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Mrs Melanie Pitkeathly
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Dear Mrs Pitkeathly

Inspection of Rutland Early Years Agency Ltd

Thank you for your cooperation during the inspection on 18 October 2017 and 3 November 2017. I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. This was the agency's first inspection and was carried out under the Childcare Act 2006, as amended by the Children and Families Act 2014.

Rutland Early Years Agency Ltd is effective.

Leadership and management are effective.

The quality of the agency's services is effective.

The impact of the agency's services on the quality of the education and care provided by its childminders is effective.

Summary findings

The childminder agency is run by a company whose two directors are both Ofsted registered childminders. It is in its second year of operation and has registered six childminders. Leaders ensure that the registration process is thorough. They are not afraid to ask difficult questions when suitability checks raise concern. As a result, decisions about the suitability of childminders and household members are proportionate and based on strong evidence. However, leaders recognise that records do not always reflect the full breadth of information they have considered when making suitability decisions.

The leaders of the agency understand their role as a regulator. They use regulations to form the basis of their statement of purpose. Policies and procedures are

implemented effectively in to practice. Leaders demonstrate a secure understanding of safeguarding in all areas of their practice and how they should respond in the event of a child protection allegation or concern being received.

Childminders speak highly of the services they receive from the agency. They are provided with substantial support from their first point of contact through to registration with the agency and beyond. This includes pre- and post-registration support visits as well as unlimited and timely contact by telephone and e-mail. Leaders work closely with the childminders so that the needs of individual children are met. Leaders are scrupulous in checking the quality, credibility and relevance of training before disseminating it to childminders. This includes online training packages focusing on safeguarding topics such as female genital mutilation, as well as bespoke one-to-one training sessions to meet specific developmental needs. Where they do not have the expertise themselves, leaders are highly proactive in sourcing advice and guidance from external bodies, consultants and national organisations.

Leaders are enthusiastic, ambitious and make continual improvements to the services they offer. They are reflective in their practice and work well together to achieve the shared vision for the agency. However, use of self-evaluation to monitor priorities for improvement and track the extent of any success is at an early stage and requires greater strategic direction.

Recommendations

- Improve the procedures for recording how decisions are reached about childminder's knowledge and understanding of the early years foundation stage requirements and 'readiness' to start childminding.
- Improve the self-evaluation process by using all available information to evaluate the agency's priorities and set clear targets that will allow the impact of any actions to be measured.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the childminder agency

- Leaders are aware of the significance of the decisions they make in registering individuals to care for children. As such, they tested their registration processes in practice when registering their first childminders in 2016. As more individuals have become interested in registering with the agency, leaders have positively reviewed and refined their supporting documents and procedures.
- Childminders' knowledge of the early years foundation stage requirements is checked at registration and the visits that follow. Leaders have devised a range of questions and scenarios to check individual understanding. However, the information recorded at these visits does not fully capture that childminders have the required understanding of how they will meet the requirements.

- The agency does not employ any staff. Leaders understand the possible risks associated with this, especially in relation to future expansion. They are keen to take the time needed to make sure that their business grows at a controlled and manageable pace. This reflects an awareness of their own abilities and capacity as well as their desire to provide quality over quantity in terms of the services they offer.
- Leaders are dedicated and passionate about what they do. They have a good understanding of the needs of childminders and use this, alongside their local knowledge, to tailor support and services to meet the needs of those registered with the agency.
- Leaders take a proactive and creative approach to sourcing training, advice and support for themselves and their childminders. They continually look for ways in which they can broaden the services that they offer. Leaders have been invited to talk about childminder agencies both within the authority and to wider audiences nationally. They report that this has served to promote the benefits of childminder agencies to the sector.
- Leaders have a sound knowledge and understanding of safeguarding. Steps have been taken to further clarify the process to follow in the event that an allegation is made against a registered childminder or one of the registered individuals.
- Leaders thoroughly test an individual's safeguarding knowledge and understanding during the registration visit. A wide range of scenario-based questions is used to test all aspects of safeguarding knowledge, including wider issues such as how a childminder may identify risks from radicalisation.
- Leaders regularly invite the views of others about the range and quality of services they offer. They have used this information to improve procedures for registration. However, they are not yet making the most of the information they gain to carefully plan for longer-term improvements.
- Leaders have been effective in building an informal network of support for themselves and their childminders from the local area. This includes partnerships with local schools and national organisations such as Action for Children.

