



Department
for Education

Study of Early Education and Development: views and experiences of childminders

Research report

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents findings from a qualitative study of childminders undertaken as part of the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED). SEED is a major evaluation undertaken by NatGen Social Research, the University of Oxford, 4Children and Frontier Economics on behalf of the Department for Education. This qualitative study of childminders was commissioned to shed light on the experiences and contribution of childminders, and aims to explore their:

- Current provision, including factors influencing capacity, fees and staffing
- Experiences of offering funded two and three-year-old provision, including views on the barriers and facilitators to providing this care
- Views of the infrastructure and support available for the sector, including the introduction of childminder agencies.

Methodology

Twenty in-depth telephone interviews were carried out with childminders from across the country. The findings presented here reflect the range and diversity of their views and experiences. As this was a small scale qualitative study, the prevalence of views and experiences arising from the data are not reported.

Summary of findings

Current provision

- Childminder capacity
Childminder capacity is influenced by the physical space available (including transport capacity), their ratios and whether they employ assistants. Workload also influenced capacity with childminders limiting the size of their childminding business to balance spending time with their own families and to keep paperwork at a manageable level.
- Fees, costs and financial viability
In our sample, hourly rates ranged from £3.50 to £6.95. Childminders reflected that income from childminding could fluctuate widely throughout the year because of seasonal fluctuations and children leaving and joining. There were mixed views on the financial viability of childminding: some said that they did not make enough from childminding to run a household without a second income. Others were

making a living from their childminding business and had no other sources of income.

Offering funded provision

Facilitators to offering funded provision:

- Continuity of care

A strong motivation for offering funded provision was a desire to continue caring for a child (or a sibling of a child) already in their care who had become eligible for a funded place.

- Local demand

Where childminders perceived a local demand for funded provision, this was a motivation for registering. They hoped that offering funded places would help fill vacancies and would meet the needs of local families.

- Making a difference

Childminders were motivated to offer the two-year-old funded provision because they felt they could make a difference to disadvantaged children by promoting school readiness and providing support to the families.

Barriers to offering funded provision:

- Lack of local demand

Some childminders were discouraged from offering funded provision for two-year-olds because of a perceived lack of local demand. This was attributed to the affluence of their local area limiting the number of eligible children, a lack of awareness and take-up from eligible families, and/or a perception that professionals working with eligible two-year-olds encourage families to take-up provision in group based settings rather than with a childminder.

- Ofsted rating

To be able to offer funded places for two-year-olds, childminders must be rated 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted, (or 'requires improvement' where the local authority believes it is necessary to ensure sufficient capacity is available locally). This meant some childminders in the study sample wanted to offer the provision but were ineligible.

- Challenges of meeting additional needs

There were some concerns raised over the challenges involved in offering two-year-old places to families with additional needs, including the potential for safeguarding concerns.

- Splitting funding with other provision

Some nurseries would not split funded places and share care with childminders. This meant childminders could not offer this option to parents.

- Accreditation

There was a perception amongst some childminders that the accreditation process to register for funded provision would be bureaucratic and costly, deterring them from registering.

- Perceived ineligibility

In one case, a childminder had not registered to offer funded places because she did not hold a Level 3 qualification. It was her understanding that this was a requirement for funded provision and she was therefore ineligible.

- Administration

Extra paperwork such as feedback on head-counts or using on-line portals to submit administrative data were identified as barriers.

Views on funding levels

- Two-year-old funding

Within the sample for this study, reported funding levels for two-year-old places ranged from £4.60 to £6.10 per hour. Childminders reflected that these levels were similar or higher than the hourly rates they charged privately and were generally felt to be adequate.

- Three and four-year-old funding

Reported funding levels for three and four-year-old provision varied and typically ranged from £3.40 to £5 an hour. Compared to funding for two-year-old places, childminders felt these levels of funding were less satisfactory with levels often lower than the levels they charged privately. The level of funding was perceived as a barrier to offering these places by some.

Administration

Some childminders who were accustomed to weekly or monthly payments reported difficulties managing cash flow, when funded places were paid twice termly. They preferred monthly payments to avoid cash flow difficulties.

Perceived impacts

Childminders identified a range of benefits of funded provision:

- **Welfare and safeguarding**
Impacts related to welfare and safeguarding included healthier eating, increased exercise and the development of important skills including road safety and stranger danger. Improvements in behaviour were also reported with shy children increasing in confidence and aggressive or anxious children becoming happier and more relaxed.
- **Learning and development**
Childminders thought that funded provision gave children access to a learning environment that otherwise they might not have. As professionals they were also able to identify developmental delays and take action.
- **School readiness**
Ensuring children were ready for school was viewed as an important aim of the funded provision. Socialising with other children, developing routines, and supporting potty training were all elements of early years provision viewed as important for preparing children for school.

In terms of the local childcare market, there was no clear message from the interviews on the impact of funded provision on local demand for childminder places. Some childminders felt the two-year-old provision was either not being taken-up by eligible families, or families were being encouraged to access nursery provision, which consequently reduced demand for funded childminder places. Other childminders reported an increase in demand and this was particularly the case where there was felt to be a shortage of childminders in the area.

Infrastructure, support and quality

Sources of support & guidance

Childminders drew on a range of support and guidance depending on services available in their local area. These included childminder networks, Children's Centre Childminder Groups, Local Authority co-ordinators and professional associations. Overall, the view

was that sources of support and guidance have reduced in recent years as a result of cut-backs in local services.

Training

Childminders in this study had varying Early Years qualification levels (some qualified to Level 3 or higher, some working towards their Level 3 and others not qualified to Level 3). Facilitators to Level 3 qualifications included bursaries to cover course fees and flexible course formats to fit training around their childminding.

In terms of on-going professional development and training, childminders accessed training courses through their Local Authorities, and professional bodies including PACEY and the Pre-School Learning Alliance. Overall there was a general sense that costs for training had increased (particularly for courses run by their Local Authority) and courses that used to be free or had a nominal fee were now more expensive.

Partnership working

Childminders' involvement in local partnership working in their area varied. There were examples of strong partnership working with schools and with health visitors and social workers. However, childminders also reported limited partnership working in some instances. They attributed this to workload pressures which limited opportunities for information sharing and collaboration.

Views on quality

Childminders felt that the following were hallmarks of good quality provision:

- Supporting learning and progression through the implementation of the EYFS framework;
- Fostering health and wellbeing by providing a safe and secure environment that fosters confidence, independence and enjoyment;
- Supporting parents by providing support and advice and building good relationships;
- Continually striving for quality improvement by reviewing and improving practice, with an emphasis on maximising the benefits to the children in their care.

Childminders in this study drew on a range of tools and used many different approaches to maintain and improve the quality of their provision. Quality standards and awards, childminder networks and on-going professional development were all used to maintain quality.

Childminders identified Ofsted's role in setting standards and judging the quality of childminder settings as important, and their reports were a valued source of feedback on the quality of settings for both childminders and families. However, there were some

concerns that local quality assurance schemes have been superseded by Ofsted and this was not felt to be an adequate replacement for this on-going support and guidance.

