

# Rutland Early Years Agency Limited

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**Inspection dates:** **5 to 9 June 2023**

**Overall inspection judgement** **Ineffective**

Leadership and management Ineffective

The quality of the agency's services Ineffective

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

**Previous overall inspection judgement** **Ineffective**

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## Summary findings

Rutland Early Years Agency Limited (REYAL) was registered in 2015 and since then has rapidly increased the number of childminders registered with them nationwide. The number of childminders on roll at this reinspection is 728, with approximately 50 applications pending. This reinspection was conducted seven months after the prior inspection where the agency was judged as ineffective. In November 2022, leaders decided to pause the processing of new applications to register as a childminder.

This is REYAL's second consecutive ineffective inspection judgement. Leaders have not ensured that all childminders registered with them have received a statutory annual quality assurance visit. The agency's records indicate that this affects around 10% of their childminders. The length of time these visits are overdue varies between a few weeks to more than two years. This demonstrates a lack of oversight by leaders into how quality assurance visits have been prioritised.

Leaders have completed a self-evaluation of their practice. The points covered in this are focused on the key aspects they have identified as requiring their input and attention to improve. Leaders explain that these areas of their work are those which will make the most impact to their business, to childminders, and for children. However, meeting the statutory duty to carry out annual quality assurance visits is not included. This indicates that leaders have not recognised the importance of this requirement.

Since the previous inspection, leaders have delegated some of their responsibilities to two new lead roles in the agency. This includes the development of a revised framework to inform quality assurance visits, and an internal quality assurance (IQA) process. The IQA provides the initial oversight of all registration reports, quality assurance reports, and support plans written by the agency's Early Years Consultants. These two roles and the linked processes are in their infancy and under review, but nevertheless they have been implemented.

The agency's revised quality assurance framework is not yet precise enough to support childminders to plan and deliver an appropriate curriculum for early years children. Additionally, it does not support the Early Years Consultants to make accurate assessments of the quality of care and early education children are receiving. The framework gives a strong recognition of the importance of children's personal, social and emotional development (PSED). However, the other two prime areas of development (physical development and communication and language) are not given the same regard. Literacy and mathematics are not pitched at the right level for children in their early years.

The oversight of consultants' written evidence and reports lacks challenge and scrutiny. Therefore, the process does not yet promote the consistency and validity that is intended. While this role has been delegated and a review is due imminently, there is no evidence of continuous oversight and challenge by leaders in the agency to identify and address weaknesses in the system ongoing, ahead of any formal evaluation.

Leaders are placing too much confidence in the assessments made of childminder's practice under their previous framework, which was judged to not be effective at the prior inspection. Alongside the lack of oversight of new processes, and the percentage of childminders yet to receive an annual quality assurance visit, it is not clear how leaders can be certain that children in the care of REYAL's registered childminders are effectively safeguarded and engaging in a high-quality curriculum. Where children are receiving a good-quality early years experience, it is not evident that this can be attributed to what the agency does to support their registered childminders.

Childminders' knowledge and understanding of child protection matters are not effectively explored during the registration process, at quality assurance visits, or through regulatory work the agency undertakes. This information is not challenged when consultants submit their evidence and reports for these activities. Consequently, a culture has developed where weak child protection knowledge is accepted, because it is not routinely recognised as such, or challenged.

Leaders provide childminders with a vast range of materials to develop their skills and knowledge. These include access to an e-learning academy, regular newsletters, signposting to relevant training which may include that provided by the local authority where the childminder lives. In addition, the agency makes good use of social media platforms. Leaders state that the impact of any training and development opportunities on the provision children receive is considered at quality assurance visits. However, the shortfall in these visits means that this is not yet accurately measured. Plans are in place for future monitoring of childminders' access to training and development materials. However, at present, leaders are unable to ascertain which, if any, of these resources are effective. Leaders describe a higher level of engagement in webinars and have plans to roll out more of these on specific relevant subjects.

Leaders continue to be proud of the supportive nature of their relationships with their registered childminders. In turn, childminders spoken to as part of this reinspection agree, describing the agency staff as friendly, responsive, informative and reassuring.

The nominated individual for the agency must devise a plan to address how the agency will meet the actions laid out below. This 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. The agency must respond by 1 September 2023, setting out their actions 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**

- Devise a clear and robust process for meeting your statutory duty to ensure all childminders receive an annual quality assurance visit. This includes catching up on all outstanding visits, and contingency arrangements to prevent any delay in the future.
- Ensure all staff, consultants, and others appointed to key roles in the agency are capable of fulfilling their responsibilities and are offered appropriate support, challenge and oversight.

