



N C M A B R I E F I N G

Children's and integrated centres – working with childminders



The Government's vision is that children, families and communities across England and Wales benefit from the best in quality childcare, combined with early education, parenting support and child and family health services delivered via children's centres in England and integrated centres in Wales. The National Childminding Association (NCMA) shares and supports this vision.



Children's and integrated centres

Registered childminders can work with children's/integrated centres to provide high quality, flexible childcare in the community, offering parents a real choice in the type of provision they can access.

In many areas of England and Wales registered childminders – through quality-assured childminding networks – are already working with centres to achieve this vision, providing local communities with quality home-based childcare and, where they are accredited, early years education.

Together, childminders and children's/integrated centres

are ensuring local families can benefit from both home and centre-based care, depending on their needs.

New guidance on children's centres states that these must now work collaboratively to support quality registered childminding networks – a proven model of workforce transformation that supports registered childminders to deliver high-quality childcare.

Children's/integrated centres should investigate the existing local childcare provision in their catchment areas and work with providers to extend this provision.

Childminding networks

A quality-assured childminding network can be set up by a local authority, employer, NHS trust or other organisation. The NCMA Children Come First quality-assurance scheme for childminding networks was developed in partnership with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Ofsted as a way of demonstrating to parents the high quality of care childminders are providing.

Generally, no more than 40 registered childminders work together on an NCMA Children Come First network. Supported by a full-time network coordinator (often a former childminder with practical knowledge and experience), network members work to quality standards as well as their national registration requirements. A childminder can use the support of a network to develop their career, and to become an accredited or community childminder.

Networks support workforce development and play a key role in sustaining childminding in the local community. Recent research has shown that around half of network childminders have a level 3 childcare qualification, and a further 22 per cent are working towards one¹. Over 70

per cent of network childminders say they are more likely to continue as childminders because of network membership².

NCMA believes that integrated/children's centres should work collaboratively with childminders by establishing quality-assured childminding networks, so that registered childminding becomes a key part of the integrated service they provide to families.

Childminders are able to offer a wide range of services to parents and children, depending on local need. They are particularly well placed to offer family support, such as care for children whose parents work shift patterns, and to care for very young children.

Children's centres could work with childminders and childminding networks to offer:

- wrap-around childcare
- specialist care for disabled children
- care for very young children
- full day care
- early education in a home-based setting.

¹ Children Come First – The Role of Approved Childminding Networks in Changing Practice. Sue Owen, Director of Early Years, National Children's Bureau (2005).

² as above.

The benefits of registered childminding

Children's/integrated centres can benefit from childminding services by working with a childminding network. This network could either follow the NCMA Children Come First model, which is endorsed by Investors in Children, or an equivalent model which works with individually quality-assured childminders.

As well as providing quality, inclusive childcare, registered childminders on approved childminding networks can become accredited to draw down government funding to offer free early education for eligible children in their care.

Centres integrating an NCMA Children Come First network of accredited childminders into their service will be able to:

- provide early years education places for 3- and 4-year-olds in England
- deliver Early Learning Goals in England and Desirable Learning Outcomes in Wales
- respond to community need – particularly in some rural areas where centre-based care is not sustainable because a community is too dispersed
- offer a more flexible approach to integrated childcare and education, helping many parents balance work and family commitments
- sustain childcare places, a proven benefit of establishing childminding networks
- ensure babies and under-2s are cared for in the preferred environment of a “real home”
- provide flexible childcare places without the expense of a capital building project
- help raise community awareness of and trust in children's/integrated centres, encouraging parents to use their services, because they live and work in that community

- ensure continuity of childcare and education for babies and children, from 0 to 5 and beyond
- provide families with the choice of home-based childcare and education which, for some children, better meets their needs
- offer specialist services such as care for disabled children or children with special educational needs, excluded children, respite care for families, and support for teen parents returning to work or education
- offer flexible family support services – childminders can empathise with parents and, in an informal way, be someone to talk to or seek advice from on parenting issues.