Childminder agencies

The prevailing view of childminders in this study was that currently there is not enough information about how childminder agencies will operate in their area for them to make an informed decision to join or not. Information and clarification were needed on the following:

- The financial viability and stability of agencies: Childminders were unclear how the funding models would work and were worried that agency fees would erode childminder income or increase costs for parents.
- Ofsted inspecting childminder agencies (sampling a number of their childminders) and provide an overall rating of the agency. Agencies will be responsible for quality assuring their registered childminders and the childcare they provide: Views were mixed on this, with some childminders viewing it positively. Others were concerned that an Ofsted rating applied to the agency (rather than the individual) could risk some poor practice being hidden and exceptionally high standards going unnoticed and unrecognised.
- Childminder independence: There was a perception that joining an agency could erode childminder independence, either because childminders could become employees of the agency or because the agency would oblige childminders to conform to standardised procedures and models of working. The desire to maintain independence was as a key barrier to agency membership.
- Allocating childcare places to childminders in an agency: Established childminders generally did not feel they needed help with recruiting families, although it was acknowledged that new childminders may find this help attractive when starting up. The possibility that childminders would have little or no choice in the children allocated to them was unpopular.
- There was an understanding that childminder agencies would provide support in a range of areas including policies and procedures, invoicing, and quality, as well as provide training and cover for sickness. Again views were mixed on the value of this service. Although it was acknowledged that there had been reductions in the training and support available from Local Authorities in some areas, childminders remained to be convinced that agencies would be able to provide a similar level of support.

Conclusion

As eligibility for funded early years provision was extended to two- year old children in the 40 per cent most disadvantaged households in England in September 2014, childminders will play an important part in providing this early years education. The following draws out the key themes of the report and reflects on suggestions made by childminders to support the sector as it meets these new demands:

- **Capacity to provide funded places**

The level of funding for two-year-old places was generally felt to be sufficient. However, barriers to providing funded places included concerns that disadvantaged two-year-olds (and their families) may require additional support. Limited demand was also reported by some childminders, although this may change as eligibility extends and awareness grows. The findings from this study suggest that the number of childminders offering funded places might increase if:

 - The funding available for three and four-year-old places is increased;
 - The payment structures are designed to minimise cash flow difficulties;
 - Clear information is disseminated on the accreditation process and eligibility criteria.

- **High quality provision**

High quality early years provision depends on a well trained work force with embedded quality assurance processes and access to continuing professional development. Quality assurance was underpinned by local Quality Awards, Quality Forums, Quality Standards and on-going support from network and local authority co-ordinators or quality assurance officers. The Ofsted inspection process was also valued for its role in maintaining quality, however concerns were voiced that Ofsted should not supersede the support provided local sources to maintain and improve quality in the sector. The findings from this study suggest that high quality provision could be supported by:

 - Bursaries and flexible course formats for Level 3 qualifications;
 - Access to affordable on-going continuing professional development;
 - Support for local quality assurance systems to embed good practice.

- **Infrastructure**

Childminders currently use a range of sources for advice and support, from Local Authorities, childminder networks, professional associations and Ofsted. This support was viewed as invaluable, and important for maintaining standards. Childminder agencies are intended to provide childminders with support for quality assurance, CPD, training, and sustainability advice. Childminders felt they needed

more detail on how agencies will operate in their local area to make an informed decision about whether to join. They would value further information regarding:

- The financial viability of agencies
- How childminder independence will be maintained
- How childcare places will be allocated
- The proposed approach to quality assurance.

1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of a qualitative study of childminders undertaken as part of the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED). This introduction sets out the research context, aims and methods.

1.1 Policy Context

From September 2013, two year old children living in the 20 per cent most disadvantaged households in England became eligible for 570 hours of funded early education per year. This was extended in September 2014 so that two year old children in the 40 per cent most disadvantaged households in England were also eligible for the funded provision. The early years provision for disadvantaged two-year-olds builds upon the existing entitlement of 570 hours of funded early education for three- and four-year-olds, available to all children from the term after their third birthday.

Funded provision is being assessed by the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED), a major new study commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) and undertaken by NatCen Social Research, the University of Oxford, 4Children and Frontier Economics. SEED is an eight-year study following approximately 6,000 children across England from the age of two, through to their early years at school. The study aims to assess the impact of early education on children's school readiness, children's longer-term outcomes and its impact on the most disadvantaged children in society.

Childminders play an important role in the delivery of early education and childcare. In March 2014 Ofsted data showed that there were a total of 51,789 childminders on the Early Years Register (EYR) in England, with capacity to provide 265,366 (approximately 21%) of childcare places for children under the age of 8¹. Given their important role in providing a fifth of all early years places², and in light of the recent changes that have seen the provision of funded early education extended, this study was commissioned to shed light on the experiences and contribution of childminders.

¹ Ofsted (2014) Registered childcare providers and places in England March 2014 – Key Findings (<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/registered-childcare-providers-and-places-england-december-2008-onwards>)

² This figure refers to the number of places provided by childminders, however it is likely that some of these places are vacant, and some registered childminders may be inactive.

1.2 Methodology

Research Aims

This study aimed to gather the views and experiences of childminders providing early years education. It set out to explore their:

- Current provision, including factors influencing capacity, fees and staffing
- Experiences of offering funded two and three-year-old provision, including views on the barriers and facilitators to providing this care
- Views of the infrastructure and support available for the sector, including the introduction of childminder agencies.

Sampling and recruitment

Being exploratory in nature, this study was designed as a small qualitative study of in-depth telephone interviews with a target sample of twenty childminders. Childminders were recruited to achieve diversity on a range of characteristics including geographical region, the length of time they had been a childminder, and whether they currently offered funded provision. Seven of the childminders who participated were looking after children participating in the SEED longitudinal survey and had expressed an interest in participating in the study. The remaining participants were recruited using information from local Family Information Service records, as a sample frame. The following table gives an overview of the characteristics of the childminders who participated. While efforts were made to achieve as balanced a sample as possible, fewer interviews than intended were achieved with childminders choosing not to offer funded provision. This limitation of the achieved sample may mean that the views and experiences of this group of childminders are not fully represented here, and the full range of barriers to providing funded places may not have been captured.

Initial contact was made by an introductory email (with a leaflet providing further information about the study – Appendix B). This was followed up by a telephone call to explain the research in further detail and invite participation. Flexible appointment times were offered to maximise participation.

Table 1 Achieved sample of childminders

Achieved sample of childminders		
		<i>Achieved sample</i>
Region	East Midlands	4
	London	2
	South East	5
	South West	4
	North East	1
	North West	3
	West Midlands	1
Funded provision	Yes – 2 and 3-4 year old	15
	Yes - 3-4 year old	2
	No	3
Indices of Multiple Deprivation	1	2
(1= least deprived, 5= most deprived)	2	6
	3	4
	4	4
	5	4
Experience	Up to 4 years	4
	5 - 10 years	9
	11+ years	7
Total		20

Fieldwork and analysis

Fieldwork took place between May and September 2014. A topic guide was used to guide the discussions (Appendix A) and interviews typically lasted 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted by telephone. This is a cost efficient and flexible data collection method and meant interviews could be arranged in the evenings when most convenient for childminders or rearranged at short-notice when childcare commitments changed. As a thank-you for their time all those who took part received a £20 high street shopping voucher.

The qualitative data were analysed using Framework - an approach to qualitative data management which is systematic and comprehensive. This approach ensures the study's

findings are robust and grounded in the data³. Verbatim interview quotations are provided in the report to highlight themes and findings where appropriate.

The findings presented here reflect the range and diversity of views and experiences among the childminders interviewed. As this was a small scale qualitative study, the prevalence of views and experiences arising from the data is not reported.

The project was carried out in accordance with the ISO20252 international quality standard for market and social research.

