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Rutland Early Years Agency Ltd

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Dear Directors,

Inspection of Rutland Early Years Agency Ltd

Thank you for your co-operation during the inspection from 2 to 5 December 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, as amended by the Children and Families Act 2014.

Rutland Early Years Agency Ltd 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

Rutland Early Years Agency Ltd has grown significantly since its last inspection. The agency now has 323 registered childminders, and leaders have taken on six consultants to support them in their work. Previously the agency only operated in Rutland, but it now has childminders registered in over 60 English local authority areas. The agency also offers support to all Rutland childminders through a contract with Rutland County Council. This includes those who are registered with Ofsted. The agency's two directors are passionate about childminding and ensuring that children receive the best possible early years care and education.

The process for registration of childminder's remains robust. The agency has made decisions to refuse registration based on sound evidence of possible risk, indicating a lack of suitability. This year the agency has used its regulatory powers for the first time. Leaders have made proportionate and well-informed decisions to issue actions, suspend and cancel registration when necessary.

The agency continues to evaluate what has worked well, and what they need to do to inform their next steps to continue to improve.

Leaders use the Ofsted education inspection framework to grade the quality of care and education offered. Their findings are consistent with what inspectors observed during sampling visits to childminders, which were undertaken during the inspection.

The agency offers good levels of support and training to its childminders and ensures they deliver good quality care and educational experiences for children. However, the agency has not ensured that new childminders receive two visits in the first 12 months of registration. This is a breach of legal requirement, but it has not had an impact on the quality of childminding.

A comprehensive review of record keeping identified that some records do not contain enough detail to support the decisions made. For example, records made during the interview process for consultants, and records of evidence used to support the grading of care and education provided by childminders. Additionally, there is a lack of detailed recording of ad hoc support given by the agency to childminders.

Actions:

- Ensure that a minimum of two quality assurance visits are completed in the first year of a childminder's registration, one of which must be unannounced.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen procedures for record keeping to ensure that records are sufficiently detailed to withstand challenge. This relates to the records kept to monitor the quality of childminding provision, demonstrate the suitability of consultants, and monitor the provision of ad hoc support and advice.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the childminder agency

- Leaders are highly reflective, on both a strategic and operational level. They seek feedback and suggestions from professionals, childminders, consultants and parents of minded children on how they can improve the services they offer. For example, they are working with a local authority designated officer to ensure their annual declaration of suitability for childminders is sufficiently comprehensive.

- Leaders identified that their recent expansion required changes in how they work, in order to be able to continue to provide a quality service to their childminders. They have taken on consultants to deliver aspects of their work, and they have introduced local childminding networks to nurture support between childminders.
- Safeguarding is effective. Leaders are decisive and proportionate in the action they take when childminders are found to have breached legal requirements, or where they identify potential harm to children. They work effectively alongside lead child protection agencies to refer and manage risk, and to ensure the continued suitability of the childminders they register. They maintain a clear audit trail of action taken. Childminders can access leaders at all times, via a designated safeguarding telephone number, in the event of a concern or allegation.
- Leaders have good working partnerships with external agencies and strive to ensure communication is both productive and professional. Where they have encountered challenge, they have been constructive in their approach. They have created a local authority information-sharing protocol to assist local authorities in their understanding of the roles and responsibilities of a childminding agency.
- Procedures for the recruitment and induction of consultants are robust, and systems to monitor their performance are effective. Expectations and responsibilities of the consultant role are made clear from the outset. Moderation meetings are held, where consultants and leaders can spend time evaluating their work together. The agency's records, which demonstrate the suitability of consultants, are not as detailed as they could be.
- While leaders effectively monitor the quality of their childminders, they do not fulfil the statutory requirement of two quality assurance visits within the first year of a childminder's registration, one of which must be unannounced. However, this has not had an impact on the quality of care and education provided by the agency's childminders. Additionally, recording of how they assess quality at visits is not as robust as it could be.

The quality of the agency's services

- Leaders have used their extensive knowledge of childminding to provide a comprehensive starter pack to applicants in advance of their registration visit. This contains relevant policies, procedures, and recording templates. Childminders who choose to use the agency's policies and procedures templates confirm that the agency test their knowledge and understanding of these during their registration visit. Childminders are given useful guidance prior to registration about factors to consider before commencing the childminder role. Childminders feel fully prepared for their registration visit as a result of the support given.
- The registration process is robust. Concerns raised through suitability checks are thoroughly explored, and the agency does not register the applicant, or an associate, if they are unsuitable. Leaders check that childminders understand and are confident to implement the policies and procedures provided by the agency. Leaders and consultants use answers taken from a pre-visit questionnaire to test the applicant's knowledge of the early years foundation stage (EYFS) safeguarding and welfare, and learning and development requirements. A detailed report is

completed during the registration visit, and the decision to register is quality assured by leaders.

