



Health Information and Quality Authority Regulation Directorate monitoring inspection of Foster Care Services

Name of service area:	Mayo
Type of inspection:	Focused Inspection
Date of inspection:	4 – 6 July 2023
Fieldwork ID:	MON_0039830
Lead Inspector:	Sheila Hynes
Support Inspector(s):	Sabine Buschmann Adekunle Oladejo Caroline Browne

About this inspection

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 national 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 access to 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 foster care services provided by the Child and Family Agency (Tusla)¹ and to report on its findings to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

This inspection was a focused inspection of the Mayo service area. The scope of the inspection include Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 and 21 of the *National Standards for Foster Care* (2003).

¹ 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 with the relevant managers, child care professionals, children and foster carers. Inspectors observed practices and reviewed documentation such as children's files and foster carers' records, policies and procedures and administrative records.

The key activities of this inspection involved:

- the analysis of data submitted by the area
- interviews with:
 - the area manager
 - the principal social worker for alternative care
 - the senior psychologist
- focus groups with:
 - four social work team leaders
 - nine social workers
 - seven children
- observations of:
 - a Quality, Risk and Service Improvement meeting
- the review of:
 - local policies and procedures, minutes of various meetings, seven staff supervision files, audits and service plans
 - staff personnel files
 - a sample of 21 children's files and 13 foster carer's files
- visits to two foster care households to meet two children and two foster carers
- visits to a family contact centre to meet two parents
- conversations with:
 - one foster carer

Acknowledgements

HIQA wishes to thank parents, children, foster carers and external stakeholders that spoke with inspectors during the course of this inspection, along with staff and managers of the service for their cooperation.

The Child and Family Agency

Child and family services in Ireland are delivered by a single dedicated State agency called the Child and Family Agency (Tusla), which is overseen by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The Child and Family Agency Act 2013 established Tusla with effect from 1 January 2014.

Tusla has responsibility for a range of services, including:

- child welfare and protection services, including family support services
- existing Family Support Agency responsibilities
- existing National Educational Welfare Board responsibilities
- pre-school inspection services
- domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services

Child and family services are organised into 17 service areas and are managed by area managers. The areas are grouped into six regions, each with a regional manager known as a regional chief officer. The regional chief officers report to the national director of services and integration, who is a member of the national management team.

Foster care services provided by Tusla are inspected by HIQA in each of the 17 Tusla service areas. Tusla also places children in privately-run foster care agencies and has specific responsibility for the quality of care these children in privately-provided services receive.

Service area

The population of children and young people in Mayo was estimated at 137,970 in 2022 (Census data). Data published by Tusla in 2019 showed that the Mayo service area had a population of children aged between of 0-17 years of 31,968².

The Mayo service area is one of four Tusla areas within the West North West region. The area was under the direction of the regional chief officer for Tusla West region and was managed by an area manager. The alternative care service in Mayo consisted of two children in care social work teams, a fostering and supported lodgings team, an aftercare team and a psychology service. The management

² *Annual Review on the Adequacy of Child Care and Family Support Services Available – 2019 (Tusla website, May 2021).*

structure of the alternative care service comprises of a principal social worker who reports directly to the area manager and oversees the work of three social work team leaders, an aftercare manager and a psychologist for children in care. Team members include senior social work practitioners, social workers and social care leaders and a family support practitioner.

From the data received from the Mayo service area prior to inspection, the area had a total of 141 children in foster care. There were 89 children in general foster care and 52 children in relative foster care and there were no children waiting for a placement. There were no children placed in private foster care settings.

Of the 141 children in foster care in the area, 127 children were placed within their community. There were 11 children placed outside of the service area. All of these children were placed with a relative foster carer. There were three children placed in the service area from another service area. A total of 115 children were placed with foster carers from the same religious, ethnical or cultural background. There were 19 children in foster care in the area with a disability.

There were 39 sibling groups in the area. 17 of these sibling groups were placed together in general foster care and 11 were placed in relative foster care, with the remaining children placed with general foster carers. There were no children not placed with their siblings, contrary to their assessment.

There were 97 foster care households, of these 62 were general foster carers and 35 were relative foster carers. There were eight available respite placements and 10 available foster care placements. Fourteen foster carers left the panel in the 12 months prior to the inspection. Six foster carers came from diverse background.