Children's centres should support childminders to deliver these services by:

- enabling childminders to use centre facilities such as toy libraries, play sessions and meeting rooms
- helping with vacancy coordination
- including childminders in staff training opportunities
- ensuring registered childminders are fully represented in centre staff meetings.



Making it happen

Investigate existing local provision

If an NCMA Children Come First childminding network (or equivalent) already exists in your centre's catchment area, you can work with the local Sure Start, Cymorth or local authority team to integrate it into your centre's services, by bringing the network coordinator role into the centre's staff team. Then, to ensure families have access to enough childminded childcare places, the network coordinator can either recruit registered childminders in your catchment area to join the network and provide additional places or, if existing network members have vacancies, assign these for the centre's use only.

NCMA can provide consultancy advice to help children's/integrated centres make this transition and, if the childminders on an existing NCMA Children Come First childminding network are not already accredited, provide the centre with the training and resources needed to

support them to become accredited to provide early years education as well as childcare places.

Establishing a new network

If no NCMA Children Come First network exists in your centre's catchment area, or existing ones are fully utilised, you can work with NCMA (through a service level agreement) to establish one. The quality-assured childminders in this network can then provide some of the childcare places for the centre and, over time, work towards accreditation and so provide early years education places.

NCMA staff are happy to have an informal conversation about possible ways forward. Visit www.ncma.org.uk for contact details of your local NCMA regional office.

Working together

St Albans Childminding Network

St Albans Children's Centre in Hertfordshire has an early years network of 12 childminders supporting 75 local families.

"The two-way partnership between St Albans Childminding Network and the children's centre is wonderful for families," says Childminding Development Worker, Micky Waters. "Some parents want their child placed with a nursery, and others want their child cared for in a home environment. With a network and onsite nursery, the centre has the flexibility to offer parents that choice."

The network is useful for the centre too, as it has the added support of community-based childcare professionals. "Because childminders work flexible hours, they're well placed to provide respite care or crèche facilities at short notice," says Micky. "And when the centre starts a new project such as supporting parents going back to college, the network can help by referring families in the community, offering a form of outreach."



The network also benefits from the partnership with the centre. Childminders enjoy greater visibility in the community and have been able to fill vacancies more easily. They have a central point to meet and make arrangements to cover holidays or sick leave. And with a resource room and regular training sessions, there's plenty of scope to pick up new ideas, as well as new skills.

"The centre is the first port-of-call for childminders looking for information or advice, as there's always somebody at the centre who can help," says Micky. "The network is a great way for the centre to link to families and to ensure that useful information cascades out to parents."

Biggleswade Childminding Network

Biggleswade Childminding Network is an integral part of the Lawns Children's Centre in Bedfordshire.

Quality-assured by the NCMA Children Come First childminding networks scheme in 2003, the network is now county-wide and acts as part of the children's centre's outreach service when needed. The 17 childminders on the network care for almost 100 children.

The majority of services offered by the children's centre are based centrally which means that, although some childminders may have to travel some distance, they can access all the services they need in one visit.

Members of the Biggleswade Childminding Network are invited to a regular drop-in session each week. There is always a planned activity, usually linked to the Birth to Three Matters framework.

Three of the network childminders are already accredited to deliver early years education, and another two are being assessed. This increases the number of early education places the centre can offer parents in the area. The local

early years advisory teacher visits accredited childminders twice a month to offer support in the delivery of early years education.

Network childminders who form part of the centre have a variety of skills to share. This is particularly useful when helping families knit together the childcare provision they need.

As part of the network's ongoing training programme, childminders have gained knowledge of special needs care. This knowledge is particularly relevant as the children's centre adjoins Sunnyside Special Needs School, and network childminders offer respite care for parents.

There are many practical benefits to working so closely with the centre. All network childminders have access to the toy library, which has a specific focus on toys and equipment for children with additional needs.

The network is highly visible in the centre, helping increase understanding of childminding in the community.

