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## Foster care, Foster Care Ireland, OSV-0005713, 20 June 2023

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## Health Information and Quality Authority Regulation Directorate monitoring inspection of Non-Statutory Foster Care Services

Name of service provider:	Foster Care Ireland
Type of inspection:	Announced
Date of inspection:	20-22 June 2023
Fieldwork ID:	MON_0039828
Lead Inspector:	Grace Lynam
Support Inspector(s):	Rachel Kane Saragh Mc Garrigle

## About this inspection

The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) monitors services used by some of the most vulnerable children in the State. Monitoring provides assurance to the public that children are receiving a service that meets the requirements of quality standards. This process also seeks to ensure that the wellbeing, welfare and safety of children is promoted and protected. Monitoring also has an important role in driving continual improvement so that children have better, safer services.

HIQA is authorised by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth under Section 69 of the Child Care Act, 1991 as amended by Section 26 of the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2011 to inspect services taking care of a child on behalf of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla)<sup>1</sup>, including non-statutory providers of foster care.

This inspection was a focused inspection of Foster Care Ireland (FCI) to assess eight of the national standards.

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<sup>1</sup> Tusla was established on 1 January 2014 under the *Child and Family Agency Act 2013*.

## How we inspect

As part of this inspection, inspectors met foster carers and spoke with the relevant professionals involved with FCI. Inspectors observed practices and reviewed documentation such as foster carers' files, children's files and relevant documentation relating to the areas covered by the specific standards against which the service provider was inspected.

The key activities of this inspection involved:

- the analysis of data submitted by the service provider
- interviews with:
  - the chief executive officer (CEO) of the company
  - the service director of the company
  - the team leader
  - the recruitment team
- focus groups with:
  - three link workers
  - five foster carers
- the review of:
  - policies and procedures, minutes of various meetings and service plans, review of trackers and case management records
  - four staff supervision records
  - 11 children's files
  - 16 foster carers' files
- conversations or visits with:
  - seven children and
  - 16 foster carers
- conversations with five external professionals.

### **Acknowledgements**

HIQA wishes to thank children, foster carers and professionals that spoke with inspectors during the course of this inspection in addition to staff and managers of the service for their cooperation.

### **The Service Provider**

Foster Care Ireland is an independent non-statutory (private provider) fostering agency providing respite, short-term and long-term foster care placements. Foster Care Ireland has operated since 2016 as a subsidiary of Sorcha Homes Ltd. With a background in children's residential services, the directors established the fostering service to meet the evident need for more foster placements and to provide opportunity for early intervention for children in need of care. Foster Care Ireland's vision - as stated in their handbook for foster carers - was that all children in foster care in Ireland have a safe, secure, and loving home in which to grow up. Their mission was to develop a high quality fostering service that supports its foster carers in providing the best possible care for children and young people. After an initial period of recruitment of foster carers, FCI began, in 2017, to provide placements for children and young people referred to them by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The service was based in Santry, Dublin, and focused mainly on recruiting foster carers in the province of Leinster. The foster care agency recruits, assesses, trains and provides support to foster carers to enable them to offer a high standard of care to children between the ages of 0 – 18 years who need care and protection.

Data provided by FCI for the inspection showed that the service had 26 foster care households and, at the time of inspection, 18 foster carers were providing foster care placements for 29 children. These foster care households were located mostly in North Dublin but also in various areas across Ireland.

Placements with FCI are commissioned by Tusla service area teams.

Tusla retains its statutory responsibilities to children placed with this service and approves all foster carers through their foster care committees. The foster care agency is required to adhere to relevant standards and regulations when providing a service on behalf of Tusla. Both services are accountable for the care and wellbeing of children.

Private foster care services are monitored by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Foster Care Ireland was last audited by the Tusla Alternative Care Inspection and Monitoring Service (ACIMS) in November 2022. The objective of the monitoring process is to provide assurance about the quality of care, challenge poor performance and promote improvement, and safeguard the rights of young people in care. The monitoring audit completed in November focused on Standard 8: matching carers with children and young people. Monitors found that in relation to the standard assessed the service was well managed and operated under clear governance.

They had comprehensive policies and procedures in place in respect of matching and had oversight structures that supported foster carers. Some areas for additional development were identified:

- updating the matching policy to ensure it includes reference to the views of birth children and children already placed with a foster carer, and their social worker, in relation to the matching process
- ensuring that the views of birth children are sought and recorded as part of the matching process
- the agency continuing to plan and develop their support plan for the children of carers to ensure they receive support throughout their fostering experience.

Please see Appendix 2 for FCI's organisational chart.

## Compliance classifications

HIQA will judge whether the foster care service has been found to be **compliant**, **substantially compliant** or **not compliant** with the regulations and or standards associated with them.

The compliance descriptors are defined as follows:

**Compliant:** a judgment of compliant means the service is meeting or exceeding the standard and or regulation and is delivering a high-quality service which is responsive to the needs of children.

**Substantially compliant:** a judgment of substantially compliant means that the service is mostly compliant with the standard and or regulation but some additional action is required to be fully compliant. However, the service is one that protects children.

**Not compliant:** a judgment of not compliant means the service has not complied with a regulation and or standard and that considerable action is required to come into compliance. Continued non-compliance or where the non-compliance poses a significant risk to the safety, health and welfare of children using the service will be risk-rated red (high risk), and the inspector will identify the date by which the service must comply. Where the non-compliance does not pose a significant risk to the safety, health and welfare of children using the service, it is risk-rated orange (moderate risk) and the service must take action *within a reasonable time frame* to come into compliance.

This inspection report sets out the findings of a monitoring inspection against the following standards:

National Standards for Foster Care		Judgment
Standard 8	Matching carers with children and young people	Compliant
Standard 10	Safeguarding and child protection	Compliant
Standard 15	Supervision and support	Compliant
Standard 16	Training	Compliant
Standard 18	Effective policies	Compliant
Standard 19	Management and monitoring of foster care services	Substantially Compliant
Standard 21	Recruitment and retention of an appropriate range of foster carers	Compliant
Standard 25	Representations and complaints	Compliant

**This inspection was carried out during the following times:**

Date	Times of inspection	Inspector	Role
20 June 2023	10:00hrs to 17:15hrs	Grace Lynam	Lead
	10:00hrs to 17:15hrs	Rachel Kane	Support
	10:00hrs to 17:15hrs	Saragh Mc Garrigle	Support
21 June 2023	9:00hrs to 17:15hrs	Grace Lynam	Lead
	9:00hrs to 17:15hrs	Rachel Kane	Support
	9:00hrs to 17:15hrs	Saragh Mc Garrigle	Support
22 June 2023	9:00hrs to 17:15hrs	Grace Lynam	Lead
	9:00hrs to 17:15hrs	Rachel Kane	Support
	9:00hrs to 17:15hrs	Saragh Mc Garrigle	Support
23 June 2023*	14:30hrs to 16:30hrs	Rachel Kane	Support
	14:30hrs to 16:30hrs	Saragh Mc Garrigle	Support

\*This was an additional fieldwork task.

## Children's experience of the foster care service

Children's experiences were established through speaking with and or visiting a sample of children, foster carers and professionals. Inspectors also reviewed case files and complaints for evidence on children's experience of FCI. Inspectors spoke with or observed seven children, spoke with sixteen foster carers, two social workers and one team leader for children in care and two Guardians ad litem. A guardian ad litem refers to an individual appointed by the court to represent the best interests of a child in legal proceedings.

A service that is implementing a rights-based approach will ensure that principles such as fairness, respect, equality, dignity and autonomy are incorporated into their policies and practices. Implementing fairness includes providing accessible information about the service and supporting people to make complaints. Respect is demonstrated in child-centred care and equality in social care is shown by promoting each person's participation in the service. Promoting dignity and autonomy involves respectful communication, seeking consent and supporting each person's capacity.

From what inspectors were told and from what they observed and read, it was clear that a rights-based approach underpinned FCI's approach to providing foster care and children's rights were promoted.