1.3 Report coverage

The remaining chapters present the findings from the study, as follows:

Chapter 2: Current provision

Chapter 3: Offering funded provision

Chapter 4: Infrastructure, support and quality

Chapter 5: Conclusion

³ Ritchie, J; Lewis, J; McNaughton-Nicholls, C; Ormston, R (2013) *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*; London

2 Current provision

This section provides an overview of the range of provision offered by childminders registered with Ofsted delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework who participated in the study. It reports on childminders' views of the key dimensions affecting childminder provision - capacity, ratios, staffing, fees and costs.

2.1 Ratios, Capacity and Staffing

Currently childminders in England can care for three children under the age of 5 and a total of six children under the age of 8. Since 2012, childminders may care for four children under 5 in exceptional circumstances to maintain continuity of care.

Childminders were broadly happy with the ratio of 1:3 under 5s as they felt they were able to give each child sufficient individual attention. However, some felt that a ratio of 1:4 would be manageable, while others felt it depended on the range of ages in the setting, with a higher ratio of 1:4 possible where children were closer in age (for example, four three and four-year-olds) and less feasible where there were greater age gaps. Typically the childminders interviewed worked with ratios of 1:3 although this was sometimes lower if a child had SEN or where they had spaces available which meant their ratios fluctuated throughout the week.

The size of childminder settings ranged from a setting with three children on roll⁴, to a setting with forty-five children⁵ on roll reflecting the diversity of provision in the sector. Factors influencing childminder capacity can be split into three broad groups: physical capacity; ratios and staffing; and workload.

1. Physical capacity

Limits on physical space (and the space requirements set out in statutory guidance) limit the capacity for childminders to increase the number of children they care for. Similarly, a desire to limit physical wear and tear on their property and health and safety requirements places limits on the number of children that can be looked after.

Another key physical limitation is car size - some childminders rely on cars for pick-ups and drop-offs and for travel to activities throughout the day. Where this was the case, the number of children they cared for depended on car size.

⁴ The number of children on roll is the total number of children accessing their provision. This figure includes all children who may be accessing provision full-time, part-time or occasionally (including after-school or during holidays).

⁵ This was based on 36 regular contracts and a further 9 holiday / emergency contracts. The childminder operated with two assistants, typically caring for 9 under-5s every day and a further 3-6 school aged children.

2. Ratios and staffing

As already discussed, childminders have a maximum ratio of 1:3 under 5s, which limits capacity unless they work alongside a co-childminder or employ assistants. Within the sample participating in this study a number of childminders worked alone, while others employed assistants (with the largest setting employing six staff) operating with three staff in the setting caring for nine children under five each day.

Childminders who worked with assistants did so because additional staff increased their capacity, providing greater protection from fluctuations in the number of children on their books and improved the financial viability of their business. They also valued the flexibility that having other staff afforded, enabling them to split groups by age and offer different activities. Childminders also reflected that the profession could be isolating and working with assistants helps avoid that.

A challenge of employing assistants is responsibility for paying salaries on tight margins. Some childminders took on apprentices to keep staff costs to a minimum while others employed assistants on an ad-hoc basis. Childminders also fed back that the two hour limit for leaving assistants on their own with children was challenging because it limits scope for attending training, appointments and group activities:

'From my perspective it's a hindrance because we live where we do, for us to go anywhere, my nearest town is six miles away. So if we want to go for a day out we either all go or we don't go. So if we have to do a school pick up... in our two hours we just about manage the school pick-ups'

(Childminder, South East)

Childminders who chose not to work with assistants reflected that they enjoyed the freedom of working independently and did not want the responsibility of employing someone. In some instances other factors limited their capacity to care for more children (car size for example) and therefore employing an assistant was not financially viable as they would not be able to increase in size sufficiently to make it cost effective.

3. Workload

Childminders identified workload as a factor in decisions not to expand the number of places they offered. Examples of this included childminders who wanted to limit the size of their childminding business to balance spending time with their own families (for example over the summer months or in the evenings). Others reflected that the level of paperwork was such that they would not want to increase their numbers to keep paperwork at a manageable level.

2.2 Fees, costs and financial viability

Within our sample, hourly rates ranged from £3.50 to £6.95. In setting fees, childminders primarily based their charges on the fees of other childminders in their area, aiming to be competitive within the local market. Other factors included an assessment of the quality they offered, (based on their Ofsted rating), their facilities and their range of activities. Hourly rates were sometimes inclusive of meals, or charged as an extra (typically £1 to £1.50). Hourly rates were also sometimes increased for:

- Unsocial hours (for example after 6pm or on bank holidays)
- School aged children (to make the short time they were in the setting financially worthwhile)
- Part time places (to encourage parents to take more hours and make it easier to fill full-time places)

Hourly rates were sometimes discounted for siblings and there were also some examples of childminders factoring in affordability for a particular family when setting their rate. Childminders were also cautious about raising their rates, with examples of no fee increases in some instances for nine years. The view was that parents find childcare expensive and increases in fees would be unaffordable for many of the families they worked with.

Childminders reflected that income generated from childminding could fluctuate widely throughout the year because of seasonal fluctuations and because children left and joined the setting. In small settings in particular, these fluctuations have a substantial impact on income, as one child leaving a setting could potentially reduce income by a third:

'I don't think it's a job if you're on your own and you're looking for a steady income... It's like one minute... I was only working two days a week and now I'm full again, but you get to that point you think '... I'm going to have to give up, I've got no children'. You can't ever guarantee your children. You can't guarantee that tomorrow one of my mums going to say 'Do you know what I've packed my work in. She's not coming no more... if you want a career where you want to earn regular money every month, then no.'

(Childminder, South West)

The economic context also had an impact. Some childminders reported seeing significant reductions in their income during the recession as parents became unemployed and no longer needed childcare.

The main costs associated with childminding differed depending on individual circumstances, with rent, staff, food, energy and petrol all identified as large costs. Other

costs included professional insurance, membership to professional bodies, printing ink and stationery, and maintaining a good range of resources and equipment.

Childminders in this study had mixed views on the financial viability of childminding. In some instances, smaller childminders reflected that they did not earn enough income from childminding to run a household without a second income in the family. However, there were also examples of childminders who were making a living from their childminding business with no other sources of income.

3 Offering funded provision

In England, all three- and four-year-olds are entitled to 570 hours of funded early education per year, which is often taken as fifteen hours per week for 38 weeks of the year. From September 2013 around the 20 per cent most disadvantaged two-year-olds also became eligible (with pilot schemes operating before this) and in September 2014 eligibility was extended to two-year-old children in the 40 per cent most disadvantaged households. This section reports the views and experiences of childminders who offer the funded entitlement as well as the reasons why some childminders do not offer it.

3.1 Motivations and barriers to offering funded places

Childminders offering the funded entitlement for two-, three- and four-year-olds did so for a number of reasons:

- Continuity of care

A strong motivation (and recurrent theme) during the interviews was a desire to provide continuity of care for children in their setting. Offering long-term stable provision was felt to be important for the wellbeing of the children and their families. Childminders described registering to provide the funded entitlement for three-year-olds to enable them to continue looking after children they were already caring for. This was also the case when offering the two-year-old funded entitlement, where a desire to continue caring for a child (or a sibling of a child) already in their care was a motivating factor for registering. This was typically triggered by a parent asking whether they could take-up their funded entitlement.

- Local demand

Where there was a perceived local demand for funded provision, this was a motivation for registering. They hoped that offering funded places would help fill vacancies and would meet the needs of local families. In some instances, childminders had been encouraged to offer funded provision by local services including Children's Centres, Social Services⁶ and the Local Authority and this was a catalyst to their registration.

