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Mrs Penfold
Leap Ahead Achieving for Children Childminder Agency
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Dear Mrs Penfold

Inspection of Leap Ahead Achieving for Children Childminder Agency

Thank you for your cooperation during the inspection on 3 and 4 April 2019. 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 second inspection and was carried out under the Childcare Act 2006.

Leap Ahead Achieving for Children 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 childminder agency is operated by Achieving for Children. It is in its fourth year of operation and has 48 registered childminders. Championing inclusion is at the very heart of the services offered by the agency. The leaders' and managers' primary purpose is to ensure that the needs of children and their families are met at the earliest opportunity.

High expectations to deliver good-quality, flexible early years provision are shared across the agency team and communicated clearly to childminders registered with the agency. Childminders particularly value the quick and helpful responses to their general queries by the agency staff and feel they are assisted well. However, some additional work is needed to ensure that childminders residing in secondary boroughs are better supported to fill their childcare places and can access the childminder agency meetings.

Feedback from parents to the childminders and agency about the quality of care and education children receive is mostly positive. The agency staff have reviewed their approach to handling complaints and are considering how they might resolve complaints earlier to bring about further improvements.

The agency's process for recruiting childminders continues to be effective. It involves a pre-registration visit followed by a registration visit by the agency to establish the childminder's suitability. On occasions, the agency has taken the decision to refuse registration when managers and staff are not satisfied that statutory requirements and agency professional standards will be met. This shows that the agency takes the necessary action to consider whether or not applicants are ready and confident to deliver both the learning and development requirements and the safeguarding requirements of the statutory framework for the early years foundation stage. Unannounced visits are undertaken soon after registration to inspect the delivery of children's early education and check the ongoing suitability of childminders. Regular access to safeguarding training and the agency's policies means childminders are up to date in their knowledge of how to keep children safe and secure. As a result, safeguarding requirements are met.

Generally, childminders are challenged and supported well to build on what they already know about helping children to make progress in their learning. The agency reviews and assesses the learning, and development opportunities are planned around the needs and interests of children. The agency staff hold regular meetings with their leaders and managers to discuss practice, while panel meetings are convened to address more complex issues. Agency staff offer substantial individual support when childminding practice is weak, but they do not always check that improvements are made swiftly. Managers report that they are yet to establish clearer procedures for monitoring staff performance to quality assure the work of the agency staff.

Since the last inspection, agency leaders have improved their understanding of the breadth of the agency's responsibility as a regulator. However, further work is needed to firmly embed the agency staff's knowledge of enforcement procedures. Childminders understand the agency's expectations for them to continually improve their practice and to ensure that the requirements of the statutory framework for the early years foundation stage are always met.

Recommendations

- continue to strengthen agency workers' and managers' understanding of suspension and cancellation procedures so that the agency's implementation of enforcement procedures is robust
- ensure that childminders who live outside Kingston and Richmond receive the same opportunities as those who live in the primary boroughs

- implement plans to review the rigour of quality assurance and monitoring of staff practice, ensuring that these have a positive impact on the service and outcomes for children.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the childminder agency

- The agency maintains a strong commitment to the youngest and most vulnerable children. For example, it has established good links between the agency and the boroughs' specialist inclusion services. Some agency childminders in Kingston and Richmond are now accessing intensive training to support children with special educational needs. This means they can provide peer-to-peer support to ensure children receive high-quality care and education. The agency offers all childminders access to ongoing training, workshops and support for inclusive care and education to ensure that children receive the very best start in life.
- The agency meets with other childminder agencies nationally to ensure they share any challenges and best practice in their role as a regulator. The role continues to develop as the number of childminders registered with the agency increases.
- Raising the agency's profile has been a combined effort on the part of leaders, managers and staff. They have worked hard to ensure newly recruited childminders can enter the childcare market with the necessary support. As a result, the agency's reach has increased significantly since the last inspection. It has registered childminders in several surrounding boroughs and is sharpening the protocols for working relationships between the Leap Ahead Achieving for Children Childminder Agency and other local authorities.
- The agency provides childminders and parents with useful information on its website about the registration process and the annual quality assessment audits it conducts. It offers both new and experienced childminders their own profile page that they can personalise and make accessible to parents.
- Effective self-evaluation is evident through some of the actions taken by the agency to improve the quality of its services. For example, leaders and managers have met the recommendations from the last Ofsted inspection. They have taken some effective steps to identify and address any weaknesses following complaints. This has included a review of the agency's statement of purpose, and further work is underway to strengthen the implementation of complaints and safeguarding procedures.
- The agency offers a valuable brokering service, which has appealed to parents, giving them a choice of a wider number of childminders. Feedback gathered through parent surveys shows that families benefit from being signposted to flexible, inclusive care.
- The agency understands the context within which it works well and uses its resources appropriately. Leaders and managers have made a concerted effort towards identifying areas of deprivation where the need for intervention is greater to help narrow the gap for children.