Children visited by inspectors presented as safe, happy and content in their foster homes and demonstrated affectionate relationships with their foster carers. Foster carers were observed to be appropriate in their interactions with children.

Children told inspectors:

- "I've gone to a good few events and they're fun but some of them are geared towards younger children.... There is an event coming up which is really fun and I'm looking forward to it"
- The "link worker has talked to me a few times, gives me a recap on stuff – been asking what's going on"
- " I would like another young person to move in"
- "I have the complaints booklet, haven't made a complaint – I know how to if I want"

They also told inspectors about living with foster carers and about the activities they took part in, supported by their foster carers:

"I relax at home, cycling, watch movies"

When asked if they liked living in the foster home a child said "yes" and whether someone explained to them about moving to the foster home one child said "kind of". The inspector

asked a child whether they would be comfortable to tell carers if they were not happy and they said "Yes". When asked if they felt safe in the foster home a child said "yes".

An older child told the inspector that they knew how to make a complaint and had been given a booklet with information in it about being in foster care. Regarding whether they see the link worker much a child replied "sometimes".

Three children told inspectors about the events they go to that had been arranged by FCI and one child described how an FCI staff member was proactive in planning an event that would be more suitable for their age group. All the children inspectors spoke with said that they sometimes chat with the link worker when they visit the foster carers' home. Children were supported to meet their birth families which upheld their right to have access with their birth families and to promote their sense of identity. One child told the inspector they see one of their siblings regularly. Foster carers supported children's rights to an education and facilitated their attendance at school.

Foster carers demonstrated a child-centred approach in their attitudes towards the children in their care and they were respectful and caring in how they spoke about children. One foster carer told the inspector that they were mindful of children's rights in every conversation they had with children and that younger children's voices could be heard through observation of their behaviours. One foster carer described a child placed in an emergency as 'starting to feel safe' with them and another foster carer told the inspector that their link worker supported them to have a good relationship with the mother of the children they were fostering. Foster carers said that children were provided with information about fostering in a young people's booklet and that they read it through with the children. A foster carer told the inspector that FCI have the children's best interests at heart and that FCI was like a family.

The foster carer's handbook, provided to all foster carers, outlined the expectations of foster carers to promote the rights of children in care. Children's rights, such as being safe, having contact with their family and friends and the importance of religious celebration were included in the handbook and guided foster carers on how to support children's rights.

From discussions with foster carers and external professionals inspectors found many practice examples of children's rights being promoted and facilitated:

- a link worker completed life story work with a child to help them make sense of their circumstances. The child's social worker acknowledged that this was very beneficial to the child
- a link worker and a child's social worker worked together to empower a child to develop safe social interactions
- foster carers described the link workers as an advocate for their foster child

- link workers escalated their concerns to Tusla when children did not have an allocated social worker thereby advocating for their rights
- therapeutic support was provided to support children during a transition from care
- there were placement plans in place for each child to ensure their individual needs were met by the appropriate person
- foster carers were provided with information and support to uphold specific practices and dietary needs of children from diverse cultural backgrounds
- external professionals said that link workers and foster carers advocated for the needs of children in care, specific examples included link worker supporting contact arrangements for a child and being involved in meetings with the child's family to facilitate this/ link worker attending child in care review (CICR) and strongly advocating for a child's therapeutic needs
- link workers worked collaboratively with social workers allocated to children in care and developed good working relationships with them to ensure children's needs were met in foster care
- children were given information on how to make a complaint
- foster carers demonstrated a child-centred approach
- foster carers celebrated children's achievements
- foster carers supported children's relationship with their families.

External professionals all had a positive view of FCI in regard to children's rights. They described co-operative, efficient working by link workers with professionals and foster carers. They said that link workers and foster carers advocated on behalf of children especially in regard to children's needs for additional services and supports. They described how placements were 'positive' and 'good' for children placed with FCI and how responses to children's needs for additional support from foster carers were timely and appropriate. One external professional described FCI as 'exceptional' and the foster carers as 'brilliant'. Another described foster carers as 'in tune with' children's needs and said they are 'really happy with the care the children are getting'. An external professional described the foster carers they worked with as child-centred and 'fully focused on meeting the child's needs' - describing the foster carers as warm, open and honest and working well with the professional network that supported the child. This professional said that the child's physical presentation had improved since coming into care and that the child has generally 'come on' since coming into care. Another external professional described how focused on the child's rights FCI were and confirmed that FCI escalated a delay in receiving a child's updated care plan.

In contrast, one foster carer told the inspector they had an experience where the professionals involved in a child's life did not work together to ensure the child's needs were met. Another said that FCI used to be like a family but had become more like a business.

## Summary of inspection findings

Placements with FCI are commissioned by Tusla service area teams. Tusla retain their statutory responsibilities to children placed with this service and approve the foster carers through their foster care committees. The foster care agency is required to adhere to relevant standards and regulations when providing a service on behalf of Tusla. Both services are accountable for the care and wellbeing of children. Children in foster care require a high-quality service which is safe and well supported by Tusla social workers. Foster carers must be able to provide children with warm and nurturing relationships in order for them to achieve positive outcomes. The service provider must be well governed in order to produce these outcomes consistently.

This report reflects the findings of a focused inspection which looked at eight standards. The standards included matching carers with children and young people, safeguarding and child protection, supervision and support to foster carers, training, effective policies, management and monitoring of foster care services, recruitment and retention of an appropriate range of foster carers and representations and complaints.

Overall this inspection found that FCI provided a good quality service to foster carers and the service was compliant with all but one standard, which was substantially compliant. In this inspection, HIQA found that, of the eight national standards assessed:

- seven were compliant and
- one was substantially compliant.

Foster Care Ireland had up-to-date policies on all aspects of their fostering service which were regularly reviewed. They maintained a panel of foster carers in line with the standard and had a service plan in place for 2023 which set out their plan for the development and delivery of a high quality foster care service. Staff advocated for the particular needs of children in care.

Foster Care Ireland had effective structures in place for the management and monitoring of their foster care service. Despite going through an unexpected period of uncertainty, overall, management structures had maintained clear accountability within the service. There were a number of effective management and quality assurance systems in place including effective communication systems, good oversight of safeguarding and a good risk management system. Staff supervision was good. However, there were other quality assurance systems that required improvement or where management oversight could be strengthened, including adherence to their risk management framework.

Foster Care Ireland were actively involved in recruiting and retaining an appropriate range of foster carers and had recently increased resources and strengthened management oversight in this area.

Foster Care Ireland demonstrated commitment to improving the quality of the service through complaints and feedback. All complaints were fully investigated in a timely manner and the process was fully and comprehensively recorded and reported back to the complainant in compliance with the standard.

There were a number of areas where improvement was required:

- Foster Care Ireland had identified that they needed to improve their consultation procedures to include all foster carers and children – both those in care and the foster carers' own children. They had a plan in place to progress this.
- Some policies, including the support and supervision policy, required minor improvements.
- Management oversight of information required some improvement
- no formal audits had been completed to date
- identifying all the factors that contributed to unplanned endings of placements would help to identify any learning which could be used to prevent future placements ending in an unplanned manner
- elements of the recording of risk required improvement.

These areas for improvement had been identified by management and were included in the service development plan which had been delayed due to the unexpected staffing deficit created by the vacant principal social worker (PSW) post.

## **Standard 8: Matching carers with children and young people**

Children and young people are placed with carers who are chosen for their capacity to meet the assessed needs of the children and young people.

Foster Care Ireland aimed to place children with foster carers who were chosen for their capacity to meet the individual needs of the child requiring placement so that children placed through FCI would experience the best possible outcome from their time in foster care.

There were policies and procedures in place to support good matching of foster carers with a child whose needs they would be able to meet. The implementation of these procedures was recorded on a number of standardised templates. These templates promoted a children's rights perspective and prompted link workers to consider the match under a number of different criteria including the child's ethnicity, facilitating the child's contact with their family and their medical and educational needs. A pre-placement meeting was held

with all the relevant people in attendance, foster carers met children prior to their placement if possible and arrangements were made for the child's contact with their family. Foster Care Ireland had begun to promote children's participation in the matching process and to hear their views. They had begun to ask children their views about a potential placement – this included the views of the child already placed with a foster carer and the carers own child about potential placements with their family.