- Making a difference

Childminders also offered the two-year-old funded provision because they felt there was a need in their local area to support families living in deprived

⁶ Findings from Smith, R (et al) (2009) *Early Education Pilot for Two Year Old Children Evaluation*. DCSF Research Report No. DCSF-RR134 suggests that social workers have historically played a role in targeting families eligible for funded provision and this may explain their role in encouraging childminders to register to offer it.

households. Childminders were committed to making a difference, working towards school readiness and supporting families where there may be additional needs. This in turn increased job satisfaction:

'To be honest... it was a bit more of a challenge for me. Because a lot of the children that require the - especially the two-year-old funding in this area - their families and the children required additional support. And I quite like that.... it was a different aspect to my job, I suppose.'

(Childminder, East Midlands)

However, a number of barriers to offering funded places were also mentioned:

- Lack of local demand

In cases where either childminders were not offering funded places (or offered them but had no funded children currently on roll), a reason given was that there was limited local demand. For two-year-old funded places, three possible reasons for low demand were identified:

1. They lived in an affluent area with few eligible children.
2. It was felt that awareness levels amongst eligible families was low, and in some cases families were not motivated to take-up their funded childcare place because of other issues and challenges in their lives:

'At the moment a lot of [childminders] are saying that not many two-year-old funding people are getting in contact with them. They reckon there's hundreds around, but you see it's down to the parents and if the parents can't be bothered then.. I think if they've got their own problems a lot of them won't phone up or they won't talk to somebody'

(Childminder, South West)

3. Although some childminders reported working closely with social services and health visitors, others felt that parents are being encouraged by these professionals to take up funded provision in nurseries, rather than take up places with childminders:

'I don't know whether, you know, health visitors promote this, or, you know, if they even see health visitors or social workers.. and if they do then they're usually, those kind of health professionals push nurseries, so childminders don't really get a look in, because we're kind of thought of on that basis as just we're a glorified babysitter. Still. I come across that still now.'

(Childminder, North West)

For three- and four-year-old funded places, low demand in a local area was felt to be the result of parents preferring to use their funded hours in a nursery setting, as a more structured group based provision was viewed as a stepping stone to school. In these cases, it was not uncommon for childminders to provide additional wrap-around care alongside the nursery setting provision.

- Ofsted rating

To be able to offer funded places for two-year-olds, childminders must be rated 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted, or 'requires improvement' where the local authority believes it is necessary to ensure sufficient capacity is available locally. This means some childminders who would like to offer the provision are currently ineligible. Some concerns were raised that Ofsted are behind schedule with their inspection visits, delaying the opportunity for some childminders to improve their Ofsted ratings and begin offering funded two-year-old places⁷.

- Challenges of meeting additional needs

Some concerns were raised over the additional challenges involved in offering two-year-old places to families with additional needs. Examples were given of childminders providing a lot of additional support to parents (for example, support with potty training, sleep routines, healthy eating and behaviour management), working closely with social services and in some instances dealing with safeguarding concerns. While meeting these additional needs was a motivator for some childminders to offer funded provision, it was also acknowledged that these demands could be a barrier:

'Two year old funding can be a bit hairy because you might be getting children who might be under social services, they might have problems... some people don't want to deal with them.'

(Childminder, South East)

As childminders live within the communities they serve, they described the importance of factoring in risk when deciding whether to work with a family (taking into consideration the potential risks to themselves, their families and the other children in their setting).

- Splitting funding with other provision

There were examples of childminders splitting funded places with other settings including local nurseries. This was viewed positively by childminders who felt that sharing care could be beneficial for children of this age as they moved from a small setting to larger group based settings:

⁷ From March 2014, the Children and Families Act has made provision for childcare providers to request an Ofsted inspection on the payment of a fee.

'I think initially, if a child's going to pre-school it might be it's too much for them to go five days, and it would be better to [start with] two, and then build it up nearer to them sort of starting school, you know, build it up so.. 'Oh, yeah, I'm bigger now, I'm going five mornings now', you know?'

(Childminder, South East)

However, some nurseries would not split funded places in this way and consequently childminders were not able to share care in these instances.

- Accreditation

There was a perception that to register to offer funded provision, childminders must undergo an accreditation process that might be costly and would involve a local assessment, either by the Local Authority or the local childminder network. While this was not identified as the primary barrier, it was a contributing factor that discouraged registration for some childminders. In one case for example, a childminder who had recently completed an Ofsted inspection felt reluctant to go through a similar process locally:

'[You have to] sort of become accredited by a local childminder network who come out and, you know, inspect and look through. It's - that's pretty much like an Ofsted inspection. You know, they give their own inspection. If they decide that, you know, you meet the standard that they think you should, then you can become accredited and then you can claim back that funding to offer a place. But, to be honest, at the time, I think it, you know, would have cost me money to sort of join the network. I think it was about £100 to join the network.. I probably would have done it by now if it was.. if it was a bit more straightforward.'

(Childminder, North West)

- Perceived ineligibility

In one case, a childminder had not registered to offer funded places because she did not hold a Level 3 qualification. It was her understanding that this was a requirement for funded provision and she was therefore ineligible.

- Administration

Additional paperwork (for example, head-counts or using on-line portals to submit administrative data) were identified as barriers to offering funded provision. While typically not primary barriers, they were a contributing factor that made registering for funded places less attractive for some childminders.

3.2 Funding levels

This section reports the views of childminders on the levels of funding available and the impacts of funding on the provision offered.

Two-year-old funding

Within the sample for this study, reported funding levels for two-year-old places varied from £4.60 to £6.10 per hour. Childminders reflected that these levels were similar or higher than the hourly rates they charged privately and were generally felt to be adequate. Some felt that children eligible for funded two-year-old places had additional needs and higher hourly rates were needed to meet these extra demands. Because the places are only funded for fifteen hours, thirty-eight weeks of the year higher rates were important to make it viable to offer these places. This is particularly true because families taking-up two-year-old funded places typically could not afford to pay for additional hours so childminders had to work harder to accommodate more part-time places.

Three and four-year-old funding

Reported funding levels for three and four-year-old provision varied and typically ranged from £3.40 to £5 an hour. Compared to funding for two-year-old places, childminders felt these levels of funding were less satisfactory with levels often lower than the levels they charged privately. Rates were also typically lower for three- and four-year-old places than two-year-old places in the same locality (although there were examples where the same rate was offered for both).

Childminders reported that these lower levels of funding had an impact on the financial viability of offering three and four-year-old funded places, particularly where childminders were paying staff costs. While some were able to accommodate the funding levels and reported that they had no impact on how they structured their provision or which children they cared for, this was not always the case. Impacts on how childminders structured their provision included:

- charging for food (with the option of parents sending packed lunch) which would otherwise have been included in the hourly rate they charged
- offering funded places only at quieter times of the week (for example after 2pm), unless parents were paying for additional hours on top
- charging for optional additional classes that would otherwise have been included in the hourly rate charged e.g. cooking classes, etc.
- not marketing the availability of funded places and prioritising providing places to children they already care for to maintain continuity of care

It was also common for rates for three and four-year-old funding to vary within individual local authorities, with childminders receiving different rates depending on:

- qualification level
- whether offering flexible hours e.g. early mornings / evenings

- whether offering pick-ups and drop-offs
- their Ofsted rating
- the number of eligible children in the setting (with a lower hourly rate, the higher the number of eligible three and four-year-olds).

'I do get a little bit of flexibility allowance and quality allowance. They have sort of different things, they bump the hourly rate up a little bit if you could offer certain things. So I'm on £4.12 an hour, the base rate is £3.88, so with the quality and flexibility allowance it bumps it to £4.12, but that's still way, way below what my hourly rate is.'

