

Have your say on the Children and Families Bill

Calling all childminders!

Please take a moment to give your views about the aspects of the Children and Families Bill that affect you - because you are working every day with children who will be affected by the Bill.



The consultation on the Children and Families Bill is online here -

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2013/february/have-your-say-on-the-children-and-families-bill/>

This response to the consultation has been written by Sarah Neville from the Childminding Forum. It will hopefully give you some ideas about what you might want to put in your own response. It is for the use of **all** childminders who want to share their opinions about the relevant areas of the Children and Families Bill with the Public Bill Committee. The Committee is responsible for examining the Bill in detail.

You have until **22nd April 2013** to submit your letter because the Public Bill Committee meet on that date - however, the earlier you email your letter the better.

Writing your response

You need to number your paragraphs like I have done. If you need any help with this please ask and we will help you.

Your letter needs to be attached to your email as a Microsoft Word document. If you do not have Microsoft Word on your computer please send a personal message to sarah707 on the Childminding Forum and I will convert it for you. If you have any problems sending an attachment by email we will help you with this as well.

A template for letter writing is here - www.childmindinghelp.co.uk/sampleletter.

Your letter needs to be maximum 3000 words. To give you an idea of length, the suggestions I have written here are 2000 words.

In your email cover note you need to say -

Email address - scrutiny@parliament.uk

Subject - Children and Families Bill

My name is -

My address is -

My telephone number is -

My email address is -

First of all you need to introduce yourself. This is paragraph 1!

1. My name is Sarah. I have been working as an Ofsted registered childminder for nearly 20 years and previously I was an early years teacher. I am extremely passionate about my role as a childminder, carer and educator of babies and young children and I am very concerned about the 'More Great Childcare' plan which I believe is very badly thought out and worded. I believe it will put outcomes for the next generation of our children at risk and it will adversely affect the sustainability of my business and the businesses of thousands of childminders and other early years providers throughout England.

2. The areas of the Children and Families Bill about which I have most concerns are - ratios for early years children, childminder agencies and qualifications for early years workers.

3. Ratios for early years children

3.1 Babies and young children deserve to be cared for in settings which offer low ratios because low ratios will support their learning and development and enable them to grow and develop to their full potential. We are told by experts in early years that children need to develop strong bonds with the adults who care for them, have plenty of space to move around and develop physically and that their language and listening skills need to be supported by caring, sensitive adults who have time to give them one-to-one attention. I am very concerned that these essential outcomes for babies and young children will be adversely affected if ratios of adults per child are changed because adults will not have the time available to appropriately care for them, educate them or to spend time chatting and loving them.

3.2 Childminders throughout the country, like many nurseries and pre-schools, are struggling with sustainability because of the current economic crisis. I am very concerned that the future sustainability of my business will be adversely affected if all early years providers are allowed to increase the number of children for whom they care.

3.3 I am very worried about the health and safety of our youngest children if there is one adult to 6 x 2 year olds in nursery environments. Nappy changing alone for this type of ratio will take hours out of the adults' day, notwithstanding the fact that some might be toilet training and others having strong emotional outbursts as they are prone to do at age 2 - all this before the children are played with and their individual needs are met. It makes no difference whether the adult is a teacher or not - this does not give them more than 2 eyes or 2 hands - see paragraph 5.4 for more information.

3.4 At the moment, when childminders make changes to their early years ratios for continuity of care in exceptional circumstances there is an Ofsted procedure they need to follow to ensure children's educational outcomes, health and safety are protected. This includes writing a risk assessment, considering the impact of the changes on all the children and consulting with parents. I believe that this is a sensible and well considered procedure which allows childminders time for reflection before making changes which might adversely affect outcomes for the other children in their care. If the extra children per adult becomes the norm and these very sensible Ofsted procedures are no longer followed, I am very concerned that outcomes for children will suffer.

3.5 I believe that it is a mistake to say that laws can be dismantled just to push changing ratios through. For example, Ms Truss suggests that the 'floor space per child' law might simply be ignored in future. This law is in place for a very good reason - to ensure children have space to move around and places to go when they want some quiet time. If more children are looked after in smaller rooms I believe this will adversely affect their learning, development and care.

3.6 At the moment I care for 3 children under the age of 5 on some days. I take them on frequent outings to enhance their learning and development and to ensure they develop an awareness of the local community, have opportunities to make friends out of the provision, see the changing seasons first hand, go on listening walks and have adventures in the woods. I also have school drops and collections during the day for older children. I am able to keep children safe on outings because I have robust risk assessments in place and I know each child very well. I am very concerned that more children per adult will lead to greater risks on outings. This will either mean that children are not taken out of provisions or that their health and safety is put at risk during the outings. This will also lead to higher costs as childminders will need to buy bigger cars, larger buggies, more car seats etc which will not bring down costs to parents as suggested by Ms Truss as one of her reasons for writing the 'More Great Childcare' plan - see paragraph 3.7 for more information.