Inspectors reviewed five files for matching and found that the matching process was comprehensive and well documented. Matching documents were completed by link workers who were knowledgeable about foster carers and their ability to meet the needs of children. Link workers knowledge of foster carers informed initial matching discussions with the PSW or Service director. Records reflected careful consideration of how the potential foster carer could meet the individual needs of the child requiring placement. This included consideration of how a child would be supported to continue in their current school and whether siblings could be placed together. The matching documents sampled by inspectors reflected how consideration was given to all the competing factors associated with matching a foster carer to a child. For example, it is best practice for a child to have their own room in a foster home, but sometimes the need to place the child together with their sibling was given more weight than the need for privacy, especially if the children were very young. Link workers also considered the views of the foster carers own children in the matching process. The PSW or the service director had oversight of all the matches made between children and foster carers. The rationale for matching decisions was recorded including the weight given to the various considerations relevant to the matching of the child to a foster carer who had the capacity to meet their needs.

The majority of foster carers who spoke with inspectors said they felt the matching process was comprehensive, with FCI striving to find the most suitable match for children and foster carers. Pre-placement meetings took place and information was shared with foster carers about the potential match and discussions were held with the child's social worker. Both foster carers and link workers were clear that foster carers could refuse a placement that they believed would not be the right match for their family. When a decision was made to place a child with a foster family a transition period was planned so that the child and the foster carers could meet and get to know each other before the placement was made and the child moved in with the family. Files reviewed by inspectors reflected that this transition period was well managed.

Where children were placed in an emergency, foster carers received as much information as was available at the time of the placement. If possible, pre-placement meetings took place prior to the child being placed, and in one emergency placement sampled by inspectors the foster carers had met the child before the placement was made. Foster carers reported mixed experiences of children being placed with them in an emergency. Some said they had received sufficient information about the child but a small number of foster carers felt they had not been given sufficient information about a child's needs prior to the child being placed with them. Given the emergency nature of these placements

providing information in advance may not always be possible. Some foster carers told inspectors that they got additional information about a child after they had been placed with them.

The standards state that generally no more than two children should be placed together at any one time except in the case of sibling groups. Foster Care Ireland's policy on matching stated that unrelated children would not be placed together unless the placing agency and FCI deemed it to be in the best interests of the child and following consultation both with the child already placed and their social worker. Inspectors found that when this was the case, the second placement had been an emergency and all the necessary considerations were weighed up before a decision was made to place two unrelated children together. This included getting the views of the child already in the foster home and the child about to be placed there. The second placement was appropriately notified to the Foster Care Committee (FCC).

Children should never be placed with foster carers who have not been approved for the type of fostering that a child requires. For example, foster carers that are approved only for respite care should not have a child requiring short term care placed with them. Foster Care Ireland had made one placement where the foster carers were fostering outside of their approval status. This was being rectified and a report was presented to the Foster Care Committee during the period of the inspection recommending a change in the approval status of the foster carers. Evidence gathered for the inspection reflected that the child's placement was going very well and the care being provided to the child was of a very high standard.

Whilst every effort was made to match foster carers with a child whose needs they could meet, seven placements ended in an unplanned manner in the 12 months prior to the inspection. This can happen as a result of changes in a foster carers' circumstances or for other reasons. When this happened in FCI placements disruption meetings were held. These meetings sought to identify the contributing factors to the placement ending, any learning from the event and whether foster carers required additional supports and or training following the unplanned ending. In one case where a placement had ended FCI identified that one factor relating to the match had not been given sufficient weight in the decision-making process. In another case the disruption meeting was scheduled to take place in the days following the completion of the inspection.

Sometimes children remain with their foster carers for the long term when they cannot return home, ensuring stability for children. Long term placements are made in line with the care plan for the child. Information provided for the inspection reflected that the long term matches of seven children with their foster carers had been approved in the 12 months prior to the inspection. Inspectors found that the long term matching process was completed to a good standard. There were detailed reports on file which reflected that both the foster carer, their children and the child in care were consulted about the match becoming a long term arrangement for the child already placed with the family. Where children were very young, detailed observations of the foster carers' interactions with the

child were recorded to facilitate the decision-making process. Foster carers told inspectors that the long-term matching process was careful and thorough and considered all the individual needs of the child. Long term matches were approved by the FCC.

Placements were reviewed and reassessed when circumstances changed. There were examples of how link workers encouraged foster carers to make changes in their personal circumstances to support their capacity to provide care to a child and of additional supports being provided to foster carers and their birth children when required. At the time of the inspection there were two children in special foster care arrangements where additional supports were in place to support the placement to meet the children's needs.

Children's right to maintaining relationships with their families and people that were important to them was promoted and facilitated. There was evidence of ongoing access and contact arrangements in place for children. These included birth parents visiting their child in the foster carer's home, photographs of the children with their siblings on display in a foster carers' home and foster carers facilitating children's contact with their families.

Foster Care Ireland had policies and procedures in place to ensure that children were matched with foster carers who had the capacity to meet their needs. The process was well recorded and the templates used supported a children's rights perspective. There was a good process in place to approve long term matches of children with foster carers. Children's views were considered as appropriate. For these reasons this standard is deemed to be compliant.

Judgment: Compliant

## Standard 10: Safeguarding and child protection

Children and young people in foster care are protected from abuse and neglect.

Foster Care Ireland ensured that children and young people in foster care were protected from abuse and neglect in line with their responsibility under *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017)*. The service had a child protection and welfare policy and procedure which clearly set out foster carers reporting responsibilities as mandated persons. Foster Care Ireland had developed a child safeguarding statement which was displayed publicly in the FCI offices and they had appointed a designated liaison person (DLP). Staff and foster carers had completed training on Children First 2017 and they understood their responsibilities as mandated persons to report child protection concerns to Tusla. Foster carers also received a handbook which contained all the information they required about being a foster carer for FCI including their role as mandated persons.

Overall, child protection concerns were reported to Tusla in a timely and appropriate manner. These are reports of concerns that come to light when the child is in care. Tusla holds the statutory responsibility to investigate these reports and FCI has responsibility to report any concerns to Tusla. Foster Care Ireland maintained an up-to-date tracker for child protection concerns. The tracker reflected that 12 child protection concerns had been reported to Tusla in the 12 months prior to the inspection. Six of these had been investigated and were closed. Four remained open and were being investigated by Tusla. Inspectors reviewed a sample of these reports and found that child protection concerns were reported to Tusla in a timely manner. Foster carers were clear about their responsibility as mandated persons under Children First 2017 to report concerns about children directly to Tusla, and the majority of these reports were made by foster carers themselves. On two occasions link workers had made the report to Tusla by way of a support to the foster carers. When it was not clear whether the information constituted a concern about a child, FCI held discussions with Tusla to ascertain whether a report should be made.

Not all foster carers were aware of who was fulfilling the role of DLP in the absence of the PSW but this was rectified by the service director before the inspection was completed. Foster carers confirmed to inspectors that they had received an email during the time of the inspection advising them that the service director was currently fulfilling the role of the DLP.

Information provided for the inspection indicated that there had been no allegations made against foster carers in the 12 months prior to the inspection. If FCI were unsure whether a concern met the threshold for reporting to Tusla, then FCI requested a strategy meeting with Tusla and a decision was made as regards whether the information met the threshold for a referral to Tusla or not. When allegations had been made about foster carers in the past a review of the foster carers continuing capacity to foster took place and was presented to the FCC.

In June 2022 Tusla introduced a new procedure 'The Child Abuse Substantiation procedure' (CASP) which is a process to assess current and retrospective allegations of child abuse. There had been no allegations made about FCI foster carers in the 12 months prior to the inspection that met the criteria for a CASP referral. Foster Care Ireland had incorporated references to the CASP procedure in its policy and procedure on child protection and welfare concerns but the implementation of this policy had not yet been tested.

