



Department
for Education

Voices from the childminding profession: Perceptions on challenges and opportunities

Research report

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Contents

Executive summary	3
Introduction	7
Method	7
Interpreting the findings	9
Bureaucratic challenges	11
Challenges	11
Solutions	18
Retention	20
Reasons for leaving	20
Reasons for staying	26
Childminding assistants	29
Perceived benefits of working with assistants	29
Perceived challenges of working with assistants	32
Childminder agencies (CMAs)	36
Awareness of CMAs	36
Perceptions of CMAs	37
Solutions to joining CMAs	42
Summary of key findings	44
Appendix A: Achieved sample	48
Appendix B: Topic guides	50

Executive summary

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to conduct qualitative interviews with active and former childminders in England. The aim of the research was to fill evidence gaps related to four thematic areas: bureaucratic challenges, retention, childminder agencies (CMAs) and childminding assistants. Active childminders were sampled from the 2021 Survey of Childcare and Early Years Providers (SCEYP) from those who had agreed to be re-contacted on behalf of the DfE up to 24 months after the original survey. Former childminders were recruited through snowball sampling and social media.

This report presents findings from 33 qualitative interviews, including 19 interviews with active childminders and 14 interviews with former childminders. Interviews with participants lasted around 45 minutes and were conducted using topic guides. Data collection took place between late June and mid-August 2022. The sample includes participants from across all regions of England with varying levels of experience, including experience of working with childminding assistants.

Key findings

Bureaucratic challenges

- Participants faced several bureaucratic challenges as childminders. Some found it difficult to complete paperwork, including paperwork relating to the care of children and statutory requirements or self-employment. Managing updates and changes to policies in response to frequently changing statutory requirements constituted another challenge, and participants did not always understand what evidence to gather for Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Ofsted inspections.
- Completing paperwork and compiling paperwork perceived as necessary for Ofsted inspections were considered burdensome because of the amount of time they were seen to require. Participants often completed administrative tasks on weekends or evenings to avoid compromising the quality of their care.
- The perceived lack of clarity over how and whether evidence and documentation was used (e.g., by Ofsted and schools) resulted in some participants spending considerable time gathering evidence and producing policies that were not required.
- The communication and documentation participants received (e.g., from the DfE) was often seen to be targeted at the wider early years workforce. This was particularly the case during the COVID-19 pandemic and made it difficult for participants to understand what was relevant for their profession.

- Policies and resources (e.g., from the DfE or local authorities (LA)) could be difficult for participants to understand. They cited the EYFS framework as illustrative of this complexity due to the volume of information it contained, and the level of knowledge they believed was needed to understand and implement it.
- A perceived lack of consistency relating to Ofsted inspections made it difficult for participants to know what constituted best practice. They reported receiving contradictory feedback from different inspectors, for instance on what constituted an 'outstanding' grading.
- There was no evidence that perceptions of bureaucratic challenges and their causes differed by participants' levels of experience.
- Participants' suggestions for addressing bureaucratic challenges related to communication, inspections and support. Concrete examples included providing targeted, childminder-specific information and guidance; making inspections shorter and more frequent; and having access to dedicated support personnel, for example at the LA.

Retention

- Reasons for participants leaving the profession or considering leaving the profession revolved around factors internal or external to the profession and pragmatic considerations.
- Participants reported feeling lonely and working long hours, which impacted their wellbeing and personal life. Dealing with parents could be challenging, for instance when parents did not pay on time.
- There were also concerns about the lack of stability of being self-employed, reflected in a lack of sick pay. This lack of stability was heightened during and following COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, as the level of demand reduced as parents changed their ways of working. Former childminders who left during the COVID-19 pandemic explained that they might have stayed in the profession had they been better supported as self-employed professionals.
- A recurring view was that overall pay was inadequate, with the hourly rate often being below minimum wage. Participants also faced challenges with the funded hours as part of early years entitlements, including receiving less than the hourly rate they would typically charge for these entitlement hours. Although they knew that statutory guidance prohibited them from asking parents for 'top ups', some participants asked for parental contributions in other ways (e.g., payment for nappies or food) which is permitted within the guidance.
- Participants felt undervalued by government, parents and the early years sector. and believed they were not always viewed as professionals. This impacted their

ability to recruit families, who would often favour nurseries. Participants suggested concrete steps to improve the status of childminders, including providing more information to parents on the role and training of childminders, and replacing the term 'childminder' with a name that better reflected the professional nature of the role.

- Working with children was a key reason childminders remained in their profession. Others enjoyed the independence and flexibility of the job and found it compatible with having a family of their own. For some participants, the family-friendly nature of the profession was the reason for initially entering the profession, as they could care for their own children while also earning an income.

Childminding assistants

- Participants reported professional, financial and personal benefits to employing assistants. Assistants enabled childminders to share their workload, exchange ideas around best practice and provide more targeted care. Some participants chose to hire assistants to increase their income, as it allowed them to care for more children. Participants also liked the adult company assistants provided.
- Challenges of hiring assistants related to a perceived increase in responsibilities and risks, financial concerns and limited space, all of which drove participants' decision not to hire assistants. Participants did not want to face more paperwork, including organising and overseeing staff pensions and administering holiday and sick pay. They did not think it was always financially lucrative to hire an assistant, especially when they struggled to fill their places. Limited space in participants' domestic settings was another factor not to hire an assistant.

Childminder agencies

- Participants' awareness of childminder agencies (CMAs) varied, with a large group of participants having no or only limited awareness of CMAs. They were especially unclear about the role between Ofsted, CMAs and individual childminders.
- Participants' favourable perceptions of CMAs focused on CMAs' provision of training, which was seen to be more accessible and frequent than training provided locally (e.g., by LAs). CMAs were perceived to be responsive and clear in their communication with childminders, especially around communicating policy changes. There were also positive perceptions of CMAs' quality assurance visits. They were seen as less stressful than Ofsted inspections, partly because they were carried out by the same assessor who knew the childminder well.
- Participants with concerns about CMAs cited the possibility of being less in control over running their setting as a reason for not joining a CMA, although they had no

direct experience of working with CMAs. Others suggested that childminders could lose or fail to attract families if their CMA received a negative grading from Ofsted. Some participants also voiced concerns about a perceived lack of external quality assurance of CMA-registered childminders. A perception was that CMA-registered childminders did not need to fear the consequences of being in breach of regulations compared to Ofsted-registered childminders.

- There was no evidence that participants' perceptions of CMAs differed by levels of experience.
- Participants were keen to know and learn more about CMAs, which they regarded as important for making an informed decision about joining one. They suggested that childminders could be persuaded to join an agency by CMA-registered local childminders, as they were seen to have the necessary credibility. Others suggested the prospect of receiving support with paperwork and training at convenient hours would make CMAs appealing for them and other childminders.

Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to carry out qualitative interviews with active¹ and former childminders. The aim of the research was to fill evidence gaps related to bureaucratic challenges, retention, childminder agencies and childminding assistants. Active childminders were sampled from the 2021 Survey of Childcare and Early Years Providers (SCEYP).² Former childminders were recruited through snowball sampling and social media.

The four key research objectives were:

1. To explore the range, type and causes of bureaucratic burdens faced by childminders and how they could be reduced.
2. To identify the reasons for childminders either leaving or remaining in the profession and childminders' thoughts on changes to the profession over time.
3. To examine childminders' awareness and views of childminder agencies and possible reasons for childminder agencies' limited growth.
4. To explore childminders' reasons for working with and without childminding assistants and factors that would help childminders consider employing childminding assistants.

Method

Sample

Active childminders were sampled from a total of 200 childminders who took part in 2021 SCEYP and who had agreed to be re-contacted. NatCen had permission to contact 2021 SCEYP participants on behalf of the DfE up to 24 months after the original survey. A range of primary and secondary sampling criteria were established in consultation with the DfE (Table 1). The aim was to achieve a balance across all sampling criteria while prioritising a diverse sample across the primary sampling criteria (see Appendix A for the achieved sample by sampling criteria). No hard quotas were established given the limited sample size (n=200).

¹ We used the term 'current childminders' in the study plan and recruitment materials. However, the term 'active childminders' more accurately conveys that this group of participants worked as childminders at the time of the interview.

² More information about 2021 SCEYP can be found on the survey's webpage:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-and-early-years-providers-survey-2021>

Table 1: Overview of sampling criteria

Sampling criteria	Detail
Primary: Years as a childminder	Participants with different levels of experience
Primary: Childminding assistant	Around five participants with assistants in the overall sample
Secondary: Region	Participants from all nine regions of England
Secondary: Area of deprivation	Participants from areas with different levels of deprivation (based on the English indices of deprivation 2019)

Recruitment

Recruitment for interviews with active and former childminders took place between the 24th of June and 22nd of August 2022. An invitation email was sent out to all 200 childminders in the 2021 SCEYP sample. The email explained they were being invited to participate as they had agreed to be re-contacted as part of taking part in 2021 SCEYP. The email also included a link to the NatCen taking part page and the privacy notice. Childminders that did not respond to the initial email received up to three email reminders and a phone call. Former childminders were recruited via advertisements on social media (NatCen’s twitter page and PACEY’s Facebook and Twitter page). Active childminders were also asked to share our invitation email with any of their former childminder contacts after the interview. All childminders received a £30 Love2Shop voucher as a thank you for their participation.

Data collection and analysis

A total of 33 interviews were carried out: this included 19 interviews with active childminders and 14 interviews with former childminders. Interviews with participants lasted around 45 minutes and were conducted using topic guides to structure the discussion. These were prepared before fieldwork in consultation with the DfE (see Appendix B for both active and former childminder topic guides).

All qualitative interview data was digitally recorded with permission from participants and transcribed by a professional external transcription agency. At the end of each interview, participants were given the opportunity to have information removed from the analysis if

they did not want it to be included. Recordings were supplemented by structured fieldwork notes, which researchers produced after each interview. The purpose of fieldwork notes was to facilitate discussions between the research team around emerging findings.

Transcribed interview data was managed and analysed using NatCen's Framework approach in Microsoft Excel.³ Using the themes in the topic guides, a matrix was set out in which each row represented an individual and each column a theme and any related sub-themes. Transcribed data was thematically summarised and illustrative verbatim quotes added to the matrix. Analysis was then conducted by theme, across participants, and by case, across themes. This allowed mapping the full range of views and experiences, identifying commonalities and differences across participants, and developing explanations. The analysis was fully documented, and conclusions can be linked back to the original data source.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the NatCen Research Ethics Committee ahead of recruitment and data collection. Before the research encounter, participants were given clear, detailed information about the content of each discussion and how their information would be stored and used. They were also notified that the data collected would be published in a report for the DfE. Participation was voluntary and individuals could opt out of specific discussion or the full study.

