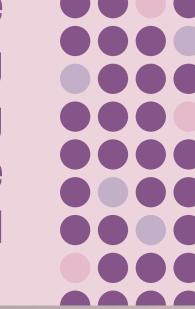# The Role of Childminding Networks in supporting the Sure Start programme in Northern Ireland

NICMA

SureStart

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

January 2010

CONTENTS

Childminding Networks bring together childminders to enhance childcare quality and to provide professional support. They have the potential to make a particularly positive impact on outcomes for children in deprived areas. This study, commissioned by NICMA - the Childminding Association, examines the achievements of 10 NICMA/Sure Start Childminding Networks in Northern Ireland, and provides recommendations for maximising their potential.

KEY FINDINGS

The study found that the Childminding Networks were delivering a number of significant benefits for parents, children and childminders, despite the fact that most networks were at a relatively early stage of development. The main benefits identified by the evaluation were as follows:

- Networks are **assisting parents in being able to access work or training** – an outcome which is particularly important in the Sure Start areas covered by the networks which are, in general, areas of relatively high deprivation. They have achieved this objective in the following ways:
  - The number of registered childminders in each of the areas covered by a childminding network had increased, on average, by one third within the first two years of the establishment of the network, resulting in a significant increase in the number of places offered by registered childminders in most network areas
  - Network Co-ordinators have helped many parents to find childminding places and have been able to offer reassurance where parents lack confidence in using formal childcare
  - Networks have assisted in retaining childminders who might otherwise have left the profession
  - Parents registered with Sure Start projects with Childminding Networks have been made more aware of the opportunity for self-employment as childminders

- Networks are **enhancing the quality of care provided by childminders** in the relevant Sure Start areas through the following:
  - The provision of opportunities for training and professional development
  - The opportunity for children looked after by childminders to have access to quality play experiences and to mix with other children through network drop-in sessions
  - The opportunity for childminders to gain ideas about quality activities and play experiences for children
  - The advice and support offered to network members on taking a more professional approach to their business

- Many parents and children are benefiting from **the provision of short-term respite placements** provided by networks - reducing parental stress levels, enhancing children's development and raising the quality of family life

- Networks provide childminders with **social and peer support**, helping to counteract isolation, and to provide companionship and emotional support. This is provided in the following ways:
  - The opportunity for network members to meet regularly with other childminders in their local area
  - The support, advice and accessibility of Network Co-ordinators, including the provision of home visits, where this occurs

- The availability of emergency back up childminders

- There was also evidence that networks are:
  - **Boosting the self-esteem** of many childminders, making them more relaxed and confident carers as a result
  - **Raising the status and improving the image of childminding** in the eyes of many parents

- In addition, networks are helping Sure Start projects to achieve the following Sure Start outcomes for pre-school age children:
  - Being healthy
  - Enjoying learning and achieving
  - Contributing positively to community and society
  - Economic and environmental well-being

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department of Education should:

- Provide strategic guidance to Sure Start programmes on how the daycare funding they receive should be spent

- Require every Sure Start project to provide access to home-based childcare, and support for local childminders

- Increase Sure Start funding to enable Childminding Networks attached to all 32 Sure Start programmes in Northern Ireland to be established

- Fund a full-time Network Manager within NICMA and adequate provision of Network Co-ordinators

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should:

- Ensure all childminding registration applications are dealt with within three months, unless there are exceptional circumstances

- Introduce minimum standards for childminding registration to ensure a consistent approach to quality standards

- Make accredited introductory training mandatory for prospective registered childminders

CASE STUDY

At 7.3%, Strabane has one of the highest levels of unemployment in Northern Ireland. In December 2007, the Strabane Sure Start centre teamed up with NICMA to appoint Clare McGillion as a part-time Childminding Network Co-ordinator. Clare quickly discovered that just 20 registered childminders were active in the town and that there was a clear shortfall in provision.

So she set about persuading suitable individuals to take up a career in childminding. Within just over 2 years, she had recruited 10 new registered childminders. In effect, she had increased the number of registered childminding places in the town by 50% - a huge boost for parents hoping to access job opportunities who want to use quality childcare.

