



# 'More Great Childcare'

## An analysis of the Government's plans written by childminders

### Written with input from -

Ofsted registered childminders  
Nursery and pre-school partners  
Other early years professionals  
Newspaper and magazine articles  
Government documents  
Parents of children in early years childcare

Established Ofsted registered childminders have embraced a number of changes over the years - we have been transitioned from Social Services to Ofsted, we have welcomed the professionalism which the EYFS (2008 and 2012) have brought to our work and through the years we have worked with and supported all Government and local initiatives which we believe raise outcomes for children.

However, this latest Government 'More Great Childcare' plan (Feb, 2013) concerns us to such an extent that we have spent many hours collating the attached comments and questions, to present them to the Government for urgent consideration.

The comments in this document have been made by thousands of colleagues locally, on the Childminding Forum ([www.childmindingforum.co.uk](http://www.childmindingforum.co.uk)) and other social media, via the 'leave our ratios alone' petition ([www.keepratiosdown.co.uk](http://www.keepratiosdown.co.uk) which has received over 20,000 signatures to date) and by other professionals and parents who all believe that the Government proposals will put outcomes for the next generation of our children at risk and adversely affect the sustainability of the majority of early years providers including childminders.

We believe that change can be a good thing when it is thought through carefully, considered after comprehensive consultation with all stakeholders and implemented only if it has the backing of the majority of those who will be affected.

However, we do not think that the 'More Great Childcare Plan' has been thought through carefully. For example, Ms Truss is still referring to the Dutch agency model for childminders which has been discredited and disbanded (Nursery World, 6.4.2012) and she seems to have little understanding of the current EYFS (2012) ratios as evidenced in her recent Nursery World interview (6.4.2012) and repeated during her Mumsnet webchat (7.1.2013).

The 'More Great Childcare Plan' may have been consulted with a few stakeholders, quote 'I've held a series of meetings with nursery providers, interested organisations like the Daycare Trust, NCMA, My Family Care and nanny agencies' (Mumsnet webchat, 7.2.2013). However, Daycare Trust has reported grave concerns about the plans (21.5.2012); NCMA quickly released a statement reassuring their members that neither they nor the 'overwhelming majority' of their members support the plans (7.2.2013); My Family Care reported that, 'This Truss woman has a load of very strange ideas that she's cobbled together from around the world' (19.9.2012) and childminders are confused about the relevance of consulting unregulated nanny agencies about early years ratios and childminder agencies.

The 'More Great Childcare' plan has been criticised by childminders, nurseries, pre-schools, Government ministers and parents, who all share grave concerns. The recent Mumsnet webchat (7.2.2013) did not contain one statement of support for Ms Truss' plans and I have yet to speak to a childminder who thinks that the plan will raise outcomes for children or lower childcare costs or improve their business sustainability once they understand the plans fully.

This document contains a collection of comments from childminders, colleagues from early years and parents. We ask that the government carefully considers our views and concerns before pushing ahead with a plan which we believe will adversely affect the next generation of our children and the sustainability of thousands of thriving independent childminders and other early years providers.

Thank you for taking the time to read our analysis of the 'More Great Childcare' plan. We look forward to receiving your response.

## **Analysis of the 'More Great Childcare' plan**

The Government document 'More Great Childcare', written by Elizabeth Truss (Jan 2013), Member of Parliament for south west Norfolk, states,

*'Every parent wants the best for their child. They expect childcare to be safe and of good quality, because high quality childcare promotes children's development in the early years'*

Childminders agree with this comment. We feel that this should be the aim of every early years professional, parent, childminder and Government minister. It is exactly why many thousands of parents and early years providers and professionals are joining together to express their grave concerns about the 'More Great Childcare' plan.

We would like to look at the aims of the document and discuss some of the problems we have noted in more detail -

**The Plan states** - *'The availability of affordable, safe and stimulating care is crucial in supporting families by enabling parents to work'*

The writers of and contributors to this document have carried out an unscientific audit of childcare providers in their local authority areas throughout the country and note that care as described in this statement is already available in the majority of local authorities.

We would like to ask the government if audits have been carried out to recognise areas of need which should be addressed or if this is simply a sweeping statement (one of many which are used in the plan) which has no basis in fact.

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**The Plan states** - *'The affordability and availability of childcare are growing concerns to many working parents, and some childcare providers are struggling in these tough economic times'*

Childminders agree that some childcare providers are struggling to remain viable in these tough economic times - we would like to ask why the government is therefore suggesting increasing the number of children who can be cared for in all early years provisions. We note that very few nurseries, pre-schools and childminders in the majority of local authorities in which we (the writers of and contributors to this document) live are currently full to capacity.

We believe changes to ratios will adversely affect outcomes for children. They will have the effect of putting many providers out of business because other providers in their local area will be keen to fill their newly created spaces and a fees war will ensue.

If these nurseries and other providers are then agencies for childminders, the situation for childminders will become even more untenable, as we will simply not be offered vacancies in the future.

We ask the Government - why not carry out an audit in each local authority and simply tackle the issues in areas of the country where this is a specific problem?

## **Concerns about changing ratios**

We are concerned that Ms Truss does not fully understand the current childminder ratios and exceptions rules. We feel that this might be causing her to misinterpret some of the requirements of the EYFS 2012 and that her calculations might be based on flawed information.

In her Nursery World article 'Why we are introducing childminder agencies' she states 'One childminding couple I met in Thetford in my constituency look after six children between them. Because of the current rules, if one of them needs to buy a pint of milk at a shop around the corner, they have to take along three children.'

This is **not** the case - using the current EYFS (2012) the childminders who work together can quite easily write a change to the conditions of their registration (often called a 'variation') for continuity of care. This will enable them to leave 4 children with the childminder who stays at home while the other 2 children go with their childminder to the shop. This outing might be used as a learning experience, with different children preparing a shopping list, thinking through their own outing risk assessment and maybe visiting the park on the way back for a play. The children who go to the shop might be varied during the weeks so they all experience this valuable community outing.

When childminders organise variations for continuity of care in exceptional circumstances we are aware that even one extra child can reduce the quality of service we provide at the time and we are unable to provide the same quality attention for all children. We know that we must think carefully about what we are doing, write a risk assessment, consider the implications to the learning and care of all the children, involve parents in our decision making process and much more. Our concern is that more children per adult will become the 'norm' rather than the exception for some childminders and outcomes for the children will be compromised as a result.

Another area where Ms Truss appears to be struggling is with the ratios for childminders and 2 children under the age of 1. Her comments, 'The existing ratio of one child under the age of one per childminder means that twins are a no-no without special permission. And there is very little scope to manage if one parent is late picking up their child, which is why an additional allowance will be given to manage changeover periods.'