Interpreting the findings

Limitations

Sample size and method. The purposive sampling approach ensured that the study captured a diverse set of active and former childminders' views and hence provides a good sense of the range of views and experiences across active and former childminders in England. However, as a qualitative approach was used, the study cannot provide robust information on the prevalence of these experiences and views.

Depth and quality. Two factors affected the depth and quality of interview coverage. First, the issue of bureaucratic challenges was complex and so took much of the interview time to cover. This meant that other sections of the topic guide, such as the section on childminding assistants or CMAs, were occasionally covered more lightly. Second, a large group of participants had limited or no awareness of CMAs. This meant

³ Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., McNaughton Nicholls, C., and Ormston, R. [eds.] (2013) *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. London: Sage.

that they either had little to say about CMAs or expressed views that were 'speculative' or inaccurate rather than informed by any knowledge or experience.

A note on terminology

Interviews were held with active and former childminders. We use the term 'participants' where findings relate to active *and* former childminders. Where they only relate to one group, this will be made explicit by referencing 'active' or 'former' childminders.

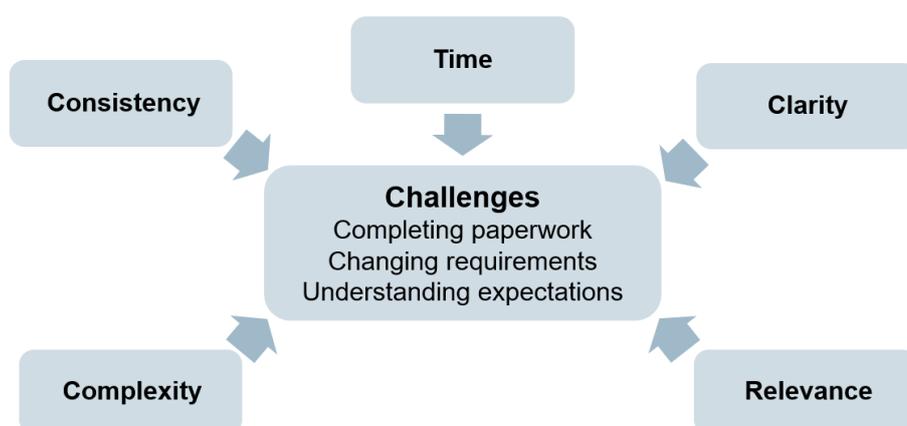
Findings have been anonymised throughout to protect the identity of participants, and case illustrations include pseudonyms. Where quotes are included, these have been attributed by childminder status (former or active), years of experience and whether the participant worked with an assistant or not.

Bureaucratic challenges

Participants discussed any bureaucratic burdens or challenges⁴ they faced or had faced as a childminder, and what they thought caused those challenges. Bureaucratic challenges in this context refers to administrative tasks and challenges of setting up and being a childminder, and with being regulated.

Across the interviews, there were several recurring challenges that were driven by key factors. Figure 1 presents the main challenges participants reported and the five underpinning drivers. These are discussed in detail below.

Figure 1. Bureaucratic challenges and their drivers



Challenges

Completing paperwork. Participants reported that completing paperwork was one of the main challenges of being a childminder. The types of paperwork they referenced related to two distinct areas:

- **The care of children or statutory requirements.** This included evidence for Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) or Ofsted (e.g., learning journeys⁵ or progress reports)⁶; two-year checks with health visitors; risk assessments and health and safety policies; and transition reports and assessments for other early years settings and/or schools.

⁴ The terms 'burdens' and 'challenges' are used interchangeably throughout the report.

⁵ Learning journeys (or journals) are a tool used by early years practitioners to document a child's developmental progress in their setting over time.

⁶ Recent reforms to the EYFS framework, and related Ofsted inspection guidance, have moved away from 'unnecessary paperwork' such as learning journeys. These reforms came into effect on 1 September 2021. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/changes-to-the-early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs-framework/changes-to-the-early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs-framework>)

- **The self-employed nature of childminding.** This covered tax returns; contracts with families; managing financial accounts and invoices; and payroll (for those with assistants).

There were always a lot of policies and things ... you had to write up. The paperwork did get a bit silly really. – Former CM, 17 years, no assistant

Changing requirements. Another challenge participants reported was managing frequent updates and changes to policies and requirements. They believed that statutory requirements such as EYFS and the necessary evidence for Ofsted inspections as well as health and safety guidance changed frequently. They were not always aware when these changes happened. They were also unclear how to incorporate changes into their own policies and procedures and communicate these to parents.

One of the main challenges was keeping up to date with government guidelines ... trying to decipher exactly the real meaning of what we were meant to do ... try and document that in an easy-to-understand way to either amend our policies or to advise parents of latest updates and things. – Former CM, 35 years, no assistant

Understanding expectations. Participants did not always understand what was expected of them, particularly around gathering evidence for EYFS and Ofsted inspections, leading to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety.

I don't honestly know what the requirements of Ofsted are. They seem to want a lot of paperwork ... I don't really know if they do. – Former CM, 12 years, no assistant

When participants described the challenges they faced, several mutually reinforcing factors driving these burdens emerged. These driving factors are outlined below.

Drivers underpinning challenges

Time

Participants found completing paperwork and preparing for Ofsted inspections burdensome because of the amount of time they felt they had to dedicate to them. Similarly, they stated that updating their own policies and procedures when policies and requirements changed was time consuming.

Especially keeping up with changes, so when they change the EYFS requirements. Then you have to change your policies ... staying on top of that can be time-consuming. – Active CM, 2 years, no assistant

Participants tended to complete paperwork in their own time to manage the time pressures and their professional responsibility of looking after children. They did not want to complete these tasks when children were with them, because they were concerned this would compromise their ability to look after children.

I always make sure the children and parents come first, so no. It [time spent on paperwork] doesn't affect them. – Active CM, 23 years, no assistant

Spending their own time on administrative tasks meant that some participants did this in the evenings or weekends, though this limited the time they could spend with their own families. Others changed their working patterns, for example not caring for children one day per week.

The policies and procedures just go through the roof ... continual updates. When you work alone, there's only me that can do it ... That's why I freed myself up on a Friday. – Active CM, 17 years, no assistant

Other participants did not see spending time completing administrative tasks as overly burdensome. This was because they:

- **Were experienced childminders** who had established systems in place for dealing with such tasks.
- **Had previous administrative experience** from former careers, for instance working in an office.
- **Used tools like apps or other online systems** to manage paperwork, for example to collect evidence on children's developmental progress.

Clarity

Participants had contrasting views on the volume and type of evidence they were required to gather. Some felt that the levels of paperwork required had reduced with changes to EYFS and Ofsted requirements, while others felt the volume was still high.

It was not always clear if participants were aware of recent changes. For example, an active childminder mentioned how the levels of paperwork had increased over time, and how time-consuming documentation such as learning journeys could be. Similarly,

participants were not always clear what to expect before, during and after Ofsted inspections, which could lead to feelings of stress and anxiety.

Well, everyone always gets anxious when it's time for the Ofsted inspection ... you always lived in fear that you'd forget to dot an I or cross a T and all of a sudden, something could go drastically wrong just for a slight oversight. – Former CM, 31 years, no assistant

Some participants believed that these feelings of stress and anxiety impacted the quality of care they provided when Ofsted were present.

It's hard to explain. It's someone in your house pulling you apart constantly. I think on that day, the children don't get the best out of me because I'm too stressed. – Active CM, 20 years, no assistant

The documentation of learning journeys illustrated the lack of clarity participants felt around recording children's progress in preparation for Ofsted inspections. For instance, some participants produced detailed and paper-based records for learning journeys to maintain their Ofsted grading.

I still do original old-school paper learning journeys ... [the] standard of learning journeys I send home ... [T]o keep up with an outstanding grade, you have to do the paperwork to go alongside it. – Active CM, 13 years, no assistant

Others however recognised that this level of evidence was no longer needed.

Ofsted did change, so when I first started childminding, we had to document absolutely everything ... but things did ease a little bit. – Former CM, 3 years, no assistant

Participants were also unclear whether and how their documentation was used by Ofsted, parents, health visitors, schools and other early years settings. This made them feel like their efforts could be a 'waste of time'. For example, some participants felt that the evidence they gathered on children's developmental milestones was not always reviewed by Ofsted during inspections. Similarly, they explained that parents often did not read the written evidence produced, and instead preferred verbal or informal updates. In another example an active childminder recounted their frustration about spending time on producing detailed transition reports and assessments for schools, although they believed schools disregarded this documentation.

I do other transition reports for schools ... It's report-writing, which nobody [schools] really seems to look at. – Active CM, 1 year, no assistant

The perceived lack of clarity over how and whether evidence (e.g. learning journeys) and documentation (e.g. transition reports, policies) was used resulted in some participants 'overcompensating'. They could spend considerable time and effort gathering evidence and producing policies even where these were not required.

I have got a folder full of policies but the actual only standard policies that you needed were your safeguarding and your complaints. So, you overcompensate ... just in case Ofsted ask you. – Former CM, 8 years, assistant

Relevance

Participants questioned the relevance of some of the communication and documentation they received from sources such as the DfE or local authorities (LAs) for the childminding profession. In particular, they cited receiving regular communication and guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic, which they felt were targeted at the wider early years or even education workforce rather than at childminders. This made it difficult for participants to decipher what was relevant for them as self-employed practitioners.

Most [COVID-19 related communication] of them are related to schools or nurseries attached to schools and have absolutely no impact at all on childminders. It's just, yes, it's just constant, a constant barrage of emails that are nothing at all to do with us. – Active CM, 5 years, no assistant

There was a view among participants that it could be difficult to find childminder-specific information and advice. This meant that childminders could spend significant time finding answers to questions they had. It reinforced a feeling they had that childminders were not sufficiently represented or acknowledged as part of the early years sector.

We just don't fall into anything and with a lot of the rules and regulations, it's really difficult because half the time, nobody can give us definitive answers on things. – Active CM, 9 years, no assistant

Complexity

Another driving factor behind the challenges participants faced was complexity. Participants found that policies, communications and resources (e.g., from the DfE or LAs) were often presented in a complex way or were difficult to locate.