(Childminder, South West)

Generally some acknowledgment of higher qualification levels, Ofsted ratings and flexibility in pay rates was felt to be fair, as a way of reflecting the quality of the care being offered and incentivising improvements.

3.3 Administration

Childminders typically received payment for funded childcare either monthly or termly with a 70 per cent payment towards the start of the term and 30 per cent paid in arrears at the end of the term. Some reported difficulties managing cash flow, with payments being made twice termly when they were used to weekly or monthly payments from private clients. Managing changes in headcount during the term could also be challenging as overpayments may need to be paid back or additional payments made.

Some childminders reflected that they were able to accommodate the payment structure because they only had a few eligible children, but would struggle if their numbers rose. The preference was for monthly payments to avoid cash flow difficulties of this kind.

3.4 Views on impacts

Childminders who offered funded places thought the provision was important. It offered children who might otherwise not have access to early years provision, access to a learning environment with professionals able to support their learning and identify and tackle any learning delays. This section reports on childminders' views of the effects of funded provision on children and the local childcare market:

Impacts on children and families

Childminders identified a range of benefits for children of funded provision:

- Welfare and safeguarding

These effects (particularly for funded two-year-olds) included healthier eating, increased exercise and the development of skills including road safety and stranger danger. Improvements in behaviour were also reported with timid children becoming more confident and aggressive or anxious children becoming happier and more relaxed. These benefits were viewed as particularly important for children who may have difficult home lives:

'So they come here, and, you know, yes, they're learning, but they're just in a lovely environment where they feel safe and relaxed, so they can open up and, and speak and communicate to people where, you know, maybe they don't get the opportunity at home, if there's a lot of, you know, depression or violence or situations at home. Mum is getting a break from the children, because she struggles, and they are just making friends... and I've just seen them develop from being very sort of timid, fairly aggressive children, to just really well-balanced, communicative... they're just lovely children. They're just typical two- and three-year-olds, really.'

(Childminder, South West)

- Learning and development

Childminders reflected that funded provision gave children access to a learning environment and as professionals they were able to identify developmental delays and take action:

"It also gives children access to a learning environment, a learning play environment if I can say that... I think as professionals we are better placed to spot if there's perhaps a learning delay or anything like that because I think as a parent when you're so close to a situation you tend to go into denial of there being perhaps a learning delay or a speech and language delay or, or even a physical development delay; whereas as a professional... I've got that opportunity to be able to say to the parent well look, this is where your child should be according to the EYFS but this is kind of where he's not, where she's not, but this is what we can put in place to make sure that we bring them up to speed."

(Childminder, South West)

Examples were also given of children with speech and language delay who made good progress:

'The child came to me with quite severe speech and language delay. He's now able to put five words together. When I say severe speech and language delay he, how old is? Three and a half and he was just making one word, one word phrases but now we, we've kind of pulled him right up as to have, he's able to now have a conversation; albeit he still has some

sound problems but he's now able to make himself understood.'

(Childminder, South West)

- School readiness

Ensuring children were ready for school was viewed as an important aim of the funded provision. Socialising with other children, developing routines, and potty training were all elements of early years provision that were viewed as important for preparing children for school.

Childminders also described supporting parents (particularly for funded two-year-olds) in a variety of ways including providing guidance on healthy meals, advising on potty training, sleeping and behaviour issues:

'I'm usually supporting the families, and it's that bit I like, you know, that 'Come on, we need to get his name down for the school, we need to do this'. You know, you're sort of, it's like being on a journey with the parent, and you're trying to support them through... you're trying to sort of direct and support the families, and I find most of the two-year-old children I've got it's because the families need that support.'

(Childminder, South East)

Local childcare market

There was no clear message from the interviews on the impact of funded provision on local demand for childminder places. Childminders who were at capacity reflected that it was difficult to judge whether demand had changed because they were already full. In other cases, as discussed in Section 3.1, some childminders felt the two-year-old provision was either not being taken-up by eligible families, or families were being encouraged to access nursery provision (which was expanding its two-year-old provision) consequently suppressing demand for funded childminder places:

'[Funded provision] has made a little bit of difference [to demand], but I still think that although they wanted to bring childminders in to offer more places [the Family Information Service are] still pushing the places out to nurseries and then if a nursery is full, then 'oh I'd better look for a childminder in that area'. I had four referrals in three months last year which resulted in two placements.. I've had nothing since and then I've had two referrals beginning of June this year which resulted in one placement.'

(Childminder, South East)

And:

'I think there's, there's enough childminders offering it, but a lot of them aren't full because the people aren't taking them up on the offer 'cause there's one, two, three, there's three actually on the estate.. And they all offer it and then there's one starting up on the estate. So there's four childminders on the estate, but then the school is opening a two year old nursery in January.. That will most probably have a massive impact.'

(Childminder, South West)

There were some concerns about the appropriateness of group settings for two-year-olds. Some childminders had the opinion that some two-year-olds were better suited to small settings in a family environment.

'I don't think two year olds should be in the nursery setting. They're still too little.. I think they should be allowed to play and learn to play and things like that and not be chucked into a nursery environment, but that's because I'm a childminder so I'm a bit biased.'

(Childminder, South West)

In other instances, childminders reported an increase in demand and this was particularly the case where there was a shortage of childminders in the area, or where local Children's Centres had closed:

'When I get calls through now to say, you know we want to place our child, I just can't fit anyone else in and I can't even recommend any other childminders in the area because we are full, all of us... There is a shortage of childminders in the patch at the moment to fill the places and I think that's been driven by the two year funding.'

(Childminder, South West)

4 Infrastructure, support and quality in childminder settings

This section discusses key issues for the sector in relation to infrastructure, support and guidance and quality.

4.1 Sources of support & guidance

Childminders drew on a range of support and guidance depending on services available in their local area. Overall, the view was that sources of support and guidance have reduced in recent years as a result of cut-backs in local services. Key sources of support were:

- Childminder networks

For childminders who were part of a network, these were a valuable source of support with regular meetings and support from co-ordinators. However, not all areas had a network and in some instances childminders had chosen not to join their local one, preferring to use other sources of support (including Ofsted and informal peer networks).

- Children's Centre childminder groups

Childminder groups held at local Children's Centres or local play-centres provided childminders with an opportunity to meet other childminders and share information and advice while children used the play facilities. In some instances, these groups were also attended by a Local Authority co-ordinator, which was also welcomed because childminders valued having a childcare professional available to answer queries and provide advice. However, some childminders in rural areas did not have a local group. There were also examples of childminder groups closing because rooms were needed in Children's Centres to expand provision for funded two-year-olds.

- Local Authority co-ordinators

A key source of support for many was the Local Authority co-ordinator, development officer or quality assurance officer, either employed directly by the LA or as a contracted service, for example from the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY). Childminders found the support and advice from these staff invaluable but reflected that recent cuts in services had reduced the support available. Examples included home visits being discontinued or limited to childminders with Ofsted ratings of satisfactory/requires improvement or lower. In other cases, fees had been introduced for home visits.

- Professional associations

Childminders drew on the support of professional associations including PACEY and the Pre-School Learning Alliance, including accessing training and advice and guidance.

4.2 Partnership working

The extent to which childminders reported being involved in local partnership working in their local area varied. Examples of strong partnership working included a childminder who worked closely with health visitors and social workers in her area, sharing the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and liaising closely on individual cases – a form of partnership working she attributed to the system set up by her Local Authority:

'We have a good system in place. We know exactly who we need to speak to, so if we have a referral through social services, through, you know, a social worker, then that would be our first point of call. We get the CAF form, so we would know why those children were referred. We would have all of the different agencies we know we could speak to: the doctors, the health visitors, the social workers. And we get the parents to sign a disclosure form.. to say that I can talk to any of these agencies if I need. I think it's a good system.'