The quality of the agency's services

- Leaders provide a range of training, advice and guidance. This allows childminders to choose a bespoke package of support that is tailored to meet their individual development and training needs.
- Registration decisions are sound. In the days that follow registration, the agency is on hand to provide support, if required. Leaders respond effectively to childminder's individual queries and provide helpful advice, such as how to help children settle into their care or meet children's individual dietary needs. When a query does not fall within leaders' own range of expertise, they endeavour to source additional information and guidance.
- Assessments of the quality of childminders' practice are accurate. Leaders are at the early stages of implementing quality assurance visits. They provide the childminder with a helpful report following these visits, which is also made available to parents. The process for completing these visits is under review and

leaders are seeking childminders' views about how effective these visits are at helping to improve practice.

- Leaders ensure that prospective childminding applicants are well informed from their very first contact. A welcome email is sent, which provides a clear list of considerations for those thinking about applying to become a childminder. Once individuals have proceeded to registration, they receive a comprehensive pack containing a wealth of information and published guidance as well as signposts to community-focused support and events specific to the local area. This ensures that those who are newly registered feel fully supported in their new venture.
- Monthly newsletters provide a wealth of information to help childminders keep up to date about current issues. These cover changes in legislation and current sector-specific issues as well as providing signposts to local resources and support. They also provide innovative ideas about how the areas of learning can be covered, for example, when celebrating Chinese New Year.
- Leaders are instrumental in teaming up new childminders with those who have more experience. Newly registered childminders find this support invaluable as they start their childminding business because it helps them build a support network within the community.
- The agency also provides services to parents seeking childcare. Leaders have been successful in matching those in need of childcare with newly registered childminders seeking business.

The impact of the agency's services on the quality of the education and care provided by its childminders

- The post-registration visit assures leaders that what childminders have said they will be able to achieve pre-registration is in fact being delivered in practice.
- Childminders value the support they receive from the agency. They say the guidance they receive has helped them to start up their childminding business. For example, the suite of paperwork that leaders provide helps childminders get off to a professional start.
- Leaders check newly registered childminders' understanding of the documents the agency provides and actively encourage childminders to adapt these to suit their business needs. Parents told inspectors that forms are easy to complete and include key information that helps childminders to meet the needs of children.
- The pre-registration training and guidance provided to applicants help newly registered childminders offer a range of interesting and challenging learning opportunities. For example, children were keen to tell the inspector how pumpkins left over from Halloween were going to be fed to the pigs at the local farm, and a child's interest in farm vehicles was to be used to inform a mark-making activity to develop his communication, language and literacy.
- Childminders demonstrate a clear understanding of how to meet the needs of the children in their care. This includes supporting children's language and communication development. Inspectors observed childminders introducing new descriptive words such as 'juicy' and 'crunchy', modelling correct pronunciation and asking questions designed to elicit thoughtful responses from children.

- Pre-registration training also helps newly registered childminders to promote British values with children in their care. Childminders encourage young children to be respectful of each other, to take turns, to share and to involve each other in their play. This also supports children's personal, social and emotional development.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Bell
Early Years Senior Officer

Information about the inspection

This inspection was carried out by an early years senior officer and one of Her Majesty's Inspectors. The inspection took place on two separate days. Inspectors undertook four visits to three childminders. This included an interview with a childminding applicant, both pre- and post-registration, to test the robustness of the registration process; a visit to registered individuals to observe a post-registration support visit; and visits to observe childminding practice in order to assess the accuracy of assessment of the quality of care provided. Inspectors held discussions with leaders about their roles and sampled a range of policies, procedures and records designed to ensure the safe and efficient management of the agency. This included records of registration, support visits to childminders and information provided to childminders and parents regarding the support and services available. The views of four childminders and a parent were also taken into account.

Information about the agency

Rutland Early Years Agency Ltd registered as a childminder agency in October 2015. The agency's office is in Oakham, Rutland and offers services to childminders in this and neighbouring authority areas. The agency currently has six childminders registered. It registers childminders on both the Early Years and Childcare Register. The two directors who run the agency are also childminders themselves, registered with Ofsted. At the time of inspection, the agency was not employing any staff. Rutland local authority commissions the agency to provide support, advice and training to all registered childminders in the authority.