The information is not readily available in one place for us. It's up to us to find that, and it can take a long time to find out where you need to go from there or what you need to do. – Active CM, 8 years, no assistant

Participants had different views on the complexity of the EYFS framework and how to apply it to their work. Some participants praised the recent changes, such as the focus away from monitoring.⁷ They found it easier to understand and implement and explained that it required less administrative work.

The changes last September ... before that there was a big focus on observations and paperwork tracking. That's been reduced a lot. – Active CM, 4 years, no assistant

Other participants continued to find the EYFS framework challenging. Some believed the document was difficult to digest due to the volume of information. Others commented on the level of knowledge required to understand and implement it. For example, a participant who had recently left childminding found it time consuming and challenging to identify where developmental events fit within the various areas of the framework.

They [children] do something, and you think, oh, that's good that they've done that, but you don't instantly know what area of learning that covers, so then you have to go through those areas to fit the thing that they've achieved there into their area of learning, so it is time consuming. – Former CM, 12 years, no assistant

⁷ Reducing workload for early years professionals, such as unnecessary paperwork, was one of the main aims of the EYFS changes that came into effect in September 2021.

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/changes-to-the-early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs-framework/changes-to-the-early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs-framework>)

Case illustration

Meghan [name changed] has been a childminder for over 24 years and works in the South East. She felt that the EYFS framework was a helpful guideline for childminders. However, she commented on the detailed knowledge required to understand and implement the framework, and felt the document was 'massive'. She felt that a lot was expected of childminders now, and that this had changed over time.

The Early Years Foundation Stage ... is a massive document. It takes a lot of time and effort and it's been revised two, three times now since it was first introduced ... you do have to have fairly detailed knowledge of it to then be able to implement it and then be able to gauge how your children are developing and growing against it.

Consistency

Participants attributed a lack of consistency relating to Ofsted inspections and LA support to some of the bureaucratic challenges they faced.

There was a view that the outcome of an Ofsted inspection was strongly dependent on the individual inspector. Participants felt inspectors were at times trying to 'catch them out' during inspections and focus disproportionately on 'small things'.

People would get picked up on quite small things. Not anything that was safeguarding-related or anything serious ... they'd get marked down on it. There was no consistency. – Former CM, 3 years, no assistant

Participants reported receiving contradictory feedback from different inspectors. This made it difficult to know what they should and should not do. These inconsistencies included seemingly minor issues, such as whether to label boxes, and more substantive issues, for example how to apply the inspection framework and what constituted an 'outstanding' grading.

Participants also highlighted differences in the level and type of support provided by LAs. A group of participants felt that they had limited or no support from their LAs despite wanting 'someone to go to'. In contrast, others reported having supportive LAs with dedicated resources and/or staff that childminders could access. For example, a participant who recently left the profession had a dedicated local 'support officer' they had worked closely with.

I think we're very lucky certainly in this area. We're very well supported by our local authority and they have developmental support officers who keep in touch on a regular basis. - Former CM, 12 years, no assistant

Solutions

Participants also provided suggestions for ways in which these challenges could be addressed or reduced without compromising on quality and safety. Suggestions fell under three broad themes: communication, inspections, and support.

Communication

- **Clear communication in relation to policies, regulations and requirements** from the DfE, LAs or other early years stakeholders to help childminders better understand and implement new or changing requirements.
- **Provision of targeted, childminder-specific information and guidance** to allow childminders to better understand what applies to them rather than other educational settings.

Inspections

- **Providing 'guides' for inspectors and childminders** to ensure a degree of consistency between inspectors and to reassure childminders what to expect from inspections.
- **Changing the frequency and length of inspections, to be shorter but more frequent.** This would allow the inspector to see the childminder and setting in different circumstances and take pressure off the childminder to 'perform' on a single day. Ideally, the same inspector would return each time to allow the inspector and childminder to 'get to know each other'.
- **Asking inspectors to assess any evidence childminders are required to produce ahead of the inspection.** This would allow more time for meaningful conversation between the inspector and childminder and observation of practice.
- **Asking for feedback from parents, as well as observing childminders.** This would provide inspectors with a more holistic view of the care provided and better understand parental satisfaction.

Support

Participants suggested access to free or affordable online tools could reduce some of the bureaucratic challenges and help with the process of:

- **Gathering and sharing evidence for EYFS, Ofsted inspections and with parents.** Specific suggestions included online apps, checklists and guides.
- **Managing the self-employed aspects of their business,** for example helping them to produce invoices and file tax returns.

Participants also wanted more opportunities to receive support from individuals or groups. Concrete suggestions included:

- **Networking with other childminders to share best practice and support,** whether through in-person local networks or wider online networks (e.g., Facebook groups).
- **Having access to dedicated support personnel** to turn to with questions or concerns, for example through the LA or Ofsted.

Retention

Reasons for leaving

Former and active childminders cited several reasons for either leaving the profession or considering leaving the profession. These revolved around reasons internal and external to the profession and pragmatic considerations.

Internal reasons

A range of factors internal to childminding as a profession led individuals to leave or consider leaving the profession.

Feeling lonely. Participants expressed that they often felt lonely due to working on their own. A solution for some participants was therefore to look for jobs where they would work with other adults, for example in an office or in a school.

[I]t's quite an isolated job ... I think I am ready for something new. Going back to work with people again, rather than just by myself. – Active CM, 8 years, no assistant

Participants thought that spending time with other childminders could help alleviate feelings of loneliness. However, the options for doing this were not always available locally. For instance, an active childminder explained that their local authority (LA) no longer organised events for childminders.

So, you'd go along to a big childminding event and there would be lots of like-minded childminders, and there would be free face painting or animal handling ... but there's nothing like that anymore. – Active CM, 13 years, no assistant

Working long hours. Former childminders mentioned that the long hours required to accommodate multiple children in their care were a reason for leaving, as it impacted on their wellbeing and personal life. For example, a former childminder explained how they were unable to 'switch off' due to the long hours and their own caring responsibilities as a parent.

[I]t did get too much. It just became a lot of hours to work and no switch-off time. – Former CM, 3 years, no assistant

Dealing with parents. Challenges with parents were also a reason for leaving. Former childminders explained that parents did not always pay on time or pay the correct

amount, leading them to chase parents for payments. This resulted in participants feeling disrespected and taken advantage of.

I just got tired of constantly asking to be paid, getting paid the wrong amounts, and just felt a bit disillusioned and a bit disrespected. –
Former CM, 18 years, no assistant

Another challenge former childminders reported concerned childminders witnessing or being involved in arguments between parents of children in their care. This could be a stressful and at times dangerous experience and was made worse when they did not feel adequately supported by LAs to deal with such issues.

Case illustration

Emily [name changed] recently left the profession after working as a childminder for eight years. She cited parents as one of the main reasons she decided to leave. One of the biggest issues she faced was a difficult domestic situation between two parents, which led to safety concerns. She felt like she was unable to guarantee the child's safety, which she found devastating.

I've had a few difficult parents over the last six months ...
some that should I say the family situation is not the best ...
just turning up at my house unannounced ... threatening to
kidnap the child ... [F]rom a safeguarding point of view, I
couldn't promise that I could keep that child safe.

Being self-employed. Other reasons for leaving related specifically to the self-employed nature of childminding. Former childminders commented on the lack of stability they experienced. Some participants illustrated this with the lack of sick pay and the income they missed out on if they could not work and find cover.

[S]ick pay, we're not being paid to be off. I recently had COVID again
and obviously, don't get paid any sick pay for that. – Former CM, 16
years, no assistant

Others pointed to the risk of losing income, as there was always a risk of parents losing their jobs or moving. They explained that this instability was heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants highlighted that only certain children could attend care

during the first lockdown.⁸ This resulted in fewer or no children being in their care for extended periods of time, which negatively affected their income.

I think realising how fragile childminding is and how it can suddenly change ... [o]ne day you're happily going along, you're full, you've got all these ... places. Then all of a sudden, no one can come ... it was only keyworkers' children who could attend during the first lockdown.
– Former CM, 31 years, no assistant

When COVID-19 restrictions began to ease and childminders opened up to all children, some participants noticed a shift in the level of demand for childminding services, impacting their earnings. They reported that some parents no longer had a need for the same level of or any childcare, as they were increasingly working from home, worked fewer hours or had not returned to work.

Then, obviously the children that came back, they didn't come back full time because parents had jobs working from home or different hours or ... it's just the money side was a big issue. – Former CM, 4 years, no assistant

Former childminders who left during the COVID-19 pandemic explained that they might have stayed in the profession had they been better supported. They found working during the pandemic stressful, as they were expected to stay open for keyworker children but were uncertain about the amount of work they would have. In particular, participants highlighted challenges with the self-employed support scheme during the pandemic, as it either took a while to receive the support or they were ineligible. This meant that childminders went without income or any financial support for extended periods of time.

COVID hit us pretty hard. Because you're self-employed as a childminder, I basically was not paid for about half the year. I wasn't entitled to any government grant. – Former CM, 4 years, no assistant

Pay and expenses. A group of participants did not think the role was well paid, highlighting that the hourly rate could be less than minimum wage.⁹ They also explained that rates had not increased much over time.¹⁰ Although they were able to set their own

⁸ During the first COVID-19 pandemic related lockdown between March and May 2020, only 'vulnerable children' and the children of 'critical workers' were allowed to attend school and early years settings in person. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>)

⁹ At the time of writing in September 2022 the National Living Wage (for 23 and over) was £9.50 per hour.

¹⁰ Similar findings were reflected in the 2021 SCEYP survey results. The proportion of childminders who were paid at or below the national living wage (NLW) was 65 percent. (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1071812/Frontier_-_SCEYP_2021_Finance_Report.pdf)

hourly rates, they felt they could not always raise the rates. They did not want to risk losing children whose parents would seek out alternative childcare options.

[Y]ou've got to keep it within the rate of the area, and when you say to parents that you're increasing your prices, you've got to consider that you might then lose that child because they might try to go elsewhere that might be cheaper. – Former CM, 12 years, no assistant

Participants also found that the process to set up and run a business as a childminder was expensive, as they had to pay for things such as registration, training, and insurance, alongside household costs. They expected some of these expenses to increase further with the looming cost of living crisis. For an active childminder, the rising costs were one of the reasons they had decided they would be leaving the profession.

Over recent times as the cost of living has risen, inflation and everything is going up ... with staff wages and all my outgoings, I was going to run at a loss. – Active CM, 18 years, assistant

External reasons

Participants also reported several factors external to childminding that led them to leave or think about leaving the profession.

