

# Suffolk Childcare Agency

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**Inspection date:** 6 and 7 December 2021

**Overall inspection judgement** Effective

Leadership and management Effective

The quality of the agency's services Effective

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

**Previous overall inspection judgement** Effective

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## Summary findings

The agency is led by one director, who brings her aspirational vision for the agency and the services provided to life. There is collaborative working within the management team. All share the aim to achieve better care, experiences and education for children and their families, through the provision of well-trained childminders who help children to achieve their fullest potential, in a safe and supportive environment.

The consistent and robust support provided to childminders by agency staff ensures the quality of childminders' practice and ability to meet the requirements of the early years foundation stage (EYFS) effectively. Any deviations in the quality of practice are addressed to bring about rapid improvement. New childminders are well trained from the start and all registered childminders benefit from good-quality, ongoing continuous professional development throughout their time with the agency. The agency provides a suite of information. This includes on-line and face-to-face support and training opportunities for childminders registered with it. The agency goes beyond the legal requirements, by providing additional services for families, such as those to match the provision required by parents to childminders registered with the

agency, and alternative provision for those affected by changes to their childminders' circumstances. Parents spoken to as part of the inspection confirm the benefits of these services in providing reassurance and continuity of care.

Childminders submit assessments of children's progress to the agency. Agency managers take dedicated action to identify strategies to prevent the attainment gap from widening. Plans are implemented without delay, to help close any gaps in learning for those children who are at risk of falling behind. This has been invaluable during the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and priority has been given to the prime areas of learning which have been most affected. Leaders consider innovative ways to develop the service for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although the project is in its infancy, leaders are working with partner organisations, such as job centres in areas of deprivation, to help recruit childminders who are able to support vulnerable children.

Leaders and managers understand the agency's enforcement powers and regulatory responsibilities. There are clear procedures in place to take action where required by regulations and also where the registration requirements set out by the agency have ceased to be satisfied.

The registration procedures include scrutiny, through suitability checks. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual pre-registration meetings are held to discuss applicants' understanding of the requirements of the EYFS. These are completed prior to a visit to consider the suitability of the premises. During the virtual meetings, agency managers assess the applicants' knowledge and understanding of safeguarding and the care, teaching, learning and assessment requirements of the role. At times, the questions posed to applicants do not challenge them to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding fully. However, any concerns about an applicant's responses are diligently reviewed with the agency director. Documents confirm that well-informed decisions have been made to refuse registration where there have been concerns about the suitability of people or premises.

The statement of purpose confirms how the agency meets the requirements for registration. A summary of the statement, which sets out the agency's services, aims and objectives, is included on the website for applicants', parents' and childminders' information. The statement of purpose is constantly under review and contains information about the changes that have been made to some procedures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, although not all updates have been detailed. The agency meets all aspects of the required safeguarding responsibilities to promote the welfare of the children cared for by its registered providers. These responsibilities are detailed in practice but are not fully developed in the statement of purpose.

## **Recommendations**

- Develop the information provided in the statement of purpose, to include all details about how the agency's practice has been adapted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and to include all aspects of practice relating to safeguarding.
- Develop the way in which questions are asked of applicants wishing to register with the agency, to encourage them to better demonstrate their understanding of requirements.

## **The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the childminder agency**

- The agency has grown considerably since the last inspection. The director has remained personally involved in all decision-making and has an excellent oversight of the provision. She initiates and maintains effective communication with other childminder agencies, Ofsted and the Department for Education through the meetings she attends. She is fully involved in opportunities to help shape practice across the sector. She proactively liaises with all local authorities in the places where registered childminders live, to agree protocols and develop effective working relationships.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the agency was effective in ensuring that childminders registered with them had the support and information they needed to continue to provide a safe and effective service for vulnerable children and children of key workers. They offered an on-line facility to keep childminders and parents well informed, and willingly provided advice to other childcare providers who sought it. The agency monitored the provision for vulnerable children and advised childminders how to stay in touch with families. The agency's inspector carried out virtual safeguarding audits to encourage childminders to reflect on their practice, particularly for vulnerable families, and to provide reassurance for parents. As a result of the audit, guest speakers, such as a health visitor and a speech and language therapist, attended childminder support groups to develop childminders' understanding of the professionals' roles in the community.
- Agency managers actively monitor childminders' safeguarding practice and ensure that any non-compliance of the safeguarding and welfare requirements is identified. The managers support childminders to act quickly and responsibly to reduce or eliminate any risk to children by working together with local statutory children's services agencies. Managers maintain a clear and comprehensive audit trail to support any decisions they make to help keep children safe. If a childminder's practice needs to improve, managers initiate action plans with agreed timescales, and monitor their completion.
- The agency's statement of purpose has been developed and updated since the last inspection, and sets out most procedures for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the children who are cared for by the childminders registered with it. The agency sets out its aim to create a culture of safety. Effective procedures are in place to ensure that agency staff and childminders have a secure understanding