- Make the registration process more rigorous to ensure that only those with a solid knowledge base relating to the Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage are granted registration.
- Ensure leaders have effective oversight of childminder's knowledge and practice linked to safeguarding through the processes and deployment of roles within the agency. This is relevant to registration, quality assurance visits, and regulatory work.
- Devise a quality assurance framework that is reflective of appropriate stages of development for young children, and in line with the Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage (EYFS).

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

- Leaders have developed their self-evaluation processes since the last inspection. The main areas of focus are succinct and reflect their assessment of the agency's strengths and areas to improve. However, some of the weaknesses identified in this reinspection have not been included in the agency's self-evaluation, or addressed by leaders, and therefore have not been given appropriate attention. Leaders have looked at ways to further their own professional development which has included engaging with an external advisor and commissioning a national child protection organisation to write and deliver a bespoke safeguarding programme for the agency in the coming weeks. Despite the improved self-evaluation and plans for future improvement, some aspects of the actions raised at the prior inspection are not fully met, embedded or making a positive impact for children.
- The statutory duty to carry out a quality assurance visit for every childminder annually is not being fulfilled. Leaders describe a number of factors which have contributed to this shortfall which includes the significant and lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (including periods of lockdown), and retention and recruitment of their contracted Early Years Consultants. Nevertheless, the agency's records indicate that at least 78 childminders' quality assurance visits are overdue. Leaders cannot adequately explain why this is the case; three childminders having gone in excess of two years without a visit. Leaders asserted that those childminders who are overdue a quality assurance visit do not have any concerns recorded against them. However, three childminders who have not received a visit are logged as having had a concern raised about their provision. Furthermore, leaders fail to recognise that the absence of a recorded concern does not necessarily equate to good-quality provision. Failure to uphold this statutory duty means that the quality of children's early education cannot be accurately measured; any weaknesses and issues cannot be addressed; and children could potentially be in provision that puts them at a disadvantage or a safeguarding risk.
- Despite consultant training and the IQA process, the registration reports sampled, omit stringent exploration and testing of applicants' knowledge of the Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage. Where applicants have previously worked as a nanny or a childminder, appropriate training has not been checked.

One registration report evidenced incorrect and concerning advice given to an applicant by a consultant as part of a safeguarding scenario which would potentially put children at risk of harm. Some sample visits indicated that applicants' knowledge and understanding of the learning and development requirements in the EYFS were not thoroughly explored during the registration process.

- A revised quality assurance framework has been written to include improved guidance for consultants when exploring childminders' knowledge and understanding of child protection matters. Leaders describe the inclusion of 'safeguarding scenarios'. However, these require further development as they are not effective in assuring that childminders would recognise and properly manage signs and symptoms of abuse. Instead, they are written as questions and are heavily weighted towards the desired response.
- One of the more recent quality assurance visits, where a newly recruited Early Years Consultant was being supported by a more experienced mentor, highlighted an incident where the childminder was advised to close the provision until some specific safeguarding training had been completed. Leaders stated that they were unaware of this situation until inspectors queried the rationale. Further discussions held relating to the visit led to differing accounts of how this situation had occurred and concerns over leaders' oversight of consultants' practice.
- Leaders are passionate about their vision as 'a childminding agency, run by childminders for childminders'. They celebrate the positive feedback they consistently receive from their registered childminders. They explain that following the previous inspection, they reflected on how rapidly the agency had grown over time and that it had become very difficult for them to continue to effectively manage under the same organisational structure that had been in place for some years. This has led to some delegation of tasks and development of new key roles within the agency. Additionally, REYAL has partnered with another childminding agency (CMA) with the intention of sharing best practice to benefit many more childminders in all areas of the country.
- The directors work collaboratively with other CMAs to inform, challenge, and consult with relevant government departments as well as with local authorities to promote the professional position of childminders in the early years sector, and raise the profile of the role of CMAs as a regulator.
- Leaders describe plans they have in place to develop and test new ways of working with the intention of continuously improving their service. This includes the use of technology, which they believe will be helpful to record occupancy and attendance in each childminder's provision; to monitor childminders' access to training and development materials; to log any safeguarding concerns; and to plan and prioritise statutory quality assurance visits. The collaboration with another agency has also given leaders access to a wider range of skills and experience held by those with key roles in the partner agency.
- Safer recruitment procedures are followed when employing or contracting staff and consultants. Appraisal and performance management processes for the employed team are informal and the staff state how well supported they feel in

their roles. Agency staff have a regular 'chill and chat' session where they can discuss and debate aspects of their roles within the agency. This is facilitated, but not attended, by the leaders to encourage honest feedback.

- Examples have been shared where leaders have properly exercised their regulatory powers. This includes de-registration of a childminder where leaders identified a lack of capacity and willingness to improve practice; a referral to Ofsted regarding provision of unregistered childcare; and refusal to register an applicant due to concerns regarding a household member.