Information provided for the inspection reflected that there were no foster carers with numbers of children placed that exceeded the standards. There was one situation where foster carers were fostering outside of their approval status, that is, providing care other than what they had been approved for. Appropriate actions had been taken to rectify this situation.

There were two incidents where a child had gone missing from care and these had been appropriately reported, recorded and managed. Foster Care Ireland maintained registers of significant events and incident reports. Inspectors reviewed these and found that the record included a summary of the event, the action taken and whether further action was required and the outcome of the significant event or incident.

Foster Care Ireland had a number of safeguarding practices in place. These included vetting by An Garda Síochána (police) of foster carers and of adults living in fostering households. Foster Care Ireland had policies and procedures on bullying and on what foster carers should do if a child went missing from their care. Foster carers were aware of their right to refuse the placement of a child if they believed the placement would not be the right fit for their family. There were detailed safe care plans in place for all foster carers and there was an out-of-hours on-call service available to foster carers. There was evidence that children in care were facilitated to develop self-care and protection skills as appropriate to their age.

Unannounced visits to foster carers were conducted annually. The foster carers' handbook set out the foster carer's responsibility to uphold the child's right to be safe and protected from harm. This included information on internet safety for children. Foster carers were encouraged and supported to promote positive behaviour in children and to use appropriate sanctions with children. Inspectors found evidence of link workers supporting foster carers in many of these aspects of providing good quality, safe care to children.

Child protection and welfare concerns were appropriately reported to Tusla in line with Children First (2017). Foster carers were clear on their role as mandated persons to report such concerns to Tusla. All staff and foster carers had completed training on Children First. Incidents of children missing from care were well managed. There were a number of good safeguarding measures in place in FCI, including unannounced visits. For these reasons FCI is judged to be compliant with this standard.

Judgment: Compliant

## **Standard 15: Supervision and support**

Approved foster carers are supervised by a professionally qualified social worker. This person, known as the link worker, ensures that foster carers have access to the information, advice and professional support necessary to enable them to provide high quality care.

Foster Care Ireland was committed to providing high quality support and supervision to its foster carers. Inspectors found that foster carers in FCI received good supervision and support from allocated link workers who ensured that they had access to information, advice and professional support to enable them to provide high quality care to children in

their care. Foster Care Ireland had a written protocol on the responsibilities of the link worker and a support and supervision policy.

All foster carers in FCI had an allocated link worker at the time of the inspection. Foster carers who spoke with inspectors confirmed that they had always had an allocated link worker, although two foster carers said they have had a few different link workers over a number of years. An external professional told the inspector that, in their experience, changes in link workers were well managed: they were told in advance that a different link worker was being allocated to a foster carer and they described a good handover process between the two link workers.

The majority of foster carers who spoke with inspectors were very positive about the support and supervision they received. One foster carer described their link worker as 'really good and proactive'. Foster carers told inspectors that link workers visited regularly and were contactable when they needed them. Communication was good between link workers and foster carers and appropriate information was shared - as available - with foster carers about children placed with them. One foster carer said that FCI go 'above and beyond' in their support of foster carers and provided a number of examples from their own experience. Inspectors found that counselling had been appropriately provided to foster carers and their children as an additional support. A small number of foster carers described negative experiences of fostering for FCI including feeling they were not listened to by their link worker and not being given all the support they required or had requested.

Link workers visited foster carers regularly in line with FCI's support and supervision policy. Link workers regularly telephoned foster carers to keep in touch and maintain a good working relationship with them on all aspects of the care they provided. The handbook provided to foster carers clearly set out that supervision of foster carers was necessary to ensure that safe care was provided to children in care, and included performance management as well as support to comply with best practice. To this end, foster carers completed weekly reports on the placement they had and the care they were providing to the child or children in their care.

Inspectors reviewed a sample of foster carers' files and found that link workers visited every four to six weeks. They met with the foster carers own children and recorded their views. They also met with the child in foster care and became familiar with their individual needs. Inspectors observed good relationships between link workers and children in care and it was clear the children were used to seeing and interacting with the link worker. Inspectors found, from reviewing files and speaking with external professionals, that link workers were knowledgeable about the needs of the children in foster care and they promoted their rights. There were many examples of good practice evident: link workers advocated for children's contact with their families, they got involved in supporting children's education, they completed in-depth direct work with children in care and advised and guided foster carers in managing challenging behaviour.

Foster carers told inspectors about the additional supports they had been offered with placements that were challenging. These included counselling for their child during a difficult time and financial supports. Foster Care Ireland were committed to improving their consultation with children and promoting their right to participation in the service. There were plans in place to start a group for the children of foster carers and one child told an inspector they had already been asked about joining this group. Arrangements were put in place to ensure foster carers continued to receive support and supervision when link workers were on leave.

Link workers recorded their supervision visits with foster carers on a standardised template. During these visits they discussed how the placement of the child was progressing, how the foster carers were meeting the child's needs and whether they required additional support, guidance or training to fulfil their responsibilities. Link workers maintained a collated record (tracker) of their visits to foster carers to provide managers with oversight of their practice in this regard.

There was evidence in case files of link workers conducting joint visits to foster carers with Tusla social workers when required. Link workers liaised with social workers and other professionals about children's needs and external professionals confirmed this to inspectors.

Foster Care Ireland supported their carers in additional ways. They facilitated an online support group for foster carers and foster carers told inspectors they attended this group and most found it useful. The online support group was held monthly and took place after online training sessions. There was also a foster carers group internet messaging application for mobile phones which foster carers could use to keep in touch with each other in an informal way. Link workers were members of this group also. The majority of foster carers found this group helpful and supportive.

Foster carers had access to support outside of normal working hours. Foster Care Ireland provided an out-of-hours service for foster carers through their residential service. Foster carers could ring a social care worker if they required support and or guidance out of normal working office hours. This service was managed by the team leader through weekly updates on placements and quarterly meetings. Foster carers told inspectors they knew how to access this service, but few utilised it. In addition, respite care was also available as a support to placements.

Foster Care Ireland was committed to developing the support they provided to foster carers and to this end had recently established a group specifically for men who foster.

Regular events were planned for foster carers and their families and these included seasonal events such as Christmas parties. There were also family fun days out which were attended by staff, managers and fostering families. Foster carers and children told inspectors about these events and how much they enjoyed them.

Managers had good oversight of the support and supervision provided by link workers to foster carers. Inspectors found that comprehensive case management records were maintained on foster carers' files.

Foster carers were given information on their right to access the records maintained by FCI about them. There was information in the foster carers' handbook on this and foster carers confirmed to inspectors that they were aware of this right.

All foster carers had an allocated link worker. There was substantial evidence that foster carers received good quality support and supervision from their link workers. Link workers visited foster carers regularly in line with their policy, they also visited foster carers together with children's social workers as appropriate, they maintained records of their support and supervision with foster carers and they facilitated a support group for foster carers. Foster Care Ireland provided an out-of-hours service as a support to foster carers. For these reasons FCI are deemed compliant with this standard.

Judgment: Compliant

## Standard 16: Training

Foster carers participate in the training necessary to equip them with the skills and knowledge required to provide high quality care.

Foster Care Ireland promoted children's right to be safe and well cared for by providing for the training needs of foster carers. FCI's training strategy was contained within their training policy which outlined their commitment to arranging and delivering the necessary and appropriate training to foster carers to enable them to provide high quality care. The expectation that foster carers would attend training was outlined.

Foster Care Ireland had a programme of training events scheduled for 2023. All foster carers had training development plans, which were updated by link workers in consultation with foster carers. Training was delivered online and after each training session participants could stay online to participate in the foster carers support group. This was a good use of resources in that attendance was maximised both at the training and at the support group. Each training session was evaluated and many of the compliments recorded in the compliments register related to how informative and helpful foster carers found the training provided. Training sessions were recorded so that foster carers who were unable to attend could benefit from the information at a time which suited them.

