



Experiences of former childminders in London Report for the Greater London Authority

*Family and Childcare Trust
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Summary

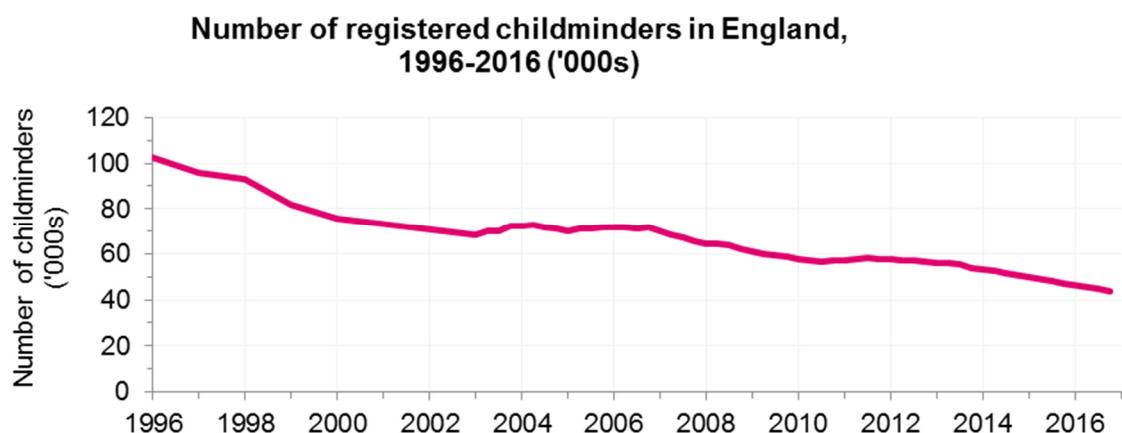
As part of Family and Childcare Trust's work with the Greater London Authority (GLA) and in the context of a twenty-year decline in the number of childminders registered in London, we have interviewed sixteen people who were previously Ofsted registered childminders working in London. The aim of this research was to gain a clearer understanding of why people take up childminding, why childminders are leaving the profession, and whether the GLA can take any steps to support and encourage childminders to remain in the profession.

The former childminders we interviewed left the profession for a number of often overlapping reasons. More than half of our interviewees reported that the regulation and paperwork surrounding childminding represented an unreasonable burden that detracted and distracted from the time spent with the children. Many of our interviewees often had significant problems in their relationship with Ofsted and its inspectors, and a common feeling was that Ofsted was working against, and not for or with, childminders. Another important finding was that our interviewees felt that support for childminders had been reduced or completely removed in recent years.

Other concerns bought up in our interviews included financial viability both of childminding generally, and in the context of the new 30-hour free early education for three and four year olds, the isolating nature of being a childminder, and the lack of a clear division between home and work spaces.

