

Suffolk Childcare Agency Limited

Inspection dates: **17 to 19 September 2024**

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**

Summary findings

Since the last inspection, the agency has grown substantially in the number of childminders and childcare on domestic premises providers that it has registered with it. The agency has been proactive in managing their services during the expansion to ensure the legal requirements continue to be met. Changes have been implemented, or are designed and soon to be implemented, to improve the way information is gathered, recorded and stored. This is to aid the management of information relating to the larger group of registered childcare providers it has and helps manage the potential increase in registration and regulatory work.

The agency manager role has been expanded to operate in clusters across the country. This is to enable support to be provided to the agency's registered childcare providers in the areas in which they operate. Work is still ongoing to provide clear information about the roles and responsibilities of agency managers to ensure that support is consistent for all the agency's childcare providers. Feedback gathered from their providers during the inspection was very positive about the support and training

they receive. Processes for the agency to gather feedback from their registered providers about the support they receive and/or expect are not yet fully established. In addition, the monitoring of the agency manager role is not yet at a level that helps the agency fully identify and manage any inconsistencies in the support their childcare providers receive. However, there are plans in the future to build more performance management systems in relation to the agency manager role and to provide further opportunities to gather feedback from their registered providers.

There is a robust system in place for registering new childcare providers, which takes account of the applicant's history, qualifications, skills and knowledge, along with identity and vetting checks. The agency offers support to the applicants during this process, which aids them to be well prepared for their role. The files sampled during the inspection showed that the process for registration is thorough, and visits made to a sample of the agency's childcare providers confirm their view that the recruitment process is robust.

There are secure systems in place to monitor the progress children make, through the sharing of children's tracking information with the agency managers. Care is taken to swiftly identify where children are falling behind or are at risk of falling behind in their learning and development. The agency provides support, guidance and signposting to help the childcare provider and the children's parents to access the support of other professionals. This system results in swift action being taken to support children with emerging developmental needs and to help them to catch up.

The agency has processes in place to manage concerns they receive about their registered providers. Much of the high-level decision-making, such as around suspension and de-registration, falls to two of the senior leaders, who then manage the administrative aspects and inform the childcare provider. While enforcement decisions are found to be sound, made in the best interests of safeguarding children and backed up with evidence, responsibilities are not yet shared across the wider team. This limits staff's ability to learn from the work carried out and drive the cycle for improvement. Administrative tasks, such as sharing information with suspended providers, do not consistently provide sufficient detail on the reason for suspension, when the decision will be reviewed, or the ability to appeal such decisions.

There is a complaints policy in place that defines the action the agency will take in response to a concern being raised about one of the agency's registered childcare providers. The agency takes all complaints seriously and acts promptly to explore the concerns; for example, they will visit, inspect, or make a telephone call to the registered childcare provider. However, when managing complaints, the agency's complaints policy does not set out all the steps that the agency may take. For example, information reviewed during the inspection shows that the agency will speak with the complainant to help resolve their concerns and, as a result, do not confirm an outcome in writing as stated in their policy. Some concerns from parents

are dealt with as allegations and therefore follow a different process. There is a lack of clarity as to what the agency deems to be an allegation and what constitutes a complaint and how they will deal with different aspects raised by parents. The agency does not routinely seek the views of parents to enhance the complaints process and their overall provision. However, parents spoken to during the inspection expressed that they were happy with the services the agency provides. They feel confident that their childcare provider is well trained and that their quality is monitored by the agency.

Recommendations

- continue to develop the agency manager role to ensure that both the agency managers and the providers that are registered with the agency understand the expectations for support and guidance
- refine processes for managing enforcement decisions so that all of those involved in decision-making and those actioning decisions have clearly defined steps to follow so that there is greater consistency in how such cases are managed
- review the complaints policy so that it aligns with practice to improve clarity of the process and to aid consistency in complaints management.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the childminder agency