All foster carers had completed the training on Children First 2017 which was a mandatory requirement. Foster Care Ireland kept an up-to-date record of foster carers' attendance which alerted them to the date for each foster carer to have their two-yearly refresher in Children First 2017. Foster carers told inspectors about the training they had received, which they believed was relevant to the care they provided to children. This included training on Foundations for Attachment, First Aid for Parents and the Importance of Play. One foster carer suggested that there was room for improvement regarding training and

that it should be targeted to age groups and be more in-depth. Link workers reinforced learning from training in subsequent supervision visits to foster carers and records read by inspectors reflected this in practice. Foster Care Ireland also promoted training provided by other relevant organisations such as the training on the CASP provided by the national foster care association.

There was evidence that, on occasion, foster carers were provided with training on the specific needs of the child in their care and this was sometimes completed in an individual session with the foster carer by the link worker.

Link workers maintained records of the training that foster carers attended. There were a number of training sessions that were jointly attended by foster carers and link workers together in line with the national standard. These included training sessions on topics such as Domestic violence, eating problems and cyber safety. There was a tracker kept of individual foster carer's attendance at training events which provided management oversight of foster carers' attendance at training.

At the end of 2022 FCI had evaluated the training provided in that year and had developed the training programme for 2023 based on link worker feedback and requests for training from foster carers. The 2023 programme included training on understanding and managing challenging behaviour, 'children's rights and voice' and 'cultural awareness and inclusion'.

Foster Care Ireland had a training strategy and a programme of training planned for 2023 based on the assessed training needs of foster carers. Attendance at training was facilitated and training was evaluated. Foster carers received training on key areas relevant to the specific needs of individual children in their care. Records of training undertaken by foster carers were maintained and there were opportunities for foster carers and link workers to attend training together. For these reasons this standard is judged to be compliant.

Judgment: Compliant

## Standard 18 : Effective Policies

Health boards<sup>2</sup> have up-to-date effective policies and plans in place to promote the provision of high quality foster care for children and young people who require it.

Foster Care Ireland had a number of up-to-date policies and procedures in place to promote the provision of a high quality foster care service for children and young people. The organisation maintained a panel of foster carers and was actively involved in recruiting more foster carers as part of their service development plan. This plan included recruiting more

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<sup>2</sup> These services were provided by former health boards at the time the standards were produced in 2003. These services are now provided by the Child and Family Agency (Tusla).

foster carers from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds in order to be able, in future, to match children with foster carers from culturally appropriate backgrounds.

The agency's policies, procedures and guidance documents for the delivery of foster care services were aligned to relevant legislation, regulations and national standards. The service had a comprehensive service plan in place for 2023 which outlined their objectives including the delivery of a fully compliant, quality fostering service for children in foster care.

There were policies and procedures in place for every aspect of the service many of which were directly related to the *National Standards for Foster Care 2003*. There were additional policies which included policies on unannounced visits to foster carers, placement review, internet safety, protected disclosures and risk assessment for placements.

Of note, there was also a policy on children's rights which outlined how children in foster care have additional rights as well as those set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This policy stated that FCI promoted, respected and valued the rights of children and set out the actions it would take to ensure children's rights were upheld. These included providing foster carers with a comprehensive handbook containing all the relevant information they required and providing children with information such as the young person's guide to foster care, information on making a complaint and information on advocacy services for children.

Staff were aware of policies and procedures. Link workers told inspectors that policies and procedures were included in the induction process for new staff.

Foster Care Ireland had on occasions consulted with foster carers on the development of policies and one foster carer confirmed this to inspectors. Managers had identified this as an area of practice that could be further developed and they had planned an event to seek feedback about the service from children.

Foster Care Ireland's policies and procedures were incorporated into the foster carers' handbook, which was provided to all foster carers on approval. There was evidence that policies and procedures were appropriately reviewed and updated in light of changing needs. For example, following the recent inspection of FCI by the Tusla Alternative Care Inspection and Monitoring Service (ACIMS) FCI had updated their matching policy and procedure to incorporate the views of children in care and the children of foster carers in their matching process. The importance of considering the impact on the whole family, of a potential match of a child with foster carers, had been added to the policy.

Foster Care Ireland had also recently reviewed and updated their policies on external supports, advocacy and supported lodgings. The service director told the inspector that updates were circulated to all staff and discussed at team meetings and staff confirmed this. Foster carers were informed of revised and new policies and procedures and link workers reminded them of policy updates in their visits. The service director told the inspector there was a plan in place to update the foster carers' handbook. New policies and updates to existing policies were shared by email and discussed at team meetings. Any actions required to bring practice in line with the updated policy was implemented. An example of this was a recent update to the child safeguarding policy, which was issued to staff and sent to all foster

carers and which resulted in safe care plans being reviewed. Foster carers were also aware of policies and said they received emails advising them of updates to policies.

Foster Care Ireland had a transfer policy to identify the steps required to facilitate a formal transfer of approved foster carers between FCI and other fostering services as required by the standard. However, to support consistency in practice they did not encourage this practice.

There was some policies that required minor improvements that did not impact negatively on practice. Foster Care Ireland had two escalation policies: one related to the steps that would be taken if foster carers failed to meet the requirements of their role. The other identified the key steps that would be taken to ensure the timely receipt of all documentation required by the service. These included documents such as care plans, care orders, reports for long term matches, reports required for reviews of foster carers and others. However, this policy did not include any actions to escalate a situation where a child did not have an allocated social worker. Inspectors found evidence that appropriate actions were taken when children in care did not have an allocated social worker so this policy did not reflect the good practice that was in place.

The support and supervision policy required a minor adjustment to align it with FCI's child protection and welfare policy which outlined the regularity with which foster carers would receive a visit from their link worker. Link workers were clear that they should visit foster carers every four to six weeks and there was evidence that they did so, so there was no impact on practice or on the service provided to foster carers.

It was clear from inspector's reviews of files and from what foster carers, link workers and external professionals told inspectors that FCI advocated with other agencies for the individual needs of children.

Foster Care Ireland had up-to-date policies on all aspects of their fostering service which were regularly reviewed. They maintained a panel of foster carers in line with the standard and had a service plan in place for 2023 which set out their plan for the development and delivery of a high quality foster care service.

Staff and foster carers were aware of policies and procedures and there was evidence that these were implemented. Staff advocated for the particular needs of children in care with agencies responsible for other services. Whilst there were some areas for improvement these are quality improvements and do not impact on the compliance of FCI with this standard, which is deemed to be compliant.

Judgment: Compliant

## Standard 19 : Management and monitoring of foster care services

Health boards have effective structures in place for the management and monitoring of foster care services.

Foster Care Ireland was committed to providing a high quality foster care service that achieved the best outcomes for children and which protected and promoted their rights. They had a service plan for 2023 that set out the strategic direction for development and growth of the service and how that would be achieved. The 2023 service plan outlined how the service would grow and develop its capacity to provide foster care commencing with the recruitment of additional staffing to enhance the capacity of the management team. The service plan espoused a rights-based approach and addressed how FCI would vindicate the rights and expectations of all stakeholders involved in fostering. There was also a suite of policies and procedures to guide staff in the delivery of a quality, safe fostering service to children and against which FCI measured its performance and the quality of the service it provided.

Foster Care Ireland had a number of structures in place to support the delivery of a high quality foster care service. An organogram was provided for the inspection which reflected the management structure of the organisation. The service was led by the chief executive officer, who, together with the principal social worker or the service director reported to a consultative committee. The CEO line-managed the service director who, in turn, managed both the principal social worker and the operations manager. The principal social worker managed four link workers, the sessional fostering assessor and the team leader. Managers were experienced practitioners who were committed to providing safe good quality care to children and who provided clear guidance to staff.

Due to the period of unexpected uncertainty described earlier in this report which resulted in the need to cover the responsibilities of the PSW post during various periods throughout the first quarter of 2023, the roles and responsibilities of the service director and team leader were not in line with what had been anticipated. The responsibilities of the PSW were being shared by the service director and the team leader. There was potential in this arrangement for confusion about lines of accountability, and - whilst some foster carers were not clear about who was fulfilling the role of DLP in the absence of the PSW, as already outlined (under standard 10) - there was no evidence that the unexpected changes in management had impacted on the care provided to the children placed with FCI foster carers or on the support that foster carers received. There were clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all other staff members of FCI and lines of accountability were clear. Foster Care Ireland had taken action to address this issue by the time of the inspection, and had recruited a principal social worker who was due to commence in the role in mid-August 2023.