The removal of childminder conditions in the revised EYFS (published in Sept 2012) gave childminders the ability to change the conditions of their registration for cases such as this so we can offer a flexible service to parents.

## **Further concerns about changing ratios**

Ms Truss states that, 'the evidence from studies like EPPE, and from the OECD's Starting Strong work, that having graduates in settings, even for babies, has a positive impact on children's outcomes.' (Mumsnet webchat, Thu 07-Feb-13 13:03:25)

We note that these studies were primarily concerned with children of three years and above, whereas the proposed ratio changes affect infants and two year olds who require secure attachments with a responsive key person in order to thrive emotionally and intellectually. Furthermore, even amongst the older age group, the OECD's Starting Strong work identifies high staff: child ratios as a factor in securing positive outcomes from early years childcare and education'.

Childminders, pre-schools, nurseries and parents have come together to condemn the plan to change ratios. They believe that the plan to increase the number of children for whom one adult can care takes no account of the needs of the children involved - or the needs of the adults who are attempting to care for them and provide them with a high level of attention and care.

Here are some practitioner and commentator comments -

- 'It is hard to contemplate the demoralising and damaging effect of this policy proposal on the early years workforce as it clearly places very little value on what they already do.' (Nursery World magazine, Kate Hulm, 4.2.2013).
- We need to spend time with each child to foster their personal, social and emotional development and communication and literacy - the EYFS tells us this. If we are struggling to cope with the care needs of more and more children, where will we find this time?
- To support children's physical development, we need to provide children with space to move around and safe areas in which to play. If ratios are changed and floor space rules are changed so more children are squeezed into each room - how will this be achieved?
- The plan fails to acknowledge that staffing ratios have existed largely unchanged since the 1970s for good reason - because of the strong professional consensus about what babies and very young children need so they can flourish and grow in a safe and healthy environment.
- NCMA state, 'The decision to allow childminders to care for more children under five has not been linked to any quality measures' and, 'the decision to increase ratios in groups settings is likely to risk quality for children in those settings'.
- Recently published government reports suggest that something like one in five children in England today has additional needs. The childcare market already fails these children and their families through lack of one-to-one care, lack of training, lack of space and time and much more. Reducing the ratio of adults to babies and young children will mean even less opportunity for them to flourish and for their individual care and learning needs to be met.
- The 'More Great Childcare' plan suggests that changing ratios will enable childcare settings to recruit more children, earn more income, pay staff more, improve quality and reduce costs for parents. We believe that the plan will not do any of this - it will, instead, put outcomes for a whole generation of children at risk.

At the time of writing this document, over 20,000 childminders, early years professionals and parents have signed an online petition with change.org asking the government to 'leave our early years ratios alone'.

The petition can be found here - [www.keepratiosdown.co.uk](http://www.keepratiosdown.co.uk)

## **The 'Leave our ratios alone' petition states -**

'Increasing the number of children per adult in an early years setting is likely to put the wellbeing, health, safety and education of our youngest and most vulnerable children under threat.

On 11th January 2013 we asked early years professionals including childminders on the Childminding Forum and Facebook page 'Childminders' for their comments to the question:

*'Do you think childminders having higher ratios will improve outcomes for the children... and lower costs for parents as suggested by recent Government reports?'*

We very quickly received almost 100 comments, all telling us that early years professionals do not want to compromise children's outcomes or put their safety at risk by taking on more children. For this reason, the Childminding Forum is working to lobby government via this petition.

We believe that the Government and Ofsted are working together to put the wellbeing, health, safety and education of our youngest and most vulnerable children under threat.

We believe that Government proposals to change child per adult ratios will quite probably lead to some early years settings taking on more children than at present, possibly without the extra support, staffing, space and knowledge that they need to meet the children's needs effectively on a day-to-day basis... and that this will put outcomes for children and their health, safety and wellbeing at risk.

We believe that there is some misinformed notion within government that if ratios are increased the cost of childcare for parents will come down. We all know that if ratios are increased we will have to buy more resources, provide extra food, purchase bigger cars and buggies, buy more equipment, work much harder every day, complete more paperwork in our already dwindling family time, pay higher insurance costs, pay more tax and national insurance, make changes to our premises to remain commercially viable... and much more... all of which will quite probably increase rather than lower our fees.

We believe that the suggestion of increasing the number of children per adult will make our provisions completely unsustainable. The vast majority of childminders already work for well below the minimum wage and few childminders, nurseries, pre-schools and other providers are full to capacity. We wonder where the government foresee this influx of children coming from to make the new ratios sustainable.

We are responsible for ensuring the next generation have the very best opportunities available to them. Increasing ratios does not put the children's interests first and will only lead to lower standards and less one-to-one time causing a potential significant detriment to a child's life chances.

We believe that young children's early years experiences must not be compromised by Government policy as has happened so many times in the past.'

We urge Ms Truss to read comments noted on the petition and listen to what we are saying. We are asking her to consider changing her plans before it is too late and outcomes for the next generation of our children are seriously compromised.

## **Note the following website links -**

Childminding Forum - [www.childmindingforum.co.uk](http://www.childmindingforum.co.uk);

Facebook page 'Childminders' - [www.facebook.com/childminders](https://www.facebook.com/childminders).

## **Continuing with our analysis of further statements from the 'More Great Childcare' plan...**

**The Plan states** - *'As Professor Cathy Nutbrown told us in her report last summer, the quality of provision for children could be improved'*

We are in favour of raising outcomes for children - and many thousands of childminders and nursery providers through the country attend training and courses to further enhance their personal professional development.

We wonder if Ms Nutbrown was made aware of the ways in which Ofsted inspectors discriminate against, for example, newly registered childminders by suggesting they are not well enough established to receive a better grade than satisfactory - in their own literature (pre-September 2012)?

We will look at this issue in more detail later in our response.

We are also concerned about repeated references in the plan (and referenced verbally by Ms Truss during interviews) to early years children being taught by teachers through structured activities. These comments and the lack of mention throughout the plan to the EYFS 2012, which is a play based curriculum, are deeply worrying to many childminders.

We know that children learn best through playful interactions - this is supported by all early years professionals and the writers of the EYFS 2012. We strongly believe that children should not start formal education until they are ready - and that they are not ready at the age of 2, 3 or, in many cases, 4 - which is why the majority of well informed and successful educational approaches throughout Europe and the rest of the world start their children in school much later.

Concerns that our children are being subjected to 'inappropriate learning environments' are the focus of many early years campaigns (Nursery World, 8.2.2013).

