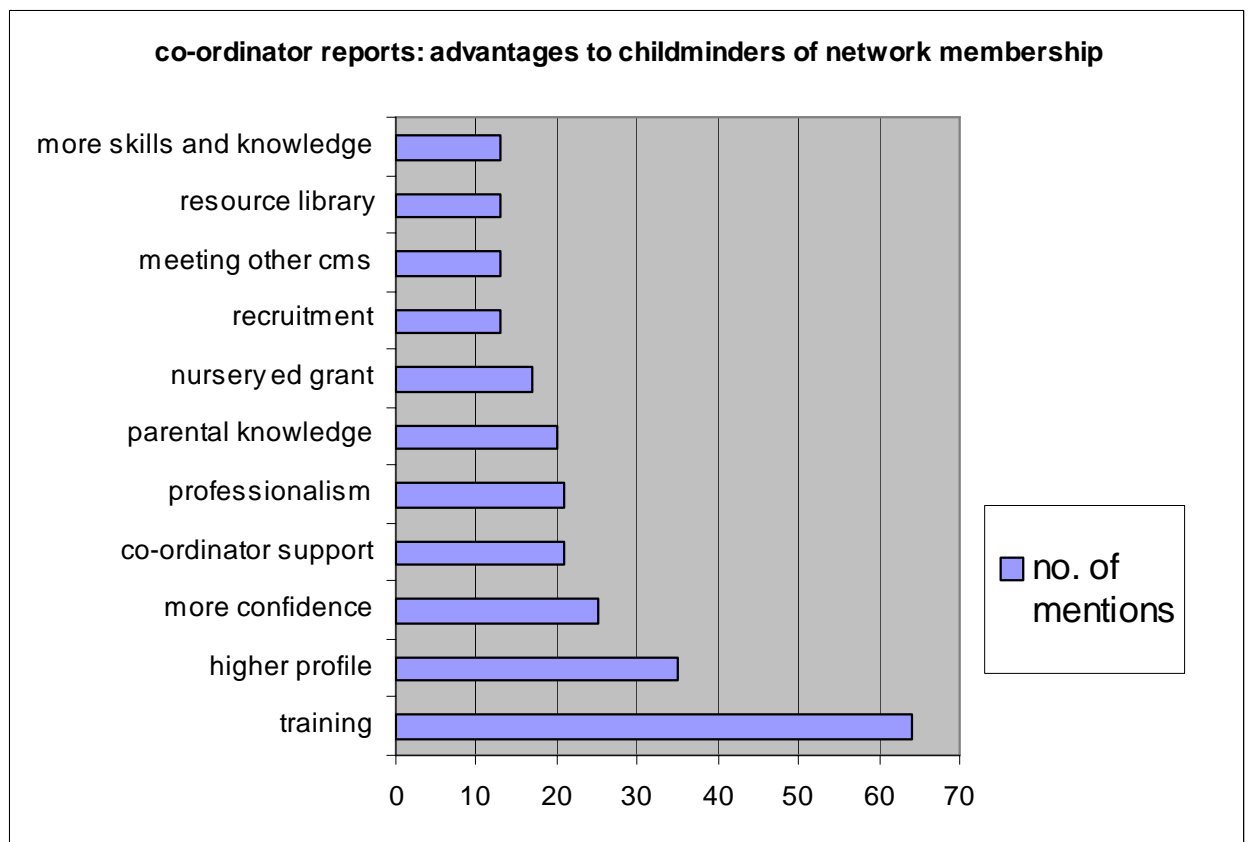
**Fig 5**

A discussion group exercise conducted with over 200 network co-ordinators at one of their national training events in January 2005 produced exactly the same order of priorities. These were similar to the elements identified in the co-ordinator reports but there were differences in emphasis. Figs 6 and 7 show which elements of network membership came out as the most

significant in the co-ordinator reports, both for quality in general and in terms of advantages for childminders of network membership.



**Fig 6**



**Fig 7**

Within each of the sections which follow, we talk about the differences between these two views and also between these groups and the local authority managers who took part in our discussions.

## **5a Training and qualifications**

*“The training teaches me how much I already know and how much I still have to learn”*

*(survey childminder)*

Training was easily the most frequently mentioned aspect of network activity. It was clear that the greater accessibility of training and qualifications was felt to be extremely important and to make a big difference to the quality of the service provided for children and families.

The existence of an accreditation training programme (for the delivery of funded nursery education) was the second most frequently mentioned quality aspect in the co-ordinators' reports and was top of the list of network activities which the co-ordinators felt benefited childminders. Training for community childminding and other “specialist training” was also mentioned by some co-ordinators together with the following, related aspects: having a planning system in place to meet individual training or qualification needs, having funding available to support training, production of a training directory, the chance to provide training to others, improved offers of training from colleges, the availability of distance learning and the chance for staff and childminders to develop specialist skills.

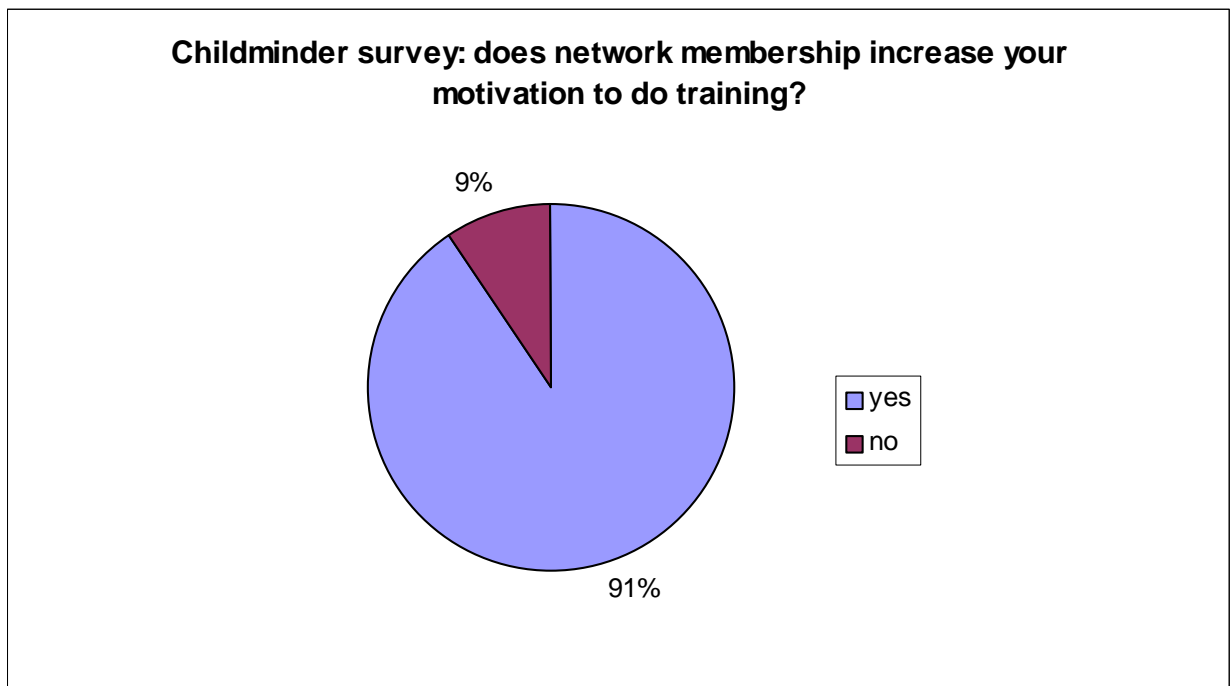
Although it was the chance to have specialist training to deliver funded nursery education or care for vulnerable children which featured most strongly in the co-ordinator reports, the childminders in the survey were more general in their appreciation of training opportunities. 76% said training was one of the most important aspects of the network frequently citing level 3 training and one day workshops on activities. Some also specifically mentioned the importance of subsidised or free training. When asked how, if at all, their

networks could be improved 15% mentioned that they would like more training or more funding for training.

91% said that network membership increased their motivation to do training and qualifications and some of the other 9% indicated that network membership had made no difference to this only because they had always been motivated to do training.

*“this is probably the biggest impact the network has made, I am very motivated to continue training”*

*(survey childminder)*

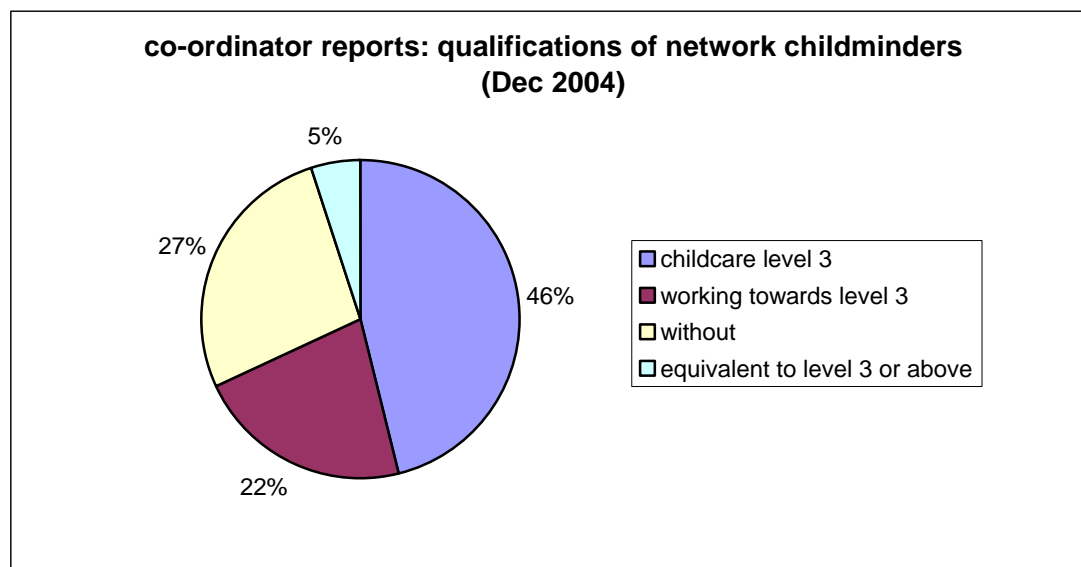


**Fig 6**

The requirement to be at least working towards a level 3 qualification is one of the most recognised features of CCF approved networks and we can see from the following statistics, gathered in the co-ordinator reports, that it has succeeded in changing the profile of childminding. Historically childminding has been the childcare occupation in which workers have the lowest level of qualifications, for instance only 16% had a level 3 qualification in the 2002/3 Childcare and Early Years Workforce Survey (quoted in DfES 2005).

