

# Rutland Early Years Agency Limited

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<b>Inspection dates:</b>	<b>31 October to 4 November 2022</b>
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<b>Overall inspection judgement</b>	<b>Ineffective</b>
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Leadership and management	Ineffective
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The quality of the agency's services	Ineffective
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The impact of the agency's services on the quality of the education and care provided by its childminders	Ineffective
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<b>Previous overall inspection judgement</b>	<b>Effective</b>
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## Summary findings

Rutland Early Years Agency Limited registered in 2015. The agency has continued to grow exponentially and has more than doubled the number of childminders registered with them since the previous inspection in 2019, with 766 childminders based in 109 local authorities across the country.

During this inspection, a serious safeguarding breach was identified which has a significant impact on the assessment of child protection procedures used by the agency's childminders and of the leadership team's own internal monitoring systems. Relationships that leaders build with childminders are founded heavily on trust and confidence in the quality of each childminder's provision and capacity to improve. However, this confidence is sometimes misplaced or misjudged because of a lack of oversight by leaders. As a result, children's safety and well-being is not always prioritised in decision-making linked to child protection concerns.

The processes used by the leadership team to monitor the quality of childminder's knowledge and practice are not strong enough to continually raise the standards of education and care for young children. Leaders offer many resources to educate and guide childminders in a variety of methods such as self-directed learning, regular newsletters and online support forums. However, during the quality assurance visits, consultants do not always effectively explore whether any training and support that the childminders have accessed is making a positive impact for the children in their settings. Consequently, this leads to consultants awarding judgements to some childminders that do not truly reflect the quality of the provision children receive. Furthermore, the leadership team's oversight of the quality assurance visits, and the accompanying reports are not thorough enough to ensure that the consultants are fulfilling their delegated responsibilities.

Leaders have used their enforcement powers as a regulator successfully in many cases. This includes suspending the registration of childminders when there is a reasonable belief that children may be at risk of harm. They have cancelled childminders' registrations and have refused registration to applicants they do not believe are suitable. However, they do not always appropriately assess whether childminders are complying with requirements which could potentially compromise children's safety and the quality of children's early education.

Leaders pride themselves as strong advocates for the voice of childminders as professionals in the early years sector, recognising the positive impact a good early education can have for children as they grow and progress. Leaders are proud of the support and guidance they offer, which in turn is very well received by the childminders who access this. They celebrate the successes of the childminders registered with the agency and seek to empower them through praise and recognition of their important work and achievements.

The nominated individual for the agency must devise an action plan to address how the agency will meet the actions laid out below. This action plan must demonstrate how the action taken will improve the standards of the agency, as well as the agency's employees, contracted consultants, and childminders registered with the agency. This should also demonstrate how the action taken will ensure that the agency meets the requirements so that children's safety and welfare are maintained. The agency must respond by 16 January 2023 setting out the actions they have taken to meet the requirements. We will review their response and may visit or inspect again to make sure that they are meeting all the regulations.

## **Actions**

- Implement a robust monitoring system which identifies and swiftly addresses gaps in the safeguarding knowledge and child protection practices of all registered childminders and consultants.

- Ensure any safeguarding matters brought to the attention of the agency are rigorously explored by leaders in order to prioritise children's safety and well-being.
- Implement an effective procedure to monitor childminders when they have had their registration suspended to ensure that they are not committing an offence and putting children at risk by continuing to provide childcare.
- Implement focused oversight arrangements of the quality of childminders' practice, and that of consultants, so that weak practice does not drift and go unchallenged.
- Provide a transparent report to parents when a quality assurance visit has taken place which ensures parents are fully informed of any weaknesses and/or breaches of registration requirements. This should ensure that parents have all the information they need to make an educated decision about the provision for their children.