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**The Plan states** - *'The plans in this document are the first step'*

We are very concerned that this statement which, when read alongside interviews given by Ms Truss (Nursery World 5.2.2013; Mumsnet live webchat 7.2.2013) and the article 'What are childminder agencies?' (Department for Education, 7.2.2013) suggests that the 'More Great Childcare' plan is a fait accompli. Are the government telling us that this is the way forward and these plans are happening? Ms Truss states that agencies will be up and running from September 2013 - where is the consultation time? What has happened to asking childminders, parents and other involved professionals what they want - and listening to their responses?

There is no suggestion in any of the comments from Ms Truss that the plans are proposals. She states in the interview 'This change will enormously help professionals, parents and children alike' - not as she might have said, 'this proposed change'. Similarly, she tells us 'We will pilot them (agencies) in September 2013 and I hope that they will be fully operational a year later.'

A consultation suggests a 2 way flow of ideas, suggestions and initiatives, where the Government listens to the people involved and takes their views into consideration. Childminders, parents and other early years providers are asking the same question - will a consultation happen or is the 'More Great Childcare' plan already decided?

## Childminders and agencies

Over 11,000 childminders, early years professionals and parents signed a petition against agencies last year (2012). The Government does not appear to have listened to our concerns... so this time we would like to tackle things from a different angle. Now that the subject of agencies has arisen again, we would like to ask questions about how agencies will work, how they will support sustainability, what they will do for the thousands of established childminders who want to be self employed and how they will help to raise outcomes for the children in our care.

We are calling for consultation before plans are implemented and we look forward to receiving answers to our questions...

**The Plan states** - *'We want to make it simpler for talented people to become childminders and for quality childminders to operate and grow their business. Therefore, in addition to making it easier for existing childminders to care for more young children, we will also create new routes for people to enter childminding.'*

### Questions...

- Have audits been carried out to check that new childminders are needed and that there are sufficient families looking for childcare throughout the country to fill their spaces? Many Childminding Forum members already have free spaces despite advertising and foresee even more problems finding work when nursery ratios are changed and schools are encouraged to take both 2 year olds and set up before and after school clubs (so we lose the school aged children as well).
- This statement encompasses 'quality childminders' in the plan - and yet in another part of the plan it is stated that established childminders will not need to join the agencies. Please clarify - it appears to established childminders that we are not considered to be 'quality childminders'.

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**The Plan states** - *'At the moment, most childminders are self-employed individuals running their own business. Many childminders are happy with these arrangements. But many other current and former childminders have found the requirements of setting up and running their own business far too burdensome. In some cases, it has prevented childminders from concentrating on delivering high quality early education and care, and in others it has driven people out of the profession altogether. This is one reason why the number of childminders has almost halved over the last twenty years.'*

### Questions...

- Setting up a childminding business is not burdensome - it can be a lengthy process but many established childminders feel this is a good thing as it teaches patience, resilience, perseverance and much more - all valuable qualities in a childminder. There is a lot of help and advice available to newly registering childminders via the local authority infrastructure already in place which we are very concerned will be lost if agencies are given control. We also feel that a lengthy induction process serves to dissuade those people who are not really interested in doing the job. If agencies make it easier for childminders to register, we have concerns about the percentage of people who will be wasting their own and other peoples' time and money.
- The statement that childminder numbers have 'almost halved' does not fully appreciate the market factors involved. Has natural wastage, maternity leave, up-skilling and people retiring been taken into consideration? We are not aware of exit questionnaires to determine reasons for leaving and therefore would like to question the validity of this sweeping statement.

**The Plan duplicates the above and extends the intention by stating -** *'We will enable the creation of childminder agencies to relieve childminders of some of the burdens of setting up their own business, provide training and match childminders with parents. Instead of having to investigate prospective childminders to check they are happy to entrust their children to their care, parents could instead approach a childminder agency to match them with a nearby childminder. There could be many practical benefits too. For instance, agencies could arrange for cover when childminders fall ill, saving parents the hassle of finding someone else at short notice or missing work.'*

### **Questions...**

- How much will it cost to be part of an agency?
- We believe that this will create a 2 tier system with agency childminders promoted by agencies, local authorities and / or the government as better than independent childminders. We are also concerned that it will cause confusion for parents. Can the Government please clarify how they intend to protect the sustainability of the many thousands of established childminders who wish to remain independent?
- Very few childminders feel that running their own businesses is burdensome. There are concerns about certain paperwork expectations, often requested by Local Authority advisors and Ofsted inspectors... however, these do not include finding new business or organising insurance. How does Ms Truss suggest agencies will reduce the burden of a childminder's ongoing documentation for children while ensuring childminders are allowed to stay within the EYFS framework so they continue to offer the same level of high quality care as other providers?
  - Will agencies complete childminder accounts and help with invoicing?
  - Will agencies write observations and complete the children's Learning Journeys?
  - Will agencies write our self reflections for us?
  - Will agencies do our training so we can free up more time to be with our families after work and at the weekend?
  - Will agencies write our risk assessments so they are individual to our homes and outings?
  - Will agencies formulate policies for how each childminder operates in our unique settings?

We note that the 'More Great Childcare' plan does not mention the EYFS 2012 - only to offer 'high quality care'. Please also clarify the role of the EYFS for childminders in the future.

- Parents do not want to use a childminder matching service. Parents to whom we have spoken say they prefer to visit a variety of childminders and make up their own minds rather than be pointed in a certain direction by someone who might not fully understand their family's individual needs.
- Do childminders trust agencies to send parents to them rather than being in control of their own sustainability? What if the agency is the local nursery and it is struggling to fill its own spaces or the local Children's Centre which has absolutely no interest in working with childminders?
- The majority of childminders have short term cover in place already and are not prepared to pay for it to be organised for them. New childminders who follow the requirements of the Childcare Register will arrange emergency care with parents to fulfil the requirements. Has a consultation been carried out to clarify is this service is of value to parents?
- From where will all the new childminders be recruited to make the agencies self sufficient? Many areas of the country are already awash with established childminders, nurseries, pre-schools etc.
- If established childminders were to join an agency would our existing parents have to pay more for the privilege or would we be expected to carry the loss in income?
- Can you please explain how the money will bring down costs to parents when it has to go through an agency middle man - so in fact our service to parents will cost us more? Or is the government expecting childminders to further reduce their already below minimum wage incomes?

**The Plan states** - *'Childminders who join agencies will find they can concentrate on childminding rather than administrative tasks such as arranging training and finding clients.'*

**Questions...**

- We have asked a selection of childminders how long it takes to arrange training and they all say it is not difficult. There is an excellent training network already in place throughout most of the country for childminders - we would like to ask whether investigations have been carried out to consider whether the current network can simply be improved.

