

The Local Authority Model: Leap Ahead

Background

Leap Ahead, in the London Boroughs of Richmond and Kingston, is one of the first childminder agencies in the country to register with Ofsted and is well on the way to meeting its self-imposed target of signing up 30 childminders in its first year. The agency, which registered in May 2015 and officially launched in October of the same year, has already signed up 17 childminders, and has another eight going through the registration process.

Barbara Morton and Helen Swan, the team behind Leap Ahead, bring decades of experience in the early years sector to their new roles. They worked together for a number of years at Richmond Council running a thriving childminder network, but following a local authority restructure the network was no longer viable. The new agency model was an ideal way to continue to offer much-needed support and training to local childminders, in a sustainable fashion.

"We conducted a range of consultations with existing childminders across both Richmond and Kingston, and the response was more positive than we had anticipated," says Ms Morton. "Childminders here were fortunate to have had a very strong network, and they said they would happily pay for that higher level of support."

Delivery

The Leap Ahead agency is part of Achieving for Children, a social enterprise company created and funded by Richmond and Kingston Borough Councils to provide their children's services. The company's focus on quality and innovation played a key role in inspiring the team to set up Leap Ahead, and it provided the agency with a start-up loan of £15,000. "As a social enterprise, income generation projects are positively encouraged," says Ms Morton. Leap Ahead is staffed by Ms Morton and Ms Swan, who together make the equivalent of one full time employee, with the option of extra admin support when it is needed.

The Leap Ahead team divide their time between agency work and delivering generic support for childminders on behalf of Richmond and Kingston Councils – for example, tutoring on the childminder pre-registration course. The two roles are strictly delineated, with each contracted to spend half their time at one and half at the other. "Leap Ahead is part of the Early Years Service, and we carry out the statutory duties for support and advice for childcare providers, but we ensure that this element of our role is kept separate from the running of the agency," says Ms Morton.

Childminders can register with the agency for £250 the first year and £300 a year after that. Applicants pay a £50 non-refundable deposit, which covers the administration involved in carrying out suitability checks. In return, registered childminders are entitled to a package which includes a range of training events, membership meetings, support visits, a toolkit of essential paperwork and the opportunity to advertise themselves on the agency website with a personalised profile page. Each childminder will remain independent and self-employed.

Inspection

Childminders also appreciate the agency's plans for annual quality assessment visits. "Annual visits were one of the main selling points for childminders from our point of view," says Ms Morton. "In between Ofsted inspections they might have improved their services, but they have to wait until the next one for a change in grade. That could be a very long time to go with a low grading. With our annual visits we will give them an action plan and a timescale to make changes and then reassess, so as long as they have carried out the required changes they could up their grade."

Childminder agencies will be inspected by Ofsted as one body, but agencies must carry out at least one quality assessment visit a year to all their registered childminders. Leap Ahead has decided to use the same grading system as Ofsted, so as not to confuse parents, and each childminder will hold an individual grade.

Recruitment

Childminders are responding enthusiastically to the agency, and those on its books include both those new to childminding and experienced childminders who have de-registered from Ofsted and moved over to the agency. Leap Ahead says people have been attracted by word of mouth, and so they haven't had to do much marketing. "Our childminders who are already signed up have said how much they talk to their friends about the agency," says Ms Morton. "We also feel that being tutors on the pre-registration course has resulted in a few of the students registering with us, as they appreciate the relationship. Childminding can be a fairly isolated profession so the support of the agency team is a plus point."

Sustainability

While the agency has not struggled to register childminders, the Leap Ahead team recognises that it must find additional sources of income to ensure sustainability. The agency offers a range of "pay as you go" services which can be purchased by Ofsted-registered childminders when they need them, including spaces on training courses and pre-inspection support visits. "We are very clear that the membership fees alone will not sustain the business, so the additional services will need to be developed and marketed going forward," says Ms Morton.

For further information, visit:

www.leapahead.org.uk

www.achievingforchildren.org.uk