However this situation has been changing rapidly over the past few years with

a dramatic growth in the number of childminders enrolled to do level 3 NVQ or the Certificate in Childminding Practice (also level 3).



**Fig 7**

The childminders in these networks showed a much higher level of qualifications than previous surveys of childminding have found (Mooney et al 2001). Nearly half 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.

The Government's 10 Year Strategy talks about the importance of building the qualifications of childminders and increasing the opportunities for more to obtain level 3 childcare qualifications. 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 .

The Childminder Network Census (DfES 2004) asked about the training which local authorities required of non-Children Come First networks in their areas and it is interesting to note that the requirements were at a relatively low level. Nearly all required first aid training, over three quarters required Introduction to Childminding Practice (the first level childminding qualification) and two

thirds required another locally approved training course. However, these are close to the minimum requirements under the current legislation and would not meet the aspirations articulated in the Ten Year Strategy, nor the levels being reached by the approved networks.

Training also featured prominently in the discussions with network co-ordinators, network members, local authority managers and NCMA staff. The NCMA staff group were not surprised that accreditation training featured so prominently because most networks provide it and it is the job of co-ordinators to do the initial assessment and to complete an extended form at 8 week monitoring visits. However, they pointed out that there are no extra hours for this and also no financial reward for the childminders. They also cited experience of the Qualified Teacher (QTS) support for those providing funded nursery education varying considerably from one area to another, for instance in one it was being provided by nursery nurse trained classroom assistants under the direction of a teacher rather than by a teacher herself.

The network focus groups also specifically mentioned training for accreditation:

*“it makes you think about why you are doing things, about progression and planning”*

*(childminder in network focus group)*

They emphasised the importance and usefulness of training and qualifications, not only for their careers and the quality of their practice but also for themselves as individuals:

*“you can be an adult and hear other perspectives”*

*(childminder in network focus group)*

In one group 4 days a year of training was expected and it was arranged for the childminders, this was seen as a definite bonus.

Where there were complaints about training it was always because people wanted more or for it to be more accessible. For instance, in one discussion group there had been changes in their training provision; it used to be local, run by their own co-ordinator and on a week night. The network then joined with others into a cluster and they were all expected to train together on a Saturday, sometimes in quite distant locations, so it was not as convenient for them.

In their discussion of factors which are traditionally associated with childminding it was lack of training and qualifications that was the aspect most frequently mentioned by the local authority managers. They identified networks as being successful in addressing this.

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, 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 the following factors which had impacted on their ability to take this training:

- Funding so that it was free or cheap
- Accessibility in terms of the days and hours on which it was offered
- Appropriateness i.e. having it run by people who understood childminding practice
- Planning: customising training packages for individual needs
- Peer support: providing training as part of a network means that childminders can take it as part of a supportive group within a culture of learning and change.

It was these active strategies which had the transformative effect; just making training courses available to childminders was not enough, they needed it to be accessible, affordable and required.

## 5b The co-ordinator

*“the most important part of the network is the support from the co-ordinator. In the transition from social services to Ofsted a lot of minders felt very isolated and unsupported. I would have given up without the network”.*

*(survey childminder)*

56% of survey respondents said that the co-ordinator’s support and monitoring was one of the most important aspects of the network and this was supported by the discussions with the two networks who couldn’t speak highly enough of their co-ordinators, 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 to them.

*“I feel that the co-ordinator visits give you a better idea of how you are doing than the Ofsted process, my co-ordinator has a good knowledge of my practice.... gives a truer picture”*

*(survey childminder)*

When asked how, if at all, their networks could be improved 10% of respondents said they would like more co-ordinator time and some specifically mentioned that part time co-ordinators didn’t have enough time to fulfil all their duties and ensure high standards.

The co-ordinators themselves, both in the NCMA staff group and the two networks emphasised the importance of their role and the fact that it was wide ranging, a personal relationship which involved supporting childminders on personal as well as childcare issues. However a number of people, both co-ordinators and childminders, stressed that this could be twinned with professionalism:

*“If someone calls I always go and I always arrive on time and with my paperwork in order. I try to make sure that I know all the children’s names and ages. I feel that they should be accorded that degree of*

*respect and that they will respond positively and professionally in return.”*

*(co-ordinator in network discussion)*

In the co-ordinator reports, the support from a dedicated worker was one of the 5 most frequently mentioned “advantages to childminders” of network membership and most of the other quality related elements mentioned in the reports also relied on the existence of a co-ordinator. For instance, improved links with other agencies, the production of training programmes, specific information on the network for parents, the maintenance of toy and equipment loan schemes and group meetings.

One of the quality related aspects mentioned most often in the co-ordinator reports concerned developing better relationships with other agencies, particularly the local authority planners. This is not a specific requirement of network operation although it is expected that co-ordinators will develop the role of networks in the community as well as supporting individual childminders. It has clearly become an important aspect of their work which relates to the status of childminding and its role in a planned system of childcare and so it is not surprising that it featured prominently in their reports. There was general agreement that it did contribute to raising quality because it increased the expectations of those outside bodies which, in turn, placed increased expectations on childminders. This, twinned with higher self-esteem, was felt to lead to improved performance. It was also believed that better links with outside organisations opened up more channels of training and support to the childminders.

This could have a negative side too because other organisations don't always understand childminding and can give inappropriate training and advice. In the staff discussion groups most co-ordinators had experienced dissatisfaction from childminders over non-NCMA training. However, one had good outside trainers and hadn't experienced this so it is clear that steps can, and should, be taken to ensure a full understanding of childminding by trainers and advisers

Although this development work is felt to be essential if networks are to flourish, it is very time-consuming and not always factored into co-ordinator job descriptions. It was generally felt that it placed a burden on a part time co-ordinator and that more hours were needed to do it effectively.

A related point was brought up in some of the staff discussions about the extra work involved in bidding for funds and developing new networks. Co-ordinators said they would like to have more information about how others do this and what works well. They feel there is very varied practice and there should be more consistency across the organisation as a whole, they would also like there to be more consultation with co-ordinators over new areas of work. The co-ordinator's role is split between management and childcare aspects and it is a complex and time-consuming job, especially if there are accredited childminders in the network. Planners need to take these extra dimensions such as marketing and fund raising into account when estimating the cost of networks.

Co-ordinators commented on the change in attitude towards childminding which they noticed following network development and on the fact that they felt childminding was being taken seriously and that they were being recognised as experts in childcare practice. The following are typical quotations:

*“The work that we have done to contribute to the progress of the EYDCP has been essential towards raising the profile of childminders as well as giving childminders a professional career structure and support...we now have representatives on all the EYDCP boards and working groups”*

*(from co-ordinator report)*

and

*“I continue to build links with other agencies and am working closely with special needs support services throughout the city. This has led to the placement of children with additional needs”*

*(from co-ordinator report)*

Occasionally a co-ordinator would comment on a specific initiative which illustrates the difference between networked childminding and individual childminding. The following, for instance, relates to the delivery of funded nursery education:

*“The Head of the early years service and the elected councillor with responsibility for education were looking at the different types of nursery education being provided across the city. As they had little knowledge of the childminding early education network I explained to them the process of accreditation and supported a visit to a childminder’s home. They were extremely impressed at the high level and quality of the education being provided. They commented on the value of low ratios and the flexibility of planning according to the weather and the needs of the child.”*

*(from co-ordinator report)*

However, it is the role of the co-ordinator in monitoring standards which is one of the most central aspects of approved networks. A previous study (Dawson, Berry and Gillard 2003) found some disquiet over the amount and frequency of monitoring by the co-ordinator and, indeed, the NCMA has recently announced that monitoring visits will go from 8 weekly to 10 weekly and be more ‘light touch’. There were very few childminders in either the survey or the discussion group who said that they were over-monitored and some specifically praised an aspect which they felt ensured and maintained higher standards and gave reassurance to parents:

*“Monitoring visits are very useful as they help me evaluate the work I do and, as a result, improve it.”*

*(survey childminder)*

A number of people in both the survey and the discussions felt that this was even more important now that Ofsted inspections have reduced to 3 yearly intervals and day care advisors within local authorities have been replaced by Ofsted inspectors who don't provide on-going support.

A couple of the co-ordinator reports mentioned that they were about to drop the frequency of visits because childminders felt over-monitored. In the discussion groups it was pointed out that this probably related to the support visits, although there are various aspects to the monitoring of standards which cannot always be clearly demarcated. Unannounced visits also caused some problems including the likelihood that people would be out, concerns over how to address bad practice (although it was agreed this was the point of unannounced visits) and the burden of extra paperwork. On these points the discussion groups felt strongly that more advice and support leading to more consistent practice was needed for co-ordinators across the system as a whole. This will be especially important if, as is expected, the emphasis is to shift more towards self-evaluation supported by external inspection.

A further important aspect of monitoring arose in discussions over the many different systems which childminders in networks have to relate to. It was felt that there was a lot of duplication of evidence for childminders if they are engaged in a number of development activities e.g. quality assurance schemes, inspection, NVQs etc. Most discussion groups had examples of unnecessary burdens being placed on childminders. For instance local colleges which refused to accept any evidence prepared for another purpose so that everything has to be done over again. The same was said to be true of the day care inspection process. Others had examples of the Certificate in Childminding Practice (CCP) not being accepted as a full level 3 qualification and of childminders finding it difficult to access funding for it because they weren't providing group care. Apparently NCMA staff are taking up these issues but they were felt to be examples of the way in which childminding practice was still not understood or esteemed in the same way as other early years services. Needless to say, for childminders in networks, committed to

quality and self improvement, such unfortunate duplication of requirements could be unnecessarily off-putting.