Follow up questions - will training cost money? How will non agency childminders access training? Will non agency childminders have to pay more money than agency childminders to access essential training such as first aid and safeguarding?

- We have asked a selection of childminders whether 'finding clients' takes a long time and they say that the biggest problem is caused by parents not arriving for interviews. They do not feel this will improve simply because a 'middle man' agency is involved. Some childminders do complain that the phone never rings - but that is mostly because there is no demand for their service in their local area and all early years providers are quiet. As we are yet to be convinced that any of these plans will create a sudden influx of children needing childcare, we fail to see how this service will support childminders in the future.
- What if the agency favours one set of childminders over another and fails to find clients for a childminder? To whom might the childminder complain?
- There is a grave concern that even more paperwork 'hoops' will be invented by agencies trying to prove their worth to Ofsted. What guarantees will be given that this will not happen?
- What if the agency and childminder have a different ethos, terms and conditions, policies and procedures etc? Will the childminder have to adopt the ethos of the agency before joining? It is unlikely there will be a choice of agencies for the childminder to join, simply because of travelling distance when accessing training.
- What if the childminder and parents do not get on? Will the childminder be penalised for saying 'no' to a client - perhaps by not receiving any more calls for new business?
- How will agencies make sure they always have up-to-date childminder vacancies? We are concerned that this will cost a lot of money to implement - we know that thousands of pounds a month are already spent by totally impartial childminder - parent matching services such as Childcare.co.uk and the Family Information Services. If agencies are to be self supporting we assume that childminders will be paying for this service out of their already low income.

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**The Plan states** - *'Parents will also benefit. Instead of having to investigate every prospective childminder to check they are happy to entrust their children to their care, they could instead approach a childminder agency to match them with a nearby childminder. The agency would be quality assured and inspected by Ofsted, offering parents reassurance.'*

**Questions...**

- Does this mean that the government will be telling parents that only agency childminders are properly qualified to look after their children? What happened to free choice?
- Getting their work via word of mouth and recommendation means a lot to the majority of childminders. It means they are valued in their local community and current parents are happy to recommend their services. Many thousands of established childminders do not want to lose this - will they still be able to take on work which does not come through the agency if they are agency members? Will they be penalised for this?

- Agencies will mostly be existing nurseries and schools according to the 'More Great Childcare' plan. Does the government really think they will pass vacancy requests on to childminders when they already have their own vacancies to fill? Especially as schools will be taking 2 year olds and setting up after school clubs - because Government is planning to relax the rules...

As an extension to that question, please explain how rules can be relaxed for schools and after school clubs but not for childminders who offer after school care. Childminders who care for older children have to comply with the requirements of the Childcare Register 2012 and cope with Ofsted inspectors who ask for written evidence of the children's learning and development even though it is not required by the EYFS 2012. Will this be the same for the after school clubs?

NCMA state, 'Whilst the childminding agency model is only optional now, it will still lead to parental confusion and a two-tiered system of regulation and support for childminders. We remain concerned it will impact on childminding's future sustainability.' (Feb 2013)

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**The Plan states** - *'We will legislate so that, subject to the will of Parliament, childminder agencies will be able to:*

- provide regular training and quality assurance;*
- match supply and demand, helping to fill places and act as a point of contact with parents. They will also be able to resolve complaints and other issues;*
- take on administrative tasks, for example, around registration and insurance. This will allow childminders to focus on caring for children; and*
- be registered with, and inspected, by Ofsted, who will inspect and report on agencies' quality. Agencies will have their performance assessed so that parents and childminders know exactly how well agencies are fulfilling their duties and supporting childminders. Ofsted will also inspect a sample of childminders under an agency, with a reduction in the overall bureaucracy of inspection without compromising quality.'*

**Questions...**

- The majority of childminders already have access to regular training - if they want to attend. Will accessing training become a requirement under agency control? What about childminders who live a long distance from the nearest agency... or childminders who do not drive? Will they be penalised for not attending training? Will agencies be graded lower by Ofsted because childminders do not attend the training they offer? Will this lead to childminder grades being lowered?
- What training will be offered to childminders who do not join the agency? Will they be invited to agency training? Will they be charged a fee for this?
- The majority of childminders and parents believe that Ofsted offer parents reassurance of their quality through the current inspection system. How will information given to parents to reassure them that the 2 tier system does not mean independent childminders offer a lower quality service than agency childminders? Our concern is that this will further confuse parents.
- When matching supply and demand, will the agency also fix local prices? What about individual childminder independence to charge what they feel they are worth depending on their availability, local knowledge, training, flexibility, reputation, Ofsted grading, facilities etc?
- Childminders tell us that they neither want nor need an agency to tell them where to go to buy their insurance. How do you anticipate this service will be of benefit to childminders?
- Will 'administrative tasks' include jobs such as chasing late payments? How much will the agency charge (percentage of income or monthly fee) to fulfil this role for the childminder?

- Childminders tell us that while they find the support of their local Development Officer reassuring when complaints are made against them, they much prefer the current system whereby the majority of day-to-day complaints are handled in-house. They do not want a third party involved and their concern is that the agency will support the parent rather than the childminder and that there will be a conflict of interest. Who will adjudicate in such matters?
- What will happen to the childminders and families if the agency is failing to comply with the requirements or is not financially viable?
- What happens to each agency childminder's individual grades if the agency receives a 'satisfactory' Ofsted inspection grade? Do they lose their previous 'good' or 'outstanding' grades because the agency is failing them?

As a follow on question, childminders ask - if agencies receive a 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory' Ofsted grade does this mean that the childminders will lose their funded children because of their association with the agency?

- The majority of childminders belong to networks, forums and other local and national support groups. They tell us that they do not feel 'unsupported' and prefer to continue working as self employed. How will this affect the sustainability of agencies? Is it not just an excuse for local nurseries to control childminders and put us out of business by taking all the early years work for themselves? Who will mediate in such cases if childminders feel that they are not being treated fairly?

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**The plan states** - *'The agency approach may be particularly attractive to people who have previously thought about entering the profession but been put off. This might include, for example, a new parent looking for a career change that lets them spend time with their child, but daunted by the prospect of unsupported self-employment. Equally, it might be attractive to a nursery worker, interested in working for themselves, but nervous about leaving the supporting structure of group provision.'*

**Questions...**

We are always happy to see new childminders enter the profession and many of us are mentors and support newly registering childminders in many different ways. Our concerns, as already noted, are centered on their sustainability, our future sustainability if all these new childminders are introduced into many areas of the country where business is already scarce and the creation of a 2 tier system.

- What assurances can the Government give us that this will not happen?
- What will be done if it is happening and established childminders are leaving the profession because they have been 'squeezed out' by newly registering childminders who are members of agencies?