Status of childminders. Participants felt they were not always viewed as qualified professionals by government, parents and other early years and school settings. They noted that many perceived them as 'glorified babysitters' and did not recognise that childminders followed the EYFS framework and underwent similar training and safety and quality assurance processes as nurseries.

[W]hat parents and a lot of professionals and even the media really think of childminders. A lot of it is wrong, misinformed, always being called babysitters ... I think people don't understand that we have put a lot of time, a lot of effort, a lot of money into doing it. – Former CM, 4 years, no assistant

Participants explained that the perceived status of childminders had consequences for:

- **Childminders' mental wellbeing** and desire to remain in the profession.
- **Their ability to recruit families**, as parents did not always recognise that they were a high-quality alternative to nurseries.

- **Their relationship with other early years settings or schools**, who disregarded their transition reports and assessments and instead completed their own. Participants believed this was because these settings did not trust their professional expertise.

A group of participants suggested ways of improving the status of childminders. Suggestions included changing the narrative around childminders in the media through a campaign (e.g., run by the DfE or sector-specific organisations like PACEY), providing more information to parents on the role and training of childminders, and changing the name 'childminder' to reflect the professional nature of the role, thereby counteracting the perception of childminders as 'babysitters'.

Funded hours. Participants reported facing challenges with the funded hours as part of early years entitlements for 2, 3- and 4-year olds.¹¹ One challenge was the amount of funding received from their LAs, as participants reported receiving less than the hourly rate they would typically charge for these entitlement hours. The discrepancy between hourly rates and pay for funded hours meant that participants either lost out on income or would need to ask parents for additional contributions.

Participants responded differently to this challenge. Some had left the profession because of the reduced pay associated with the funded hours. Others stopped offering entitlements and only cared for children who were ineligible for universal funded hours, for example children under the age of 2 or school-aged children.

For us childminders, we're better off to have babies from nought to three before they get the funding ... We'd be better with anybody that's not three to four, which is a shame. – Active CM, 20 years, no assistant

Participants reported that the funding they received for disadvantaged 2-year olds was closer to their hourly rate, but this was reduced as soon as a child turned 3-years old. This was a challenge, as participants were suddenly being paid less despite the child's needs being the same.

It's [hourly funding rate] really good when they're two-year-olds but as soon as they hit their third birthday, it drops by £1-something an hour, and they still require the same [care]. – Active CM, 8 years, no assistant

¹¹ Government funding for early years providers in England is mainly delivered via three childcare entitlements: 15 hours entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds; 15 hours universal entitlement for all three and four-year-olds; extended 30 hours entitlement for three and four-year-olds of eligible working parents. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-education-and-childcare--2>)

There was a realisation among participants that due to statutory guidance, childminders were not allowed to ask for 'top-ups' from parents in these instances.¹² However, participants had found ways around this through private arrangements with parents or by asking for contributions in other ways (e.g., payment for nappies or food) which is allowed within the statutory guidance. Participants found conversations with parents about funded hours difficult, as the entitlement hours were marketed as 'free childcare' instead of 'subsidised childcare'.

I think it's been mis-sold to parents. I think, calling it free 30-hours funding is - it does us a disservice ... I think, if it had been branded ... as subsidised childcare, rather than free, parents wouldn't mind paying that little... extra. – Former CM, 13 years, assistant

In addition to the actual funding received for entitlements, participants found that the portal used for claiming funding was overly complicated, particularly for those with more limited digital skills. Some participants had consequently stopped offering entitlements because of their experiences with the portal: it could take months to be paid, so their business often ran at a loss while waiting for payments.

Pragmatic reasons

There were also several pragmatic reasons participants had left the profession or were planning to leave in future.

Age. Some participants had reached or were approaching retirement age. They framed their departure in terms of a natural end to their professional life because the physical requirements of the profession became more challenging with age.

[M]y ultimate reason for leaving is that I felt that I had got too old for it and couldn't really give the children my best at that point. – Former CM, 12 years, no assistant

Family and home life. A view among participants was that the home-based nature of childminding became increasingly at odds with their own and their families' needs. They wanted their 'home back' and wished to spend more time with their loved ones. This was especially the case for those childminders who had always considered the role 'temporary' and whose children had now grown older.

¹² The statutory guidance for LAs on early education and childcare states that LAs need to ensure that providers do not 'charge parents "top-up" fees (any difference between a provider's normal charge to parents and the funding they receive from the local authority to deliver free places)'. Providers are, however, allowed to charge for food and other consumables (e.g., nappies and sun cream). (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-education-and-childcare--2>)

My own children were grown up ... it was a bit of a natural progression, in the fact that two of them had left home and one of them was at that teenage age where she didn't really want other kids in the house anymore, and I felt I wasn't giving her time. – Former CM, 18 years, no assistant

Career change. Some former childminders had already left the profession for a career change while other active childminders considered leaving for a 'new challenge'. Participants expected more stability and more adult interaction from their new career, or a job that was more aligned with their qualifications. For example, a participant had recently completed their bachelor's and master's degrees and had decided to leave childminding to become a university lecturer.

For a group of participants, the new career involved still working in early years, schools or with children. Others had left or were thinking of leaving early years and education altogether, for example to work in a law office or for a charity.

I sort of got to the point really where I felt I needed to do something different after 17 years ... I think maybe I just needed to get out the house a bit more, into a different environment. – Former CM, 17 years, no assistant

Reasons for staying

Active childminders reflected on why they had decided to stay in the profession. Active and former childminders also shared their thoughts on what they liked most about being a childminder.

Working with children. This was one of the greatest perceived joys of childminding and the main reason active childminders had remained in the profession. Participants found it rewarding to watch children grow and develop, because it made them realise the 'difference' they had made to their young lives.

[I]t's very rewarding, and I love seeing how children grow. Yes, and you kind of build this family bond altogether, and I really like that a lot. – Active CM, 3 years, no assistant

Family-friendly profession. Active childminders reported that the family-friendly nature of childminding made them stay in their roles. For some participants, this was the reason they had initially entered the profession. For instance, it enabled them to care for their own children and earn an income while they were young, rather than paying for childcare.

They also believed it was possible to combine the job with older children's school schedule and extra-curricular activities.

I'll be continuing as a childminder because it works well with my family, and my family's needs. – Active CM, 13 years, no assistant

Case illustration

Louise [name changed] is a childminder with four-years' experience working in the East of England. Louise changed careers to become a childminder, as she wanted to spend more time with her two children. She plans to continue as a childminder for the foreseeable future as it works for her family life. She enjoys it and feels she earns enough income.

I'm definitely going to continue it for the foreseeable future ... I don't have any stress regarding taking time off or anything for my own children because I work from home ... The money I think is suitable for what I do ... [I]t's a very satisfying job ... It's a job where you can actually make a difference and do something worthwhile.

Independence and flexibility. Participants liked the independence and flexibility of being self-employed, including being their 'own boss' and being able to decide what activities to do with children. Active childminders liked that they had control over the number of hours they could work and how many children they could have in their care.

I'm picking my hours that I want to work. I don't work a Friday anymore. I give them my holidays in the January for the year and they all know when I'm going, and I'm not dictated to by anybody. – Active CM, 21 years, no assistant

Local demand. Active childminders in areas with a lot of demand and limited supply cited this as a motive for staying in the profession. They reported that did not have to put much effort into advertising and enjoyed the stability in their income and workload, as families often came to them through word of mouth.

I've never had a problem filling places. I've got a good reputation in the village that I live in, and most of my business has been word of mouth. – Active CM, 20 years, assistant

Formal and informal networks. While not specifically cited as a reason for remaining in the profession, participants who were part of formal or informal networks with other childminders found these groups helpful. They provided the opportunity for sharing ideas and mutual support and made the profession less lonely.

[C]an always bounce ideas off other childminders and meet up with them, and you can share experiences. – Active CM, 13 years, no assistant

Childminding assistants

Perceived benefits of working with assistants

Participants with and without experience of working with assistants identified three benefits of doing so: professional, financial and personal.

Professional benefits

Professional benefits included the ability to share the workload and provide targeted and higher quality care.

Sharing the workload. This related to the sharing of day-to-day caring tasks and administrative tasks. Some participants employed assistants who largely completed the same day-to-day tasks (e.g., cooking, nappy changes). They enjoyed having an 'extra pair of hands'; in some cases, this support was provided by partners and daughters, who lived in the same household but worked as assistants. For instance, a former childminder recalled how employing their husband was particularly helpful during outings.

It worked out quite well ... [H]e'd come out on outings as an extra pair of hands. All the parents were really comfortable for him to look after the children. – Former CM, 13 years, assistant

Other participants with experience of hiring assistants highlighted a clear division of tasks, where administrative tasks (e.g., raising invoices) remained their responsibility.

She's [the assistant] very much involved in the children's routine after lunch ... and we'll do the thinking sessions and the story time and settling anybody for a nap... apart from all the business side of things. The financial side of everything, that's what I deal with. – Active CM, 20 years, assistant

A view was that hiring assistants could help free up time to complete administrative tasks during the day, which had the benefit of not needing to complete these tasks in the evening. A group of active childminders who had not worked with assistants also saw the ability to share administrative task with assistants as beneficial. For instance, an active childminder who found it challenging to understand formal guidance documents for childminders suggested assistants could help them more easily make sense of such information.

I think there'd be great benefits because obviously, you share the workload between you and ... there's two of you to decipher through everything. – Active CM, 18 years, no assistant

Providing high-quality and targeted care. A group of participants explained that improving their professional practice and care motivated them to work with assistants. By this they meant the ability to:

- **Share best practice and ideas.** An example included a childminder having regular staff meetings and training sessions with their assistants.
- **Receive support with documenting progress.** This included assistants providing input in monitoring and recording progress to ensure a child's learning journey was comprehensive.

They [assistants] will obviously observe and monitor, so if there's anything I don't see, they make a note of that ... so that feeds into the child's learning journey. – Active CM, 18 years, assistant

Former childminders with no experience of working with assistants also suggested that assistants could help childminders offer more targeted care by dividing up caring responsibilities. With two practitioners present, each practitioner could focus on age-appropriate activities and care rather than having to care for all children with different needs at once.