of all aspects of safeguarding. The statement of purpose acknowledges safeguarding as a wider subject than the elements contained within it. However, the document does not fully reflect the breadth of the agency's safeguarding responsibilities.

- The pandemic slowed down the achievement of some goals, such as the development of parent forums to bring more of a 'parent voice' to the agency and support childminders in generating an even more effective parent partnership. Despite the enforced delay, the development and quality-control plan remains focused and ambitious, and promotes a culture of continuous improvement. The red, amber, green prioritisation method ensures that all agency staff understand what is expected of them and when this should be achieved. They are clear about their roles and know how the aims and objectives will be met. Leaders are reflective and act quickly on suggestions to develop practice.
- The selection, recruitment and induction procedures for agency staff are thorough. The director is driven to employ experienced and qualified staff who share her vision for high-quality care and education for all children. Staff benefit from close working relationships with one another, and this contributes to consistency and cohesion across the management team. Effective ongoing supervision ensures that staff's work in the agency is effectively monitored and shadowing and coaching arrangements help them to develop their skills. Staff are highly valued and the director prioritises their well-being. Supervision meetings provide opportunities to discuss concerns and set individual performance targets.
- The director and agency managers fully understand their role in addressing any safeguarding concerns or issues of suitability to promote the welfare of children. They act swiftly on concerns that are brought to their attention in order to safeguard children.
- The processes for assessing initial and ongoing suitability of childminders are robust. Agency staff work in partnership with statutory agencies, including Ofsted, to safeguard children. Where concerns are identified through the rigorous application process, managers make informed and effective decisions about applicants' suitability. This includes refusing registration where necessary. Once childminders are registered, they are provided with comprehensive guidance to follow to notify any changes about themselves or those living or working with them to the agency. As a result of the regular progress checks and quality assurance visits carried out by managers, any changes that may affect the registration and the childminders' suitability are quickly identified and addressed.

### **The quality of the agency's services**

- Agency managers work very effectively with the childminders they support to build confidence and empower them to develop and implement an ambitious curriculum for the children in their care. Through excellent processes, such as monitoring and progress checks, the managers build up a picture of each individual childminder. They understand their strengths and weaknesses and assess the support they need. They help them to stay abreast of current childcare issues and provide a

bespoke range of training opportunities, which are included in the individual childminders' online portals for completion. Childminders visited during the inspection confirm that they are easily able to contact agency staff for advice and guidance when they need it. All aspects of childminders' continued professional development (CPD) are rigorously monitored by agency managers, to ensure that knowledge and practice develops and improves over time. Regular reports relating to the training undertaken by childminders are produced and reviewed by the management team. The agency liaises with childminders to ensure that the requirement of the agency's registration, to provide practice support, is met. Action is taken to deregister individual childminders who fail to maintain the level of CPD expected of them.