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One childminder would like to share the following...

'So, with no new money injected, the scheme promises to:-

- improve the standard of care, education and inspection
- reduce childcare costs for parents
- improve incomes for childcare providers and thereby attract 'better people' into the industry

It's clearly designed to be attractive to everyone: parents, nurseries, childminders, taxpayers, etc.

The plan uses statistical evidence to show how poorly paid childcare workers are, and say, "hey guys, we know your pay compares badly with Europe - this scheme will give you better earnings." It uses other statistical evidence to say, "hey parents, we know UK childcare is pricey - we'll bring the cost down." I'm reminded of the soccer manager who likened statistics to swimwear, because it shows an awful lot but still manages to cover up what you don't want people to see.'

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**The plan states** - *'It will not be compulsory for childminders to join agencies. Many existing childminders have already overcome barriers to enter the market - the registration process, the costs of training - and have built up successful small businesses. It is absolutely right that these childminders continue to be free to operate independently. However, for new or existing childminders, such as those working in rural areas where support is lacking, for example, agencies can offer a formalised support network and a more secure way of working.'*

### Questions...

- How long does the Government consider independence will be sustainable if parents are told that agency childminders are better than independent ones and if money is spent aggressively marketing agencies? Can the Government please reassure independent childminders that they will still be supported in the future by, for example, local networks, Development Officers, toy libraries, training opportunities, meetings in Children's Centres etc?
- How will agencies help overcome the barrier of the registration process? Will they have the time, resources, funding etc to do this for all newly registering childminders as well as supporting established minders who want to join them? We think this is very doubtful but would like assurances on behalf of new childminders who currently receive a lot of support.
- We are back to cost again - how much will all this cost childminders and is it a worthwhile service? Do we need someone else doing these jobs for us? The majority of childminders tell us that they are running their businesses successfully and do not need this type of intervention.
- As agency childminders will be newly qualified, and parents will be guided towards agencies as the preferred suppliers of childminder care, how will parents ensure they are getting the very best care for their children? Newly registered childminders do not always have, for example, parent references, experience, embedded self evaluation, ongoing training etc.

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**The plan states** - *'Each childminder is inspected every three or four years, usually for only around three to four hours. Agencies will deliver intensive support to childminders, with regular monitoring visits and training. Ofsted will carry out thorough inspections of agency support and monitoring systems. Where childminders are registered with agencies, we do not envisage Ofsted needing to inspect each of them individually. Instead, Ofsted will inspect a sample of individual childminders to ensure that agencies are appropriately assessing the quality of childminders on their books. Childminders who do not join childminder agencies will continue to be inspected individually. The regulation and inspection of childminder agencies will be overseen by Ofsted's HMIs.'*

### Questions...

- Does this mean that childminders will lose the right to individual inspections if they are belong to an agency? Many thousands of childminders petitioned and lobbied against this last year - did the government not hear us?

- Will Ofsted guarantee to continue charging the current £35 a year to childminders who wish to be registered with them (as opposed to an agency) or will the cost rise prohibitively as previously threatened?
- Childminders who are not part of an agency will still, according to the 'More Great Childcare' plan, have Ofsted inspections - will these be as frequent as at present and will childminders still be inspected in the same way? Our concern is that this will create a 2 tier system, with parents confused about whether Ofsted inspected or agency inspected childminders are the best. What assurances can you give us?
- To whom will childminders complain if their agency is underperforming? Childminders have little confidence that Ofsted will have sufficient resources, manpower or time to support them.
- One childminder asks, 'If inspectors spend 3-4 hours inspecting 1 provider with up to 3 children, compared to 2 x 6 hour ('school hours') days inspecting group settings with perhaps 30 early years workers and 120 children, then does it not follow that the inspection of childminders is likely to be more comprehensive? Why is this being changed when there is no evidence that it will improve outcomes for children?'

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**The plan states** - *'We do not intend to be restrictive about the business model for childminder agencies and we see considerable scope for innovation. Beyond setting out the core functions of an agency – supporting and training staff, registering with Ofsted, quality assurance – we will not prescribe a single approach. Agencies will be free to respond to the needs of parents and childminders directly, as well as to local need. We anticipate a variety of business models, including:*

- agencies led by high-quality nurseries, primary schools or children's centres who want to increase the choice of provision available to parents in the local area;*
- organisations offering both group-based and home-based provision, perhaps with flexibility for parents to move their children between the two; and*
- childminder-led agencies, with experienced childminders moving to a training and development role, supporting other childminders in the agency.'*

### **Questions...**

- How many agencies does the Government feel will be sustainable throughout the country?
- How will the Government ensure a spread of agencies through the country? What about areas of the country where no agencies set up?
- Will training offered by agencies which are, for example, nurseries be offered at the weekends to accommodate childminders who work through the week?
- Childminders tell us they do not want to be linked to local nurseries - with their significantly higher ratios if they are teacher led. The nurseries will need to fill their own spaces so they can pay higher wages to their better qualified staff - we question how Ofsted will ensure all agencies put childminder needs first in the current economic climate.
- Nanny agencies charge parents a premium to arrange their childcare - which does not help to bring down childcare costs. Will this be the same for parents who approach agencies?
- We have spoken to a number of nannies through the country who tell us that although we already have lots of nanny agencies, more and more families are finding a nanny online and more and more nannies are finding work without the need for agencies. Ms Truss stated in her Mumsnet webchat that she had consulted with nannies before formulating her plans - we are concerned that they did not inform her of this so she could consider it before organising something that is clearly failing for us childminders. Please clarify.

- Many childminders have had previous issues with their local children's centres and do not trust them to put childminder needs first. Who will mediate in situations such as this on behalf of childminders who are not being supported by the centres?
- Childminders have grave concerns that the majority of primary schools do not have enough understanding about childminder needs to successfully manage us, provide us with support and training, organise our vacancies etc. What training and support will be offered to primary schools and who will provide this support?
- Where will all the children come from to fill new agency childminder spaces? The Government is making it easier for schools to provide care for 2 year olds, wants to increase nursery ratios to what many feel are dangerous levels and intends to make it easier to set up and run after school clubs. We are struggling to see how new childminders will be able to run sustainable businesses - and where existing childminders will find new work. Please clarify.