[O]lder ones need different attention to the younger ones ... [T]he younger ones will play, and you can watch. The older ones, you need to interact with them more because they're doing, I don't know, drawings, colourings, reading, things like that. So again, to have an assistant there would be very, very helpful, I think. – Former CM, 12 years, no assistant

Financial benefits

Participants who had hired childminders saw the possibility of increasing income by caring for more children as a benefit to employing assistants. Some participants *proactively* sought out opportunities to increase income: their decision to work with assistants was largely financially motivated. This tended to be participants who employed 'formal' assistants, i.e. trained non-family practitioners.

In comparison, other active childminders described employing assistants primarily to meet local demand. Their decision to work with assistants appeared to be more *reactive*

and driven by an increase in local demand, convenience as well as financial considerations. For instance, an active childminder explained how an increase in demand and change in children's needs required them to hire an assistant after moving to a new area.

[W]hen I moved to this house ... there was a lot of school children that needed picking up ... so I started off by employing one and then another, and then I just had lots and lots and lots of enquiries for little children as well ... So, basically, I just make sure that I've always got three of us here at one time. – Active CM, 18 years, assistant

Case illustration

Leyla [name changed] is a childminder with 20 years' experience under her belt. She has been working with her assistant for nearly 10 years, who joined her at the age of 18. Leyla explained that the assistant was very inexperienced at the beginning and did not even know how to change a nappy. Leyla has since taught her all the basics, and 'trained her to do what I do'. Since starting with Leyla, the assistant has also gained her Level 2 qualifications. She is employed full-time, 40 hours a week, and has enabled Leyla to grow her business and make enough money. At the moment, Leyla has 31 children 'on her books', although many children she only takes to or from school once a week.

I have 31 at the moment, but obviously, I've been the sort of childminder who will take on bits and pieces of work. There's some children I just pick up once a week from school, or take them to school once a week. I've found that works really well in making the hours work.

Personal benefits

Having adult company and more flexibility at home were two personal factors shaping participants' decision to hire assistants.

Having another adult present. A view shared by participants with and without experience of assistants was that assistants could help childminders feel less lonely and isolated, which they regarded as a by-product of working alone.

Having someone to talk to as well, that's one of the bigger things, it's such a lonely job. Just having someone for support really. – Former CM, 3 years, no assistant

One view was that the presence of another adult could be beneficial for childminders' mental wellbeing and improve their job satisfaction. An active childminder explained that this had been their motivation to work with an assistant.

For my own mental health and my own enjoyment for the job, it's really nice to share it with other people. – Active CM, 4 years, assistant

Having more flexibility at home. Increased flexibility to respond to unforeseen circumstances in their home life was another reason to work with assistants. Participants cited the ability to take time off to support sick family members or to have cover for any accidents and emergencies as key benefits when working with assistants.

I then took on another assistant because at the time my mum was ill for a while, and then numbers wise it gave me more options some days in terms of the flexibility. – Active CM, 18 years, assistant

Perceived challenges of working with assistants

Some participants' decision not to work with assistants was a decision for the status quo rather than one against assistants: they did not see an assistant as necessary for carrying out their role, for instance because they preferred to work on their own or because they preferred caring for few children. A group of participants however identified multiple challenges of working with assistants, which underpinned their decision not to employ them. These included responsibilities and risks, financial concerns and a lack of space.

Responsibilities and risks

For some participants with no experience of working with assistants, the increased responsibility and risks of employing them outweighed any benefits such as increasing income. They were especially concerned about the prospect of being and feeling responsible for another adult.

I think I'd be worried having to have somebody else's life in my hands to pay wages and stuff like that. – Active CM, 20 years, no assistant

The multiple challenges of working with assistants they highlighted included:

- **Increase in planning and preparation.** Having to spend more time planning ahead and preparing lessons as a result of managing others.

- **Increase in amount and complexity of paperwork.** Including organising and overseeing staff pensions, carrying out Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks, administering holiday and sick pay and paperwork for tax and National Insurance (NI) contributions. This was particularly concerning for those with limited knowledge or confidence of running a business. However, they believed a course for childminders on what is required for hiring assistants could make them become more receptive to employing one.

[I]f there was a course that had everything you needed to know, with a simple tick sheet of, 'Have I done this, that, the other?' Just really black and white. – Active CM, 1 year, no assistant

- **Provision of training.** Needing to ensure that assistants are adequately trained and prepared for Ofsted inspections, which could be time-consuming. Participants saw this as possibly most challenging when the assistants were new to the profession.

I didn't really want to have somebody [an assistant] who didn't really know what they were doing. – Former CM, 4 years, no assistant

- **Recruitment.** Being responsible for finding an assistant that shares the same approach to childminding and is reliable. Participants were concerned about the consequences of recruiting the 'wrong' person, as they would be liable if something happened. To avoid this, they suggested it could be beneficial to hire someone they knew.

I think you'd have to find the right one and I suppose you'd have to be able to get on with them ... Being quite a close environment, and you both have to have the same look on bringing up children ... [Y]ou'd have to get on, so it'd have to be someone you knew. – Active CM, 32 years, no assistant

- **Staff sickness.** Needing to deal with the consequences of assistants falling sick, such as sending children home to comply with ratio requirements but inconveniencing their parents as a result.

Financial concerns

There were two key financial reasons behind participants' decision not to work with assistants. These included:

- **Sufficient income.** A view that they were earning enough money and so did not need to increase their income by hiring an assistant.

- **Financial risk.** A suggestion that working with an assistant could be financially risky, especially for those struggling to fill their places. A former childminder recounted that their colleague ended up making less money than their assistant because they had to pay the assistant their base wage while caring for fewer children than planned.

Somebody that I know that did employ an assistant ended up with a minimal amount of children to look after, so she was paying her assistant because she had to, and then not making any money herself. – Former CM, 12 years, no assistant

Case illustration

Natalia [name changed] is a former childminder in the East Midlands, who has been working as a childminder for five years. She considered employing an assistant at a time when she was very busy and worked five days a week. When she sat down with her husband though she realised that she would have needed to bring in at least three more children to make it work financially. Natalia wanted to keep her setting fairly small, and so decided against the idea of hiring an assistant.

My husband is a maths teacher so we looked at the financial side of it. In order to pay someone minimum wage you have to have at least three more children, and then ... I would be running a nursery, basically, because I was earning less than minimum wage myself, but to employ someone you have to pay them minimum.

Lack of space

A recurring theme among participants was that their setting was too small and did not have the necessary 'floorspace' to accommodate any assistants. Other active childminders cited regulations on space to explain why they had not taken on any assistants.¹³

I don't think that I could ... take more than four children in the space that I've got, so if I was to employ an assistant ... You have to have

¹³ The EYFS framework outlines the space requirements for providers. For instance, 3.5 m² is required per child under the age of 2. ([Early years foundation stage \(EYFS\) statutory framework - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/442423/early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs-statutory-framework-2017.pdf))

so much space per child, depending on what age they are. – Active CM, 8 years, no assistant

Other participants explained that they did not want to share their own space with a 'stranger'. For example, a former childminder decided against having an assistant to maintain their family's privacy and protect their belongings.

I've got my own family and my own belongings. Even my best friends don't know all my belongings or things like that. I just wouldn't have wanted somebody else. – Former CM, 12 years, no assistant.

Childminder agencies (CMAs)

Awareness of CMAs

Participants' awareness of childminder agencies (CMAs) was mixed. Some had never heard of them, while others had a limited understanding. A third group was more knowledgeable, either because of direct experience of registering with CMAs or friends and colleagues who had told them about CMAs, for instance on childminding groups on social media channels.

Participants with a more limited understanding of CMAs partly attributed this to a lack of CMA presence in their local area, despite CMAs operating across England.¹⁴

I don't really have any knowledge because I've not looked into it because I've been told there's none in [name of area]. – Active CM, 1 year, no assistant

They were particularly unclear about the role between Ofsted, CMAs and individual providers;¹⁵ for instance, a former childminder wondered if childminders would still be inspected by Ofsted if they registered with CMAs.¹⁶

If you register with them ... do you still then get your Ofsted inspections? ... Do you have to use both of them, basically? – Former CM, 16 years, no assistant

Other participants were unsure how CMAs graded their providers. Despite government guidance making it optional for CMAs to individually rate or grade their registered childminders,¹⁷ a perception was that childminders registered with the same agency all received the same grading regardless of any differences in the quality of their provision.

¹⁴ As of 31 March 2022, 7 CMAs were registered with Ofsted, of which 5 CMAs reported childminders on roll. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-providers-and-inspections-as-at-31-march-2022/main-findings-childcare-providers-and-inspections-as-at-31-march-2022#childminder-agencies>)

¹⁵ CMAs are regulated and inspected by Ofsted once they register with Ofsted. As of 31 March 2022, 3 CMAs have been inspected by Ofsted and all judged to be effective. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-providers-and-inspections-as-at-31-march-2022/main-findings-childcare-providers-and-inspections-as-at-31-march-2022#childminder-agencies>)

¹⁶ Individual childminders are quality assured by CMAs. CMAs are required to carry out a minimum of 1 quality assurance visit (unannounced) per year to each of their registered providers. However, CMAs can undertake more than 1 visit per year and at any time, for instance if they have concerns about the quality of a provider. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childminder-agencies-cmas/childminder-agencies>)

¹⁷ This can include using an equivalent of Ofsted's 4-grade judgements, or a simple 'met' or 'not met' rating. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childminder-agencies-cmas/childminder-agencies>)

I don't like the fact that you get graded the same as all the other childminders – if this is true – under the umbrella heading. – Active CM, 12 years, no assistant

Some participants were unclear *who* CMAs were for. For instance, a former childminder believed CMAs were primarily intended for new childminders; they recounted ignoring an email from a CMA when they were still a childminder, as it appeared to be less targeted at experienced childminders.

I just remember this lady just emailing everyone ... it almost seemed like it was something that you did if you were just starting out, whereas we were already established, but that might be me not understanding it. – Former CM, 18 years, no assistant

Case illustration

Michaela is a childminder with 20 years' experience, living in a large city in the North East. She had always found Ofsted inspections stressful and came across the name of a CMA on a local Facebook group. She contacted members of the group and asked them a range of questions about CMAs, such as what they thought of CMAs and what the process was of registering with a CMA. The feedback she received was overwhelmingly positive. She then spoke to individuals at the CMA, who answered all her questions and were very helpful. This was enough for Michaela to make her realise that this CMA was for her.

What I did was I private messaged about ten people ... I asked them their opinion and how they went about it, what they got out of it. Every one of them was so positive ... so then I phoned [the CMA]. They spoke to me for about two hours on the phone answering all my questions, told me to go away and think about it ... I came away and I sat and thought, yes, this is what I want to do. I want to change to [name of CMA], everybody's so happy.

