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Mrs Claire Chapman
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Dear Mrs Chapman,

Inspection of Suffolk Childcare Agency Limited

Thank you for your cooperation during the inspection on 2 and 3 July 2018. 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.

Suffolk Childcare Agency Limited, Childminder Agency 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 importance of the agency having a positive impact on childminding provision, and the benefits for the children attending provision, are the primary purpose of Suffolk Childcare Agency and this was evident throughout the inspection. The agency has one director, fully supported by a confident team of agency staff. A strong purpose, clear vision and high expectations are shared across the team. Relationships between agency staff, childminders and parents are very productive. These relationships are sustained by excellent arrangements for contact and communication and the use of the practical and helpful website. Effective links have been established with the local authority early years teams, environmental health services, YMCA, job centres and colleges. These links are extending as the agency has started to register childminders in Norfolk and Essex. Safeguarding arrangements are comprehensive and effective, this relates to both the recruitment of childminders and agency staff and the practice of all adults working with the

children and for the agency. The agency ensures that children attend provision that keeps them safe, protects their well-being and supports their development.

Rigorous processes to monitor the practice of the childminders, and the agency, are consistently applied so that improvement is supported. Where practice falls below the expectation of the agency, rapid and appropriate action is taken to resolve this. The Statement of Purpose for the agency complies with regulatory requirements. The agency has accurately evaluated its performance so far and has a development plan. The development plan and Statement of Purpose do not yet reflect all of the comprehensive operational arrangements and the challenging targets the agency has agreed for its improvement.

Initiatives to improve practice are targeted appropriately and accessible to the childminders, with a clear focus on their needs. Their progress is monitored effectively. A broad range of training and other opportunities to discuss issues and work together are available to childminders and agency staff. Areas of practice that need improving are effectively assessed and appropriate events are sourced, developed and delivered by the agency. The quality of provision is improving through the systematic monitoring arrangements and the targeted approach of the agency. The processes in place allow the agency to see quickly and easily where intervention may be needed and swift action is taken where necessary.

Recommendations

- Enhance the Statement of Purpose, so that the wide-ranging operational arrangements of the agency are clarified for all interested parties.
- Improve the development plan, so that the challenging targets agreed within the agency are well-explained, and all involved in progressing the plan can identify their responsibilities and understand what is expected of them.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the childminder agency

- All involved in the agency, leaders, staff and childminders are ambitious and have high expectations of the agency and themselves. Providing excellent quality provision for children is at the heart of the agency's work. The agency has registered a range of childminders, some are established and some are new to the childminding sector. Each childminder is encouraged and supported to develop according to their existing knowledge and skills. The recruitment process is thorough, to ensure that childminders are suitable to be registered and understand the expectations of the agency. The agency has refused registration where the application did not provide the necessary evidence to proceed. The action taken by the agency, and the reasons for the decision, are well-considered, proportionate and accurately documented.
- The safeguarding arrangements across the agency are effective. Agency staff and childminders demonstrate a good knowledge of safeguarding issues. They are

confident about the process to follow if they are concerned about a child or an adult, this includes managing allegations. Escalation routes and whistleblowing processes are considered as a routine element of safeguarding practice. Safeguarding arrangements and responsibilities are routinely reviewed with childminders and agency staff to ensure that knowledge is up to date, and so that any concerns are identified and acted upon appropriately.

- Routine opportunities to share information and reflect on the work of the agency and individual staff are well-embedded in the operational arrangements. Contact between childminders and agency staff is regular, useful and clearly recorded, and the agency uses this information to offer support where it is needed. In addition, agency managers can see if the agency expectations are being met or if an individual is struggling with or failing to fulfil a particular aspect of their work. Swift action is taken to bring about improvement where it is needed and childminders in particular were positive about the high levels of support offered. The performance management of agency staff is equally thorough and successful.
- Continuous professional development is a substantial part of the agency's work. Many different procedures, such as monitoring visits and surveys before and after training events, are used to establish the strengths of each childminder and identify their areas to develop. Training events and other opportunities to improve practice are well-constructed to meet the needs of the childminders. Due to the systems in place, any concerns have been identified quickly and the agency has taken action to bring about improvement where it is needed. This may be through the use of additional visits to a childminder, increased telephone contact with them and arranging additional training.

The quality of the agency's services

- Parents are positive about the services the agency provides. They are happy with the benefits for, both, their childminder and their children. Other stakeholders, such as the local authority, recognise the benefits of the training arranged by the agency and how hard the agency has worked to put in place arrangements that support the childminders and improve their practice. The childminders are confident to deal with a range of issues with parents because of the support of the agency.
- There are high levels of attendance and participation at training events. New childminders are expected to complete mandatory training before registration, and there is an annual expectation that childminders will renew prescribed mandatory training. Childminders self-assess their knowledge and skills before a training session and again afterwards. This helps the agency to see the extent to which training is improving practice and monitor the progress individual childminders are making. In agreement with the local authority, some training sessions have been offered to other providers in the community. This extends the reach of the training itself and allows for a larger group of providers to discuss issues and learn from best practice.