BACKGROUND

There are 12 Childminding Networks attached to Sure Start programmes in Northern Ireland. They are jointly managed by NICMA – the Childminding Association and by each of the respective Sure Start programmes. NICMA describes a childminding network as:

... a formal group of registered childminders who are recruited in a particular geographical area and assessed and monitored to quality standards by a Childminding Network Co-ordinator.[1]

The networks in Northern Ireland are modelled fairly closely on those approved by the National Childminding Association (NCMA) in England and Wales. Similar networks also exist in parts of the United States. They are all underpinned by a commitment to enhancing the quality of care of their members.

Extensive research studies have shown that quality of childcare affects outcomes for children. Research also indicates that quality of childcare may be especially important for children from low-income households both in terms of the positive impact of good quality care and the adverse effect of poor quality care. In Northern Ireland, Sure Start programmes generally serve only the most deprived areas. Thus, Childminding Networks attached to Sure Start projects in Northern Ireland are almost all serving areas where there is a relatively high proportion of low-income households.

The networks therefore offer great potential for improving outcomes for children in their areas through the provision of high quality home-based childcare.

The UK government is committed to halving the level of child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020. The Northern Ireland Executive has also stated that it is committed to working towards this goal. In England, the government has made its Sure Start programme one of the central vehicles for progressing this key policy objective. Although Sure Start has evolved further in England than in Northern Ireland, with the creation of more than 2,900 Sure Start Children's Centres, the 32 Sure Start Local Programmes in Northern Ireland have considerable potential to assist in meeting the goal of reducing and eventually eradicating child poverty.

The first two NICMA networks to be attached to Sure Start programmes began in 2003 and 2004. The others were established as a result of a two-year programme of funding for daycare which was made available by the government in 2006 through the then Children and Young People's Package.

10 of the 12 NICMA/Sure Start Childminding Networks are evaluated in this study[2]. This review, which was commissioned by NICMA and has been supported by Sure Start, represents the first evaluation of the performance of the networks since they were first established in Northern Ireland.

OBJECTIVES

The study was required to examine the following:

- How Childminding Networks are helping Sure Start to achieve its objectives

- The benefits of a childminding network vis-à-vis:
  - Improvements in the quality of childminding offered
  - Benefits to the recruitment and retention of childminders
  - Practical benefits to parents with regard to helping them to return to work, education and/ or personal need
  - Improvements in the perception and status of childminders (in the eyes of parents)

- Benefits to the childminder of belonging to a network

- The added value of a childminding network

- Any recommendations arising from the evaluation

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1 From NICMA promotional leaflet about Childminding Networks

2 Blossom Sure Start and Arke Family Support Sure Start were not included in the original study brief due to the low number of hours allocated to these networks.

CASE STUDY

After studying for a qualification as a teaching assistant, Ann [not her real name] was offered a job at a school in Newtownabbey. The Childminding Network Co-ordinator at ABBEY Sure Start centre was able to help Ann find a network childminder who could take her young son.

Ann says having access to good quality childcare has transformed her life and that of her children. "I wouldn't have been able to take the job without the childcare," she explains. "It's helped a lot financially – I'm able to buy the kids things I wouldn't have been able to afford before. But I'm also really happy that I've been able to get out of the house and back into the workforce again."

The study was also required to focus on four key Childminding Networks attached to Sure Start programmes in Coleraine, Cookstown, Newtownabbey and Strabane. However, the report also draws on evidence and data from the other six NICMA/Sure Start Childminding Networks which form the subject of this study. In addition, the author was asked to take into consideration existing British and American research on Childminding Networks, and to provide some comparative data on how networks in England are managed and funded.