A couple of survey respondents complained at length about their current situations in which, in two separate networks, their co-ordinators had been moved on to other jobs or other areas by the local authority and I quote at length from one of these because it illustrates exactly how important home-based providers feel this role to be.

*“Earlier this year our network co-ordinator was moved by the early years team to a new area. We were not asked about this and she was not given much option. Since then I feel that we do not get the support we once had, a lot of the other network childminders and myself feel let down. We have a new co-ordinator but she also looks after pre-schools, nurseries, out of school clubs and children’s centres as well as childminders. The network has fragmented into little cliques. We just feel that now the early years team have their network set up they can forget about us. We all trusted and respected our co-ordinator and it’s going to take a long time to build that trust and respect back up...I don’t feel they realised (because they never asked) how well respected and trusted our old co-ordinator was”*

(survey childminder)

For many different reasons the role of the dedicated co-ordinator was seen as central to the quality improvements being made by networks. It was only in the discussions with local authority managers that there were any queries over their value and these centred around the cost of the service and concerns that it might isolate childminders from the development of a more integrated children’s workforce. For instance, one manager explained that the example quoted above could equally be seen as good practice because the new co-ordinator was including the childminders in an area-wide system alongside other forms of provision. As we move towards more integrated provision and as childminders come to be closely linked to children’s centres, as is envisaged by the 10 Year Strategy, it will be vital to find a way to

reconcile these differing views and meet the training and quality assurance needs of specific types of provision within an integrated whole.

### **5c Meeting other childminders**

*“the best thing about the network is the human contact, I am getting better at sharing and, therefore, at relating to parents”*

*(survey childminder)*

48% 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. Toy and equipment loan schemes are also often facilitated at such meetings and so it is hard to disentangle the two. The childminders in the survey, however, clearly mentioned both as being separately important to them.

Meeting with other childminders came first in the co-ordinator’s list of effective quality elements (mentioned in 45 out of 76 reports) and the positive effect of networks on isolation featured prominently for the local authority managers and the NCMA staff. Reports also mentioned other aspects relating to this:

- Frequent drop-in facilities
- Requirement to attend a certain number of events
- Transport and crèches allowing for better involvement in activities
- Resources swap shop or similar
- Wider contacts for children

On one level, the popularity and transformative effect of such meetings is no surprise. It has been an accepted principle of childminding development over the last thirty years that, for home-based workers, groups in which you can get together and talk to your peers, supported by expert workers and additional resources, will improve your practice and make the occupation more attractive and rewarding. Given that this has been such a universal development tool, we have to question why the higher level of network activity is still necessary. What is different about network support meetings? This was

explored in more depth in the discussions with network members and NCMA staff and it emerged that they had experienced some difference in the quality and type of discussion at network meetings. Childminders who had attended, or still did attend, local drop-ins which weren't connected to networks felt that discussions focused on more mundane issues such as group organisation, social events etc. while the network discussions were more about children's learning and specific issues of practice.

*“they are more focused and professional with accepted standards to work to, it's less like friends getting together for a chat”*

*(network discussion group)*

Specific differences identified in the discussions were:

- There is an expectation that you will go (recognised as part of the job)
- More in-depth discussions
- The group is composed of people working at a higher level.
- Better quality of group activities for children and as models for childminders
- All engaged in other training activities as well
- All engaged in a common purpose (the network)
- Better quality of support staff with specific childminding remits
- There's likely to be more funding for resources

Needless to say, group meetings also linked to the work of the co-ordinators as, in most cases, co-ordinators facilitate and attend meetings and use them as a further way of supporting childminders and monitoring their practice.

In the past groups have also been seen as good for the children as they provide an opportunity to play and learn in larger groups and use wider indoor and outdoor spaces than are available in the usual home setting. This was not mentioned as much as would be expected by any of the study respondents and “wider contacts for children” appeared in only two of the co-ordinator reports. It is possible that this has diminished in importance as the quality of

childminding has improved, however, what was mentioned was the usefulness of groups in allowing children to become familiar with other childminders and their children. This facilitates a valuable aspect of networks: substitute childminding when the primary childminder is ill, on holiday, training or away for other reasons. It was felt that parents as well as children were reassured that known and trusted substitutes were available who would be working to the same standards and principles as their own childminder.

A few childminders complained that there wasn't as much commitment to the network as they would have liked and said that more people should be willing to attend meetings as they are such a central aspect of quality assurance. They felt that most childminders want the support but not all want to come out to meetings or training so some networks put requirements on this e.g. to come to 75% of events.

#### **5d Toy and equipment loans**

*“The network toy library is great as I can hire things I wouldn't otherwise be able to afford, including multi-cultural resources and wooden toys”*

*(survey childminder)*

39% in the survey said that toy libraries and/or equipment loan schemes (especially for more expensive or large items) was one of the most important services provided by the network. But only 10 mentioned this feature as something which helped them to become better at their work, preferring to concentrate on features such as training, co-ordinator monitoring and sharing ideas with others.

This was the fourth most frequently mentioned aspect of quality in the co-ordinator reports with about 30 of the 76 reports mentioning resource banks as a quality related feature of networks.

It was less likely to feature in the discussions of the local authority managers or NCMA staff and the latter commented that it was surprising that it didn't feature even more strongly in the co-ordinator reports, given how basic it has become to childminder support both in and outside of networks. They mentioned it specifically as a category which reports might be asked to feature consistently and felt that "access to higher levels of support with equipment and toys" could be one area which would indicate improved levels of quality for networked childminders.

Few childminders or co-ordinators talked about specific aspects of the resources available for loan but, when they did, they talked about resources to support equalities or anti-discriminatory practice and large or expensive items. As anti-discriminatory practice is an expected feature of networked childminders it is interesting that it featured so little in the study. In the co-ordinator reports, for instance, only 5 reports mentioned the availability of resources related to equality or inclusion. This could be because childminders are now fully engaged in it and use their own resources or it could be for precisely the opposite reason. This would be an area which would reward further study.

Access to enhanced resources is clearly an element of network organisation which is highly prized by the childminders themselves but perhaps seen as less noteworthy by others. As it has been a feature of organised childminding for many years, possibly we have come to take it too much for granted and need to do more work on what resources are made available, how they are used and what that can tell us about the support which is being provided for children's learning.

## **5e Status**

*"we are promoted as professionals and our achievements are celebrated and rewarded."*

*"I have gained more confidence and self-esteem, and feel valued for the service I provide."*

*(survey childminders)*

30% 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. Confidence was mentioned frequently and this was clearly related to the other issues and was contrasted with the situation before their network membership. This was also an aspect which came across forcefully in the discussions with the two networks. They talked again and again about the change in their attitude to themselves and to the work they do and stressed that this self-esteem led to them also getting better at their work and learning more which, in turn, led to them feeling even more confident and capable. A cycle of improvement for everyone involved.

*“I know I work completely differently now than I did last year, more balanced across all six areas of learning”*

*(childminder in network discussion)*

*“the co-ordinator builds up self esteem, we are motivated to work harder and become accredited”*

*(survey childminder)*

This was echoed in the co-ordinator 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. Fifth in this list was the issue of growing professionalism which is doubtless linked to the issues of status, confidence and self esteem. Professionalism also 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:

:

*“the commitment and enthusiasm from all the professionals really does rub off on you”*

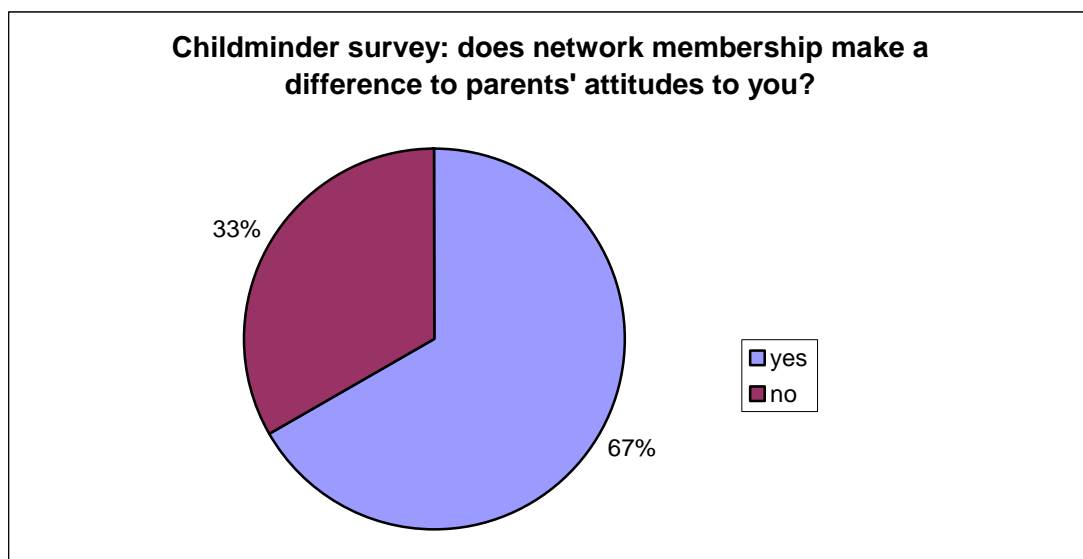
*(survey childminder)*

A further aspect of professional status was mentioned by a co-ordinator in one of the network discussions who felt strongly that network membership implied a commitment to a continual process of learning, up-dating and improving

*“The difference which a network makes is that they are not allowed to rest on their laurels, I push them continually, it keeps them up to date and helps them to think about their futures.”*

*(co-ordinator in network discussion group)*

Survey childminders also said that network membership had made a difference to the attitude of parents to them as the chart below shows. Two thirds thought that parents appreciated the higher quality and were now more understanding about the work. However, some said that this only happened once the parents were aware of the network and its features and that most weren't or showed no interest.



**Fig 8**

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.

*“parents don't seem to understand or be interested, I would really like to develop this area myself”*

*(survey childminder)*

*“it does need more marketing, parents aren’t always choosy about standards, they need the right location and flexibility first.”*

*(childminder in network discussion group)*

On balance, both childminders and network staff felt 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 which people felt arise both from the continued existence of bad practice and also from a lack of understanding about home-based provision.