Despite the changes in the management team staff were clear about their roles and responsibilities and about accountability. Staff reported that the level of management support provided to them had not changed. They said that management were accessible and

responsive and that they felt supported. Foster carers were positive about the support they received from their link workers and the majority of foster carers confirmed to inspectors that they were aware of the recent changes in management roles. A small number of foster carers were not clear about all the roles and responsibilities of the new staff members. Some external professionals were aware of the changes in the management team at FCI, but none identified any negative impact of this on the support being provided to foster carers or the quality of the care provided to children. The service director had a vision for the service which was aligned with the 2023 service plan and the Quality Assurance/Compliance Project. There were a number of effective quality assurance systems and management oversight systems in place. However, there were other quality assurance systems that required improvement or where management oversight could be strengthened.

Foster Care Ireland had sufficient resources in place to provide the fostering service and had contingency plans in place to ensure continuity of support and supervision to foster carers when link workers were on extended periods of leave. Link workers told inspectors that their caseloads were manageable and that this facilitated them to complete additional work and to be responsive to the needs of foster carers.

Foster care Ireland had policies and procedures in place to support the delivery of a good quality foster care service. These have been outlined under standard 18.

There were effective communication systems in place. The majority of foster carers said that communication in the organisation was good. They were informed about changes in policies and in staffing both by email and in person by their link workers. Foster carers told inspectors that communication with link workers was good and that they were responsive to their needs. Files reviews reflected this also. Staff told inspectors about regular practice meetings where the implementation of policies and procedures were discussed and where they reflected on their practice to share learning.

Monthly management meetings were held. Inspectors reviewed a sample of these meetings and found good oversight of the fostering service including the application and assessment processes. These minutes were comprehensive and detailed and included an overview of all placements, an update on which families were due to be presented to the FCC, discussions on placements that had ended in an unplanned manner and updates on unannounced visits and carer feedback visits as appropriate. Risks and serious incidents were reviewed and training needs discussed.

Foster Care Ireland had a consultative committee which played a core role in the governance of the service. The Committee provided strategic direction for the service which included vetting of all policies, and review of performance metrics and complaints. The committee met every two months and fulfilled an advisory role to the CEO as the person in charge of the service, and the PSW who was professionally responsible for the service. The CEO and service director presented reports and briefings on all aspects of the service to the consultative committee to ensure compliance with the standards, the maintenance of existing good practice and to identify improvements.

Managers from FCI met with managers from two Tusla service areas from which they had children placed to review individual placements, identify any issues and identify actions to address them. The CEO and the PSW of FCI met on a six-monthly basis with a delegated Tusla national manager as part of Tusla's governance of private fostering agencies. Foster Care Ireland also submitted quarterly returns to Tusla on various metrics required by Tusla which included the numbers of children placed, foster carers, complaints, allegations and significant events. A national service level agreement was in place between FCI and Tusla. There were also a fostering agreement in place with each foster carer for every individual child they had placed with them. These agreements set out the requirements for the child's care. In addition, there were foster care contracts in place with foster carers for every child's placement.

Foster Care Ireland had good oversight of safeguarding. There were up-to-date trackers maintained of vetting by AGS, of staff and foster carers training in Children First 2017 and of unannounced visits. These trackers were reviewed at weekly management meetings to identify when actions were required such as a refresher training in Children First or updated vetting by An Garda Síochána becoming due for a foster carer.

Staff supervision was good and there was evidence of good and regular management oversight of individual cases. Whilst there were gaps in formal supervision sessions provided to staff due to the unavailability of a PSW, staff confirmed that managers were available and accessible to them both for formal and informal supervision and consultation, and evidence was provided during the inspection of some informal supervision that had taken place. Inspectors reviewed records of formal staff supervision and found that some sessions had been missed where these had been scheduled during the period when the PSW was not available. However, records showed that - previously - formal supervision had occurred monthly. Sessions were recorded on a template and case management was good. Individual cases were discussed and decisions were made about actions to be taken. Supervision also included discussions about the worker's wellbeing and their training needs.

Management oversight of information required some improvement. During the inspection it became evident to inspectors that information that should be readily available to management was not to hand. This included information on the numbers of incidents of children missing from care, the number of placements that ended in an unplanned manner and the number of joint training sessions completed with foster carers and staff together. Whilst this information was known to the management team it was not always maintained in a readily accessible format that provided clear oversight to management. Trackers, which are a tool used to provide managers with oversight of the service, were not always updated or complete. For example, the tracker of allegations against foster carers was not up-to-date as it did not include one allegation against a foster carer (which was subsequently deemed to be unfounded). This did not pose any risk to children as the allegation had been fully investigated and responded to in a timely manner.

Findings in relation to data were mixed. Whilst FCI had systems in place to gather, collate, track and review some data, some were adequate and others required improvement. The

service director had identified that some of the trackers for collating information to support management oversight required improvement. Their 2023 service plan outlined the need for more efficient information systems and was an action still to be progressed.

The information recording system was suitable. Inspectors reviewed case records and found that most information recorded was accessible, contemporaneous and comprehensive. However, the recording of child protection and welfare concerns in the case record was not always easy to follow and these records could have been improved by the use of a chronology of important events. A chronology is an account, in date order, of key incidents to give an emerging picture of a situation.

In addition, the register of complaints did not include one complaint that had been managed at an informal level, nor did it reflect whether or not the complainant was satisfied with the outcome of the complaint. The list of children and carers was not up-to-date as it still included the names of two children who were no longer in placements with FCI and the register of significant events did not contain evidence of management oversight such as a manager's signature. Foster Care Ireland had an escalation policy relating to required documentation (see standard 18) under which they escalated various important issues to Tusla regarding children in care. All escalations were tracked through weekly management meetings, consultative committee meetings, governance meetings and the risk register.

The service had a good risk management system in place but elements of the recording of risk required improvement. An undated risk management consultation document provided by FCI during the inspection set out FCI's approach to risk management and outlined elements of a risk register such as recording the person responsible for the risk and a risk rating. Foster Care Ireland's risk management system involved the maintenance of two risk registers: one for risks associated with fostering placements and the other for business risks. Inspectors reviewed these registers and found that both included the nature of the risk and the plan to minimise the risk. Neither of the risk registers reflected who was responsible for the risk or assigned a rating to the risk. In addition, the fostering risk register did not include the risk associated with having a foster carer fostering outside of their approval status.

Notwithstanding this, all known risks were discussed at management meetings and actions were identified to address and mitigate the risks. Risks were also brought to the consultative committee. The service director was assured that FCI identified and managed all risks effectively and agreed that the recording of management oversight could be improved upon.

Notwithstanding that there was a good matching policy and procedure in place, information provided during the inspection indicated that a relatively high number of placements ended in an unplanned manner. There were seven unplanned placement endings in the 12 months prior to the inspection. Unusually, some foster carers had requested that a placement come to an end. There are many factors associated with placement breakdown. This can include not properly matching the capacity of foster carer to the needs of a child. Identifying all the factors that contributed to unplanned endings of placements helps to identify any learning which could be used to prevent future placements ending in an unplanned manner. The

consultative committee had been advised of the number of placements ending in an unplanned manner and had requested a further analysis of this for a future meeting.

Whilst FCI's service plan for 2023 identified that audits would be the first step in identifying the need for improvements to verify compliance, the service director confirmed that no formal file audits had been completed in the first half of the year. The CEO told inspectors that the unexpected changes in the management team had set FCI back in the implementation of their service plan.