METHODOLOGY

The study began with an initial documentary and web-based investigation aimed at identifying key relevant findings from existing research on Childminding Networks. Semi-structured telephone interviews were then conducted with the network co-ordinator responsible for each of 10 networks which form the subject of this evaluation. Semi-structured telephone interviews were also carried out with the Sure Start co-ordinator in charge of each of the Sure Start programmes to which the networks are attached, and with two of the four regional Childcare Partnership Co-ordinators in Northern Ireland. Face to face interviews were undertaken with the Director of NICMA and with NICMA's Training Manager who is responsible for the management of the Network Co-ordinators.

In addition, briefer telephone interviews were carried out with a number of network members and parents who used network childminders in each of the four case study networks. Telephone interviews were also undertaken with a few network members and parents in other networks.

Finally, telephone interviews were carried out with local authority officials and one NGO director responsible for managing Childminding Networks in five local authority areas in England, selected to represent different types of local authority and different approaches towards Childminding Networks. Network Co-ordinators from three of these local authority areas were also interviewed.

The interviews were all carried out between March and June 2009.

HOW CHILDMINDING NETWORKS ARE HELPING TO ACHIEVE SURE START OUTCOMES

All Sure Start projects are required by the Department of Education to achieve six outcomes for pre-school age children in their area. The evidence gathered for this study shows that Childminding Networks are contributing very directly to the achievement of four of these outcomes, namely:

- being healthy
- enjoying learning and achieving
- contributing positively to community and society
- economic and environmental well-being

Table 1 summarises the ways in which they are making this contribution.

CASE STUDY

Suda Sandagiri used a registered childminder from the Coleraine Sure Start Childminding Network to look after her 2-year old son, Kavish, when she got a temporary job as a teaching assistant. She was so intrigued by the weekly network drop-in sessions which her son attended with his childminder that she actually went along herself on one occasion to find out what her son was getting up to.

She was very impressed with what she saw. "There's no doubt that the children get most of their social skills, like sharing and caring, from the drop-in," she enthused. "And they also get to try out arts and crafts, and to use their motor skills. Kavish thrived on the experience."

Table 1: **How Childminding Networks help achieve Sure Start outcomes**

OUTCOME	BENEFIT
Being healthy	• Improvements in children's development and social skills • The reduction of stress for parents through short-term respite placements • The ability for parents experiencing stress to obtain a respite placement much more quickly than would be the case through social services
Enjoying learning and achieving	• Improvements in children's development and social skills • The variety and quality of activities provided for children by network members • The opportunity for children to mix with other children at the network drop-ins • The opportunity to go on outings organised by the network which parents either could not easily afford or could not easily manage to organise themselves
Contributing positively to community and society	• Improvements in children's development and social skills • The opportunity for children to mix with other children at the network drop-ins
Economic and environmental well-being	• Provision of affordable or free childcare places, enabling parents to return to work or training, or to continue in their employment/training • The provision of back-up care through the network if a child's normal childminder is sick • The opportunity for self employment for parents

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

As most of the networks were at an early stage of development, it was not perhaps surprising that a number of areas for potential improvement and enhancement of current services were identified. The main areas in which there was scope for improvement were as follows:

- The lack of a strategy on the part of the Northern Ireland Executive with regard to the role of childcare within the Sure Start projects, and the utilisation of daycare funding. This meant that:
  - Parents, children and childminders in two thirds of Sure Start projects in Northern Ireland had no access to the benefits of Childminding Networks, as there was no requirement for the projects to support such networks or to incorporate a level of home-based daycare.
  - The potential which existed for more cost-effective use of funds and sharing of resources could not be realised without more widespread support for such networks throughout the Sure Start network in Northern Ireland

- Lengthy delays in the system for registering childminders which are putting off many prospective childminders from applying, exacerbating the current shortage of childminders in many areas and potentially leading to a greater number of unregistered childminders

- The current system of quality assurance operated by the networks which could be enhanced

- Inconsistencies in the range and level of services provided by networks which were due, in part, to inconsistencies in the level of funding among different networks

- The initial training and guidance provided to Network Co-ordinators which could be improved

CASE STUDY

Vicky Neill was a single parent with a 3-year old son when she turned to the ABBEY Sure Start centre in Newtownabbey for help. Her son, Ben, started getting serious seizures shortly after he turned 2. At the same time, Vicky was caring for her father who was terminally ill with cancer. Ben was in hospital for six months but, after he left, Vicky realised she couldn't cope.