Perceptions of CMAs

Participants expressed positive perceptions about CMAs but also highlighted areas of concern. These were based on direct experience (e.g., active childminders registered with CMAs or communicating with CMAs), conversations with colleagues (e.g., on social media), or participants reading about CMAs ahead of the interview. A group of participants though did not have much to say on CMAs. For some, this was because they

believed CMAs did not operate in their area, so they had not considered joining one. Others were satisfied with their status as Ofsted-registered childminders, particularly where they felt confident about Ofsted's requirements for childminders.

Positive perceptions

Participants' favourable perceptions of CMAs focused on CMAs' provision of training and ongoing support as well as inspections and quality assurance visits.

Training and ongoing support

Participants with direct and indirect experience of CMAs perceived the availability of training and ongoing support as a strength of CMAs. There were two areas they highlighted as beneficial.

Accessible and frequent training opportunities. For instance, a former childminder explained how colleagues had spoken positively about the many training opportunities available at their CMA. Other former childminders contrasted the prospect of more regular and accessible training with the limited training provision at their local authority (LA), which tended to be offered during the day and was difficult for childminders to attend.

Regular, responsive and clear communication. An active childminder praised their CMA for providing monthly newsletters with updates on relevant policy changes or guidance affecting childminders. Similarly, a former childminder emphasised how responsive their agency was at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when there was uncertainty (e.g., about whether to remain open) and quickly changing guidance. They also valued their CMA's ability to clearly convey the changes to the EYFS framework, which they believed improved the quality of their care.

When the EYFS changed, they were really helpful. They sent the old and new versions and then a breakdown in what the new version meant ... They were really helpful with translating the EYFS for us. I just think that in turn, that makes you a better childminder because you're confident, you understand more. – Former CM, 4 years, no assistant

Inspections and quality assurance visits

A key benefit some participants saw with CMAs was that childminders would no longer need to be inspected by Ofsted. They believed Ofsted inspections could be stressful, especially for those childminders new to the profession or with negative experiences of an Ofsted inspection. They liked that quality assurance visits of CMAs could provide a more realistic picture of a childminder's practice, as they tended to be more regular.

You're so nervous when they [Ofsted] come. I don't think they necessarily get a true picture. Whereas if you have these more regular visits ... I think would take a lot of that fear away. – Former CM, 3 years, no assistant

Participants with experience of CMAs identified three key advantages of quality assurance visits carried out by CMAs compared to Ofsted inspections:

- **Lived experience.** A suggestion that those carrying out the quality assurance visits had a better understanding of the profession than more 'detached' Ofsted inspectors, as CMA assessors were considered to be former childminders themselves.
- **Consistency.** A perception that quality assurance visits by the same CMA employee enabled them to have a better understanding of a childminder's practice than different Ofsted inspectors visiting the same childminder.
- **Collaboration.** A view that CMAs addressed challenges in a collaborative way that involved working closely with the childminder and making suggestions instead of demanding changes 'like a recommendation', as Ofsted were perceived to do.

Other participants however welcomed Ofsted inspections. They regarded being Ofsted registered and inspected as a marker of quality because of Ofsted's external scrutiny. Moreover, they thought the Ofsted brand was particularly reassuring to parents, as it is well recognised.

Areas of concern

Participants' perceived concerns around CMAs related to three areas and underpinned their decision not to join CMAs. These included a loss of control; high fees; and limited quality assurance and independence.

Loss of control

A group of participants were sceptical of CMAs and believed it would limit their control, despite not having had any direct experience of working with CMAs themselves. They had specific concerns about a loss of control over running the setting on a day-to-day basis, relationships with parents and their reputation.

The setting. There was a perception that CMAs would impose on childminders a particular way of running their setting, including designing the curriculum. For instance, an active childminder questioned whether they would be able to do the same amount of physical outdoor activities with their children if registered with a CMA. They were concerned their CMA would require them to focus on other activities such as arts and crafts, which would make them a less appealing choice for parents.

I do ... an awful lot of physical activity and outdoors activities - which ... parents love ... and it's why they choose me. But if I was with an agency they might say ... 'We need you to do more arts and crafts, less outdoor activities.' – Active CM, 2 years, no assistant

A group of participants liked the nature of self-employment and feeling in 'control'. They appreciated what they perceived as a fairly hands-off approach of being Ofsted-registered which they worried would be lost if they registered with a CMA.

[I]t would mean that perhaps we weren't as much in charge of our business as we are currently ... we don't actually have a lot to do with Ofsted ... We know they're only going to come round every three years or four years ... so for the most part, we're left to get on with it, and I think people like that freedom. – Former CM, 13 years, assistant

However, a former childminder with experience of working with a CMA explained that their CMA had allowed them to be autonomous and remain in control of their business, including the curriculum.

They very openly say that they're not going to change your business, they're not going to - it's still your business. – Former CM, 4 years, no assistant

Relationships. There were concerns that CMAs could 'get in the way' of relationships with parents, as participants saw the task of finding parents as and telling parents about their setting as a key job of a childminder.

I think childminding, you have a relationship with the parents, you're word of mouth. Yes, I don't think you need an agency to get you children. I think you can do it yourself. – Active CM, 3 years, no assistant

Other participants were less sceptical and suggested that CMAs could be helpful in brokering relationships for new childminders, for instance by advertising childminders' services to local parents. This was because it tended to be more difficult for new childminders to establish themselves.

If you've joined childminding ... it's quite hard to establish yourself and get that number of families straightaway. That would be helpful if

you, obviously, need ... to get more advertising and what have you. –
Former CM, 18 years, no assistant

Reputation. A group of former childminders suggested that childminders could incur reputational damage if their CMA received a negative grading from Ofsted. This was because parents would be less inclined to entrust their children with childminders who were registered with a poorly performing CMA. A former childminder who had received an 'outstanding' Ofsted grading suggested this scenario would have been particularly damaging to them.

[S]o if they [the CMA] perform badly then it'd reflect badly on me, whereas I'd rather be in control of my own destiny ... especially as someone who had that outstanding grading. – Former CM, 30 years, no assistant

Fees

Another concern participants raised were CMAs charging what they regarded as high fees, which they suggested discouraged childminders from joining them. High fees appeared to be a particular barrier to joining for active childminders who were open to moving to CMAs. For example, an active childminder recounted speaking to a CMA but decided not to join because the CMA wanted a fee for each of their children.

I did look into possibly joining an agency, but the thing that seemed a barrier from my point of view was because I look after a lot of children, there was a fee I was going to have a pay per child, which in a lot of ways, was quite expensive, I thought for what I was getting back. – Active CM, 20 years, assistant

Limited quality assurance and independence

Some participants voiced concerns about a perceived lack of external quality assurance of CMA-registered childminders. They believed the closeness between childminders and CMAs undermined any external independent scrutiny and made it easier for childminders to bypass regulations such as ratio requirements. There was a perception that CMA-registered childminders did not need to fear the consequences of being in breach of regulations compared to Ofsted-registered childminders.

I feel like a lot of them [CMA-registered childminders] take on way more children than they're registered for ... because they haven't got that threat of someone knocking on the door to check them, if you

like ... [I]f Ofsted went to do an inspection on somebody and they graded somebody as Requires Improvement, that person loses their two-year funding. – Active CM, 8 years, no assistant

Solutions to joining CMAs

Participants offered several reflections on what would help childminders decide to join a childminder agency.

Having more information. Participants thought it would be highly beneficial to know more about CMAs in order to make an informed decision. They suggested practical ideas such as information events on CMAs or joining CMA Facebook groups as a possible avenue for finding out more and clarifying any misunderstandings. Some participants thought that CMAs would be most appropriate for new childminders, and implied that CMAs would be best placed targeting and informing those childminders about CMAs. This was because new childminders were most likely in need of establishing links with local families or unfamiliar with all the certifications and qualifications required for setting up.

Knowing someone with lived experience. There was also a view among participants that it mattered who informed them about CMAs, and that childminders could most easily be persuaded to join a CMA by a fellow childminder they knew with CMA experience. This was because such individuals were regarded to have the necessary credibility. For instance, a former childminder explained that she would have been tempted to join an agency had a local colleague recommended one.

If other minders that I know of had joined it and said, 'Oh, I've joined so-and-so, it's spot on', possibly that might have thought, because I'd know somebody. I don't actually know anybody that's gone to an agency. – Former CM, 16 years, no assistant

Attending training at business-friendly hours. Some active childminders believed that they would consider joining CMAs if the CMAs' training offer was more accessible than the training provision at their LAs, which tended to be during the daytime and required childminders to miss a day of work and sacrifice their income.

Being supported with paperwork. Those participants who found it challenging to manage paperwork (e.g., updating policies) alongside childminding were attracted by the support CMAs offered with paperwork; they believed that the prospect of having fewer administrative tasks made it more likely for them to consider joining a CMA.

[I] someone said to me, 'Here's an agency, they do this, this and that'? I think if they said paperwork ... I'd be quite happy to consider it. – Active CM, three years, no assistant

Summary of key findings

Bureaucratic challenges

Participants experienced multiple bureaucratic challenges as childminders. They found it at times demanding to complete **paperwork relating to statutory requirements and the care of children** (e.g., evidence for EYFS, learning journeys, preparing for Ofsted inspections) **or self-employment** (e.g., tax returns). It was similarly challenging for some participants to manage updates in response to what they perceived as **frequently changing policies and statutory requirements**. They did not always **understand what was expected of them**, especially what evidence to gather to meet EYFS requirements and Ofsted inspections. Participants' perceptions of bureaucratic challenges and their causes however did not appear to differ by their level of experience.

Participants' bureaucratic challenges were underpinned by mutually reinforcing factors: time, clarity, relevance, complexity and consistency. Paperwork and preparations for Ofsted inspections were seen as burdensome because they took **time** to complete, with participants frequently completing them on weekends or evenings. The perceived lack of **clarity** over how and whether evidence and documentation was used (e.g., by Ofsted, parents, health visitors and schools) resulted in some participants 'overcompensating' by gathering evidence and producing policies that were not required. The communication and documentation participants received (e.g., from the DfE or LAs) was often seen to have little **relevance** to childminders, as it was targeted at the wider early years workforce. During the COVID-19 pandemic it was particularly difficult for participants to understand what was relevant for their profession.