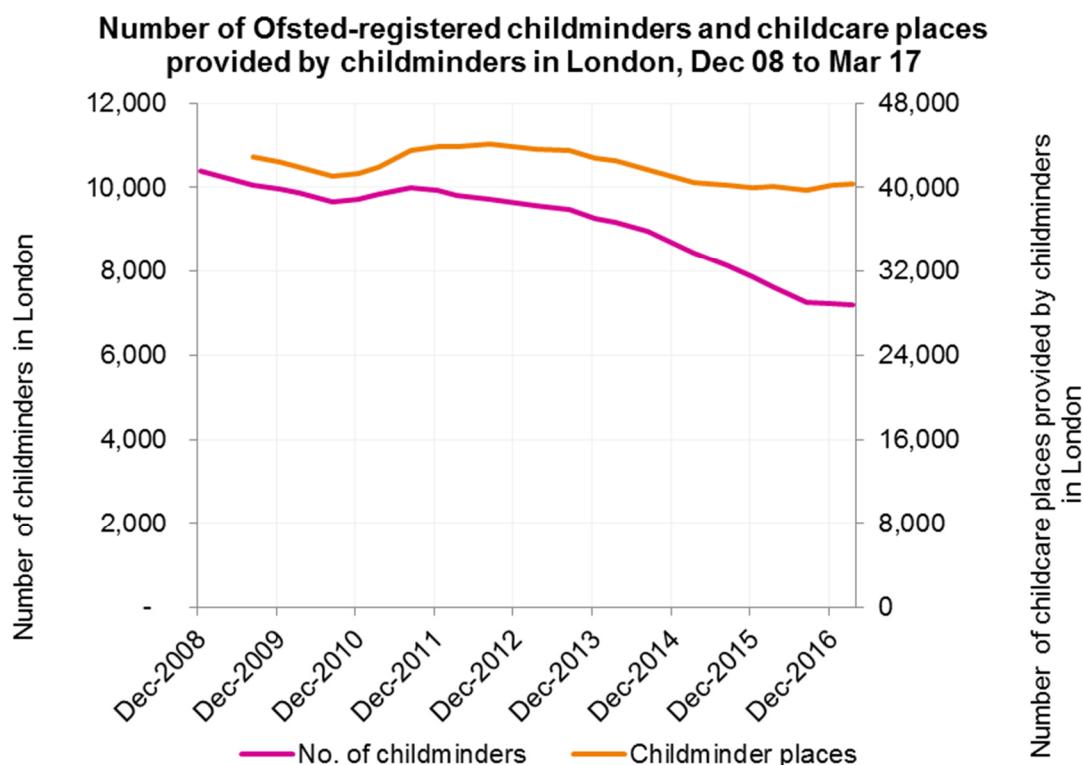
Background

Childminders provide around 20 per cent of all childcare places ([Ofsted, 2016](#)). As such, they are a vitally important element of the childcare sector, particularly for parents who need childcare at times when nurseries are not usually open. Over the past two decades, however, the number of registered childminders in England has declined steadily and significantly, falling from more than 100,000 in the mid-90s to under 44,000 by the end of 2016.



Source: Ofsted Official Statistics - <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/early-years-and-childcare-statistics>

London is no exception to this trend. Childminder numbers in London declined by more than 30 per cent between March 2008 and March 2017, with the gap being filled mainly by nurseries and pre-schools (see Figure 2, below). However, the proportion of total childcare places provided by childminders has seen a smaller reduction, from 22 per cent in March 2012 to 19 per cent in March 2017. This is because the average number of places each childminder offers rose from an average of 5.1 to 6.1 in the same period ([Ofsted, 2016](#)). In some cases, childminders will not choose to offer all their Ofsted-registered places so the actual number of places available may be lower.



Source: Ofsted Official Statistics - <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/early-years-and-childcare-statistics>

Findings

The research focused on childminders' experiences within the profession, the main reasons they decided to leave, and what could lead them to return to childminding in the future.

The reasons that respondents gave for leaving the profession can be broadly broken down into three themes: paperwork and regulation; relationship with Ofsted; and a lack of guidance and support.

Prior to undertaking our research, we hypothesised that the rising cost of living in London, especially high house prices and expensive rent, would be one of the main reasons that childminders were leaving the profession. This was not mentioned by any of our participants as a reason for them leaving childminding, but it may be a reason that people are not joining the profession.

Paperwork and Regulation

The majority of the former childminders that we interviewed cited the flexibility of the job as a reason for them entering the profession. Contrary to their initial expectations, however, many of our participants felt that the amount of regulation they needed to negotiate and the level of paperwork they were expected to complete actually made childminding very inflexible and unreasonably added to the workload. This indicates that there is a potential issue in the nature of the expectations around childminding not being clear to prospective childminders before they enter the profession. Some of the comments made concerning paperwork and regulation include that:

"The paperwork was too onerous."

"I found that there was a lot of pressure, and because I took it very seriously, there was just so much work."

Many of the childminders we interviewed felt that the level of paperwork and regulation resulted in a loss of focus on the children in their care, and that childminding had become centred on writing reports rather than the actual development and nurturing of the child. Similarly, many childminders felt that the level of paperwork meant their time and focus was being taken away from the child. As one respondent said:

"[Reporting] pulls the childminder's focus away from actually looking after the children because you're conscious of the amount of paperwork you need to get done."

Another felt that:

"The pressure of Ofsted and the paperwork ... just all seemed very irrelevant to the reason why you were looking after children."

This led to a general feeling that, as one interviewee put it, childminding had:

"lost its focus on the child."

Another said that they felt that:

"changes in politics [were] coming away from what was in the best interest of the child."

A further recurring theme was that there was a lack of support in dealing with paperwork and regulations. One participant said that they

“wanted support in writing reports.”

Additionally, one of our respondents said that, given the amount of information childminders are expected to provide about the children they are looking after, it would have been useful had they been

“provided with IT systems to capture account information.”