3.7 Ms Truss is suggesting that costs for parents will be reduced if childminders are allowed to take on more children per adult. However, she is failing to see the bigger picture. Childminders already earn less than the minimum wage per child - in some areas of the country they earn as little as £2.00 per child per hour. In Cheshire East where I live I earn between £3.50 and £4 per child per hour. Out of this income I feed the children with nutritious, healthy, freshly prepared food; buy exciting and stimulating resources for the house and garden; update my childminding environment regularly to make sure it meets each child's needs; take children on regular outings; ensure my training is updated; complete documentation for the children - at the last estimate this takes me around 3 hours per week extra which are unpaid; pay insurance, Ofsted and Information Commissioners Office fees; spend many hours of my own time preparing activities and speaking to parents - - at the last estimate this takes me around 2 - 3 hours per week extra which are unpaid and much more.

I am very concerned about how much Ms Truss wants to reduce my income. By doing this she is further demoralising a sector which has spent the last two decades fighting to be viewed on an equal footing with other early years providers.

4. Agencies for childminders

4.1 Childminders made it very clear to Ms Truss and the Department for Education last year that they did not want agencies. There were a number of very strongly worded petitions and representations. For this reason, the 'More Great Childcare' plan states that established childminders will be able to stay independent. I believe that this will create a 2 tier system which will be confusing for parents and which will cost more money than now for Ofsted to administrate.

4.2 I do not believe that agencies offer any benefits to newly registering childminders which local authorities cannot offer if they are given the support and Government backing they need. Many local authority networks are currently being disbanded which leaves thousands of childminders throughout the country without help and advice networks. This is presumably in preparation for the agencies - which are neither wanted nor needed.

4.3 Consultation about agencies has not been thorough and Government has not listened to the responses. Ms Truss says that she has spoken to some organisations about agencies, but to date all those organisations to whom she says she has spoken - such as PLA and NCMA - have publically stated that they have advised her against introducing agencies for childminders. Similarly 282 comments in just 12 days on the Government website - almost all negative - must show the strength of feeling against agencies - <http://www.parliament.uk/business/bills-and-legislation/public-reading/children-and-families-bill/childcare/>. How can a consultation be allowed to start from a fait accompli? I understand that Ms Truss is piloting agencies from September this year and yet there are currently at least 3 petitions which have raised over 60,000 signatures against childminder agencies.

4.4 Agencies are most likely to be private or local authority nurseries or schools, because it is highly unlikely that childminders will be able to raise the required funding if, as we are being told by the Department for Education, agencies are to be self funded. This means that nurseries will be in charge of childminder sustainability. It would be very naïve to think that a nursery will pass work on to a childminder if they have spaces - plus all the newly created spaces if their ratios are changed - see paragraph 3.3.

4.5 Information I have read on the D of E website states that agencies will be in charge of local training for childminders who are part of the agencies and as I have already advised - see paragraph 4.2 - many local authority networks are currently being disbanded and funding withdrawn in anticipation of agencies.

This will lead to a 2 tier system whereby established childminders will either not receive training or will have to pay a premium to attend. This will mean that their Ofsted inspection outcomes will be adversely affected and eventually all childminders will be forced to either join the agencies or fail to gain the grades they gained previously. This will lead to a further 2 tier system of unsupported independent childminders who are unable to compete with supported agency childminders.

4.6 Childminders have managed their own successful small businesses for many years without the need for agencies. Agencies will cause confusion and resentment in the sector and will lead to many highly qualified and well respected childminders leaving the profession. This will have the effect of lowering outcomes for children because new childminders brought online by agencies are unlikely to have the skills, qualifications or many years of experience of those who they are replacing.

4.7 Agencies will control the local economy because they will set prices for their agency childminders. This will create a 2 tier pricing system which will confuse parents and lead to independent childminders having to lower their already low prices - see paragraph 3.8. I believe that this will lead to reduced quality of care and education which will adversely affect outcomes for the children.

4.8 Childminders have adapted well to Ofsted control, however continuously changing requirements and Ofsted inspectors who do not fully understand how childminders operate or who tell childminders 'I do not grade outstanding' have caused issues. It will cause even more concerns when there is a 2 tier inspection system with agency childminders losing their right to an individual grading and non-agency childminders being unsupported and unable to gain the high grades their experience should allow them because they no longer receive training or guidance.

5. Qualifications for early years workers

5.1 I do not believe that the early years qualifications structure set out in the 'More Great Childcare' document is anywhere near what Cathy Nutbrown suggested in her consultation. I believe that it will create a 2 tier system for early years workers which will further confuse parents.

5.2 I know a lot of childminders and early years workers in other settings who are wonderful with the children and parents but who do not have English and Maths GCSEs. I do not believe that such qualifications are necessarily an indicator of someone who can provide the highest quality care and learning for young children.

5.4 To suggest that someone with an early years qualification is better placed to care for more children is ridiculous. A teaching qualification does not give you an extra set of eyes to keep children safe or an extra pair of hands to change nappies. It does not give you extra hours in the day to read books, chat to children, sit with them on your knee and sing them songs. This change will further put children's outcomes and health and safety at risk.