- Leaders are passionate about providing a high-quality service, at the heart of which is achieving the best outcomes for children. Leaders are fully hands-on in the day-to-day operation of the agency and together have an in-depth knowledge of every aspect of the agency operation. The expansion of the agency has been carefully considered and managed to ensure that the quality of the service they provide for its registered providers, parents and children is not lost. The eagerly anticipated information management system will enable the agency to have even more effective oversight of their registered providers.
- Leaders are fully reflective on what they provide and constantly strive for ways to learn, develop and improve. Given the national expansion, they have striven hard to foster positive relationships with local authorities in which their childcare providers are located. They work closely together to identify areas of deprivation and explore how they can increase the number of good-quality registered providers in these areas.
- There are clear plans in place to complete the annual quality assurance graded 'inspection' visits to childminders, and at this stage the agency is on track to meet this target. The agency is increasing national capacity in their inspection team as they have recognised that they need a greater geographical spread of inspectors to manage the inspections that need to be completed. The agency has identified senior staff who will coordinate these annual visits to ensure the annual target is met. Processes for assuring the quality of inspectors are in place. Leaders

complete quality assurance visits of the inspectors and complete quality checks of their reports and evidence to assure themselves that inspections are consistent and that judgements are accurate.

- Recruitment processes for agency staff and quality assurance inspectors are robust. All are required to have the same robust identity checking and vetting processes that are required of their registered providers. All staff are required to complete safeguarding training, and staff who deal with data receive specific training on how to safely handle, manage and store data. Agency managers are recruited from the high-quality childminders the agency has registered with it, with many of the agency managers being graded as outstanding providers. This enables best practice to be shared with all the agency's registered providers to support their ongoing professional development and develop their quality.
- There are clear processes for how the agency deals with safeguarding concerns. Leaders take on the roles of designated safeguarding lead (DSL) and deputy DSL. They are clear about their roles and responsibilities to safeguard children. As the agency expands, consideration is being given to assigning an additional DSL to ensure all concerns continue to be managed appropriately. The agency has built secure relationships with local safeguarding partners and routinely exchanges safeguarding information with them so that concerns are swiftly raised and managed and children are kept safe from harm.
- As the agency has expanded over the last year, leaders have recognised that there has been an increase in the regulatory work they are now undertaking. There are processes in place to manage concerns they receive about the providers registered with them. They hold extensive records of where they have acted, such as suspension and de-registration, where concerns have been significant enough to put children at risk. Where concerns about registered providers are substantiated by the local authority designated officer, there is a process to consider next steps, such as de-registration. Recent tribunal outcomes and assessment of the records held by the agency show that they make measured and appropriate decisions to safeguard children.
- The agency is clear about when they would not register an applicant where there were concerns about their suitability or the suitability of the household members. When the agency had an increase in applications, they did not compromise their registration process to assure themselves of the suitability of the applicants. Furthermore, where they identified that a previously registered childminder had not been inspected or had a quality assurance visit, they prioritised the inspection visits to fully assure themselves that the quality of care is good or better.

The quality of the agency's services

- During the inspection, visits were completed with agency inspectors to evaluate the effectiveness of their quality assurance visits. Inspectors were found to be knowledgeable and took care to put children and the registered providers at ease. They were clearly focused on evaluating the quality of care and education, and the judgements they made were fair and proportionate. The agency publishes

their quality assurance 'inspection' reports on their website for parents to view. This helps them to make informed decisions about their childcare provider.

- Inspections and consultancy visits of registered childcare providers include a clear focus on safeguarding; therefore, the agency's providers' understanding is tested routinely. Furthermore, training and development opportunities specifically focused on safeguarding are readily available to registered providers and agency staff to ensure that knowledge is current.
- There is a process in place for assessing the ongoing quality of a registered childcare provider that is graded by the agency as providing outstanding care. This includes a full inspection-type quality assurance visit once every three years, with a consultancy visit every year. The consultancy visit is a reflective process for the outstanding provider to consider how they are maintaining the quality of the care they are providing for children and families.
- There are clear processes in place to manage the performance of the agency's registered providers. For example, if they identify that a child is not making expected progress through their tracking process, they will offer support to the childcare provider and may bring forward their inspection to assure themselves that their practice is at least good. Additionally, where the agency receives concerns about a childcare provider, they will inspect and/or carry out monitoring visits to ascertain a view on the quality of what is provided. This ensures that swift action is taken to address any weak practice.
- Where an inspection results in a judgement that is less than good, registered providers receive their report and a clear action plan. This details the aspects of the early years foundation stage they need to improve on. The action plan provides clear timescales for completion, and these plans are monitored until the agency is satisfied that the improvement is made. Where improvements are not made, the agency considers de-registering the childminder.
- Through close monitoring of children's progress, the agency has recognised an increase in the number of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities and has commissioned training and support for their registered providers to help them to meet their children's needs. The agency also supports registered providers to refer to their local authority when they need support for a child who is not making expected progress.