*“childminding is still seen as ‘the poor man’s childcare’, it’s not recognised as an educational service, some people still think children are left in front of the TV all day.*

*(co-ordinator in NCMA staff discussion group)*

*“a lot still needs to be done to lift the years of stigma the name childminding has gained through some poor quality providers”*

*(survey childminder)*

Many childminders agreed with the last quotation, that individual networks, the NCMA and the government should do more to promote networks and childminding in general. One of the network discussions included an examination of this issue and it was generally agreed that, although most parents start off with a low level of understanding, they are often impressed if they take the time to find out about networks. This would strengthen the argument for the agencies to work harder at this type of promotion:

*“Parents have little knowledge of networks although it does help in the initial interview because parents are often very impressed when they find out what is available.”*

*(childminder in network discussion)*

This cluster of issues was mentioned much less frequently by the local authority managers who are, understandably, further removed from the reality of working as a childminder. This study would indicate, however, that it is a very important aspect to consider when planning the delivery of services across a local authority area as a whole and when considering how to link childminders into the work of children's centres. These childminders had been growing their own, very specific, practice by emphasising professionalism, confidence and self esteem and it would be unfortunate if this was disregarded when the nature of service delivery changes. It will be challenging to find a role for organised childminding which is equal to rather than an auxiliary to group provision.

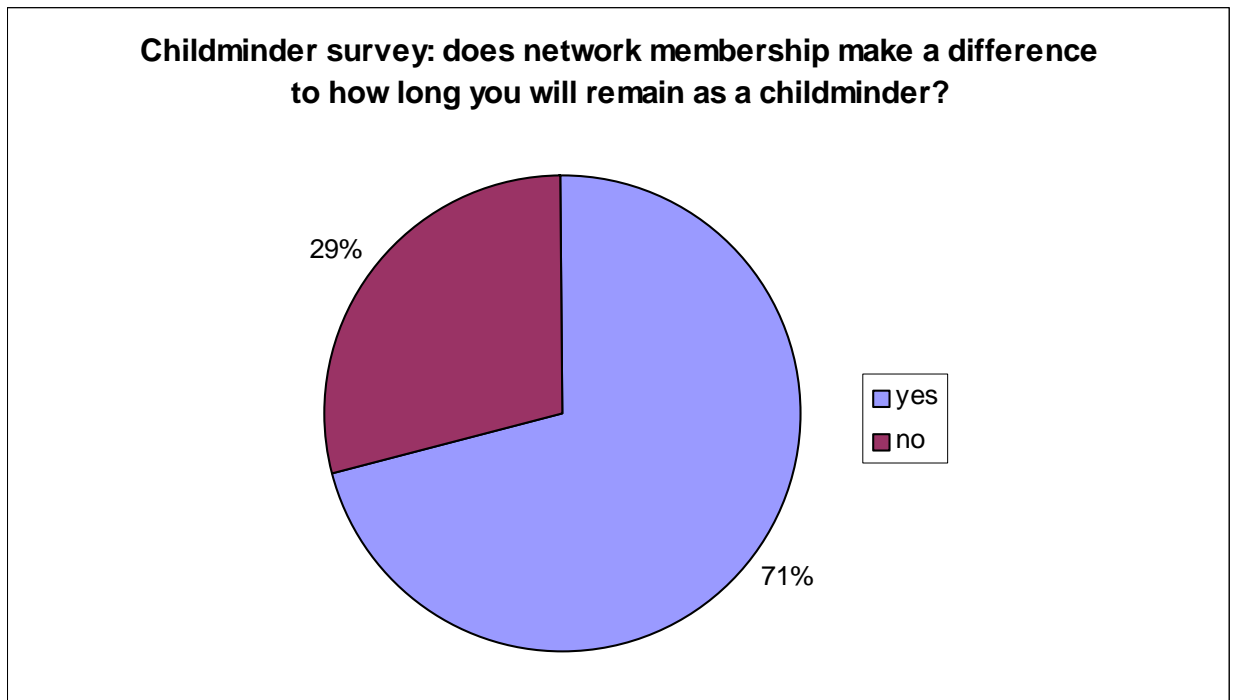
These issues are all inextricably tied to the subject of the final section: improvements in quality.

## **5f Recruitment and retention**

*"It has definitely made the job more interesting so I am less likely to give up"*

*(survey childminder)*

It is often argued that networks help in recruitment and retention of childminders and this survey certainly seems to bear out the latter. 71% 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 aspect particularly 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 and that is what makes the standard higher: taking people who want to do the job well and then fostering that attitude, providing lots of opportunities and making sure standards stay high. Most people began childminding when their own children were young and believed that networks have offered a career progression, for instance, some have expanded their business or taken on assistants.



**Fig 9**

Although it is important, and quite a challenge, to keep good childminders in a job which has low pay and no obvious career progression, it is also vital to see childminding as part of the larger children’s workforce and to make it possible for childminders to move sideways into other areas of the profession if they wish rather than feeling that they have to leave early years work altogether. One childminder stated this very clearly on her survey form:

*“I have stayed in childminding longer than I thought I would because of (the network) and intend to continue for another couple of years, but after that I may use the skills I have acquired and apply them to another position in the early years field.”*

*(survey childminder)*

One respondent also mentioned the usefulness of the network approach for new childminders:

*“I feel network membership will be particularly valuable for new childminders who will not feel that the profession is so solitary and will easily be able to access support, motivation, training and maintain quality standards.”*

*(survey childminder)*

This was brought up in the network discussions a number of times; although networks target experienced and qualified childminders in order to offer higher than average standards, new entrants also have a lot to gain from the type of services on offer. This is particularly true, as pointed out above, over support for a positive attitude towards high standards of care and education. As one of the local authority managers' groups pointed out, how can you tackle low standards if you only target networks onto the best 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 2005 p5). There could be scope for linking initiatives like this with networks so that there is a clear and supported progression within an area from prospective childminder through to network member and beyond.

The co-ordinator reports also featured recruitment and retention as advantages for childminders with 17% of the reports mentioning recruitment as an advantage of network membership and the same number also saying that they enabled childminders to widen the range of services they could offer which also made them more sustainable. Some reports also mentioned retention specifically and the fact that networks helped childminders to fill their places and therefore stay in business, however these mentions were far fewer.

Although retention must be an important factor for families, it was hardly mentioned in the co-ordinator reports as an advantage for families, with only one report in each case mentioning continuity and a "committed workforce".

Increased pay is a major determinant of retention and, as we will see later, networks had not made a difference to this. However, if network developments are addressing those issues which childminders still find frustrating such as funding for training, the attitude of parents and improved

publicity then they should be able to improve retention, even if pay doesn't increase. This will be an important element to consider in future planning.

Although recruitment also was not mentioned very often in co-ordinator reports, when groups were specifically asked to focus on this they all said that it was the overall rise in status and promotion of the profession which would improve recruitment and, most importantly, recruitment of people who were able and willing to provide higher standards. The "support childminder" report mentioned above also showed some evidence of this. The pathfinders had a broader remit to try to improve recruitment into childminding locally and they felt that having local stakeholder groups which discussed and disseminated information on childminding had been particularly useful for this (Sure Start 2005 p4).

## **5g Improvements in quality**

*"working to the kitemark enhances my skills while regular evaluation, up-dating and constant monitoring has maintained standards above average"*

*(survey childminder)*

A linked part of this study asked respondents, in both the survey and discussion groups, to think about the nature of quality in home-based provision, what makes a good childminder and what differentiates childminding practice from practice in group settings? Although that discussion will not form part of this report, it served as a jumping off point for respondents to think about the improvements in practice which networks could facilitate. The structural elements which have formed the subjects of the previous sections are often used as proxies for improved quality, relying, as we have done in this study, on the fact that previous researchers have found them to be indicators of higher standards of care and education for children. All the networks in this study were approved under 'Children Come First' a quality assurance scheme for networked childminders which has been endorsed by the government's quality assurance programme Investors in

Children and which, therefore, has set standards and a monitoring and support system for ensuring that they are met. Also, network membership is the only route through which childminders can become accredited to provide funded nursery education and this was a theme which appeared frequently in the reports, survey and discussions. In this section we look at what the respondents told us about improvements in quality and how these are related to the features of approved networks.

The co-ordinator reports said relatively little about “quality” for children in general, relying much more on the structural elements mentioned above. In their list of advantages to childminders the chance to reach higher standards and to get a “good” assessment from Ofsted were mentioned in only 2 and 1 reports respectively out of the 76 which we analysed. However “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 think in what ways network membership had enabled them to be a “better childminder” and this is where the consideration of quality in home-based settings came together with how they felt that they, themselves, practised. Here, as elsewhere, a large number of the statements related to training and qualifications (47%) or confidence and increased self esteem (47%) as being things which turned you into a better childminder but their statements amplified this in a number of ways as the following quotations illustrate:

*“I’m more aware of children’s progress, personal and educational, more confident in what I do, I believe in myself more.”*

*“more confident and assertive now and can challenge. I have raised my standards especially on education, better at observation etc.”*

*“accreditation training has improved my knowledge of curriculum planning, Early Learning Goals, implementation of curriculum plans and observation.”*

*“more confidence, part of a team and not isolated any more, I get ideas from peers, go out a lot more with children and everyone’s happier!”*

*(survey childminders)*

Because the study was looking at features of network organisation few people gave examples of actual changes in practice in relation to children, the responses concentrated much more on the “proxies” than on reflection about what is actually happening to childminders as professional providers. However it is clear from some of the thoughtful responses that this process is possible and can be very revealing about how to support good practice, for instance:

*“I now have long term plans for learning and keep more detailed reports and contracts”*

*“I’m able to give parents more feedback on their children.”*

*“I am getting better at planning and thinking about how to match activities to individual children.”*

*“It has helped me to use the home environment better.”*

*“the questions asked when I went through the network process helped me realise what areas I needed to develop, on-going assessment helps to continue this”*

*(all from survey childminders)*

As can be seen from the above quotes, these discussions often revolved around the process of accreditation for the provision of nursery education. Although not all the childminders had taken up this option, those that had felt their knowledge and understanding of how children learn and of how to support that learning had been improved.