Ofsted

Many of our respondents also told us that they felt that they historically had a very poor relationship with Ofsted and that their inspections and interactions with the organisation left them feeling frustrated. Childminders gave a variety of reasons for Ofsted causing them to leave the profession. Some were intricate and due to unique personal circumstances, and others because of a widely held view among our respondents that Ofsted were working against childminders, rather than with or for them. Importantly, half of the childminders interviewed said that more support from Ofsted and better guidance would make them consider returning to childminding in the future.

It is important to note that we do not have Ofsted's view on any of these interactions. Ofsted policies and practices have changed significantly in recent years, and it is not always clear when the interactions that childminders were unhappy with took place. Many of the issues raised correspond with those in the Government's *Childcare sector: cutting red tape review*, published in 2016.

Some respondents, who had been working in the profession for ten years or more, felt that the relationship between Ofsted and childminders had worsened as time went on, as one childminder summarised:

“When I started, you could always get hold of someone on the phone at Ofsted... there was always someone you could talk to... now with Ofsted it's impossible to get hold of anyone and I couldn't speak to anybody”

One of our respondents, who had worked as a childminder for over 20 years, said that they felt more supported and less anxious about inspections when local authorities were in control of the regulation and inspection of childminders. When Ofsted took over the responsibility for regulation, they felt like that support had been lost and the inspections became more about ensuring their adherence to regulation rather than the quality of their childminding.

Another commonly reported issue among our interviewees was that they felt that Ofsted inspections did not always reflect that childminders deliver their service from a home setting. One interviewee stated that:

“Ofsted ... was making it [childminding] more of a business, than ... a home environment for the children.”

"Ofsted are now making it more of a business in your home. When you take a child into your home you don't want to convert it into a nursery ... my home was not a nursery, my home was a home."

Many of the former childminders interviewed also said that they viewed their role as a childminder as nurturing, and that the relationship between the childminder and child should be primarily about caring rather than about formal teaching. They believed that this was often ignored by the regulator. One interviewee in particular felt very strongly about this, and spoke at length about the expectation that childminders should educate children. They believed that childminding should be a more home-like environment for children, where they learn through experiences and activities like cooking and shopping. As they put it,

"If I'd wanted to be a teacher I would have trained for it and worked in a school."

Lack of guidance and support

A final major category cited by former childminders that contributed to them leaving the profession was the lack of guidance and support provided to childminders. The interviewees who spoke about a lack of support mainly felt that they needed help with the paperwork and regulation, and a smaller number had trouble in dealing with online processes such as registering online with the regulator, and would have appreciated support in this, or an alternative method of accessing or supplying information.

Furthermore, it was commonly reported by childminders that the level of support and guidance they received had significantly declined between the time they started to childmind and when they left the profession. These comments were not necessarily from people who had spent significant lengths of time as childminders. One childminder reported that she felt less supported a year or two after starting. Other comments included that:

"There wasn't any support out there, they stopped funding and then [childminders] had to pay for training which was previously provided by the local authority. [They] stopped the network that was provided to childminders."

"Within a few months of becoming a childminder, the support from the local authority became less and less ... by the time I finished [being a childminder] I didn't know if there was anyone left there."

Many of the childminders we spoke to blamed this lack of support on cuts to childminder groups. One respondent said that when she was working as a childminder, there was:

"one lady to support the entire borough."

Another interviewee said that they:

"used to work in children centres and we used to have childminders' groups we ran every week and so many people used to go and now they're just cut ... it's quite a lonely job and now that's all been taken away."

The general feedback from those interviewed was that while local authorities had been good at supporting childminders, funding cuts had significantly impacted on their ability to do so.

Other reasons

The reasons that childminders gave for leaving the profession can be broadly broken down into the three themes given above, but there were two other areas that some childminders reported as a reason for them leaving childminding and also why they would not return to the profession in the future. These were funding rates and the isolation of working as a childminder.

Some childminders reported that the introduction of 30 hours of free childcare (which has been rolled out across England in September 2017) was a reason for them deciding to leave childminding. They reported that it was not going to be financially viable for them to continue working as a childminder once 30 hours has been rolled out. One said:

"30 hours free funding – a childminder will not be able to sustain herself on the hourly rate... [it is] just not financially viable anymore."

Some childminders also shared that they were not comfortable asking for top-up fees from their parents.

"Free funding to me means free, we can't charge a top up fee because it wouldn't be fair on the parents."

The changing government agenda for childcare was seen as having an impact on childminders, as there

"have been some quite radical changes that have come in ... like the changes to funding ... and the training is not adequate."