- Support is given to childminders through a variety of different means, such as webinars, online support, newsletters, and targeted support plans, where required. In addition, the agency provides bespoke support and information for childminders on particular topics of interest, such as how to provide, or access, forest school experiences, as well as for general issues, such as sun safety and wider safeguarding information. Childminders speak highly of the support offered, and the accessibility and availability of leaders. They confirm the support given by the agency is both timely and relevant.
- Leaders have secured the services of an online academy to deliver training. They work collaboratively with the academy to request, test and jointly design training to meet the needs of their childminders. Training offered is thoughtful and well-targeted. It covers a wide variety of topics from mandatory subjects to learning and development topics, such as speech and language, holistic play and schemas. The agency also ensures the academy provides training on other topics, for example accountancy and running your own business. They track training offered, and undertaken, by childminders and check this is having a positive impact on children. Childminders are keen to praise the agency for the level of support and individual attention they receive.
- Systems are in place to track the impact of training and support undertaken on the quality of care and education given. Leaders closely monitor childminders where weaknesses in practice are identified. If there is no improvement, or childminders fail to engage with support and training, leaders take appropriate action to de-register.
- Leaders do not maintain a record of the ad hoc support they provide to their childminders. While they feel this does not prevent them from being able to identify and act upon common themes, they do acknowledge that such information would be useful to record for monitoring purposes as they continue to expand.
- Leaders use what they know about their childminders to inform annual support visits. During these visits the agency ensures they check that childminders are meeting the requirements of the EYFS. They do this through discussion, observation and scrutiny of records. A detailed report is produced at the end of each visit and leaders use this to target support and training to improve practice further. The report is also shared with parents and local authorities.
- Time is taken during visits to observe the quality of education provided, and 'on-the-spot' advice and support is offered as appropriate. The agency ensures all childminders have regular safeguarding training and that their paediatric first aid training remains in date. Overall, childminders demonstrate a good understanding of how to identify and refer concerns, or allegations, to child protection agencies. They know what types of events they must notify the agency about and confirm that time is taken during the support visit to check they know their children well. Care and education of children observed during the inspection confirmed that children were progressing in their learning and appeared happy and secure, with evidence of close bonds formed between them and their childminders.

- During the inspection, visits were undertaken to childminders. These visits confirmed that leaders and consultants accurately assess the quality of care the childminders provide.
- Leaders have introduced a 'buddy' system through which new childminders can seek support from others in their area. While this scheme is in its infancy, it has received positive feedback. They also signpost their childminders to each other to share expertise, for example to give advice on working with assistants.

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

- Childminders ensure they keep up to date with mandatory training to support children's safety and welfare, such as paediatric first aid, and they maintain mandatory records, such as children's hours of attendance.
- Childminders know their children well and children appear happy and motivated to learn. Children engage in a range of well-planned and purposeful activities to extend their learning. For example, children take part in archaeological digs, and learn to ride bicycles and scooters.
- Childminders promote children's independence to prepare them for the next stage in their learning. For example, children were observed to make independent choices in their play. In addition, childminders encourage children to use cutlery at meal times, to dress themselves for outdoor play, and to manage their own hygiene needs such as hand washing.
- Childcare is provided in warm and welcoming homes, where children develop secure relationships with their childminder.
- Childminders mirror the values of the agency. They support each other well and think carefully about how to further improve their practice.
- Childminders share the agency's informative leaflet on early years pupil premium to encourage parents to apply for additional funding. Irrespective of whether funding is received, childminders identify gaps in children's learning, and the agency supports them in ensuring all children's needs are met. For example, it supports childminders to think about how they can successfully provide opportunities to help children, who speak English as an additional language, to make links between English and the language they speak at home.
- The agency is successful in helping its childminders to work in close partnership with parents. It runs courses, such as 'parents as partners' and offers individual advice to childminders when issues arise. Parents say they are happy with, and feel involved in, the quality of care provided by the agency childminders.
- Childminders complete the progress check for children aged between two and three years thoroughly. This is a comprehensive review of the child's development and the next steps in their learning. The agency supports this process by reviewing checks when asked and providing feedback. Such checks enable parents and carers to see the progress their children are making. Childminders use this assessment to target learning where children are making less progress than expected.

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. Additionally, a number of early years regulatory inspectors across the country took part in inspection sampling activities. The inspection took place over four days.

- Inspectors undertook visits to childminders to test the robustness of the registration process, the quality of support and training offered by the agency, and the systems in place to monitor the quality of childcare provision.
- Inspectors undertook observations of support visits to test the quality of the work of the agency's consultants.
- Inspectors held in-depth discussions with leaders about their roles and responsibilities. This included discussions regarding their registration, and regulation of childminders, and how they monitor the quality of their provision. It also included discussion as to how they recruit consultants and ensure the quality of their work, how well they offer support and training to childminders, and how they self-evaluate their services overall.
- Inspectors sampled a range of policies, procedures and records designed to ensure the safe and efficient management of the agency. This included records of registration, records of support visits and graded visits to childminders, records of recruitment for consultants, records kept in relation to regulatory matters, and information provided to childminders and parents regarding the support and services available.
- The views of childminders, parents and stakeholders 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 across the country. The agency currently has 323 childminders registered. It registers childminders on both the Early Years and Childcare Registers. At the time of inspection, the agency was contracting with six consultants who carry out registration and support visits on behalf of the agency. Rutland local authority commissions the agency to provide support and advice to all registered childminders in the authority.