*“..being able to offer funded nursery education is not only important to my on-going business, but crucial to parents who want to use the funding with a childminder.”*

*(survey childminder)*

In one network the childminders had found the accreditation process for nursery education very interesting. They already worked to a structured play programme so maybe didn't have to move as far as some childminders, but it had raised awareness of some aspects of the Early Learning Goals which they might not have been so sure about. They said that although there is more paperwork they are pleased to be able to offer parents a real alternative to group provision. They discussed the possibility 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, accredited childminders could then do extra work on the specifics of curriculum planning and reporting for the Foundation Stage.

Childminders in the discussion groups had a number of examples of ways in which home-based nursery education had benefited both parents and children. Most notably these related to being able to meet the specific needs of individual children, providing choice for parents and providing continuity with day care so that children don't have to be moved. There was also a discussion, interesting in the light of the government's aim to provide integrated services, about how childminders 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 if 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. There was general agreement, however, that children needed a classroom experience for their last term before school otherwise they are at a disadvantage because they go into an unfamiliar environment. But this was very much about preparing children for a new experience rather than a criticism of the education offered by the childminders.

*“Our network has had a number of teachers come and ask specifically if their children can access nursery education with us rather than in a school setting. I think they realise the importance of individual attention”*

*(childminder in network discussion)*

The more in-depth discussions which were possible with NCMA staff and with our two study networks also provided valuable insights into quality issues in general. One network argued strongly that standards had been raised because, twinned with the initial concerns over Ofsted inspections, a number of the poorer quality childminders had given up. It was felt that all the network childminders are good anyway so the added value comes from the support, information and training that are available. They also felt that their area benefited from having a very long-standing network with high standards. The opportunity to join the network is offered to anyone doing the Introduction to Childminding Practice course so some people could be new childminders. However, they agreed that the most important factor was to have the right attitude and disposition, if you have that then you can learn quickly. Networks take people who want to do the job well and then foster that attitude, providing plenty of opportunities and making sure standards stay high. Although they might have been doing the activities before they now felt much more focused, spending the time more usefully, providing a mix of child-led and adult-led activities and being clear on their outcomes. This was not just for the Foundation Stage, they felt it spills over into everything.

In the NCMA staff group there was a discussion of the nature of the Children Come First quality assurance scheme, is it accreditation as in reaching a standard or a process of improvement? Ideally both, they felt, but the process is the most important. NCMA has promoted networks as an assurance of quality for parents but actually they are taking people who might be new to childminding or might be of the same standard as non-network childminders. Even so, the group agreed that the value of networks lies in the fact that they provide an infrastructure or a springboard for improved practice: it's about an attitude towards development, a willingness to engage in a process and

develop your own potential. Networks then provide a way of supporting improvement including co-ordinator support, training, peer support etc. Parents can rely on the fact that Childminders have to be assessed to get onto a network, so their standards will be higher than the National Day Care Standards and, even if these are relatively new childminders, with this infrastructure it doesn't take long for them to reach network standards if they are committed and motivated.

They also discussed the difficulty of refusing or dropping people from a network. This had happened to people in the group and they confirmed that it was very difficult, but if people were clearly not going to be part of this ethos then eventually they would be asked to think about whether they should be there. A couple of people in the group who had gone through this process agreed that co-ordinators need a lot of support at this time. Ideally it is best if childminders self-select out when requirements are made clear to them and one co-ordinator confirmed that people do usually self-select out, she hasn't had to refuse or cancel anyone from the network. It is usually enough to make people aware, tactfully and constructively, of anything which needs to be improved.

The discussion of these quality-related aspects of the co-ordinator's role also brought up the issue of equality of standards between NCMA managed networks and local authority in-house networks. The former were felt to provide more specialist expertise and support which is more up to date. They set up what was described as "an effective chain of support behind the co-ordinator."

The staff group discussion also talked about the fact that some of the most obvious quality related issues were hardly mentioned in the reports and that there was little evidence about changes in practice with children.

It was agreed that this was probably because some activities are so basic to networks that co-ordinators might not think to mention them unless there had been a major development or unless, in the 1<sup>st</sup> report, they had been highlighted as an area needing improvement. This led to them recommending

a more standard reporting format which would ensure coverage of issues relating to improved quality.

Finally in this section it is important to acknowledge the concern of a few childminders over what they felt to be an elitist attitude about networks. One network childminder was leaving her network because of this attitude and others pointed out that quality childminding was not the prerogative of networks:

*“I have a friend who isn’t in the network but is still very good. She doesn’t want to do all the paperwork but provides a very high quality service. It makes me think that there should be some way of measuring quality which doesn’t rely on physical things like paperwork but more on observations of quality”*

*(childminder in network discussion group)*

*“I feel that we shouldn’t exclude non-network childminders from training events etc as we can all benefit and some people don’t want to join a network”*

*(survey childminder)*

In fact some co-ordinator reports mentioned, as a quality related aspect of their work, that the network had been able to improve services for all childminders in their area and that this was a spin-off benefit of networks. Again, this was one aspect which it was felt should feature consistently in co-ordinator reports in order to have some measure of the external effects of network development.

However, there were just as many instances of childminders wanting to join networks and not being able to:

*“we need more networks, it’s a wonderful service and it’s free! but we have a waiting list of minders to join.”*

*(survey childminder)*

The concern over what has been called “two tier” childminding is another thing which local authority planners will have to take seriously as new patterns of services are developed. In their discussions, the local authority managers in this study showed some concern over the issue with one group feeling that networks might not be the best way to tackle low standards if only the higher quality childminders were recruited. In a climate of funding constraints it could be tempting to see more thinly spread support for all childminders as a more effective strategy than intense support for a few. Ideally, this should not be the choice but it will be important for network co-ordinators and their managers to be in a position to report effectively on the higher quality outcomes being achieved by the specific inputs within the networks. For instance, the following quotation from one of the discussion groups sums up the good network practice which this study’s respondents expressed many times, but it would need to be supported by evidence of actual practice with children and families.

*“Support from the coordinator in an individual way, getting to know each childminder and their situation; setting an example and providing training and development opportunities.”*

*(childminder in discussion group)*

## 6 The findings of the study: What has not changed?

Overwhelmingly, respondents to this study, in written or verbal form, said that networks had changed practice for the better. Not just the practice of individual childminders but also the attitudes and knowledge of the people childminders deal with such as local authority planners and managers, other practitioners and parents. However, there were a few ways in which things had not changed.

Status and parental attitudes were an ambiguous area. Although survey results indicated that childminders felt these had improved, as is explained above, many felt strongly that parents were not interested in quality improvements and didn't understand about networks. For this reason forceful arguments were made for a greater emphasis to be put on the promotion of childminding and of networked childminding particularly and that this shouldn't be left to individual childminders or networks where it might sound like special pleading. National agencies and the government, it was argued, 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.

*"I wish that parents understood networks better and gave us more appreciation for the good job we do."*

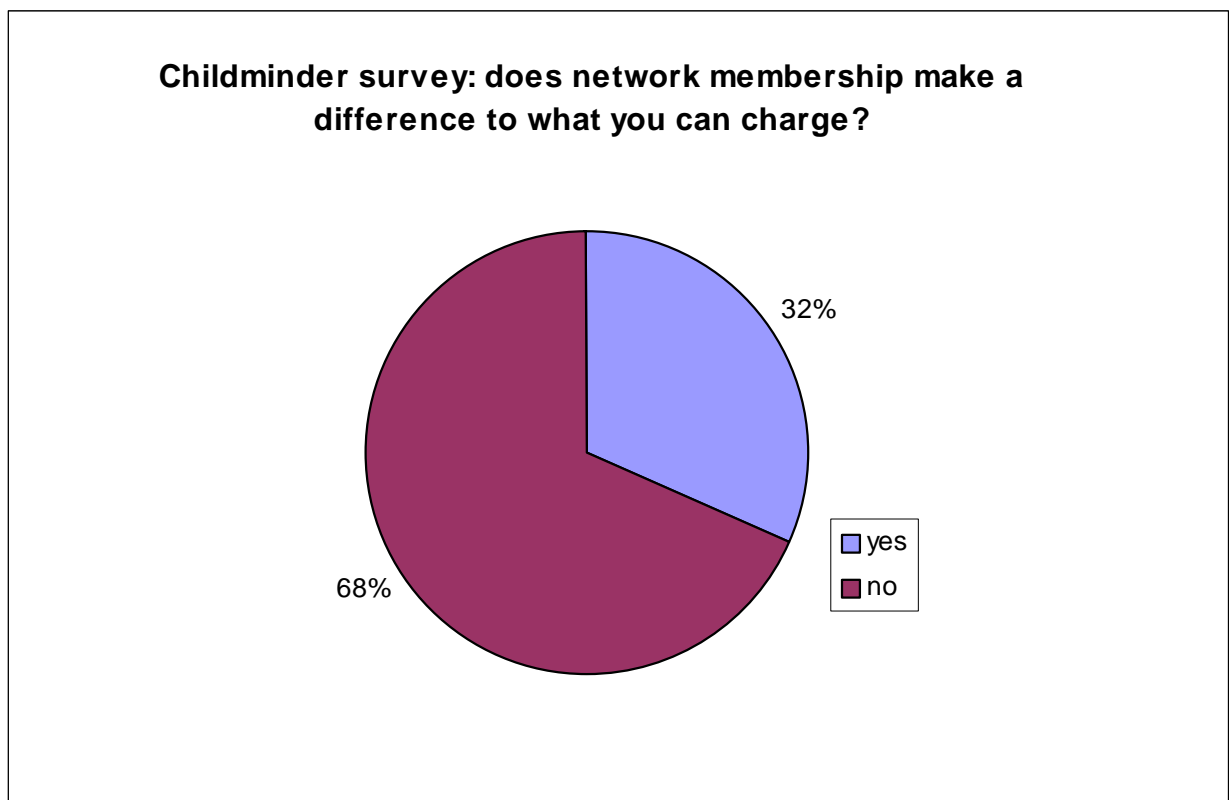
*(survey childminder)*

Greater involvement of parents in the organisation and evaluation of networks could also have an effect on this and this is discussed in section 6, Reporting on Networks

The two areas which stood out most as being unchanged by networks were pay and the profile of the childminding workforce.