(Childminder, South West)

In another example, a childminder spoke positively about her experience of working with her local primary school, sharing information on a child's progress and working collaboratively:

'The other reception teachers that I pick up from all know me by name.. they'll see this file when it goes in with the children; they see what I do with them; they see the photographic evidence.. and what I do with them is, if I've got a query about a child, they're really good: they'll have a meeting with me and I'll say, 'Look, you know, she's at this stage. Where do you want me to take her next? Do you want me to be developing this?.. And they'll tell me where they want them for when they start, to give them - you know, so they can do what they need to do. So that's fantastic.'

However, childminders also acknowledged that partnership working could be challenging because of the time pressures and demands on the professionals involved. In one case for example, a childminder reported sending letters to her local primary school to ascertain transition dates and receiving no response. In another example, a childminder reflected that she regularly wrote reports for the two-year-progress check for health visitors but never received any feedback:

'I write quite a lengthy report for the progress check, which is, you know, it's part of the, the requirements, and then send that with the parents with the two-year

check, and then - because I think that [coughs] it's important.. I never get any feedback from the health visitors, which I would like. I just kind of have to ask the parents if, you know, 'Oh, was it all right, then? Did they go okay?' and if they say it was all right. But I suppose health visitors have got so much on their plate anyway these days that I don't suppose keeping in touch with childminders would be high on their priority list.'

(Childminder, North West)

4.3 Training

Childminders participating in this study had varying Early Years qualification levels, with some qualified to Level 3 or higher, some working towards their Level 3 and others not qualified to Level 3. Those who had gained a Level 3 qualification while working as a childminder were motivated by:

- a desire to improve and develop their practice;
- an expectation that Level 3 would become a minimum standard required by Ofsted, or a minimum standard to offer funded provision:

'We've pretty much been told that - there's nothing been set in stone, but we've been - there's been rumours that by 2015 Ofsted are expecting all childminders to have that qualification'

(Childminder, South West)

Alongside these motivations, facilitators to Level 3 qualifications included:

- Bursaries

Bursaries that paid for some or all the course fees (typically from their Local Authority) were identified as a key facilitator to childminders training to this level. Where bursaries were not available, there were examples of childminders taking out student loans to pay for course fees. Some childminders said that they would find it difficult to pay course fees without the help of a bursary.

- Flexible course formats

Flexible course formats that enabled childminders to fit their training in around their work commitments were crucial to achieving Level 3 qualification. Some childminders said that they struggled to find time to complete their training while working long-hours as a childminder.

Part-time evening classes, on-line courses and work based assessment approaches that involved an assessor making regular visits to the setting were all approaches taken to achieve Level 3 qualifications.

There were fewer examples in the sample of childminders who had not trained to Level 3 (or were not in the process of studying for a Level 3 qualification). However, where this was the case, length of experience as a childminder and the view that they were nearing the end of their career were reasons given for not pursuing a Level 3 qualification. Costs and the burden of fitting course requirements around full-time employment were also barriers to studying for Level 3 qualifications.

In terms of on-going professional development and training, childminders accessed training courses through their Local Authorities, and also from professional bodies including PACEY and the Pre-School Learning Alliance. Overall there was a general sense that costs for training had increased (particularly for courses run by their Local Authority) and courses that were previously free or had a nominal fee were now more expensive. This had led some childminders to be more selective when accessing training to minimise costs.

Some childminders also reported difficulties accessing training because it was scheduled for weekdays when they were working or because demand for particular mandatory courses (for example, Paediatric First Aid) was high in their area. Business training was also identified as a gap that is not currently part of the standard training accessed by childminders:

'I think the biggest thing, and I found this out myself as well when I started, is that you receive no business training... Ofsted do the sort of regulatory side with you, you have your childminder induction training, but no one actually really sits you down and tells you how to run a business and how to work out, you know, your tax, your national insurance. When, when do you become viable? What can you afford to pay for? What can you not? What do you charge? .. it's all very vague and I know a lot of child minders struggle with that.'

(Childminder, South East)

4.4 Views on quality

Childminders in our sample felt that settings that met the following criteria were providing good quality provision:

- Supporting learning and progression

Implementing the statutory EYFS Framework, knowing the children well, monitoring progress and aiming for the next level of development. Fostering learning through play and providing a stimulating environment.

'It's all about the childminder knowing the children and having a special bond with the children, knowing them, knowing what their level of development is, always aiming towards the next level of development.'

(Childminder, North East)

- Fostering health and wellbeing

Providing care in a safe, secure and nurturing environment, while fostering independence, confidence and enjoyment:

'It's that loving, caring, nurturing environment where they can learn how to write their name, and they can learn their colours and their numbers and how to, you know, use a pair of scissors and, and just be themselves, in a small setting.'

(Childminder, South West)

- Supporting parents

Good relationships with parents built on trust and good communication, providing support and advice where appropriate:

'That the parents can get support when they need it, because a lot of the time you're not just taking on the child; you're taking on the family.. This weekend we're having a parent meet-up and I'm doing an interactive workshop with all the parents. And I think you have to have that - you have to have that trust.'

(Childminder, South West)

- Continually striving for quality improvement

Continually reviewing and improving practice, with an emphasis on maximising the benefits to the children in their care.

4.5 Maintaining quality

Childminders in our sample drew on a range of tools and used a range of approaches to maintain and improve the quality of their provision.

- Quality standards, awards and certificates

Quality standards and awards supported by Local Authorities were highlighted as an important source of support. The Bristol Standard - a self-assessed quality improvement tool was one example of an approach used⁸. Others had participated in local Quality Awards facilitated by quality visits from local development officers, or regularly attended Local Authority run Quality Forums where best practice was shared and discussed.

⁸ For further detail on the Bristol Standard (<http://www.bristol.gov.uk/page/children-and-young-people/bristol-standard>)

- Childminder networks

Childminder networks were felt to foster quality improvement, by meeting regularly, updating members on changes in the sector and sharing best practice:

'I know there has been a drive by our support network, our childminding support network to get out into the field and really bring it, it up to more of an equal level across the field.'

(Childminder, South West)

There were also examples of experienced childminders in our sample who act as mentors to new childminders supporting them in establishing their practice:

'I've been a mentor for new childminders over the last few years, so the child-minding team, once they get the new childminders registered.. Those childminders were then placed with another childminder who's been working for some time and given.. support of a mentor..'

(Childminder, South West)

- On-going professional development

Membership to professional bodies like PACEY and a commitment to continuing professional development through training and reflective practice were ways in which childminders maintained quality. Examples include a childminder who kept a journal of activities, reflecting on how activities benefited the children she cared for and constantly updating and reviewing her practice, in a process of continual improvement.

- The role of Ofsted

Childminders identified Ofsted's role in setting standards and judging the quality of childminder settings as important. Ofsted reports were a valued source of feedback on the quality of settings for both childminders and families. Their judgements were also felt to be important in validating the hard work of childminders providing high quality care and equally important for the validation of the sector as a profession with quality standards equal to other early years settings.