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

- Safeguarding is ineffective. Leaders have not exercised sufficient professional curiosity in order to follow up a child protection matter which occurred earlier this year. The guidance and support offered by the agency to the childminder involved in this particular case were not embedded and implemented in practice. This meant that neither the childminder or the agency had confirmed whether there was any involvement to support the child and their family by any other professionals. Leaders did not show a proactive approach to their own safeguarding responsibilities when Ofsted brought this matter to their attention, as they then prioritised the emotional impact on the childminder in dealing with this matter ahead of the safety and welfare of children.
- Leaders do not fully carry out their regulatory duties to assure themselves that when they suspend the registration of a childminder, that the childminder is complying with the suspension. They describe their rationale for monitoring suspension as based on 'instinct' and state that they would rely on third parties, such as parents or other professionals, to bring any non-compliance to their attention.
- Leaders collaborate with other Childminder Agencies (CMAs), Ofsted, the Department for Education and local authorities where their registered childminders are based to raise the professionalism of childminders in the early years sector. As the largest agency in the country, leaders are often a source of information for other CMAs.
- Leaders recruit appropriately qualified and skilled consultants to carry out the delegated responsibilities of support for, and quality assurance of, childminders. Recruitment of several more consultants is well underway to ensure a good geographic spread of new consultants, which will promote a more consistent offer for all childminders, regardless of where they live.
- When new consultants are contracted to work for the agency, they are offered a supportive induction package to help them understand the roles and

responsibilities of the post. This includes: a comprehensive handbook; access to the same training platform that childminders use and accompanied visits with a more experienced consultant until they are confident and competent to carry out the role by themselves.

- In order to assess the practice of consultants, leaders offer ongoing peer support and regular team meetings. Every quality assurance report written by a consultant is viewed by the leadership team. However, a lack of formalised standards which leaders can use to assess the work of consultants means that their practice, judgements and guidance is of variable quality. This is demonstrated by the differences in the benchmarking used by consultants to grade the quality of a childminder's practice.
- Early years consultants are offered an appraisal of their practice by way of an annual assessment which is conducted by the leadership team. Leaders shadow a quality assurance and/or registration visit and provide feedback in a written summary to the consultant. However, the feedback is descriptive, lacks evaluation and does not give specific targets or goals to work towards in order that consultants can continually improve their own practice.
- Leaders do not ensure they access appropriate professional development opportunities which would build and strengthen their own knowledge and understanding of their roles as a regulator. As a result, new knowledge and skills they gain are reactive and incidental.
- Leaders have a working self-evaluation document. This highlights many aspects of their own practice which they recognise needs improvement. They believe that many of these developments can be made through the implementation of new technology which they state will simplify some processes which have become less manageable due to the rapid increase of childminders registered with the agency. However, they continue to accept new registrations despite acknowledging that a large number of the areas for improvement in the self-evaluation document are 'on hold' until the new technology has been embedded.

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

- Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, a large number of childminders registered with the agency have not received an annual quality assurance visit within the last year. A small number of childminders have not been visited for over two years or longer. Leaders describe a realistic plan to ensure all childminders receive a quality assurance visit before the end of May 2023. However, in some cases, the lack of capacity across the consultant team has impacted on how leaders successfully prioritise which childminders should be visited first.
- The agency has instigated some meet-and-greet sessions in three areas of the country which have been very well received by childminders and were well attended. Leaders plan to facilitate more of these sessions. At these meetings, childminders and leaders come face-to-face to share best practice and discuss current issues in the early years sector.
- Applicants wishing to register with the agency are provided with much support from the very first time they make contact. This includes advice about the initial application processes, regular check-ins, a knowledge check in preparation for a

registration visit, an 'inspection-ready guide', and guidance to encourage the applicant to meet the registration requirements.

- When consultants identify weaknesses in a childminder's practice at the quality assurance visits, they raise actions in a support plan to drive improvement. However, these support plans, in some cases are confusing. Some actions reflect a consultant's preference or lack clarity. Consequently, it can be difficult for childminders to understand and implement areas for improvement. Therefore, it is also problematic to measure success when the actions are revisited.
- The agency provides childminders with access to an e-learning platform which includes a range of online training packages and webinars. These promote acquisition of new relevant knowledge, refresher training and interactive webinars from a third-party provider. Childminders report positively about the ease of access and how informative these courses are. Leaders do not monitor how or when childminders use this resource, so they are unable to accurately analyse the impact on children through the quality assurance visits. Additionally, during the pandemic, leaders used video-conferencing facilities to communicate with childminders and they continue to utilise this facility to facilitate some webinars. Childminders say they felt well supported and informed by the agency throughout the lockdown periods of the pandemic and as restrictions were lifted.
- The agency has an online portal from which childminders can download an assortment of policy templates and pro formas. The contents include statutory policies and additional ones which the agency determine to be important for childminders to support contractual arrangements with parents. The safeguarding policy template is regularly updated, comprehensive and relevant. It includes the flexibility for childminders to include their own local safeguarding children partnership arrangements. Surveys undertaken by the agency indicate that parents confirm they have read and understand policies and procedures provided by their childminders. Nevertheless, a proportion of parents also state they do not know how to make a complaint if they should need to. This potentially indicates that, in some instances, documentation does not align with practice.