## 6a Pay

A majority of the survey respondents (68%) 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 and others that, although they didn't charge more, they now felt much more justified in their prices. Nevertheless, one third is quite a large number to have been affected positively in this way and they, again, often mentioned that greater confidence and self-esteem had allowed them to increase their rates and to feel justified in doing so.



**Fig 10**

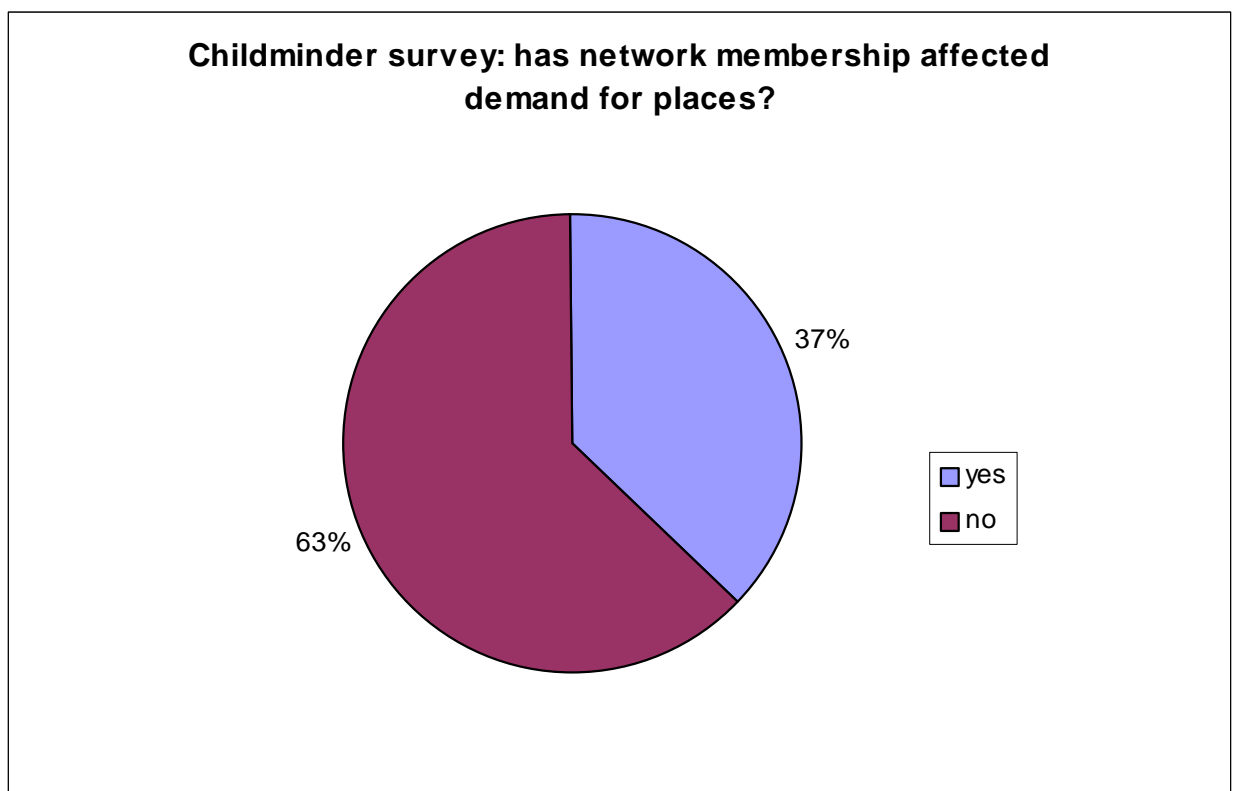
Remuneration is not just about the unit price charged. The ability to fill all your places is also an important aspect and the survey asked childminders if network membership had made a difference to the number of requests they received and their ability to quickly fill vacancies. Again, a clear majority said it had made no difference but many stressed that this was because they had

never had any difficulty in filling places anyway. There were a few interesting comments on this issue, for instance the role of Children's Information Services who, it was felt, didn't always know and understand the significance of networks and so didn't explain this to parents. Others felt that, although networks might not be understood by parents making an initial enquiry, they could have a positive effect later:

*"..it does help turn an initial enquiry into a placement"*

*"by being accredited I retain children for longer, so don't need so many places filled"*

*(survey childminders)*



**Fig 11**

These responses probably reflect the fact that, as we would expect, it is the more experienced and higher quality childminders who are being recruited into networks. However, the fact remains that, on two important issues, network organisation had not been able to make improvements to the reality

of childminding as an occupation. Childminders seemed resigned to this and the complaint below was one of the only negative responses, people seemed far more concerned by their lack of status and appreciation than the lack of income.

*“I feel we should earn more, the network gets funding because of the good job we do, but we don't really benefit.”*

*(survey childminder)*

## **6b workforce profile**

As was shown by the figures gathered from the co-ordinator reports (see charts in Section 4) networks have made no difference to the traditional profile of the childminding workforce or, indeed, the early years workforce as a whole. 77% were over 30 years of age, 98% were female and 97% were white. Therefore, in respect of workforce composition, networks do not seem to have been able to change the traditional profile. As most are recruiting from an existing pool of registered childminders, this is not surprising. If, as we have assumed, networks draw on more experienced childminders, these will come from the existing pool and are even more likely to be in an older age group. This could change with time if initial childminder recruitment also changes.

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.

*It is often assumed that networks can intervene directly in the composition of a childminding pool, so consideration needs to be given either to the expectations of networks or to the ways in which they are currently operating.*

## 7 Reporting on networks

One of the aims of this study was to provide information for NCMA's review of the organisation of approved networks and to look at improving the information which co-ordinators provide in their reports.

The reports were analysed to look for information on the effect of networks on quality improvements. This was instructive for the process of review in that it was very difficult to identify this type of information within the open-ended report format being used. Consistent information categories were used in part of the reports in order to obtain statistics on network members and it is felt that it would be helpful to have the same consistency over the qualitative information so that comparisons could be made across networks, geographical areas and time. This point was made also by the discussion groups who felt that, if consistent information is needed about the effectiveness of networks and things which could be done to improve them, then basic elements and activities should be included on a standard report form so that something has to be said about them e.g. "what developments have taken place in the toy library/resource collection this year?"

The discussion groups in the study were specifically asked to suggest what indicators of change you would expect to find in co-ordinator reports. The following list is compiled from all the responses (not in order of popularity) and is given in full here to support the NCMA review of the scheme:

- Filled vacancies or no vacancies.
- A measure of the level of phone contact with the co-ordinator (would expect this to be higher than if it was someone they didn't know)
- Higher levels of qualifications and training.
- Most becoming accredited for nursery education funding (or at least having seriously considered this).
- Higher level of support and advice from other professionals.
- Access to higher levels of support with equipment and toys.
- A positive effect on parents' attitudes.

- Measures of business sustainability.
- Effect on children's information services, improvements in the information given to parents about networks
- Waiting lists of childminders to join the network.
- Childminders' own evaluations and parents' evaluations, what differences do they think the network makes?
- The local authority putting more money into it.
- Childminders having a range of policies and strategies and the extent to which they are effective
- The level of quality, what standard is expected and achieved (QA measures could be used)
- Some measure of the growth in confidence and self esteem and how this affects their abilities
- Measures of children's developmental outcomes e.g. from childminders' record keeping, which the co-ordinator has access to or observations (possibly a longitudinal study).
- Changes in Ofsted inspection outcomes
- what changes have been put in place as a result of training and CPD
- What other QA schemes are being done by childminders in the area
- Sharing of good practice by childminders in the network
- How well the network is promoted
- How the network links into the work of the children's centres and schools
- Parents' feedback on quality of care and outcomes for children
- Greater professional relationship of childminder with parents
- Buddy or visiting systems between childminders
- Sharing best practice with other networks
- School readiness
- Evidence of educational strategies e.g. planning and observation
- Retention rates of children
- A broader perspective on the part of the childminder e.g. involvement in inter-agency working

- More specialisms: special needs, funded nursery education, vulnerable families etc
- Stability and vacancy levels in the network
- Degree to which the network can reflect local needs and diversity of local population

They also agreed that more guidance was needed on what should go in the reports. Longer ones which could consider changes in the quality of childminding practice would be acceptable if there was a recognition that they are “a crucial element of measuring performance”. Such reports could also be used in other reporting systems e.g. to the local authority when this is required. They also felt that they would be happier to do more detailed reports if they could get a summary of reports for the whole country and over time. It would be very helpful to know what was happening in other networks and how things were developing in the long term. This could be done if there was a standard format. At the moment they feel they don't get very much feedback even though they know that they are part of a very significant, nationwide movement. One group member reported that her assessor had recently asked for more quality information in her monitoring reports, more evaluative judgements rather than just descriptions of network activity. The group agreed that the descriptions were vital as evidence but that there should be evaluation also, however it was emphasised that it wouldn't necessarily help if just one manager asked for this and there was no way of standardising this across the organisation.

Local authority managers also considered the effectiveness of current reports. It was stressed that the quality of the report will depend on the expertise and understanding of the co-ordinator and a more reflective style was suggested, for instance that used by Peterborough which incorporates KEEP (Key Elements of Effective Practice). They were keen for reports to feed into local and national planning but queried how non-NCMA networks will be reported on and then linked into such planning.

It was also noted that parental feedback had not featured much in current reports. The group felt that this is not specifically requested of network coordinators and that it is a big gap. Parent newsletters could be a vehicle for this, although those in the focus group who had them said they didn't produce much feedback. Various suggestions were made for involving parents more: an annual event, a form sent via childminders, a specific part of the contract renewal process each year etc. None of these were felt to be particularly effective and, given the strength of feeling from respondents about their continued lack of status, this is one area which would repay greater examination and some innovative strategies.