**The plan states** - *We are working with providers to develop the agency proposition and business model in the coming months. We plan to look at existing childminder networks and groups, using good practice to inform the best approach for agencies. We will also look to other countries with childminder agencies, such as France and the Netherlands, to see what works and what could helpfully be brought to bear on the English model. We will pilot agency arrangements in 2013, with the aim of agencies operating (and being registered and inspected) by 2014, subject to Parliamentary approval. We will publish more guidance on setting up agencies and the implications for childminders of joining them in due course.*

### **Questions...**

- In a recent Nursery World interview Ms Truss talked as if agencies were a fait accompli. Can we please have some assurances that this is not the case and that if we present arguments against them the government will listen to us?
- What about childminders who accept vouchers and / or government funding - will they be forced to join the agency to continue?
- If agencies are handling payments - what if they are late paying the childminder? Many childminders have had experience of waiting for many months before receiving money from, for example, LA organised childcare and systems are not in place to pay in advance. Who will pay for a childminder's bank charges if the agency is late in paying?
- One of the aims of the plan is to lower costs for parents - how will any of these plans bring down the cost of childcare for parents? Does the government expect childminders to join agencies which set their prices to a local level and move from caring for say 3 children at £4 an hour to looking after more at half the cost? As many contributors to this document have said - we need better paid childminders and early years staff - not lower fees so parents pay less. Surely childminders and staff, many of whom work for less than the minimum wage in very difficult, pressurised environments, deserve at least the same amount of respect and focus in the report as parents?
- One childminder asks, 'If the agencies are to bring us in line with nurseries then can we assume that any nursery with a satisfactory rating will no longer be able to offer the funding for 2, 3 and 4 year olds? If Government wants to bring us on to a level playing field then it seems only fair to legislate both ways.' Please confirm future intentions to legislate for nurseries.
- What about childminder terms and conditions - payment in advance, immediate notice if no payment received, payment when children are sick, holiday pay etc? Will these still be honoured by agencies or will childminders have to do what the agency tells them - causing potential hardship?
- We understand that the Dutch agency model has been discredited and dismantled (Nursery World, 16.4.2012) yet the minister continues to talk about it as a successful model which we in England might emulate. Please explain this to us.

## Further concerns

The document released by the Department for Education 'What are agencies?' raises further questions we would like addressed -

### Questions...

- Will childminders be able to join an agency and continue to operate independently at the same time?
- Agencies will, according to the plan, help parents if 'any problems emerge with their childminder'. Can you please clarify for whose benefit agencies are going to exist - childminders or parents?
- The briefing document talks about what agencies WILL do - without the benefit of consultation first. It states that, 'agencies could offer combined nursery and childminder packages to suit individual parents' - does this mean that the government foresees a situation where nurseries will also come under the remit of agency control in the future or is this referring to nurseries which register to run agencies?
- How 'regular' will the home visits be carried out? These visits will be expensive to organise and implement. How much of the cost will need to be met by the childminder through the fees which the agency collects? Can the Government please explain how this will bring down fees for parents?
- How will other agencies such as tax credits and those responsible for paying the local authority free entitlement manage a 2 tier system where agencies are controlling some funding and independent childminders are in receipt of direct funding? We are very concerned that they are unable, at the moment, to manage the 1 funding stream effectively. Please give us reassurances.
- Many childminders have 1 or more parents who pay them using tax credits and / or childcare vouchers. If those payments are made directly to an agency instead of to the parents will this mean that their choice of childcare is limited to agency childminders? Or if they choose an independent childminder will they have to be paid via the agency which will take their cut first? How will this 2 tier system benefit parents and bring down costs?
- Toy and equipment sharing... training... group activities etc are all available already in most areas of the country via the local authority. Why does the government want to spend many thousands of pounds replacing a system that already works well rather than carrying out an audit and targeting support to those areas in which it is needed?

As a follow on question, childminders want to know if this support will still be available to them if they choose to stay independent.

There are very serious and growing concerns about childminder sustainability as we read further government plans to make it easier for schools to open before and after school clubs and to encourage all parents to start their children at school at age 2. Why is the Government so intent on getting children into school earlier? Being in school does not in itself guarantee quality.

We are very concerned that this is a move towards universal, state run group childcare. While we would love to get into a debate about this we feel that the Sue Palmer and the 'Toxic Childhood' campaign will probably do it better. Or perhaps the Government will listen to children's author and former laureate Michael Rosen who stated on Twitter - 'Stop toddlers playing. Tories march on'.

Is agency control just one part of the bigger problem - the whole 'More Great Childcare' plan - from its appalling use of English in the title - onwards? We are very concerned that the government are trying to force childminders into agencies. We believe this will take away our independence and adversely affect our ability to make decisions which impact on our businesses and the children and families with whom we work. We cannot see how these plans, which will cost significant amounts of money to implement, will bring down childcare costs.

We urge the government to re-think these plans and to listen to our concerns.

**The 'More Great Childcare' plan goes on to explain how the government intends to -**

*'Build a stronger, more capable workforce, with more rigorous training and qualifications, led by a growing group of Early Years Teachers'*

There is a lot of generalisation regarding qualifications in the 'More Great Childcare Plan'. Suggesting that someone must have GCSEs in maths and English to work with children is insulting to the thousands of wonderful, caring, compassionate childcare employees who do not have formal qualifications. A love of children must be the overriding reason why people enter childcare! I have seen many people with GCSEs, A levels and degrees with whom I wouldn't leave my fish, never mind my precious children.

This is also a very un-inclusive statement which shocks us - the Equality Act 2010 has legislated against sweeping statements such as this, which suggest that only people with academic qualifications should be employed in certain roles. We urge Ms Truss to reflect on the messages in the Equality Act and re-consider her words.

A degree is very laudable - the writer of this document has a degree and so do many of my childminder colleagues - but that does not give us more than 2 hands and 2 eyes to care for 5 or even 6 early years children, or 6 x 2 year olds (in a group setting) at one time. We have grave concerns that these plans will encourage nurseries and some childminders to increase the amount of children for whom they care without fully considering the consequences of their actions. This will, we feel, lead to lower outcomes for children and will put their wellbeing, health, safety and education at risk.

*'As everyone knows that a sound working knowledge of Great Expectations is fundamental to finger-painting and the effective teaching of Hairy Maclary studies.'* (Telegraph article, Judith Woods, 29.1.2013)

As one parent told us, 'No academic achievement on the planet would persuade me to leave my children with someone who didn't love them and care for them like they would their own children.'

.....

*'Drive up quality, with rigorous Ofsted inspection and incentives for providers to improve the skills and knowledge of their staff'*

We wonder how this will be achieved if agency childminders are no longer offered individual Ofsted inspections - and more and more childminders are forced, through circumstances beyond their control, to join the agency if they want their businesses to remain viable.

Childminders throughout the country have grave concerns about removing providers from Ofsted inspection and creating a 2 tier system which we feel will drive down standards and cause confusion for parents. A 2012 petition supported by many thousands of parents, childminders, professional bodies and early years professional bodies rejecting proposals to deregulate childminders raised over 11,000 signatures.