- New childminders attend a broad range of training opportunities. Well-established childminders attend training to develop their confidence in weaker areas of their practice and are invited to support other childminders where they have particular strengths. For example, a small group training session was observed during the inspection. The small group allowed for a bespoke training event. The focus of the event and levels of engagement allowed rapid learning and the identification of further learning needs. The delivery of the session was friendly, but professional, with opportunities and encouragement to ask questions and debate issues throughout. The agency director completed her quality assurance of the session and this matched the inspectors view overall. Feedback from training is requested routinely and this supports the agency in developing further events.
- In between training events, childminders are able to contact the agency at any point to seek support or guidance over particular issues. Childminders are incredibly positive about this service that helps them respond to situations they have not experienced previously, especially in the early days of their registration.
- The agency provides central policies and guidance to support childminders in meeting the statutory requirements. The construction of these policies and procedures allows childminders to adapt them to suit their own setting but with the agency expectations intact. The agency effectively uses their registration, monitoring and inspection processes to accurately judge the childminder's ability. A 'handover' meeting is used effectively to move childminders from the point of registration through to the monitoring and inspection systems. This is a distinct end to the application and registration process, the childminder's progress so far is carefully documented and logical next steps are identified.

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

- The children are provided with an extensive range of experiences. Childminders know the children in their care well and plan a range of opportunities that support their learning and development. This includes activities at the registered premises, sessions at a local forest school and trips to nearby attractions. Children are happy, they are encouraged to learn and play together, behave well and show each other respect. Children who are not making progress, for example with their speech and language skills, are identified quickly and childminders take appropriate action to support them.
- Parents are pleased with how childminders update them on their children's progress and what the childminder plans to do. Childminders provide information for parents, such as healthy eating advice, and the agency supports them in this work if they need to.
- A pre-registration questionnaire, comprehensive application form and rigorous registration process test childminders' knowledge and skills from the start. This information about the childminder is built on and training is provided. It is a priority area for the agency that children are safe and their learning and development needs are met. Unsuitable applicants are not registered and registered childminders are expected to meet the standards required by the

agency. The thorough registration process, and subsequent routine monitoring arrangements and inspections, ensure that all childminders meet their safeguarding responsibilities and the requirements of the agency. The agency fulfils its responsibilities as a regulator, setting out clear expectations for registration, and takes action when it is needed.

- The agency carefully documents contact with the childminders about specific situations and more general areas of work. The agency uses this information to determine how well childminders are fulfilling their roles and meeting the needs of the children in their care. Children's all round development needs are considered and met by each childminder and this is monitored by the agency. For example, each childminder is expected to submit tracking sheets for the children to the agency on a termly basis. Any childminder who does not submit their information in the required timeframe is quickly identified so that the information can be obtained. This may prompt further monitoring visits by the agency and other action, such as serving notices to improve childminder performance. Agency staff take the lead to re-establish contact and ensure that the childminder has the support they need.
- The childminder's plans and how they will improve outcomes for the children are discussed during monitoring visits and inspections. There is a clear link between the feedback from monitoring visits and inspections. The agency staff involved in the different visits are confident about their particular role and responsibilities. Childminders speak favourably about the benefit of the agency staff's involvement and support in improving their practice. The additional ad hoc arrangements for contact, when childminders need it, support their development in between more formal arrangements and visits.
- The agency has worked hard to improve processes around funding arrangements. This has included making arrangements with the local authority and other stakeholders to ensure that grant and other applications are submitted on time and in good order. This ensures that funding is secured and can be used to the children's advantage. The agency is aware of the localities prone to disadvantage and deprivation and have started to expand in these areas to recruit further childminders and extend their services.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Kirsty Mulvaney
Senior Her Majesty's Inspector
East of England

Information about the inspection

The inspection was carried out by one Senior Her Majesty's Inspector and an Early Years Senior Officer. The inspectors held meetings with the director, managers and

staff of the agency. They reviewed a wide range of documentation, including safeguarding information, the Statement of Purpose, self-evaluation documentation and policies and procedures. Inspectors sampled childminder case files, information about training and support offered to childminders and inspection guidance and reports. They took account of views shared through survey responses. During the inspection, inspectors visited three childminder settings, observing four childminders in total. A training session and agency manager visit were also observed. Inspectors spoke with two parents who use childminders registered with the agency, the local authority representative and other stakeholders.

Information about the agency

Suffolk Childcare Agency was registered as a childminder agency in December 2016. It is a private organisation operated by one director who works directly with the registered childminders to provide training, monitoring and support. The agency registers childminders that care for both early years and later years children. Currently, the agency has childminders registered in Suffolk, Norfolk and Essex. There are plans to extend into other local authorities in the East of England. At the time of the inspection, 11 childminders were registered with the agency.