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

- Information gathered in the inspection survey that was sent to the agency's registered providers showed that more than 90% felt that the ongoing support they received from the agency was good or very good. They value the support and training they receive from the agency. They state they have regular communication with agency staff and that there is a strong focus on their mental health and well-being. They comment that leaders are visible, approachable and

responsive, and overall, they know that the agency can be contacted for advice and guidance at any time.

- Childcare providers who are registered with the agency were visited during the inspection. Overall, they showed that they delivered good-quality care and education to children, who were happy and settled. Childcare providers offer safe and welcoming settings. They know their children well and can identify next steps for children's learning and development. They confirm that the agency monitors children's progress and supports them to put plans in place to address any emerging gaps in children's learning. Registered providers particularly spoke about their experiences of the registration process and that they felt it was very thorough.
- Parents spoken to during the inspection commented positively about the agency's services. They said that they receive regular communication from the agency, including advice on activities they can do at home with children and updates about regulation and safety. Parents are given access to a suite of training opportunities to help them to become even more involved in their children's learning.
- Childcare providers who were visited during the inspection demonstrate a sound understanding of how to safeguard children. They spoke confidently about the safeguarding processes they must follow if they have concerns about a child. This includes specific knowledge of their local safeguarding procedures.
- There is an extensive programme of training, support sessions, monthly meetings and webinars, as well as communication in social media groups for the agency's registered providers to access. The agency provides a multitude of online training courses for the agency's providers to choose from that are relevant to their individual needs and contexts. Careful thought is given to what aspects are covered in webinars and support group sessions to ensure they meet their registered providers' training needs. For example, during the inspection, a session to inform childminders about taking on an apprentice as an assistant took place. The support session generated some interest, as evidenced in the questions, about the use of assistants.

Childminder Agency details

Unique reference number	CA000026
Local authority	Suffolk
Type of provision	Childminder Agency
Registers	Early Years Register, Compulsory Childcare Register, Voluntary Childcare Register
Number of active childminders	233
Number of active providers of childcare on domestic premises	7
Date of previous inspection	6 and 7 December 2021
Previous overall inspection judgement	Effective

Information about this childminding agency

Suffolk Childcare Agency Limited registered as a childminder agency in 2016. The agency's operational office is in Wickham Market, Suffolk. The agency employs and contracts with a team of agency staff, including appropriately checked and trained administration staff, inspectors and agency managers. The agency's 233 childminders and seven childcare on domestic premises providers are located nationally. The agency provides training, mentoring and support for its registered providers and provides services to parents, including a childcare matching service and training.

Information about the inspection

The inspection team was led by an Early Years Senior Officer. The inspection team included a Senior His Majesty's Inspector and 13 Early Years Regulatory Inspectors.

To assess the effectiveness of the agency, the inspection team held discussions with the nominated individual/chief executive officer, senior managers, quality assurance inspectors, agency managers and training providers.

The inspection team accompanied quality assurance inspectors on inspections to evaluate the effectiveness of the quality assurance processes. The inspectors observed a pre-registration telephone call to a childminder applicant to evaluate the effectiveness of the registration process. They visited childminders and childcare on domestic premises providers to gain their views of the agency and spoke to parents.

The inspectors observed a training session for childminders to gain a view of the quality and relevance of training provided.

The inspectors sampled a range of documents including documentation relating to the suitability of childcare providers and any regulatory and enforcement activity carried out by the agency. They sampled quality assurance reports, training records, action plans, complaints records and the agency's statement of purpose and development and quality control plan.

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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