The Government appears to have ignored the strength of feeling which was apparent and is pressing on regardless with their plans. We are asking that they re-consider.

*'Attract more, high quality providers with new childminder agencies, which will recruit new people, train and guide them and lever up quality in an area of the sector that has lagged behind'*

Childminders take great exception to suggesting that their provisions 'lag behind' others in the sector. The vast majority of Ofsted registered childminders work incredibly hard to be professional and to raise outcomes for all the children who attend our provisions. There is an implication in this statement that ALL childminders are 'lagging behind' - when we are clearly not! A high percentage of childminders are graded 'outstanding' or 'good' with elements of outstanding by Ofsted and we find this generalisation insulting.

We know this statement has been fed by Ofsted figures and Ms Nutbrown's report. There are, however, a number of reasons why Ofsted figures might suggest we have 'lagged behind'. These include -

- A previous guidance document for Ofsted inspectors which stated new childminders would not have enough evidence to be graded good after their first inspection. As a childminder colleague comments, 'That is like saying you can't get an 'A' grade the first time you take an exam';
- Many childminders tell us that their Ofsted inspector arrived at their homes and said, 'I don't give childminders outstanding';
- Childminders with disabilities are often graded lower by Ofsted because they cannot keep up with the documentation and paperwork demands - regardless of their ability to effectively care for and educate the children and keep them safe and healthy;
- Ofsted inspectors who all look for different things - such as the inspector who focuses the whole inspection on the childminder's documentation;
- Ofsted inspectors who have little or no understanding about the ways childminders work;
- Changing goal posts and a curriculum which Ofsted do not share with the providers they are inspecting and Ofsted inspectors who present childminders with often ridiculous actions which rarely have any link with the requirements of the EYFS or Childcare Registers such as -
  - To put labels and posters in their homes;
  - To provide a covered outside play area;
  - To work with other settings - when the childminder cares for babies and when the Ofsted inspectors guidance states that this should only be applied if relevant to the provider;
  - To write daily learning intentions for every EYFS child - can you imagine the chaos if a nursery were given this action at their inspection?
  - Quote - 'the inspector stayed almost all day so she could find some reason to mark me down. She found two very minor points and I got a good'.
  - To complete the Ofsted self evaluation form (SEF) - when the Ofsted literature states that it is not a statutory requirement.
  - To work with other agencies - I have read hundreds of Ofsted inspection reports and have yet to find one 'action' which requires the nursery to work in better partnership with childminders...and many more.

We urge you to read comments on many Childminding Forum posts about Ofsted inspection outcomes and the many ways inspectors find to give childminders a lower grade. The lack of consistency is clear.

An outstanding Ofsted registered childminder - who wants to remain graded outstanding by Ofsted AND independent AND continue to deliver the 2 and 3 year old entitlement - from the south of England would like to share the following with you -

'As a lowly childminder I have paid for, out of my income, and achieved more qualifications than many nursery staff. I have EYPS and now a Masters in Early Education.

Where else do you find that sort of dedication?

I also provide consultancy to other European countries, and the NCB because my practice is OUTSTANDING!'

Another childminder who wants to remain self employed and continue to deliver the 3 year old funding from the north of England would like to inform you -

'I am an ex teacher and I have also worked in business. I bring many practical business skills to childminding plus a love of children. I spend many hours of my free time mentoring and supporting childminders across the country to help them to excel in their chosen profession. I write for magazines and share good practice on childminding forums and Facebook groups.

I have been graded outstanding twice by Ofsted and I am totally dedicated to my role as carer and educator, supporting children and their families.

I totally resent the implication that I am 'lagging behind' local nurseries and other group provisions which have satisfactory and good grades.'

Childminders spend many hours extra to their working days (which are often 10 or more hours long to accommodate the needs of various families) thinking about how they can raise outcomes for the children in their care. They -

- Attend training courses to improve their skills and knowledge;
- Complete local self evaluation documents;
- Buy new resources and equipment;
- Resource areas of provision to meet the specific needs of the children who attend;
- Follow up parent suggestions with carefully planned activities;
- Continually audit areas of provision to ensure they are offering the highest standards of care and learning to all the children;
- Spend many hours of their own time lovingly creating documentation and paperwork which parents will value in future years, making playdough, improving their provisions etc;
- Take children to appointments in their own time because parents are unable to take time off work;
- Make changes to their homes and gardens to make them more 'child friendly' and to support children's playful learning and development;
- Embrace local authority support and guidance;
- Make changes to their provisions to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities;
- Work with other agencies and professionals to support individual children... and much more.

Childminders are generally happy to do these things because they know that, by spending time considering ways they can enhance their provisions they are raising outcomes for children. Many childminders already work for significantly less than the minimum wage - in some areas of the country hourly fees of £2.50 and £2.75 per child and £20 per day are the norm. They then spend money buying resources and food, enhancing their homes and gardens, attending training courses and much more. To be told by Government that the aim is to reduce childcare costs for parents is an insult to their professionalism.

*'Free providers to offer more high quality places, with greater flexibility to invest in high-calibre staff and more choice for parents'*

Childminders have a number of grave concerns about Government plans to increase the number of children each early years provider can look after as evidenced in a number of petitions with thousands of signatures and in comments on early years forums.

We also wonder about the following -

- High calibre staff expect to receive higher wages than they are currently paid. How will this be funded if the other aim of the plan - to reduce childcare costs for parents - is also implemented?
- More spaces can only be provided if, as mentioned elsewhere in the plan, floor space per child is compromised. This is a serious issue which we believe warrants investigation and consultation in its own right. There are a number of very good reasons why the calculations for indoor space requirements for young children were set at the current levels.
- How does this improve choice for parents? Childminders are asking how this part of the plan affects parents - except that their children will be in early years provisions where there is less one-to-one care and attention which puts their wellbeing, health, safety and education at risk.

**The Plan states** - *'Note: there are two main types of childcare provider for young children in England: nurseries and childminders. Nurseries are organisations providing early education and childcare delivered by multiple members of staff. Childminders are self-employed individuals who provide childcare, usually in their own home.'*

Childminders strongly object to this footnote on page 7 of the report. Does Ms Truss not recognise that **both** nurseries and childminders provide education and childcare under the same EYFS framework?

Let us consider why parents choose childminders. The writers of this document have approached some of their current parents and asked the question. We would like to share out findings with you.