- Training opportunities are particularly effective in ensuring that childminders have the knowledge they need to carry out their role. For example, childminders attend safeguarding training in the local authority they live in so that they have a secure understanding of the processes in their locality and can act quickly and confidently to safeguard children. Leaders review the methods used for delivering the training programme, particularly as a result of the need to provide more virtual facilities. They trial any new methods, resources or training providers to confirm their quality and effectiveness before recommending them to their childminders. The agency has begun to produce innovative, themed books, focusing on particular developmental stages, to encourage childminders to deliver a broad curriculum.
- The talents, skills and abilities of experienced childminders are effectively harnessed by the agency. Where possible, they are recruited as agency managers to support the practice of new and less-experienced childcarers. Those in this role state that they also benefit from the discussions they hold with the wide range of childminders they support. They further reflect on their own practice and use information and ideas to improve their registered settings.
- The director has effectively considered and mitigated against any conflict that may be caused through the employment of family members or regulation of provision for childminders who are also employed by the agency. Quality assurance is implemented by inspectors, who remain objective through a, regulatory-focused, arm's-length approach to the role. Quality assurance inspections are carried out annually. The inspector reviews a wide range of information prior to the inspection and this allows her to target areas of priority extremely well. Judgements are based on Ofsted's evaluation schedule in the Early years inspection handbook. Any recommendations or actions are monitored by the development-focused agency managers through the progress checks they carry out. The process is effective in assuring childminders' capacity to deliver the statutory requirements of the EYFS. The director provides an overview of this process. She verifies the judgements and assures the quality of the resulting reports, which are published on the agency's website for parents to see. The accuracy of the judgements made through the agency's quality assurance process was verified through the visits to childminders carried out during this inspection.

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

- Childminders registered with the agency who were visited during the inspection, show that they deliver good-quality care and education. They confirm their enthusiasm about the opportunities they have to build their knowledge. They explain how the children in their care benefit from an improved service because of the individualised support they receive from the agency. Recent training has included access to two modules, which were designed by a play therapist and early years educators, and brought together the theory and requirements behind effective play, teaching and child development. The training focused on children's communication and language, and personal, social and emotional development to help close gaps that had been identified in children's learning as a result of the pandemic. Childminders who have completed focused training to support children with special educational needs, confirm the positive impact their improved knowledge has had on the provision for the children.
- In the inspection survey, 96% of childminders rated the level of ongoing support they receive from the agency as good or very good. They say that they feel proud to be part of the agency and they benefit from the knowledge and advice the managers provide. Respondents particularly like the monthly support meetings, held by video, where they share ideas with other childminders. They appreciate the webinars provided by guest speakers, such as accountants, that help them to develop their business. They praise the level of information available on the website and through the agency's social media platform and state that managers are always available to answer their queries.
- Childminders are reflective practitioners. They recognise that early years is the most important time in a child's life. They evaluate their strengths and identify areas for improvement, and work together with their agency manager to consider how to develop their practice further. Childminders' state that they deserve the support that the agency offers, so that they can give children the best start in life through their provision. They reflect that they have been inspired to leave their own comfort zones to provide a range of activities that promote all aspects of children's development. For example, they understand the benefits of offering sensory exploration and messy-play opportunities and have developed their environment to facilitate such play and learning.
- Childminders who were visited during the inspection, demonstrate a deep understanding of how to identify concerns about children, and are familiar with the processes to follow to report concerns to relevant agencies to keep children safe. They recognise their own responsibilities and know the action to take if allegations are made about them or anyone in their household. They are also clear about who the designated safeguarding lead is within the agency and know their role. Childminders are required to display key policies and the contact numbers for local safeguarding partners so that they can refer to them quickly to act on any concerns.

## **Childminder Agency details**

<b>Unique reference number</b>	CA000026
<b>Local authority</b>	Suffolk Childcare Agency
<b>Type of provision</b>	Childminder Agency
<b>Registers</b>	Early Years Register, Compulsory Childcare Register, Voluntary Childcare Register
<b>Number of active childminders</b>	47
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	2 and 3 July 2021
<b>Previous overall inspection judgement</b>	Effective

## **Information about this childminding agency**

Suffolk Childcare Agency Ltd registered as a childminder agency in 2016. The agency's office is in Wickham Market in Suffolk. There are 47 childminders registered with it. Agency staff provide services for parents and training, mentoring and support for the childminders, who are mainly based in surrounding counties.

## **Information about the inspection**

The inspection team, consisting of an Early years senior officer and two Early years regulatory inspectors, held discussions with the Director, Agency managers and Quality assurance inspectors. They reviewed a range of documentation, including the statement of purpose, the development and quality-control plan, Disclosure and Barring Service and recruitment records, and took account of survey responses. The inspectors visited or held discussions with five childminders who are currently registered with the agency and reviewed documentation relating to them. They also spoke to parents who use the registered provision.

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.

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