The quality of the agency's services

- The agency's lead officer for professional development works in partnership with accreditors to ensure that the content of qualifications, such as the level three in childcare, is of good quality.
- Over time, close and effective working relationships have been established between agency staff and childminders. In the event that childminders have a query, they telephone the agency staff to seek advice. Childminders told inspectors that they feel reassured and supported by the agency's visits.
- Each childminder is supported through an action plan which serves to inform the level of agency input needed to drive further improvement. Agency staff and childminders review the progress being made and identify specific support that might help them to enhance their childminding practice.
- Recently, the agency and childminders jointly identified planning, observation and assessment as a learning priority. In turn, the agency met this rising need through offering training in this area and tailored one-to-one support.
- The agency meets the requirements for continuous professional development (CPD). Agency staff regularly review their 'CPD log' and add to their extensive list of available training courses as training needs emerge.
- Childminders all receive one unannounced post-registration visit and an annual quality assessment visit. Any additional support visits and monitoring visits are planned in line with each childminder's needs. The agency's level of interaction and moderation means they know the childminders well.
- Systems for registration and quality assessment are well established. Leaders and managers monitor the quality of the agency staff's work through supervision meetings and the sampling of quality assurance assessment reports. However, plans to monitor staff practice more closely, for example through joining staff on quality assurance visits, are still to be introduced.

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

- Childminders understand their safeguarding responsibilities and their duty to report any changes in their circumstances to the agency. This helps to ensure that children are safe and secure in the care of the agency's childminders.
- The Leap into Nature project is an accreditation scheme recently launched by the agency. Although the project is in its early stages, staff have produced a useful childminder portfolio to enable those passionate about outdoor play to plan seasonal outdoor activities for children's learning. Childminders learn about engaging children with their natural surroundings and provide a more exciting range of outdoor experiences for children.
- Agency staff report that the benefits of a health initiative to improve children's oral health have, in some cases, been ongoing. Children are brushing their teeth more readily while in the care of their childminder, and also at home. As a result, children are developing good oral hygiene.

- Childminders who have attended specialist training, such as Makaton and courses to promote children's communication and language skills, report to the agency about feeling better equipped to support children with special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- The childminder agency meetings are an effective forum for childminders to discuss pertinent issues, such as how best to use any additional funding and raise the development levels of children with funded places. Some childminders have used this funding to pay for additional hours and wrap-around care so that those children who need more one-to-one support can be assured of it.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sonia Lobo
Early Years Regulatory Inspector
London

Information about the inspection

This inspection was carried out by an Early Years Regulatory Inspector and an Early Years Senior Officer. They were joined by a Senior Her Majesty's Inspector in a quality assurance role. The inspection took place over two days. During the inspection, five visits were undertaken to five childminders. The visits included two interviews with childminders at different stages of their agency journey and three pre-quality assessment visits. Inspectors observed practice while childminding was taking place to assess the accuracy of assessment of the quality of childminding provision. Inspectors also spoke to childminders separately about the support they receive from the agency. Inspectors held discussions with leaders and agency staff about their roles and sampled a range of policies, procedures and records. This included the statement of purpose, staff suitability checks, records of registration and support visits to childminders. Inspectors also sampled childminder case files and information about training and development. Inspectors reviewed parents' responses to questionnaires, which the agency uses to evaluate the services it provides. The inspectors also spoke to parents and took their views into account.

Information about the agency

Leap Ahead Achieving for Children Childminder Agency registered in May 2015. Achieving for Children (AfC) is a social enterprise company created by the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames to provide children's services. The agency's office is in Kingston. The agency serves Richmond, Kingston and the surrounding areas. It currently has 48 childminders registered, which is just below its target to register 50 childminders. The agency registers childminders on both the Early Years and Childcare Register.

The agency employs two childminder agency officers. The officers also undertake roles across both local authorities to support all childcare settings.