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

- Many of the childminders spoken to by the inspection team chose to register with the agency due to their excellent reputation for offering support. Childminders describe this as 'an arm around them', and that they feel part of a 'team', 'community' or 'family'. They appreciate the fact that the leaders have experience as childminders themselves. All of the respondents to a recent childminder survey say they would recommend the agency to prospective childminders. An example of the much-appreciated support is the safeguarding support line which childminders can use if required at any time of the day or night. Those childminders who have taken a career break or paused childminding for personal reasons say that they are included in communications and are contacted with a well-being call, even when they are not actively working.

- Some quality assurance reports demonstrate that consultants have explored aspects of teaching and learning sufficiently with childminders. These are not prompts contained within the agency's own framework but relate to comments about sequential learning observed in a childminder's practice, or questions such as 'what is your approach to teaching?'. This shows that, in some instances, appropriate consideration is given to the quality of the early education experience provided by childminders.
- Overall, the quality assurance reports detail the positive aspects of the setting the childminder is operating from. They are very descriptive but lack evaluation. Reports are heavily weighted towards the resources, furniture, decoration, and activities on offer and less so about the interactions observed between childminders and children. Therefore, the consultants appear to be giving more consideration to the environment children are in above the teaching they receive. Furthermore, the agency steers consultants to concentrate more on the safeguarding and welfare requirements and less so on the learning and development requirements. This is detailed through the agency's written framework. This demonstrates that quality judgements are based on an ability to keep children safe, but with less consideration given to children's early education provision.
- Leaders are not showing a proactive approach in promoting safeguarding. At a quality assurance visit for one childminder, which was conducted a short time after a safeguarding concern was logged at their setting, the specific concern was not discussed or explored at all by the consultant. The childminder was judged as 'outstanding' as a result of this visit despite no discussion being held to elicit whether the childminder had a secure knowledge and understanding of child protection matters. This demonstrates either that the agency is not providing the consultant with all the necessary and relevant information they require to conduct a thorough and rigorous quality assurance visit or that the consultant did not consider the matter worthy of further discussion.
- Parents are not provided with accurate information about the quality of their childminder's provision. They are unaware if their childminder has breached statutory requirements or if there are any other weaknesses in their practice, due to the lack of transparency in the version of reports shared with them following a quality assurance visit. Leaders state a desire to provide a positive report to promote the self-esteem of individual childminders who may have 'lost their way' on their journey to a 'good' or 'outstanding' judgement. However, some support plans include many significant areas for improvement indicating systemic weaknesses which require substantial levels of support and guidance.
- There is little recognition in the reports of the importance of early speech, language, and communication, or of early literacy skills and promotion of a love of books in the agency's framework. Even when childminders are judged as 'outstanding', there is little reference to, or evidence recorded of access to books, story times, singing, talking or provision of a language-rich environment. This does not demonstrate an understanding of aspirational practice which should be expected of a provider judged to be 'outstanding'.

## **Childminder Agency details**

<b>Unique reference number</b>	CA000015
<b>Local authority</b>	Rutland
<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>	766
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	2 December 2019
<b>Previous overall inspection judgement</b>	Effective

## **Information about this childminding agency**

Rutland Early Years Agency Limited registered with Ofsted in 2015. It registers childminders on the Early Years and the Childcare Registers. The agency's head office is based in Rutland and offers services to childminders in all eight regions of the country. The agency has 766 childminders registered across 109 local authorities, with over 100 applications and/or registrations pending. The agency offers ongoing support, guidance, and access to training for childminders. The agency employs a small administration team and contracts a team of 20 part-time, self-employed Early Years Consultants.

## **Information about the inspection**

This was the agency's third inspection and was carried out under the Childcare Act 2006, as amended by the Children and Families Act 2014.

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