Many of our interviewees felt that childminders are not being fully supported as these changes to funding are being rolled out. Some of the former childminders interviewed believed that the hourly rate proposed by their local authority for the 30 hours entitlement was not going to be enough for childminding to remain financially viable for them, citing this as a reason for leaving the profession.

More broadly, some said that pay was not high enough, given the length of their working day. One reported that childminding

"just wasn't paying enough, the amount of hours you put in, the money you get back, it's not worth it."

Additionally, it was mentioned in a number of interviews that childminding can be an isolating profession, as there is very little contact with adults. Where there was contact with adults, it was generally with parents, which frustrated one former childminder who said that parents often overstepped professional boundaries in how they treated their home. This sense of isolation is somewhat supported by our own experiences in trying to find participants for the study. We expected to rely heavily on snowball sampling but found that in reality, former childminders had relatively weak networks and often had few contacts in the profession.

Comparison with earlier work

The last major piece of work that aimed to assess the reasons for childminders leaving the profession in England was *A Survey of Former Childminders*, published in 2001 by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES: now the Department for Education). This was a

quantitative survey of 205 former childminders from 11 local authorities across the country, using local authority registers to select their sample. In an effort to increase comparability, many of the questions in our interviews were similar to those asked in this survey.

There is significant discrepancy between the results from the DfES survey and our own, although it is very likely that there are a number of reasons for this that include the amount of time between the two studies, the policy changes around childcare that occurred in this time, and the differing methodologies.

Respondents to the DfES survey gave multiple reasons for leaving childminding, but wanting another job was the most frequently-cited reason for leaving, followed by their own children being older, which enabled childminders to return to other employment or start something new. While 'children growing up' was given as a reason for leaving childminding by a small number of our interviewees, this did not emerge as such a significant theme in our research.

Regulation and levels of support were only cited by three per cent of the DfES survey's respondents as the main reason for them leaving the profession, and only six per cent said it featured at all in their decision. This represents a significant departure from our own results, in which regulation and lack of support feature prominently as the main reason for leaving for more than half of our former childminders. It is possible that this is due to change in regulation and support over time. The childminders we interviewed who had experienced both organisations felt that regulation and paperwork has become more prominent to the childminding role, while at the same time the level of support available to them had decreased.

Another possible explanation is the different sampling methods used in the two pieces of research. In the DfES study, the researchers had access to a register of former childminders and so could select a broadly representative sample. Our research, on the other hand, relied on snowball sampling, personal contacts, and advertisement on childminding forums and social networks. A potential consequence of this is that those former childminders who had undergone difficult experiences with the regulator and had strong views about this would be more likely to agree to take part in the research, thus skewing the results.

Participant demographics

We interviewed 16 former Ofsted-registered, London-based childminders, all but one of whom had left the profession within the last five years (the other left the profession 11 years ago). Fifteen of our interviewees were female and one was male.

The age of our interviewees ranged from 31 to 73, with the majority being between the ages of 35 and 54. Three quarters of respondents began childminding between the ages of 25 and 44, and the remainder all started later in life.

14 of the childminders we interviewed had at least one child of their own living at home with them when they began childminding. For the majority of these, their youngest child was aged four or under when they began childminding. Twelve respondents said that they owned their own home while childminding, with the other four renting. Thirteen lived with a partner who was in full-time work, for at least some of their time they were childminding.

Our interviewees had childminding careers of varying lengths, from just over a year to more than 27 years. Seven had been childminding for between one and five years, and the remainder for six years or more.

Methodology

Interviews took place in summer and autumn 2017. We pursued a number of avenues by which to advertise the study and gain participants. This included: asking London local authorities to contact childminders who have left their register on our behalf; asking early years organisations for support; asking the National Association of Family Information Services (NAFIS) to publicise the study on our behalf; contacting local childminder networks on Facebook and posting on their pages; and posting information on childminder forums. We offered a £15 shopping voucher as an incentive for completion of the interview. Data protection issues meant we were not able to access lists of former childminders from Ofsted or local authorities.

We conducted 16 interviews. As a small sample size such as this would present a number of problems with generalisability and representativeness in a quantitative report, we took the decision to present a more qualitative analysis of our findings. The interviews were structured telephone interviews consisting of 13 main questions, some of which had sub-questions. There was a mixture of short, closed questions and more open questions where respondents could give more in-depth answers.

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