Policies could also be challenging for some participants to understand. They cited the EYFS framework as an example of this **complexity** because of the amount of information it contained, and the level of knowledge needed to understand and implement it. A lack of **consistency** was reflected in participants receiving contradictory feedback from different inspectors, for instance on what constituted an 'outstanding' grading. This made it challenging to know what constituted best practice and increased uncertainty over inspections.

Participants' concrete suggestions to reduce bureaucratic challenges included providing targeted, child-specific information and guidance to help childminders better understand new or changing requirements; making inspections shorter and more frequent to minimise the pressure on childminders; and having access to dedicated support personnel (e.g. at the LA) to answer any queries.

Retention

The reasons participants cited for leaving the profession or considering leaving the profession related to factors **internal** or **external** to the profession as well as more **pragmatic considerations**.

Participants reported experiencing **loneliness** and working **long hours**, which affected their wellbeing and personal life. **Dealing with parents** could also be challenging, for instance when parents did not pay on time or when they involved childminders in domestic arguments. There were also concerns about the **lack of stability** of being self-employed. Participants illustrated this with the lack of sick pay and the sudden loss of income if parents moved to a new area. They also pointed to changes in the **levels of demand** for childminders during and following COVID-19 lockdown restrictions as contributing to limited stability.

The **pay** childminders received was seen as too low, with some participants reporting earnings below the hourly minimum wage. Participants faced challenges with the **funded hours** as part of early years entitlements, including receiving less than the hourly rate they would typically charge. This led to some childminders asking for parental contributions (e.g., payment for nappies or food). Participants also found the **expenses** associated with setting up and running a business challenging. They were concerned about these expenses increasing further because of the cost of living crisis.

Participants believed the childminding profession was **undervalued** by government, parents and the early years sector and not always regarded as a 'profession' with the necessary qualifications. The perceived **low status of childminders** impacted their **ability to recruit children**, whose parents would often favour nurseries. Participants however suggested concrete steps to improving the status of childminders. This included **providing more information** to parents on the role and training of childminders and abandoning **the name 'childminder'** in favour of a term that better reflected the professional nature of the role.

The ability to **work with children** and the **family-friendly** nature of the profession were key reasons childminders remained in their roles. For some participants, the family-friendly nature of the profession was the initial motivation for entering the profession. They enjoyed the **independence and flexibility** of being self-employed, such as having control over the curriculum and being able to decide on their working hours and the number of children in their care.

Childminding assistants

Participants reported **professional, financial** and **personal benefits** to employing assistants. They liked the ability to **share the workload** with assistants and believed

having an assistant could **help them become better childminders** by having someone to share ideas and best practice with. Some participants saw assistants as a way to **increase their income**. Participants also thought assistants could **limit feelings of loneliness** by having another adult present.

Participants identified several challenges of working with assistants, which informed their decision to continue working alone. Participants did not want to face **more responsibilities**, including organising and overseeing staff pensions and administering holiday and sick pay. They saw a particular **risk in recruiting the 'wrong' assistant**, as they would be liable if something happened. They believed it could be **financially risky** to hire an assistant, especially when they struggled to fill their places and needed to pay their assistant a base salary. A recurring theme was that working with assistants was not feasible if participants' **domestic settings were too small**.

Childminder agencies (CMAs)

There were **different levels of awareness** of CMAs among participants. Those who had either no, or only limited awareness were especially **unclear about the role between Ofsted, CMAs and individual providers**. There was also **a lack of clarity over the target audience** of CMAs. A perception was that CMAs were primarily for new childminders. Participants with more knowledge about CMAs either had direct experience of CMAs or had heard about them from friends and colleagues.

Participants' levels of awareness or perceptions of CMAs did not appear to vary depending on their levels of experience. Those with favourable perceptions of CMAs praised CMAs' **provision of training**, which was seen to be more **accessible and frequent** than training provided locally (e.g., by LAs). CMAs were complimented on being **responsive and clear in their communication** with childminders, especially around communicating policy changes. There were also positive perceptions of CMAs' **quality assurance visits**. They were seen as less stressful than Ofsted inspections; this was because they tended to be carried out by the same assessor who knew the childminder well.

A perceived concern some participants had was the risk of **losing control** over running their setting if they registered with a CMA. Others suggested that CMA-registered childminders could **damage their reputation** and lose clients if their CMA received a negative grading from Ofsted. Some participants also voiced concerns about a perceived **lack of external quality assurance** of CMA-registered childminders. Unlike Ofsted-registered childminders, the perceived closeness between CMAs and their childminders meant that it was seen as easier to breach regulations, such as ratio requirements.

Participants offered reflections on what would help childminders decide to join a childminder agency. They were keen to have **more information about CMAs**, which

they regarded as important for making an informed decision about joining one. They also believed childminders could most easily be persuaded to join a CMA by **other local childminders, as well as by** the prospect of receiving **support with paperwork and training at convenient hours**.

Appendix A: Achieved sample

Table 2: Achieved sample by primary criteria

Years as a childminder	Active childminder	Former childminder	Total
0-9	8	4	12
10-19	5	7	12
20+	6	3	9
Total	19	14	33
Childminding assistant			
Yes	3	2	5
No	16	12	28
Total	19	14	33

Source: NatCen sample monitoring information

Table 3: Achieved sample by secondary criteria

Region	Active childminder	Former childminder*	Total
East Midlands	3	3	6
East of England	1	2	3
London	1	-	1
North East	2	-	2
North West	2	-	2
South East	3	4	7
South West	2	1	3
West Midlands	3	1	4
Yorkshire and Humber	2	1	3
Total	19	12	31
Area of deprivation			
Least deprived	3	-	3
Level 2	2	-	2
Level 3	3	1	4
Level 4	7	-	7
Most deprived	4	1	5
Total	19	2	21

Source: NatCen sample monitoring information

*Data not available for all former childminders.

Appendix B: Topic guides

NatCen

Social Research that works for society

Qualitative Interviews with Childminders

Topic Guide - Active Childminder

NatCen has been commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to conduct research into the childminder workforce. The DfE have identified several evidence gaps relating to childminders and would like NatCen to gather insights on key thematic areas, which may then feed into policy changes. The four key thematic areas include:

- The bureaucratic burdens childminders face
- Challenges to retention
- The use of childminder assistants
- Perceptions of childminder agencies

This is a qualitative study which involves interviews with active and former childminders. These interviews will seek to understand participants' views and experiences across the four thematic areas.

The following guide does not contain pre-set questions but rather lists the key themes and sub-themes to be explored with participants. It includes few follow-up questions like 'why',

INTRODUCTION

Aim: to remind the participant about the aims of the research, explain how the interview will be conducted and how the data will be used. [up to 5 mins]

- Introduction to researcher - thank you for agreeing to take part.
- Introduction to NatCen – independent research organisation, we have been commissioned by the Department for Education to conduct research into the childminder workforce to help them with existing evidence gaps.
- As part of this research, we are looking to explore their views on:
 - The bureaucratic burdens/challenges they face
 - Their plans around remaining or leaving the profession

- Working with childminder assistants
- Childminder agencies
- **Participants will be provided with a Love2Shop e-voucher to the value of £30 as a thank you for taking part. This will be emailed to them after the interview.**
- Data collected will be anonymised and stored securely. NatCen will securely delete any project data two years after the project is completed in October 2022.
- The information they provide will be used to write a report that we will share with the Department for Education. The report will be publicly available. All information will be treated confidentially. No individual or organisation will be named in the report. We will do our utmost to ensure that individuals are not identifiable.
- The interview will last around 50 minutes – check if ok.
- We would like to record the interview, so we have an accurate record of what is said.
 - Recorder is encrypted, and files stored securely in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
 - Only the research team will have access to the recordings
- Any questions?
- Permission to start recording.

TURN ON RECORDER - obtain verbal consent to participate.

1. PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND

Aim: to 'warm up' participant and gather background information. [up to 5 mins]

Researcher note: Ahead of interview, researcher should review relevant responses from SCEYP 2021 in the recruitment log, particularly related to years of experience and use of an assistant.

- Length of time in profession
- Any previous experience with other roles in the early years
- Number of children currently in their care
 - Split between early years (0-5) and school-aged children (5+)
 - Number of early years children
- Whether they currently employ an assistant
 - If not, whether they have previously employed an assistant
- Whether they offer early years entitlements for 2, 3- and 4-year olds
 - If not, why not
- Overview of days and hours they operate
 - Busiest day of the week

2. BURDENS / CHALLENGES

Aim: to explore bureaucratic burdens and challenges childminders face and suggestions for overcoming them. [up to 12 mins]

Researcher note: By bureaucratic burdens, we mean administrative tasks and challenges that come with setting up as / being a childminder, and with being regulated.

- Main challenge they face in their role
- Any specific bureaucratic burdens they face [*Prompt if necessary*]
 - Paperwork associated with managing policies (e.g. safeguarding, health and safety)
 - Paperwork required for Ofsted inspections
 - EYFS and statutory requirements
 - Feedback/communication with parents
 - Feedback / communication with local authorities
 - Completing transition records
 - Lesson planning
 - Collecting data/evidence
 - Self-assessment tax return
- Reasons for burden [*for each burden*]
- Whether and how burden affects their ability to [*for each burden*]:
 - Respond to needs of children
 - Respond to needs of parents/carers
- Suggestions on how bureaucratic burdens could be reduced - without compromising on quality and safety [*Probe for specific suggestions*]

3. RETENTION

Aim: to explore participants' plans and motivations for continuing with or leaving the profession. [up to 8 mins]

Researcher note: The questions below are routed based on the participants' intention to continue as a childminder.

- Whether they want to continue as childminders in the future [*Reiterate to childminder that their data is kept confidential*]

[If they plan on continuing]:

- Why they want to continue
- Whether they have ever considered leaving
 - If so, why

[If they plan on leaving]:

- Why they are considering leaving
- What they want to do instead and why
- Anything that would make them stay. For example:
 - Less paperwork / bureaucracy
 - Being required to do fewer things under the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)
 - Changes to Ofsted inspections
 - Increase in funding
 - Being seen as having equal status to other providers
 - Better support from the local authority
 - More childminders in the area to form a network with
 - Having services better understood by parents

4. CHILDMINDER ASSISTANTS

Aim: to understand the use of assistants by childminders, including why those without assistants have chosen not to employ one, and any potential benefits of having an assistant. [up to 10 mins]

Researcher note: The questions below are routed based on the participants' use of an assistant. Please reflect on their response to the question about assistants in the 'Participant Background' section to determine route.