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

- Childminders who shared their view of the agency during this inspection, overwhelmingly spoke positively of the accessibility of support offered. They appreciate the friendly, approachable staff, and that any queries will be dealt with swiftly.
- Leaders do not yet monitor which aspects of the range of training and professional development resources are being accessed by childminders. Information from sample visits indicates that childminders are aware how and where to find the resources, but the onus is on them to independently access these as they need them. Some childminders state that they continue to access local authority training and support, and that the network of other childminders in their locality is vital to them.
- The agency's framework for quality assurance is described as a tool to support consistency in the assessments made by Early Years Consultants and is intended to be used by childminders to self-evaluate and improve their own provision. However, the framework is contradictory and does not reflect the EYFS strongly enough. For example, the guidance on assessment of the relationships between child and childminder is a strength throughout the framework, including recognition and recording of 'the voice of the child'. However, aspects relating to the quality of education, such as 'cultural capital' and 'fundamental British values' are recorded as separate and distinct areas. One example was seen where a childminder had been judged as needing a support plan for the quality of education, yet the Early Years Consultant had graded the childminder as 'good' for cultural capital and fundamental British values. This demonstrates a lack of understanding by leaders about an appropriately planned curriculum which will support children to become good citizens.
- Although criteria to assess children's personal, social and emotional development is a strength throughout the framework, the judgement made about 'Behaviours and attitudes' is very heavily weighted towards children's behaviour, with much less recognition of the characteristics of effective teaching and learning, or of children's engagement. There is reference made in the framework to an environment rating scale, but neither Early Years Consultants nor childminders receive any formal training to enable them to utilise this tool effectively.
- Following a quality assurance visit, the report shared with parents was not fully reflective of the weaknesses identified. For example, a serious issue occurred when the Early Years Consultant had to stop a child with a life-threatening allergy

from ingesting an allergen. This was not included in the report available to parents. Although the childminder was judged as needing a support plan following this visit, parents were therefore unaware of the seriousness of the poor safeguarding practice identified in this childminder's provision. Areas for development identified by Early Years Consultants are briefly addressed in the report for parents. The support plan issued to the childminder contains much more detail.

- Despite the implementation of the revised framework and the IQA process, evidence recorded by Early Years Consultants at quality assurance visits still demonstrates a lack of evaluation. Examples were observed which included Early Years Consultant's preference, and in some cases a mismatch between the recorded evidence and the text in the report.
- There is also a lack of challenge through the new IQA process. For example, while reporting on a childminder encouraging language skills while a child is playing with a pull-along train, the use of the word 'choo-choo' in relation to the train is accepted and included in the report. This does not demonstrate a robust IQA process which challenges and improves Early Years Consultants' knowledge and understanding of appropriate child development. Neither does this practice support childminders to appropriately promote children's early language acquisition.

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

- The newly developed quality assurance framework evidences some strengths. There is a focus on children's PSED throughout, recognising that this is an important prime area of learning which needs to be embedded for young children in order to support future learning. However, certain aspects relating to literacy and mathematics are not age- appropriate and do not come with enough effective guidance for childminders who may otherwise misinterpret this. Links to guidance about synthetic phonics programmes and early reading schemes are included. These are both aspects of primary curriculum and inappropriate to developing very young children's literacy. There is reference to areas of mathematical development which are more in line with key stage 1 teaching. Physical development is not specifically addressed unless in relation to the requirement for outdoor play and activities. Communication and language are not given sufficient consideration, despite the recognition by leaders that this is a vital area of children's development. This means that Early Years Consultants are not provided with effective tools to make precise assessments of the impact that childminders' practice has for children.

Due to the ineffectiveness of REYAL's quality assurance framework; the weaknesses identified in the registration processes; the lack of oversight, support and challenge in relation to the IQA process; the failure to conduct annual quality assurance visits to all childminders; and the ineffective judgement made at the prior inspection, there is little evidence to support that the quality of care and

early education provided by childminders registered with this agency is having any positive impact for children.



## 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>	728
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	31 October 2022
<b>Previous overall inspection judgement</b>	Ineffective

## 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 728 childminders registered across 109 local authorities, with approximately 50 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

An Early Years Senior Officer led this inspection, supported by an Early Years Regulatory Inspector. The inspection team consisted of a further 14 Early Years Regulatory Inspectors who were deployed to conduct 26 sample visits to childminders registered with the agency. Inspectors also shadowed two of the agency's quality assurance visits.

One inspector was deployed to analyse responses from a childminder survey and to hold telephone discussions with some of the agency's contracted Early Years Consultants.

Inspection activities included a range of leadership and management meetings with the agency's directors; meetings with those holding key roles in the agency relating to quality assurance and the training and mentoring of consultants; discussions with the agency's administration team; and shadowing of some team meetings. A wide range of relevant documentation relating to all aspects of the

work undertaken by the agency, and their statutory duties was examined and discussed with leaders.

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

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