During the course of this inspection a small number of foster carers provided negative feedback on their experiences of fostering with FCI. Only one of the foster carers who described these negative experiences had made a formal complaint. Inspectors acknowledge that FCI had commenced the process of gathering feedback from foster carers and that there was a plan in place to re-commence the visits by the service director to all foster carers on the commencement of the new PSW in August 2023. This will provide a forum for foster carers to give their feedback and influence service delivery.

Foster Care Ireland had effective structures in place for the management and monitoring of their foster carer service. Despite going through an unexpected period of uncertainty, overall management structures had maintained clear accountability within the service. Managers provided clear guidance to staff. There were a number of effective management and quality assurance systems in place. However, there were other quality assurance systems that required improvement or where management oversight could be strengthened as detailed above, including adherence to their risk management framework. For these reasons the standard is judged to be substantially compliant.

Judgment: Substantially compliant

## **Standard 21: Recruitment and retention of an appropriate range of foster carers**

Health boards are actively involved in recruiting and retaining an appropriate range of foster carers to meet the diverse needs of the children and young people in their care.

Foster Care Ireland were actively involved in recruiting and retaining foster carers so that they would have an appropriate range of foster carers to meet the diverse needs of children for whom placements were required. There were clear plans and procedures in place for ongoing recruitment of foster carers. The recruitment team comprised of a dedicated recruitment fostering advisor (RFA), who was supported and supervised by the operations manager. An administrative assistant has recently been hired to support the work of the RFA.

Foster Care Ireland focused on recruiting foster carers primarily in the province of Leinster which includes counties in the midlands and East coast. They advertised for foster carers through a popular internet search engine, where they had arrangements in place to maximise their market exposure and therefore the number of enquiries they received about

fostering. Foster carers told inspectors that they found FCI through an online search. Social media platforms were also used to promote fostering and encourage enquiries from people interested in becoming foster carers.

Foster Care Ireland aim to respond to all enquiries about fostering within 24 hours. Foster carers told inspectors they received a very quick response to their initial enquiry. They also spoke about the RFA giving them informative and realistic information about what foster care is like. This information included the use of a video interview with an experienced foster carer as part of their email response to initial enquiries.

Foster Care Ireland had a clear process in place to manage and screen potential foster carers. There was a standardised process in place for following up with potential fostering applicants. This included a telephone call and a home visit which were consistently recorded on a standard template. If appropriate the enquiry progressed to application stage and from there to assessment. The principal social worker or the service director had oversight of every stage of the decision-making process.

In addition to online recruitment, FCI ran targeted campaigns in local communities. In the past 12 months these included two pop-up events in local shopping centres as well as sponsorship of three local 'tidy town' committees and sponsorship of two children's football teams in the locality.

Foster Care Ireland had recently strengthened its management oversight of recruitment and had recently commenced fortnightly bi-weekly meetings between the recruitment team, the team leader and the service director. The purpose of the meetings was to review the progress of potential foster carers and discuss learning from assessments, feedback interviews and exit interviews with the recruitment team.

Foster Care Ireland had systems in place to monitor and measure their recruitment performance. All enquiries received were recorded on a tracker from initial contact through to application and assessment stages. The tracker was updated as enquiries progressed. Inspectors reviewed the tracker and found that on average the process from enquiry to approval stage took less than seven months. Enquiry and application statistics were presented and discussed at the Consultative Committee where they were measured against industry norms and FCI's previous performance.

The service director, on commencement of their role, had begun to meet with foster carers to get feedback about their experiences of FCI. However, this had been paused when they had to take on some of the responsibilities of the PSW. Inspectors saw completed feedback forms on three foster carers' files. Foster carers were generally positive about their experiences and had suggested some improvements which they confirmed to inspectors had been put into action.

Foster Care Ireland were committed to retaining an appropriate number of foster carers to meet the diverse needs of children needing placement. Link workers arranged activities throughout the year to acknowledge the care provided by foster carers and to show their appreciation of their commitment. These activities included organising seasonal activities and

outings to recreational parks for all the foster families. Foster Care Ireland also sent birthday gifts to foster children, birth children and foster parents and provided craft packages. Foster carers on the whole were positive about these activities. However, one foster carer told inspectors that some of the activities were more appropriate for younger children and another said they did not understand the value added by the foster carers' days out and felt the resources could be better used to individually help foster carers and children in specific ways. Some foster carers felt that consistency of staffing would support the retention of foster carers.

Link workers encouraged foster carers to participate both in the FCI support group and the national foster care association. Foster carers received good support, supervision and training from link workers and this also contributed to the retention of foster carers.

Counselling was provided for foster carers, their own children and children in care with FCI, as appropriate and this served to retain foster carers and ensure good outcomes for children.

Foster Care Ireland were actively involved in recruiting and retaining an appropriate range of foster carers. They had good systems in place for recruitment and retention of foster carers. Enquiries were acknowledged in a timely manner and response times were monitored. Foster Care Ireland had recently increased resources allocated to the recruitment team and had strengthened management oversight of recruitment and retention of foster carers. Therefore, FCI is judged to be compliant with this standard.

Judgment: Compliant

## Standard 25: Representation and complaints

Health boards have policies and procedures designed to ensure that children and young people, their families, foster carers and others with a bona fide interest in their welfare can make effective representations, including Complaints, about any aspect of the fostering service, whether provided directly by a health board or by a non-statutory agency.

Complaints made to FCI were well managed and fully investigated and recorded. The CEO was very clear that a complaint was any expression of dissatisfaction about the service. There was a clear complaints policy and procedure in place which was accessible and responsive. The complaints procedure was fully implemented.

Foster carers and children were aware of their right to make a complaint and they had been given written information about the complaints process. The complaints booklet for children had been translated into the Ukrainian language for children who had been placed from the Ukraine. The complaints procedure was clear and included an appeals process. Foster carers and children in care were also reminded verbally by link workers about their right to make a complaint and the procedure for doing so. One child told inspectors they had been told about the complaints policy. There had been no formal complaints made by children but there were examples of where FCI was proactive in identifying complaints even where a formal complaint

had not been made. These included the service director identifying as a complaint, information provided by children in preparation for a statutory meeting and the CEO raising a complaint about the quality of the information provided by FCI in a report prepared for a foster carers review. These expressions of dissatisfaction with the service were used to identify learning and improve practice in FCI.

Inspectors reviewed a sample of complaints recorded on the complaints register and found that all complaints were fully investigated and recorded. The outcome of the investigation of the complaint was comprehensively recorded. Appropriate actions were taken following complaints to address the dissatisfaction and, where appropriate, improve practice. Learning was identified and shared with staff. The outcome of the complaint was notified to the complainant in writing and all complaints were brought before FCI's consultative committee. External professionals and foster carers told the inspector that complaints were followed up and dealt with quickly and that they were satisfied with how complaints had been managed and the outcomes reached. One complaint had been dealt with at an informal level in line with FCI's complaints policy. The complainant told the inspector they were satisfied with the outcome of their complaint.

The foster carers were encouraged and supported to become members a national organisation for foster carers that provide advocacy and received complaints.

Foster Care Ireland demonstrated a commitment to improving the quality of their service. A register of compliments was maintained and this reflected a number of compliments from foster carers about specific training they had received, and compliments from external professionals about various elements of the service they had provided to children. FCI had also commenced a process to gather feedback from foster carers and the service director had visited some foster carers to ascertain their views and experiences of the organisation. Feedback from one foster carer included acknowledgement of the high level of support foster carers received and a request for cultural competency training. No areas were identified for improvement by the foster carer. This process was paused when the service director took up some of the PSW duties.

Foster Care Ireland demonstrated commitment to improving the quality of the service through complaints and feedback. The service actively identified expressions of dissatisfaction with the service as complaints. All complaints were fully investigated in a timely manner and the process was fully and comprehensively recorded and reported back to the complainant in compliance with the standard. Whilst improvements could be made to the complaints register they relate to management oversight which is covered under standard 19. For these reasons this standard is judged to be compliant.