[If currently employ an assistant (or previously employed one)]:

- Length of time they have had an assistant
- Brief description of assistant's role/responsibilities
- Why they decided to employ an assistant [*Prompt if necessary*]
 - Share workload/increase capacity
 - To increase number of children at setting
 - To increase income
 - To help increase the childminding workforce
- Any benefits/challenges that come with having an assistant

[If do not employ an assistant]:

- Why they decided *not* to employ an assistant [*Prompt if necessary*]
 - Need to become an employer, e.g. more paperwork
 - Limited floor space
 - Not financially viable / not enough demand to warrant it
 - No assistants available locally

- Prefer working alone
- Potential benefits/challenges that come with having an assistant
- Whether they ever considered employing an assistant - Why/why not
 - *If yes*: anything that would make it easier for them to employ an assistant
 - *If no*: anything that would help them to consider employing an assistant

5. PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDMINDER AGENCIES (CMAs)

Aim: to understand how aware childminders are of CMAs, what they think about CMAs and what might make them interested in registering with one. [up to 8 mins]

- Whether they have ever come across childminder agencies (CMAs) [*Probe for extent of awareness*]

Researcher note: If participant is unaware or has limited awareness of CMAs, researcher to describe CMAs to participant using definition below

Childminder agencies (CMAs) are organisations that can register, and quality assure childminders as an alternative to registering with Ofsted. They also provide extra support to childminders, for example connecting childminders and parents looking for childcare and providing business support and training and development opportunities. Like Ofsted, they charge fees for the services they offer.

[If they were already aware of CMAs]:

- What they think of CMAs
- Whether they have previously registered with a CMA – Why/why not [*it is unlikely childminders will have registered with CMAs before, so the prompts are geared towards them not having previously registered*]
 - Happy with Ofsted registration
 - Cost
 - Was concerned about losing Ofsted branding for their services
 - Was concerned about losing their Ofsted inspection judgement
 - No CMA serving in their local area/region
 - Receive all the necessary support from the LA and / or other sources such as local CM networks
 - Did not/could not find have enough information about them
- Whether they ever considered registering with one [*if applicable*] – Why/why not
 - Anything that could encourage them to decide to join one

[If they were unaware of CMAs]:

- Based on description - what they think of the *idea* of CMAs
 - Potential benefits/challenges of joining

- Whether they would consider joining one – Why/why not
 - Anything that could encourage them to decide to join one

6. FINAL REFLECTIONS

[up to 2 mins]

- Whether the profession has changed since they became a childminder
 - If so, how
- What they like most/least about being a childminder
- Final closing comments – anything else to raise?
- Any questions?

END RECORDING

- Thank them for their time and for the discussion
- Reiterate confidentiality and anonymity
- Check whether there is anything which they would not like to be included in the write up of the findings
- Check whether they would like us to send a copy of the report when published
- Confirm email address for us to send them link to £30 Love2Shop voucher
- Explain that we are also looking to speak with former childminders, ask if:
 - They know any former childminders who might be willing to speak with us
 - If so, we will forward along an email invitation, which they could pass on to their former childminder contacts. *[we cannot ask for their contact details directly due to GDPR]*

Qualitative Interviews with Childminders

Topic Guide – Former Childminder

NatCen has been commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to conduct research into the childminder workforce. The DfE have identified several evidence gaps relating to childminders and would like NatCen to gather insights on key thematic areas, which may then feed into policy changes. The four key thematic areas include:

- The bureaucratic burdens childminders face
- Challenges to retention
- The use of childminder assistants
- Perceptions of childminder agencies

This is a qualitative study which involves interviews with active and former childminders. These interviews will seek to understand participants' views and experiences across the four thematic areas.

The following guide does not contain pre-set questions but rather lists the key themes and sub-themes to be explored with participants. It includes few follow-up questions like 'why'.

INTRODUCTION

Aim: to remind the participant about the aims of the research, explain how the interview will be conducted and how the data will be used. [up to 5 mins]

- Introduction to researcher - thank you for agreeing to take part.
- Introduction to NatCen – independent research organisation, we have been commissioned by the Department for Education to conduct research into the childminder workforce to help them with existing evidence gaps.
- As part of this research, we are looking to explore their views on:
 - Reasons for leaving the profession
 - The bureaucratic burdens/challenges childminders face
 - Working with childminder assistants

- Childminder agencies
- **Participants will be provided with a Love2Shop e-voucher to the value of £30 as a thank you for taking part. This will be emailed to them after the interview.**
- Data collected will be anonymised and stored securely. NatCen will securely delete any project data two years after the project is completed in October 2022.
- The information they provide will be used to write a report that we will share with the Department for Education. The report will be publicly available. All information will be treated confidentially. No individual or organisation will be named in the report. We will do our utmost to ensure that individuals are not identifiable.
- The interview will last around 50 minutes – check if ok.
- We would like to record the interview, so we have an accurate record of what is said.
 - Recorder is encrypted, and files stored securely in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
 - Only the research team will have access to the recordings
- Any questions?
- Permission to start recording.

TURN ON RECORDER - obtain verbal consent to participate.

1. PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND

Aim: to 'warm up' participant and gather background information. [up to 5 mins]

Researcher note: Participants likely recruited through snowball sampling; we may not know much about their background ahead of time so these questions are important.

- What they currently do for a living
- When they left the profession
- Where are they based
- Length of time in profession before leaving
- Whether they employed an assistant when working as a childminder

2. LEAVING THE PROFESSION

Aim: to explore participants' motivations for leaving the profession, if they would consider returning, and whether there is anything that would have helped them to stay. [up to 12 mins]

- Why they decided to leave the profession. [*Prompt if necessary*] For example:
 - Only planned to do it for a fixed period
 - Didn't make enough money
 - Too much bureaucracy / paperwork

- Wanted a change
- Got employment elsewhere in the childcare sector
- Got employment in another sector
- The pandemic led to a re-assessment of what they wanted
- Reached retirement
- Anything that would have helped them stay
- Whether they would consider returning to the profession?
 - If so, why
 - If not, why not
- Whether they have considered other roles in the early years
 - If so, why
 - If not, why not
- *[If have little to say in this section]* Why do they think some people are leaving or considering leaving the profession

3. BURDENS / CHALLENGES

Aim: to explore bureaucratic burdens and challenges former childminders faced in the profession and suggestions for overcoming them. [up to 10 mins]

Researcher note: By bureaucratic burdens, we mean administrative tasks and challenges that come with setting up as / being a childminder, and with being regulated.

Researcher note: Participants may have discussed related burdens/challenges in the 'Retention' section above. If so, use this section to dive deeper to those and other potential bureaucratic burdens/challenges to faced further.

- Main challenges they faced when they were a childminder
- Any specific bureaucratic burdens they faced when they were a childminder [Prompt if necessary]
 - Paperwork associated with managing policies (e.g. safeguarding, health and safety)
 - Paperwork required for Ofsted inspections
 - EYFS and statutory requirements
 - Feedback/communication with parents
 - Feedback/communication with local authorities
 - Completing transition records
 - Lesson planning
 - Collecting data/evidence
 - Self-assessment tax return
- Reasons for burden *[for each burden]*
- Whether and how burden affected their ability to *[for each burden]*:

- Respond to needs of children
- Respond to needs of parents/carers
- Suggestions on how bureaucratic burdens could be reduced - without compromising on quality and safety [*Probe for specific suggestions*]

4. CHILDMINDER ASSISTANTS

Aim: to understand the use of assistants by former childminders, including why they chose to employ or not to employ an assistant in the past. [up to 8 mins]

Researcher note: The questions below are routed based on the participants use of an assistant in the past. Please reflect on their response to the question about assistants in the 'Participant Background' section to determine route.

[If previously employed an assistant]:

- Length of time they had an assistant
- Why they decided to employ an assistant [*Prompt if necessary*]
 - Share workload/increase capacity
 - To increase number of children at setting
 - To increase income
 - To help increase the childminding workforce
- Any benefits/challenges that come with having an assistant

[If never employed an assistant]:

- Why they decided *not* to employ an assistant [*Prompt if necessary*]
 - Need to become an employer, e.g. more paperwork
 - Limited floor space
 - Not financially viable / not enough demand to warrant it
 - No assistants available locally
 - Prefer working alone
- Potential benefits/challenges of having an assistant

5. PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDMINDER AGENCIES (CMAs)

Aim: to understand how aware former childminders are of CMAs, what they think about CMAs and if they were ever interested in registering with one. [up to 8 mins]

- Whether they ever came across childminder agencies (CMAs) when working as a childminder [*Probe for extent of awareness*]

Researcher note: If participant is unaware or have limited awareness of CMAs, researcher to describe CMAs to participant using definition below

Childminder agencies (CMAs) are organisations that can register, and quality assure childminders as an alternative to registering with Ofsted. They also provide extra support to childminders, for example connecting childminders and parents looking for childcare and providing business support and training and development opportunities. Like Ofsted, they charge fees for the services they offer.

[If they were already aware of CMAs]:

- What they think of CMAs
- Whether they have previously registered with one – Why/why not [*it is fairly unlikely former childminders will have registered with CMAs before, so the prompts are geared towards them not having previously registered*]
 - Happy with Ofsted registration
 - Cost
 - Was concerned about losing Ofsted branding for their services
 - Was concerned about losing their Ofsted inspection judgement
 - No CMA serving their local area/region
 - Receive all the necessary support from the LA and / or other sources such as local CM networks
 - Did not have/could not find enough information about them
- Whether they every considered registering with one [*if applicable*]- Why/why not
 - Anything that could have encouraged them to decide to join one

[If they were unaware of CMAs]:

- Based on description - what they think of the *idea* of CMAs
 - Potential benefits/challenges of childminders joining

6. CLOSE

[up to 2 mins]

- Whether the profession has changed since they left
 - If so, how
- What they enjoyed most/least about being a childminder
- Final closing comments – anything else to raise?
- Any questions?

END RECORDING

- Thank them for their time and for the discussion
- Reiterate confidentiality and anonymity

- Check whether there is anything which they would not like to be included in the write up of the findings
- Check whether they would like us to send a copy of the report when published
- Confirm email address for us to send them link to £30 Love2Shop voucher
- Explain that we are also looking to speak with former childminders, ask if:
 - They know any former childminders who might be willing to speak with us
 - If so, we will forward along an email invitation, which they could pass on to their former childminder contacts. [*we cannot ask for their contact details directly due to GDPR*]



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