ABBEY's Childminding Network Co-ordinator was able to arrange a twice-weekly respite placement with a network childminder. Vicky says the placement made a huge difference. "It allowed me to do simple essential things like the groceries," she explains. "If I hadn't been able to get the respite, I really would have gone to pieces."

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study have a number of implications for the future direction of policy, practice and funding in relation to the development of Childminding Networks and childminding support in Northern Ireland. The report contains a number of recommendations for different relevant agencies, the most significant of which are listed below.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ...

The Department of Education

- The Department should provide strategic guidance to Sure Start Local Programmes in Northern Ireland on how daycare funding should be spent. Every Sure Start project should be required to provide access to home-based childcare and support for local childminders. This is undoubtedly best achieved through the childminding network model. The guidance should permit Sure Start programmes to use the funding to support childcare providers outside the Sure Start boundaries which offer places to children within Sure Start areas

- Sufficient funding should be provided to enable Sure Start projects to research and monitor the actual and potential demand for childcare in their areas

- The Department should increase Sure Start funding to enable Childminding Networks attached to all 32 Sure Start programmes to be established. This funding should be managed centrally to help ensure that there is consistency of provision and childminder support across the Sure Start projects. The Department should consider contracting out this service to an experienced provider such as NICMA. Funding should be sufficient to include training and quality assurance programmes

- Sure Start's funding for Childminding Networks should be sufficient to enable the appointment of a full-time network manager within NICMA and adequate provision of Network Co-ordinators

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

- The Department, which has statutory responsibility for the registration and inspection of childminders should introduce minimum standards for childminding registration to ensure a consistent approach to quality standards[3]

- The Department should make accredited introductory training a mandatory requirement of the registration process

- The Department, through the Regional Health and Social Care Board and the Health and Social Care Trusts, should ensure that it has sufficient staff and a sufficiently robust system to enable all childcare registration applications to be dealt with within three months, unless there are exceptional circumstances

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3 At the time of writing the statutory function of childminder registration and inspection lies with DHSSPS.

NICMA

- NICMA should review initial training for Network Co-ordinators specific to their role. It should also provide a guidance document containing clear advice on setting up and running a network, and dedicated information pages for Network Co-ordinators (and ideally for network members) on its website. It should also consider introducing an optional peer mentoring scheme for new Network Co-ordinators

- Subject to the necessary additional funding being made available, NICMA should appoint a Network Manager to oversee the Childminding Networks

- NICMA should take steps to ensure that all networks are providing a consistent range and standard of services

- NICMA should require its Network Co-ordinators to carry out home visits for the purposes of network recruitment, quality monitoring and support to all network members at least once a quarter. One visit a year should be unannounced

- Clearer contracts should be drawn up between NICMA and Sure Start projects which specify the role and responsibilities of the network co-ordinator.

- All Network Co-ordinators should be trained to deliver relevant training to network members, and should be tasked with delivering a set number of training sessions each year to their members. These sessions should be open to other local registered childminders where there are sufficient places

- NICMA should agree a standardised approach to recruitment to the networks

- NICMA should develop a policy with regard to unregistered childminding

Sure Start Local Programmes

- Sure Start co-ordinators should ensure their annual network budget includes finance to support the achievement of Quality First accreditation by all eligible network members

- Sure Start co-ordinators should ensure that sufficient hours are allocated to network co-ordinator posts to fulfil the needs of the job

- Sure Start co-ordinators should agree a protocol which allows childminders who are not resident within the immediate Sure Start area to become a network member as long as they agree to take children from within the area

NICMA

January 2010

This report was commissioned by NICMA and compiled by Dr Liz Fawcett, Liz Fawcett Consulting.
Additional research was carried out by Lesley Walsh, Liz Fawcett Consulting.
The full Evaluation Report report is available from NICMA.

NICMA acknowledge the contribution of the Sure Start programmes in the completion of this report.