Alongside the value placed on Ofsted however, a number of concerns were also raised:

- there was a perception amongst childminders that there are inconsistencies between inspectors which have in turn led to examples of unfair and inconsistent ratings
- delays in Ofsted inspections (discussed earlier in Section 3.1) have meant delays in childminders being reassessed and potentially improving their ratings

- concerns were raised that local quality assurance schemes have been superseded by Ofsted. Visits from development officers / co-ordinators have been scaled back and Ofsted inspections were not felt to be an adequate replacement for this on-going support and guidance that had been cut:

'They seem to have decided to be the sole arbiter of everything, quality assurance, which is fine, but then it's, it's kind of, 'Well... you don't come out for, for three and four, five, six years'. Some childminders haven't had an inspection for five or six years...Whereas with the local authority, and taking part in the quality award... I'm seen every year by, or was, seen every year by our development officer that looks after childminders... whereas Ofsted only would see that once every blue moon whenever they come out to see you.'

(Childminder, North East)

- in some instances childminders reported that they would like clearer guidance from Ofsted. Examples given included advice on using the 'continuity of care' provisions correctly and sourcing First Aid training that would meet Ofsted requirements.

4.6 Childminder agencies

The Government is enabling the establishment of childminder agencies. It is envisaged that agencies will: encourage more people to become childminders; offer professional support to new and existing childminders; improve the quality of provision; and offer parents greater choice with regard to childcare. Childminders will be able to choose whether they wish to join an agency or retain their independent status. This section reports participants' views of agencies and their reflections on the potential strengths and weaknesses of the model.

The prevailing view of childminders in this study was that currently there is not enough information available in their area about how agencies will operate for them to make an informed decision about whether to join or not. Providing information of this kind and disseminating it to childminders will be the responsibility of childminder agencies. Childminders wanted further information and clarification on the following:

- Financial viability and stability

There were concerns over the intention for agencies to be self-funding and the financial viability of this model. Childminders were unclear how the funding models would work and worried that agency fees would erode childminder income or increase costs for parents. Some childminders said that they would consider joining an agency but the level of fees would be critical and would need to reflect the variations in childminder income.

Concerns about the financing of agencies in turn led to concerns about their stability and what impact agency closures would have on the childminders who had joined:

'The agency would be run as a business, a profit making business. If they're not making a profit then they're going to fold and so what happens to those childminders?'

(Childminder, South East)

- Quality and inspection

The Government has legislated so that Ofsted will inspect childminder agencies (sampling a number of their childminders) and provide an overall rating of the agency. Agencies will be responsible for quality assuring their registered childminders and the childcare they provide. Views were mixed on this approach. In some instances, childminders liked the idea that the agency would receive an Ofsted rating and they would receive quality assurance, on-going support and guidance from the agency:

'I like the idea of an agency, them knowing my setting, them coming to inspect me, and it makes me feel like they're more of a help, rather than how it is at the minute when Ofsted come round. Everyone panics, I panic because it's my livelihood that if, you know, if something goes wrong on that day and they write down satisfactory, people don't want to join this [setting].'

(Childminder, London)

However, an alternative view was that childminders valued their individual Ofsted ratings and felt that they were an important form of oversight that ensured high quality provision. There were concerns that an Ofsted rating applied to the agency rather than the individual would risk some poor practice being hidden and exceptionally high standards going unnoticed and unrecognised.

'I have concerns that when it's the agency that's inspected by Ofsted, is that you've maybe got exceptional childminders that may well come out with a lower Ofsted group rating than they deserve. But on the flip side, you may well have childminders that aren't up to standard who are being hidden by virtue of the fact that they've benefitted from a, you know, an Ofsted review'

(Childminder, South East)

Although the Government has confirmed that registration fees will remain at £35 for 2014-15, some childminders were under the mistaken impression that if they chose not to join an agency they may have to pay between £700-900 in fees to be

individually inspected by Ofsted. If that was the case, some childminders felt this would be unaffordable, effectively obliging them to join an agency to avoid these costs.

- Independence

There was a perception that joining an agency might reduce childminder independence, either because childminders could become employees of the agency or because the agency would force childminders to conform to standardised procedures and models of working. Childminders reflected that they had worked hard to build up their reputations (and achieve good Ofsted ratings) and in some instances had chosen to work in the profession because they enjoyed the flexibility and control self-employment gave them. A desire to maintain this independence was a key barrier to agency membership. Concerns were also raised that agencies would reduce choice for parents by reducing the range and diversity of provision in a local area:

'I think that, you know, if you come in to something like this, you come in to being self-employed, wanting to do it your way. You know, because no two childminders, no two nurseries are the same. And I think they may become sort of like a block of all very samey-ness in childminding agencies. You might find that they sort of dictate to their childminders how they want things done, policies, procedures and ways, and then you've just lost the uniqueness that certain settings offer. And that's parent choice then. You know, parents may go and look at three or four childminders and will select one on what they feel is the best fit. And if you're being sort of spoon fed, this is how you do it, this is how you do it, this is how you do it, they're all going to look the same... and I think that crushes some of the individuality that childminders have, some of the spark'

(Childminder, South East)

- Allocation of childcare places

Childminders were not clear about how childcare places would be allocated to childminders who had joined an agency. Established childminders generally did not feel they needed help with recruiting families, although it was acknowledged that new childminders may find this help attractive when starting up. The possibility that childminders would have little or no choice in the children allocated to them was generally felt to be a drawback:

'There's a lot of talk about wanting us to go into agencies... Not something that I want to go down the route of, personally... It just takes away so much of your freedom, being able to choose the children that come to you, for a start. You wouldn't be; you would be given the children... families looking for childcare will obviously go to the agency and then we'll be registered with

the agency, and then, you know, they'll get dished out, if you like.'
(Childminder, South West)

Building relationships with parents and ensuring a good match between the family and the setting was felt to be important for childminders and there were concerns this would be lost if children were allocated by an agency. There were also worries about agencies being also biased or showing favouritism in allocating places.

- Support, advice and guidance

Childminders understood childminder agencies would provide support in a range of areas including policies and procedures, invoicing, and quality, as well as provide training and cover for sickness. Again views were mixed on the value of this service. As discussed in section 4.1, childminders already received support of this kind from their Local Authorities and childminder networks. Although it was acknowledged that there had been reductions in this training and support in some areas, childminders remained to be convinced that agencies would be able to provide a similar level of support:

'If [the agency] was as supportive as my Local Authority is, I would say fantastic! But until I knew that I couldn't really say, because at this moment I think the Local Authority has got everybody's best interest at heart, and I really rate them.'

(Childminder, North East)

For this provision to be of value, childminders stressed the importance of face-to-face advice and a local service where the agency knew their registered childminders well.

5 Conclusion

As eligibility for funded early years provision was extended in September 2014 so that two- year old children in the 40 per cent most disadvantaged households , childminders will play an important part in providing this early years education. This section summarises the key themes of the report and reflects on suggestions made by childminders to support the sector as it meets these new demands:

- Capacity

Childminder capacity is influenced by a range of factors, including physical constraints (size of premises and car capacity), levels of staffing, and work-life balance considerations. Financial viability was also a key consideration with childminders highlighting the fluctuations in income that can result from changing numbers on roll and the challenges this can bring.

In terms of capacity to deliver funded provision, childminders were motivated to offer funded two-, three- and four-year-old places to deliver continuity of care and make a difference to children and families who otherwise may not have access to Early Years provision. The level of funding for two-year-old places was also generally felt to be sufficient, and was not a barrier to childminders offering these places.

However, a number of barriers to offering funded provision were identified. Limited demand was reported by some childminders, although this may change as eligibility extends and awareness grows. For some childminders, there were also concerns that disadvantaged two-year-olds (and their families) may require additional support, which they might find difficult to provide. The findings from this study suggest that the number of childminders offering funded places might increase if:

- The funding available for three and four-year-old places is increased;
- The payment structures are designed to minimise cash flow difficulties;
- Clear information is disseminated on the accreditation process and eligibility criteria.