The ability to provide specific information for parents was seen by the coordinators as a definite advantage of networks, with 32% of the reports mentioning this as an advantage for families and yet this feature of networks was perhaps not being exploited as fully as it could have been in order to involve parents in a debate on quality or to get feedback from parents on their usage of services.

It was also felt that childminders and close stakeholders such as local authority managers should evaluate aspects of network activity, again in a consistent format, and this should be reflected in the co-ordinator reports. There were no mentions of strategies by which children's views could be considered but this is another area which is being developed via a number of national and local projects and which NCMA could consider in its review.

## 8 Issues and recommendations

This section pulls together the main issues which emerged from the study and also makes recommendations for future action based on the findings. A number of specific recommendations have been made to NCMA on the organisation and administration of the approved networks and these have not been included here unless they relate to the overall effectiveness of the network model.

1. The workload of part time co-ordinators 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 co-ordinators 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 co-ordinator is key to high quality provision.*
2. For many different reasons the role of the dedicated co-ordinator 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 co-ordinator"*
3. 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 which are not based on approved networks.*

4. 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 with other stakeholders and the general public.*
5. 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.*
6. 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.*
7. There were fears expressed that the aspects of network organisation which make a difference cost money, particularly the dedicated co-ordinator, 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 co-ordinators 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.*
8. 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.*

9. 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 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.*
  
10. As anti-discriminatory practice is an expected feature of networked childminders it is interesting that it featured so little in the study. This could be because childminders are now fully engaged in it or because it is still given very little consideration. *It is recommended that this is an area which would reward further and specific study in the future.*
  
11. 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.*
  
12. 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.*
  
13. There was concern over the duplication of evidence requirements for both childminders and co-ordinators. *It is recommended that the Sure Start Unit work with other stakeholders to consider mechanisms whereby such duplication can be minimised and systems aligned.*

14. 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.*
15. 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 co-ordinators 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.*

## 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 (iC) endorsement.

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## **Annex A**

### **Methods used in the study**

This project had the following features:

- It made use of existing qualitative data which had not previously been analysed (the co-ordinator reports) rather than embarking on new data collection exercises.
- A literature review: we needed to frame the study with what is already known about quality in the specific context of childminding and in relation to organised networks of providers.
- It used a number of different approaches to check on and expand the findings from the analysis of the reports: a survey, focus groups and policy discussions.
- It was qualitative: a small but intensive study which we think gave us a good feel for the important issues.
- It highlights one model only (the NCMA model of Approved Childminding Networks) NCMA requested this information but the project staff and the funder were independent of the organisation.
- It is organic: the early years arena is changing rapidly so we have fed results out throughout the process of the study in order to inform our thinking and we also hope to initiate an on-going debate by publicising the findings in a variety of ways.

The study consisted of the following elements:

#### **A Desk research to analyse co-ordinators' reports**

This concentrated on co-ordinators' reports from approved networks which had been in existence for at least 2 years by 2004. The information on which the study was focused was the content of the open-ended questions on these reports (see Annex A). These are opportunities for the co-ordinators to describe network activity, changes over the year and those aspects which they feel have made a difference to the lives of families and childminders. These more qualitative aspects of the reports, which potentially provide a rich

source of information about the differences networks make to childminding practice, had not been systematically analysed before and this was one of the main drivers for NCMA to seek funding for this study.

An initial scoping exercise sought to identify the categories into which the majority of the information fell. The categories decided on following the scoping exercise were “advantages to childminders” “advantages to families” and “general resources or behaviours designed to improve quality”. The first two actually appeared as categories in the pro formas issued by NCMA for the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of operation but it was clear from comments made by co-ordinators in the first year that these were areas they were already considering and commenting on. The list of general quality issues was informed both by the co-ordinator comments and by the literature review which had highlighted what other researchers had found to be indicators of higher quality in family day care.

Two annual reports were studied from each of the networks which had been in existence for more than 2 years at the time of the study. Not all the networks had two reports available, usually because they had joined with others into a cluster prior to their second annual report or because the report had not yet arrived at the NCMA office. This meant that, in all we studied 76 reports from 42 networks.

Different pro formas had been issued for the two years and so the reports could not be compared directly. However, both consisted of open-ended questions as well as statistical categories to be completed and so the open-ended questions were used as the source of the qualitative information (see Annex B for the respective formats of the two reports).

The full analysis then consisted of a constant comparison (hand-coding) method which created an evolving list of the themes and issues being mentioned within each of the three categories. A tally was kept of the numbers of reports mentioning each of these issues. This began early in the study and resulted in a portfolio of issues which could be compared with information from the face-to-face discussions and investigated further during them.

In terms of the responses relating to quality issues the following emerged most often (each in more than 15 reports):

- Regular support meetings/evenings
- Production of training programmes specific to nursery education accreditation or community childminding
- Good links with other agencies and departments (especially the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership)
- Resource library available
- Specific information available for parents
- Planning system in place to meet individual training or qualification needs

Although the aspects mentioned most often relate, not surprisingly, to those elements which are expected to be in place in approved networks, these coordinators felt they were worth mentioning specifically in relation to quality and the advantages which network membership brings to the parties involved in them. However, the face-to-face discussions later enabled us to look more closely at their choice of these particular aspects.

## **B Face to face discussions with two networks**

Two networks were chosen with advice from NCMA development workers and support staff. They operated in different environments and different parts of the country. Childminders in the two networks were asked to discuss questions from the focus group discussion sheet (Annex B). They were also given interim findings from the desk research and asked to comment on the process, the content of the findings and its usefulness for the on-going development of their own networks. Agreed aspects of the findings were also illustrated via examples suggested by the networks themselves. In this way it was hoped to test out the initial findings with childminders and childminding workers involved in the daily practice of developing and maintaining services designed to improve on the traditional practice of individual childminding. This gave more depth to the exercise and allowed it to be illustrated with actual examples.

### **C Focus group discussions with NCMA national staff and members of the Local Authority Early Years Co-ordinators' Network (LAEYCN).**

Two focus groups were held with NCMA staff in the course of the study, the group consisted of co-ordinators, managers and regional development workers from across England and Wales, although Welsh networks did not form part of the study. They had been suggested by NCMA HQ staff because of their experience of dealing with networks and who had volunteered to take part in such a group comprised.

Quite apart from the value of the discussions for the study, the group very much enjoyed meeting and said that they had found it useful to have the time to discuss network activity and childminding in general in such depth.

LAEYCN is a national network of local authority early years lead officers facilitated by the Early Childhood Unit at the National Children's Bureau with funding from the DfES (Sure Start Unit). They were asked to take part in the study at one of their meetings which had a specific focus on changes in the early years workforce.

As with the childminding networks, these groups were provided with a discussion sheet (Annex C) and the initial findings and were asked to comment on the same range of issues. For the second NCMA staff group there were fuller findings from the co-ordinator reports which they were asked to discuss.

This exercise was designed to obtain feedback from those involved in planning and managing services and from people with experience of a wider range of networks so as to give width to the study and consider the applicability of the findings to national strategy.

### **D A questionnaire survey with 200 network childminders across the country.**

This exercise was designed to include more childminders within the study, as it was believed that the experience of childminders who have moved from individual to networked practice is key to understanding the changes which networks can make. The 100 existing approved networks were each asked to identify 2 childminders who had worked as individual childminders prior to joining a network and who would be willing to complete and return a short

questionnaire (see annex D for the list of questions). The questionnaire was designed following the above consultation exercises and highlighted aspects of the findings of the study to date. It was hoped that this would be a further way of testing the findings and recommendations arising from the previous 3 exercises but give them greater validity and highlight some areas as being more important to childminders than others. Despite the somewhat complex distribution arrangements 119 childminders returned completed forms, a respectable response rate of 60%.

The childminders were asked specific yes/no questions on aspects of practice which might have been affected by network membership: pay, parents' attitudes, motivation to train, filling of vacancies and likelihood to continue childminding. Other questions were open ended, with the childminders being invited to say in their own words what was important to them about childminding networks rather than having to choose from a menu. This makes the relatively large numbers opting for certain features quite significant.

## **E policy seminar**

Lastly, we presented interim findings from the study to a seminar of invited participants on December 7<sup>th</sup> 2004. An initial report was provided and there was also a presentation by the Bradford Childminding Network on an example of meeting the Foundation Stage Early Learning Goals in home-based provision: "a Load of Old Rhubarb". Participants engaged in group discussions on the findings and identified challenges and opportunities which they raised, especially in the light of the recently published 10 year strategy. These discussions and the recommendations arising from them have been included in this report.

**Annex B**  
**Annual pro formas used by NCMA for co-ordinator reports**

**Request for first annual report from  
Children Come First approved childminding  
network**

The anniversary of your childminding network's approval by NCMA as a Children Come First network is approaching. Please complete and return this form to

Training, Development and Quality Assurance Department, NCMA, 8 Masons Hill, Bromley, Kent BR2 9EY

**Name of Childminding Network**

**Date of approval as CCF network**

<b>Type of approval:</b>	CCF	<input type="checkbox"/>
	CCF (EYE)	<input type="checkbox"/>

This page to be completed by NCMA before despatch

**Please give details of any changes of staff (co-ordinator or manager) since approval date**

**Please give details of any changes in location and/or nature (home based, in early years centre, school, etc.) of co-ordinator or manager's office since approval date**

**Number of childminders currently in the network**  
.....

**Ethnic profile of network childminders** (enter number for each ethnic group)

White                                      Black Caribbean                                      Black African

Black other (please specify)

Indian                                      Pakistani                                      Bangladeshi

Chinese                                      Other (please specify)

**Gender of network childminders** (enter number for each gender)

Female    Male

**Age group of network childminders** (enter number for each age group)

Under 25    26-30    31-35

36-40    41-45    46-50

51-55    56 and over

<b>Any change in geographical area covered by network</b> since date of approval
--

**Numbers of childminders currently providing**

**out-of-school care** (for over 5s)

**wrap-around care** (alongside nursery or pre-school provision for under 5s)

**community childminding**

**educational provision**

(It is recognised that an individual childminder may provide more than one of these services.)