The main reasons why parents choose childminders over nurseries and other providers are -

- Low ratios;
- Loving, caring, patient, kind, gentle, home-from-home environments and a playful ethos;
- Nurturing care as well as opportunities for early education;
- Children who are disabled benefit hugely from the current lower ratios offered by childminders;
- One parent told us, 'Baby rooms in nurseries are full of screaming babies, penned in away from the other children, cared for by very young, clearly stressed staff. I wanted more for my baby';
- Childminders and their families interact with children and allow children to experience and socialise with positive male and female role models and other generations;
- Childminders are able to offer welcoming individual attention for the whole family;
- Individual attention for each child through the day;
- Focus on children's needs rather than the needs of a group;
- Detailed documentation so parents do not feel they are missing out on their children's experiences;
- Regular outings and the benefits these offer the children;
- Home cooked food which is provided taking account of parents wishes for their child and adapted to follow children's likes and dislikes;
- Flexible routines that allow childminders to respond to changes in the weather or a child's wish to be cuddled for the morning;
- Wonderful home facilities, inside the house and in the garden... and much more.

## Early years providers are united against the Government's plans

Childminders are not alone in their concerns about the 'More Great Childcare' plan. Other agencies and professionals are also calling on the Government to listen to them and to change the plans before it is too late and outcomes for the next generation of our children are irrevocably damaged.

- The National Day Nurseries Association states that 'nurseries are in crisis' and goes on to explain how, 'Insufficient demand for places and parents not being able to afford fees were found to be the greatest concerns and factors that kept childminders' incomes down. Nurseries, meanwhile, said that insufficient demand plus staffing costs, despite the low wages, were to blame for their lack of profitability.' This is even more worrying when we consider the government's plans to create thousands more early years spaces, increasing competition amongst providers at a time when we all need to consider our sufficiency;
- Home Childcarer Magazine is running a number of articles in support of childminders who are against the plan and reports, 'Government's childcare plans cut corners, lower standards and put children at risk' (01.2013).
- Chief Executives of large nurseries such as Kids Allowed are concerned about how ratio plans will lead to a 2 tier system.
- The Pre-School Learning Alliance says that ministers should 'listen to parents' (BBC, 8.2.2013).
- Morton Michel, the childcare insurance specialist, has conducted their own survey amongst their 36,000 clients who cover the entire childcare spectrum, including childminders, nurseries, nannies, preschools and out of school clubs. They will be reporting their results shortly.
- Labour states, 'Childcare plans will hit standards' (Channel 4 news, 29.1.2013).
- Anand Shukla, from national childcare charity Daycare Trust, said: "No matter how well qualified the members of staff, there are practical considerations when you increase the number of children that they have to look after," (BBC, 8.2.2013)
- NCMA, the leading national childminding association, says its members are 'strongly opposed' to the plans, support a petition against ratio changes and are lobbying the Government and state in their briefing paper to members, 'NCMA has taken the decision not to support the DfE's request that it joins the task and finish group that will advise it on the development of the agency model. NCMA sees the agency model as only likely to damage childminding's hard won reputation and future sustainability. This and the fact our members have overwhelmingly rejected the proposal, means it would serve no purpose to provide our expertise and advice on how best to make the model work for childminding in England. We do not wish NCMA involvement to give the agency model any credibility so do not intend to advise formally or informally on its development. Our focus will remain on supporting individual childminders to sustain their childcare businesses and delivery high standards of care and learning.'
- Anne Longfield, chief executive of children's charity and nursery provider 4Children, said: "The welfare of the child must be our first concern throughout, but with highly qualified early-years teachers and a better inspection regime, there is an opportunity to review current arrangements and provide simpler information for parents and better incentives for providers to concentrate on what matters - children." (BBC, 8.2.2013)
- National Day Nurseries Association chief executive Purnima Tanuku: "Many parents do not want an increase in the number of children nursery staff are allowed look after. They are worried it will have a negative impact on the individual attention and care their child receives." (BBC, 8.2.2013).
- 'Controversial plans by ministers to allow childminders and nursery workers to look after greater numbers of children will lead to a "deterioration" in the quality of their care and will not help parents reduce their costs, an official report by the Government's own advisers has warned.' The Independent (13.1.2013).
- Nursery World magazine reports in various articles and press releases that the majority of the sector is against the plans (see references).

- Earl Listowel stated in the House Of Lords: 'My Lords, following the Government's recent announcement, is the Minister aware of the widespread concern among practitioners about the increasing ratio to above 3:1-of the very youngest infants to carers? The additional investment in training that the Government have offered to reassure these practitioners is welcome. However, can the Minister go further in reassuring them, given the utmost importance of the highest quality of care for children at this tender age in terms of their future welfare and indeed their future productivity, as well as the deep adverse consequences for them of early poor-quality care in terms of their future outcomes?'
- Shadow education secretary Stephen Twigg said the plans to increase the ratios would undermine the quality of childcare in the UK (BBC news)

It is clear that nurseries, pre-schools and childminders and even Government ministers as well as shadow ministers are united in their concerns about and condemnation of the plans and comment about the ways in which the plans will reduce outcomes for children. Many are also aware of the affect the plans are having on the morale of the early years workforce. To be told we are underperforming... now being told that they are so undervalued by Government that they should work harder... with more children... for less money per child is insulting!

### **What we believe the Government should be doing...**

We are childcare providers - enablers. We look to the future and want the very best for the children in our care and we do not want this government to risk outcomes for our precious children.

If we might be so bold, we would like to make some suggestions to Ms Truss about how she might make childcare more affordable while ensuring outcomes for children are raised and childcare professionals are supported in sustainable businesses, receiving a good rate of pay for their jobs.

If she follows these suggestions, we think she would be able to throw her 'More Great Childcare' plan in the recycling and move on with 'More Great Popular Policies' such as -

- Increasing the amount of tax free childcare vouchers available to working parents;
- Keeping ratios low to support quality interactions for children in all early years provisions;
- Overhauling the current tax credits system so less money is wasted and more money goes directly to the families it was set up to help;
- Increasing the current 15 hours of free childcare and welcoming all good and outstanding childminders to apply to offer the sessions without having to jump through any more local authority hoops;
- Looking at each local authority in turn and ensuring childcare sufficiency at a local level, leaving those areas where childcare is appropriate for the needs of the families alone;
- Increasing the amount of money paid into grants for childcare, so that costs for parents can truly come down and practitioners feel valued in the professions we love.

Even her own party are not supportive of Ms Truss' plans for 'More Great Childcare'. As reported in the Guardian (29.1.2013) -

'Tory MP Claire Perry said there were still 'furious negotiations' over the plan and the Guardian reports that the 'PM's adviser says minister's news of reforms comes 'ahead of herself' as parents reject plan to relax ratio of minders to babies'.

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Omissions and / or errors are unintentional.

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