Judgment: Compliant

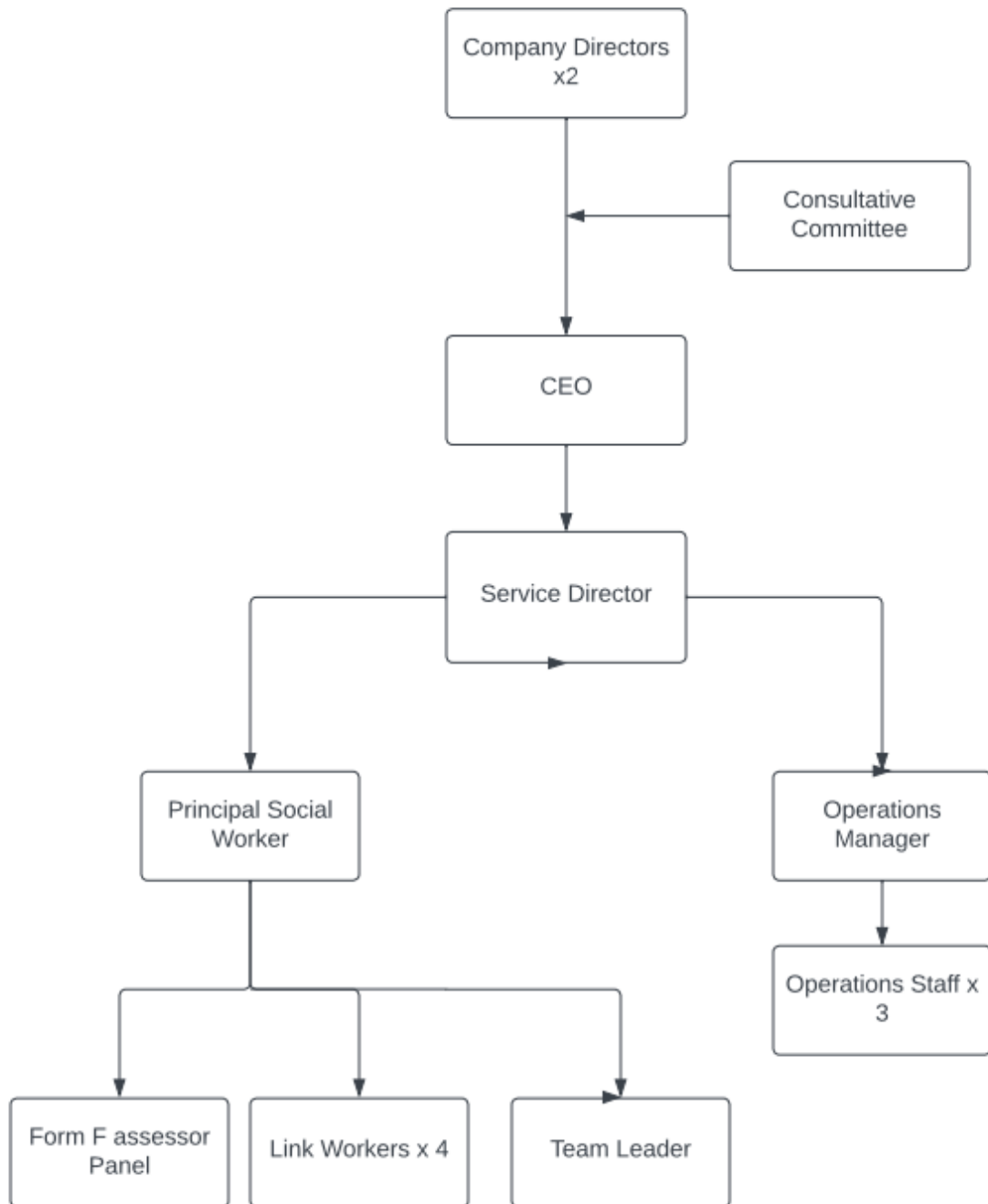
**Appendix 1:  
National Standards for Foster Care (2003)  
and  
Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care)  
Regulations,<sup>3</sup> 1995**

Standard 8  Regulations Part III, Article 7	Matching carers with children and young people  Capacity of foster parents to meet the needs of child
Standard 10	Safeguarding and child protection
Standard 15	Supervision and support
Standard 16	Training
Standard 18  Regulation Part III, Article 5 (1)	Effective policies  Assessment of foster carers
Standard 19	Management and monitoring of foster care services
Standard 21	Recruitment and retention of an appropriate range of foster carers
Standard 25	Representations and complaints

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<sup>3</sup> Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations, 1995

## Structure of Organisation



### **Introduction and instruction**

This document sets out the standards where it has been assessed that the provider is not compliant with the National Standards for Foster Care, 2003.

This document is divided into two sections:

Section 1 is the compliance plan. It outlines which standards the provider must take action on to comply. In this section the provider must consider the overall standard when responding and not just the individual non compliances as listed in section 2.

Section 2 is the list of all standards where it has been assessed the provider is not compliant. Each standard is risk assessed as to the impact of the non-compliance on the safety, health and welfare of children using the service.

A finding of:

- **Substantially compliant** - A judgement of substantially compliant means that the provider has generally met the requirements of the standard but some action is required to be fully compliant. This finding will have a risk rating of yellow which is low risk.
- **Not compliant** - A judgement of not compliant means the provider has not complied with a standard and considerable action is required to come into compliance. Continued non-compliance or where the non-compliance poses a significant risk to the safety, health and welfare of children using the service will be risk rated red (high risk) and the inspector has identified the date by which the provider must comply. Where the non-compliance does not pose a risk to the safety, health and welfare of children using the service it is risk rated orange (moderate risk) and the provider must take action *within a reasonable timeframe* to come into compliance.

**Section 1**

The provider is required to set out what action they have taken or intend to take to comply with the standard in order to bring the service back into compliance. The plan should be **SMART** in nature. **S**pecific to the standard, **M**easurable so that they can monitor progress, **A**chievable and **R**ealistic, and **T**ime bound. The response must consider the details and risk rating of each standard set out in section 2 when making the response. It is the provider’s responsibility to ensure they implement the actions within timeframe.

**Compliance plan provider’s response:**

Standard Heading	Judgment
Standard 19: Management and monitoring of foster care services	Substantially compliant
<p>Outline how you are going to come into compliance with Standard 19: Health boards have effective structures in place for the management and monitoring of foster care services.</p> <p>The Director and Consultative Committee accepted the CEO’s report on all the actionable findings and adverse comments arising from the inspection. As of 26th July 2023, several discrete actionable findings are complete and the remaining actions are prioritised for either, direct implementation by the Service Director as per 1, 2&amp;4 below, or, per 3 below, integration into a revised Service Plan 2023 (for presentation at M16 on 27th September) for implementation by 31st December 2023.</p> <p>The Service Director will,</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Secure the appointment of the PSW by 14th August &amp; complete induction by 30 Sept 2023.</li> <li>2. Conduct priority audits as envisaged in Service Plan 2023 by 30th November 2023.</li> <li>3. Review FCI’s adherence to its risk management framework (20th September), complete the assessment of unplanned endings (27th September), and ensure that data and trackers provide timely and accurate information to support effective risk management through early risk recognition and prompt mitigation (29th November).</li> <li>4. Fully implement sections i) to iii) of (revised) Service Plan 2023 by 31st December 2023: Whereby FCI, i) meets its contractual obligations to Tusla, ii) consolidates its position as a fully compliant provider of fostering services, iii) evidences the quality of its services, in the expectation that the combined effect of i) to iii) will, iv) deliver</li> </ol>	

a superior performance in terms of outcomes for children and young people.

## Section 2:

### Standards to be complied with

The provider must consider the details and risk rating of the following standards when completing the compliance plan in section 1. Where a standard has been risk rated red (high risk) the inspector has set out the date by which the provider must comply. Where a standard has been risk rated yellow (low risk) or orange (moderate risk) the provider must include a date (DD Month YY) of when they will be compliant.

### The registered provider has failed to comply with the following regulation(s).

Standard	Regulatory requirement	Judgment	Risk rating	Date to be complied with
Standard 19	Health boards have effective structures in place for the management and monitoring of foster care services.	Substantially compliant	Yellow	31st December 2023