**Numbers of current childminding places in each category**

**out-of-school care**

**wrap-around care**

**community childminding**

**educational provision**

(Include vacant places as well as those currently filled.)

**Average number of weeks between**

- **monitoring visits to childminders' homes**
- **other contacts with childminders (e.g. drop-in)**

**Numbers of childminders in the network currently holding or working towards relevant qualifications**

<i>Qualification</i>	<b>Holding</b>	<i>Working towards</i>
ICP		
DCP (or DCP1)		
ECP (or DCP2)		
Full CCP		
NVQ Level 3 EYCE		
Other (please specify)		

Training sessions and/or support sessions held within the network over the last year – give details of topic, duration, numbers participating  
***(please continue on additional page if necessary)***

**Outline the progress you have made in implementing the action points identified in the report on approval.**

**Describe any ways in which you feel that NCMA CCF approval has been advantageous to the childminders in your network**

**Name and role of person completing the report**  
.....

.....

Signature ..... Date .....

# Request for second annual report from Children Come First approved childminding network

The second anniversary of your childminding network's approval by NCMA as a Children Come First network is approaching. Please complete and return this form to

Training, Development and Quality Assurance Department, NCMA, 8 Masons Hill, Bromley, Kent BR2 9EY

**Name of Childminding Network**

**Date of approval as CCF network**

**Type of approval** : CCF

CCF (EYE)

This page to be completed by NCMA before despatch

**Please give details of any changes of staff (co-ordinator or manager) since first annual report**

**Please give details of any changes in location and/or nature (home based, in early years centre, school, etc.) of co-ordinator or manager's office since first annual report**

**Number of childminders currently in the network**  
.....

**Ethnic profile of network childminders** (enter number for each ethnic group)

White

Black Caribbean

Black African

Black other (please specify)

Indian

Pakistani

Bangladeshi

Chinese

Other (please specify)

**Gender of network childminders** (enter number for each gender)

Female

Male

**Age group of network childminders** (enter number for each age group)

Under 25

26-30

31-35

36-40

41-45

46-50

51-55

56 and over

**Any change in geographical area covered by network** since first annual report

**Numbers of childminders currently providing**

**out-of-school care** (for over 5s)

**wrap-around care** (alongside nursery or pre-school provision for under 5s)

**community childminding**

**educational provision**

(It is recognised that an individual childminder may provide more than one of these services.)

## Numbers of current childminding places in each category

out-of-school care

wrap-around care

community childminding

educational provision

(Include vacant places as well as those currently filled.)

## Current average number of weeks between

- monitoring visits to childminders' homes
- other contacts with childminders (e.g. drop-in)

## Numbers of childminders in the network currently holding or working towards relevant qualifications

<i>Qualification</i>	<i>Holding</i>	<i>Working towards</i>
ICP		
DCP (or DCP1)		
ECP (or DCP2)		
Full CCP		
NVQ Level 3 EYCE		
Other (please specify)		

Training sessions and/or support sessions held within the network over the last year – give details of topic, duration, numbers participating  
***(please continue on additional page if necessary)***

**Outline the main areas of development which you have achieved in the network over the last year.**

**Describe what you consider your network has achieved in your area for children and families, childminders and the EYDCP over the last 2 years**

Name and role of person completing the report .....

.....

Signature ..... Date .....

## Annex C

### Questions framing the semi-structured discussions at network and manager focus groups

**1 What do you think are the most important elements of quality for childminding?**

**2 Factors traditionally associated with childminding**

**In the past the following factors have been strongly associated with childminding, do you feel that they are still valid for individual (not networked) childminders?**

- Between them childminders catered for large numbers of children
- the children were very young and therefore vulnerable
- the provision was often in economically disadvantaged areas
- childminders were isolated within their own homes
- childminders' practice was invisible within their own homes
- the sector was largely unregulated
- childminders often lacked formal childcare training and qualifications
- there were few resources for support.

**Are there any other issues?:**

**3. Do networks address these issues and, if so, how?:**

**4 The following have been found by researchers to be indicators of higher quality in childminding. What do you feel about these? Would you agree? Are there any missed out?**

- 'Intentionality', the positive choice to be a provider
- training to do that specific job
- support networks and contacts
- adequate regulatory standards
- small to moderate sized groups of children
- good communication between provider and parent
- an orderly physical environment appropriate to children's activities
- a wide range of activities and toys
- a safe and healthy environment
- a sensitive and responsive relationship between provider and child

**5 Network co-ordinators do annual reports to NCMA, what measures of change would you expect to see reflected in these reports, what would be interesting and helpful in moving the networks forward?**

## **Annex D**

### **List of questions comprising the childminder postal survey**

1. In which year did you first register as a childminder?
2. Have you had any major breaks in your childminding career since then? If so, please explain briefly.
3. In which year did you join an approved childminding network?
4. Is this the same network that you are now part of? If not, please explain the change briefly.
5. This question is about childminding in general: What do you think makes for a high quality childminding service
6. What elements make it different from group day care?
7. This question is about the differences between being an individual childminder and being a member of an approved network: Which activities and services provided by the network have been the most useful to you?
8. In what ways, if any, has network membership helped you to be a better childminder?
9. How, if at all, could your network be improved?
10. In what way, if at all, has network membership affected the following aspects of your work?
  - The amount you can charge
  - The number of requests you have for places
  - The attitude of parents to you
  - How long you are likely to continue as a childminder
  - Your motivation to do training or qualifications
11. Please feel free to add here anything which you think is important about network membership and which we haven't asked about above.

## Annex E

### Full tables of issues mentioned in co-ordinator reports

<b>Quality related issues mentioned in reports</b>	
<b>Issue</b>	<b>Reports mentioning this</b>
Regular support meetings/evenings	45
No changes of staff or new posts only	39
Production of accreditation training programme	30
Good links with other agencies and depts (esp EYDCP)	29
Resource library available	28
Specific information available for parents	24
Planning system in place to meet individual training or qualification needs	15
Funding available to support training	11
Production of community cmg training programme	10
Extension of services to all cms (improving cmg generally)	9
Local newsletter	8
Childminders involved in producing own materials	7
Childminders developing own portfolios	6
Frequent drop-in facilities	5
Evaluate how network meets needs of families	5
Extra money put in by LA	5
Equalities resources mentioned	5
Improves liaison generally between cms across an area	4
Attempts to improve diversity of cms recruited	4
Unannounced visits	4
Action taken on low standards	4
Production of training directory	3
Requirement to attend a certain number of events	3
Specialist training available	3
Regular revision of network policies by cms	3
Ability to target services on children in need	3
Ability to track cm's career (retention)	3
Transport and crèches allow for better involvement in activities	3
Monitoring protocol developed – survey forms etc	2
Feedback process for parents	2
Information in other languages	2
Staff and minders develop specialist skills	2
Contributing to local authority targets	2

Experienced cms able to assist new ones (mentoring)	2
Auditing assessments for consistency	2
Being used by other organisations to pilot/discuss projects etc.	2
Leavers go into childcare related jobs	2
Resources swap shop or similar	2
Ability to co-ordinate vacancies	1
Wider contacts for children	1
Professional development for co-ordinators	1
Staff able to co-ordinate solutions to problems	1
Child observation sheets/assessment profiles used	1
<b>Issues mentioned negatively:</b>	
Drop in frequency of support sessions or visits	2
Unannounced visits as problem	1

<b>Advantages to childminders</b>	
<b>advantage</b>	<b>Reports mentioning this</b>
Chance to train and get qualifications	44
More recognition for cms/raised profile	35
Increases confidence and self esteem	25
Support from specific workers (Includes co-ordinator)	21
Becoming more professional	21
Chance to train on Foundation Stage	20
Parents more likely to know of the cmg network	20
able to get nursery education grant	17
Meet other cms for support and ideas	15
Encourages recruitment	13
Resource library available	13
Chance to extend skills and knowledge	13
Able to widen scope of service offered (sustainability)	12
Better information on local and national issues	8
Resource boxes (or other "perks") made available as an incentive	8
Personal development	8
Better able to deal with Ofsted inspection/better links with Ofsted	8
QA scheme available	7
Liaison with other agencies to meet cms needs	5
Can set a clear career path	5
More info on Children's Information Service database	5
More likely to get work (have vacancies filled)	5
More likely to stay (retention)	4
Gives equality with other providers	4
Ability to provide training to others	4
Involved in local planning	4
Specific buddy system	3
Motivated to higher standards	2
Ability to participate better in meetings	2
Support from workers who have been cms	2
Improved offers from colleges etc	2
Greater job satisfaction	2
Improved pay	2

Fills support gap as local authority support diminishes	2
Financial subsidy for special needs children	1
Distance learning available	1
Chance to think about your role	1
Grants to improve premises	1
NCMA membership paid	1
Access to other funding streams	1
Less isolated	1
Working as part of a team	1
Substitute minding available when needed	1
Priority for CCF cms when children are being placed	1
Joint agency visits arranged (avoids duplication)	1
Support with complaints and contract disputes	1
Becoming accountable for time	1

<b>Advantages to families</b>	
<b>advantage</b>	<b>Reports mentioning this</b>
Specific information for parents	24 (from quality list)
Higher quality	23
Continuity into funded nursery education (choice)	21
Ability to take sponsored children via community cmg or sure start	16
Able to take children with special needs	15
Choice for families generally	11
Quality Assurance (peace of mind)	6
Ability to meet families' individual needs (flexibility re times etc)	6
Funded nursery education available in rural areas	5
Cms will be involved in wider networks	3
Able to take children excluded from school	2
Parents' newsletter	2
Ability to identify special needs early	2
Targeting local business to help with subsidies	2
Information in other languages	2
Affordability/value for money	1
A committed workforce	1
Continuity (retention)	1
Matching children with childminders	1

## Contact details for further information

National Children's Bureau  
8 Wakley Street  
London  
EC1V 7QE  
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Web: <http://www.ncb.org.uk>

National Childminding Association  
8 Masons Hill  
Bromley  
Kent  
BR2 9EY  
Telephone: 020 8464 6164  
Web: <http://www.ncma.org.uk>