- High quality provision

High quality early years provision depends on a well trained work force with quality assurance processes embedded and access to continuing professional development. Quality assurance was facilitated by local Quality Awards, Quality Forums, Quality Standards and on-going support from network and local authority co-ordinators or quality assurance officers. The Ofsted inspection process was also valued for its role in maintaining quality, however concerns were voiced that Ofsted should not supersede the support provided by these other sources to

maintain and improve quality in the sector. The findings from this study suggest that high quality provision could be supported by:

- Bursaries and flexible course formats for Level 3 qualifications;
- Access to affordable on-going continuing professional development;
- Support for local quality assurance systems to embed good practice.

- Infrastructure

Childminders currently use a range of sources for advice and support, from Local Authorities, childminder networks, professional associations and Ofsted. This support was viewed as invaluable, and important for maintaining standards.

Childminder agencies are intended to provide childminders with support for quality assurance, CPD, training, and sustainability advice. Childminders felt they needed more detail on how agencies will operate in their local area to make an informed decision about whether to join. They would value further information regarding:

- The financial viability of agencies
- How childminder independence will be maintained
- How childcare places will be allocated
- The proposed approach to quality assurance.

Appendix A Interview Topic Guide

1. Introductions

- Introduce yourself and NatCen
- Introduce the study:
 - Funded by the Department for Education
 - Working in collaboration with 4Children, Frontier Economics and Oxford University
 - Part of the wider Study of Early Education and Development (SEED)
 - This part of the study aims to explore the views and experiences of childminders – particularly the barriers / facilitators to offering funded provision.
- Interview is one of twenty interviews with childminders.
- Digital recording – check OK, and reassure re: confidentiality
- Data kept securely in accordance with Data Protection Act
- How we'll report findings – anonymity of participants
- Reminder of interview length – (45mins-1 hour) check OK
- Right to withdraw during or after the interview has taken place
- Any questions/concerns?

2. Background

Aim: to gather contextual information on how long they have been a childminder, their motivations for childminding and their qualifications

- Length of time as a childminder
- Professional background
- Motivations for becoming a childminder
 - Career choice / stop gap/ have their own pre-school or school aged children/ whether became childminder before/after having their own children
- Childcare qualifications / training
- Any links with other local services (e.g. Children's Centre, Health Visitor)

3. Current provision

Aim: to understand in detail the provision they are currently offering, their current ratios, fees, and capacity. To explore their views of the costs associated with childminding

- Overview of current provision
 - Number of children
 - Age range of children
 - How many – if any – have some or all of their hours funded (e.g. through 2 year old offer, or universal 3-4 year old offer)
 - Whether other staff employed
 - Roles

- Ratios and capacity
 - Current ratios
 - Whether operating at capacity
 - Factors influencing capacity –
 - *Open then probe for influence of:*
 - Preference
 - Demand
 - Space
 - Quality considerations
- Fees charged / annual income
 - Level of fees charged
 - Fees structure (hourly, daily, weekly etc)
 - Discounts, e.g. full-time places, sibling
 - Factors influencing fees charged
 - Approximate annual income
- Costs
 - Views on costs associated with childminding:
 - *Open then probe for views on:*
 - Set-up costs
 - Marketing
 - Recruitment
 - Invoicing
 - Ofsted
 - Food/equipment
 - Other activities/trips
- Relationships with parents/carers
 - How they share/communicate information on children’s progress
 - Extent to which they offer parenting advice/support to families – nature/type of support
- Quality
 - Views on main features of quality provision
 - How they benchmark quality (e.g. Ofsted rating)
 - How they seek to maintain/improve quality

4. Views on funded provision

Aim: To understand the facilitators and barriers to providing funded care and the range of factors influencing these decisions. To explore

- Understanding/awareness of the 2 year old offer and universal 3-4 year old offer.
- Whether offering funded provision:
 - For 2 yr olds
 - 3-4 yr olds

For childminders offering funded provision:

- Decision making
 - Reasons for offering funded provision
 - Length of time offering provision
- Demand from parents
 - Whether parents have enquired about funded provision (for 2 year-olds, or 3-4 year olds)
 - Awareness of whether parents are accessing funded provision elsewhere
- Funding levels
 - Views on level of funding
 - Comparison to open market fees
 - impacts on willingness to offer funded places and childminders financial viability'
- Administration of funded provision
 - Experiences of administration involved
 - Sources of support / guidance
 - Any recommendations / improvements
- Impacts of funded provision

Open then probe for impacts on:

 - Children / families eligible
 - Capacity
 - Ability to fill places
 - Quality of provision (e.g. any changes required in order to be accredited to offer funded places)

For childminders not offering funded provision:

- Reasons for not offering funded provision

Open then probe for influence of:

 - Funding levels
 - Number of funded hours
 - Administration
 - Ofsted rating
- Demand from parents
 - Whether parents have enquired about funded provision (for two-year olds, or three- and four- year olds?)
 - For places for children of a particular age
 - Awareness of whether parents are accessing funded provision elsewhere
- What might encourage them to offer funded places in the future?
 - Increases in funding available for places
 - More information about what is involved

- Support in development quality of provision
- Other

Overall reflections (ASK ALL):

- Recommendations / suggestions for improvements to funded provision

5. Childcare market

Aim: to explore their views of their local childcare market, with particular focus on their views and experiences of Childminder Agencies and the role of the Local Authority.

- Awareness of Childminder Agencies
 - Level of awareness of Childminder Agencies
 - Views on the purpose of Childminder Agencies
 -
- Experiences of Childminder Agencies
 - Whether they have considered joining
 - Facilitators
 - Barriers
- Role of Local Authority
 - Level of contact / support from Local Authority
 - Nature of support
 - Training
 - Capital funding
 - Other forms of support
 - Views on support provided (if applicable)

6. Future plans

Aim: To understand their long-term goals as a childminder and whether they are planning any changes to their provision. To explore their perceptions of the future for the childminding profession

- Whether planning to be a childminder long-term
 - Reasons
 - Facilitators / barriers to staying in the profession
- Any final reflections?
- Thank and close

Appendix B Recruitment leaflet



Department
for Education



Study of Early Education
& Development

Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Research with childminders

What is SEED?

SEED is a major new study which will follow up to 5,000 two-year olds from across England through to their primary years at school. It will find out how early education and childcare provision can help to give children the best start in life and what is important for high quality provision. The study is being carried out by NatCen Social Research, working with Frontier Economics, the University of Oxford and 4Children, on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE) and is focused on all types of provider in the early years and visiting early years settings and speaking to early years practitioners.

How does this involve me?

As part of SEED we would like to speak to childminders about your experiences of delivering early years provision. We are particularly interested in your views on:

- offering and filling places, and parents' childcare requirements;
- quality in early years provision;
- the factors that help your childminding business, and any challenges you and other childminders may face.

As a thank you for taking part you will receive a £20 high street shopping voucher.

What do I have to do?

Taking part is completely voluntary and involves speaking to a NatCen Researcher for about 45 minutes to 1 hour on the telephone at a time that is convenient for you. Interviews are digitally recorded, however please rest assured that information you supply will be treated in confidence and used for research purposes only.

What happens after the interview?

A report will be produced at the end of the research that will be publicly available. The final evaluation report will be made available on the DfE website after publication.

Your privacy

Your personal details will be handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. No individuals will be identified in our published report and we will only share your personal data with third parties if the law requires us to.

Further info

If you have any questions you can contact [research team] at NatCen on [telephone number] or by emailing [researcher contact details]



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