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Bureaucratic delays ‘put children at risk’

Lengthy waits deter childminders from operating legally, says NICMA

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The childminding organisation, NICMA, is calling on the Health Minister to take urgent action to address the lengthy delays many prospective childminders are facing in obtaining official registration.

Childminders are legally obliged to be registered by their local Health and Social Care Trust before they start up in business, but a survey carried out by NICMA has revealed that prospective childminders here are facing **delays of up to 18 months** in getting their applications for registration processed.

The survey found that newly registered childminders experienced **an average wait of seven months – more than twice the maximum length of time stipulated by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety** – and more than twice the average time taken to process similar applications in England.

One in ten childminders had to wait ten months or more for their application to be processed – and three-quarters of all the childminders surveyed felt they’d had to wait too long.

“We’re very concerned that delays of this length are putting off many individuals from registering,” says NICMA’s Director, Bridget Nodder.

“These delays may well be encouraging many childminders to operate illegally without registration – which means the welfare of some children is being put at risk as a result.

“Moreover, we know that the delays are also deterring individuals from entering childminding in the first place – at the very time when we have a serious shortage of registered childminders.”

One of those affected by the delays was Lindsey Coalter, a childminder in Brookeborough, Co. Fermanagh.

Lindsey had to wait ten months to become registered – and the unforeseen delay led to financial pressures for her family.

“I was initially assured my registration application would be processed within six months,” explains Lindsey, ***“and so I gave in my notice to my former employer on that basis.”***

“The extra delay meant we spent four months managing on just my husband’s income which, with two children and the bills to pay, was a real struggle.”

“I was told by a social worker that they just didn’t have sufficient staff to process the applications any more quickly.”

Another childminder who faced a similar delay was Pauline Toner, of Cloughey on the Ards Peninsula.

Pauline waited thirteen months to receive her registration – she was told that insufficient funding and inadequate staffing were partly to blame.

“When I first approached social services, I never expected it was going to take more than a year to register,” she says.

“It seems crazy given the shortage of childcare in this area - I do think more resources should be given to social services to allow them to process registration applications faster.”

NICMA wants the registration process to be streamlined and centralised, and also wants a rigorous system put in place for monitoring the time taken to process applications.

At the same time, the charity is calling for the introduction of mandatory training for newly registered childminders, and for a requirement that all registered childminders should have insurance.

“All these steps would bring childminder registration in Northern Ireland into line with the higher standards and more efficient practice which operates in England,” says Bridget Nodder.

“Registered childminding is the most popular form of childcare in Northern Ireland, and it’s in the interests of children, parents and childminders to ensure we have a robust and effective registration process.”

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Editor's notes:

1. NICMA – the Childminding Association is a charity, and is the sole organisation representing childminders in Northern Ireland. 74% of registered childminders here are members. For more details about NICMA, please go to: www.nicma.org
2. NICMA's survey was carried out in November 2007. Survey forms were sent to 210 NICMA members who registered within the 12 months prior to November. There was a 24% response rate.
3. For further details please contact Bridget Nodder, NICMA Director on 028 9181 1015 or 07850 102561