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 1	Positive sense of identity	Substantially Compliant
Standard 2	Family and friends	Compliant
Standard 3	Children's Rights	Compliant
Standard 4	Valuing diversity	Substantially Compliant
Standard 6	Assessment of children and young people	Compliant
Standard 8	Matching carers with children and young people	Substantially Compliant
Standard 21	Recruitment and retention of an appropriate range of foster carers	Substantially Compliant

This inspection was carried out during the following times:

Date	Times of inspection	Inspector	Role
04 July 2023	09:00hrs to 17:30hrs	Sheila Hynes	Lead Inspector
04 July 2023	09:00hrs to 17:30hrs	Sabine Buschmann	Support Inspector
04 July 2023	09:00hrs to 17:30hrs	Adekunle Oladejo	Support Inspector
04 July 2023	09:00hrs to 17:30hrs	Caroline Browne	Support Inspector
05 July 2023	09:00hrs to 17:30hrs	Sheila Hynes	Lead Inspector
05 July 2023	09:00hrs to 17:30hrs	Sabine Buschmann	Support Inspector
05 July 2023	09:00hrs to 16:30hrs	Adekunle Oladejo	Support Inspector
05 July 2023	09:00hrs to 17:30hrs	Caroline Browne	Support Inspector
06 July 2023	08:00hrs to 17:00hrs	Sheila Hynes	Lead Inspector
06 July 2023	09:00hrs to 17:00hrs	Sabine Buschmann	Support Inspector
06 July 2023	09:00hrs to 17:00hrs	Adekunle Oladejo	Support Inspector
06 July 2023	08:00hrs to 17:00hrs	Caroline Browne	Support Inspector

Children's experience of the foster care service

Children's experiences were established through speaking with a sample of nine children, two parents and three foster carers. This included visits to see children in their foster homes, meetings with parents at a family contact centre as well as a phone call to a foster carer. The review of case files, complaints and feedback also provided additional information on the experiences of children in foster care.

Children spoke positively about their experiences of living in foster care. They had developed nurturing and warm relationships with their foster carers, with many children referring to their foster carers as mum and dad in their review forms. Many children were placed with their siblings group and lived in their community. They felt that they received enough information before moving into foster care. Some of the children that inspectors spoke with felt a strong sense of belonging and were settled in their foster home. One child commented "I just live with my Aunty" and another child said "I have been there since I was a baby".

Some children did not attend their child-in-care review meeting, saying the meetings were "boring" and they "had better things to do". They were all invited to attend their child-in-care reviews. They filled out their review forms and their social workers gave them feedback about the meeting. Some children had their child-in-care review in their foster home and they found this to be a positive experience and they chose to attend their meetings. Child-in-care review meeting times were also changed to facilitate children's attendance.

Children spoke about their rights and gave many examples of how the adults around them respect their rights by listening to their opinion, are there to talk to them and give them free time. They said their social worker, school and social media platforms gave them information on their rights and they knew who to talk to if their rights had not been respected. All children spoken with had an allocated social worker. Most children were happy with their social workers and they visited them often, while others felt they only visited when there was a problem. Children were aware of an external advocacy service for children in care and some children had done workshops with the service a few years ago.

Children were made aware of how to make a complaint. Children said that they would go to their foster carers if they had an issue. Another child spoke about talking to their guardian ad litem³ and social worker about any issue they have. They had received

³ Court appointed advocate to represent the best interests of children.

information on making a complaint and were aware of the different organisations that could support them with a complaint, outside of their social worker and foster carer. Children spoke about living full and active lives. Some of the hobbies they enjoyed included table tennis, kayaking, horse riding, football and art. They attended youth clubs, sports and social clubs. Many children attended a youth club that was promoted by social workers and their foster carers. Children were given independent time that was age and developmentally appropriate. Children's friendships with their peer group was promoted and supported. Their friends spent time with them in the foster home and in the community.

Family contact was promoted and supported by foster carers and social workers. All children had family contact plans and most children had regular contact with their families. Some children lived close to their family member such as cousins and grandparents and frequently went to see them independently. Some children met with their siblings in various clubs as well as during arranged family contact. There were some challenges meeting family members living outside of the service area or Ireland. However, social workers were supportive in addressing these challenges, and listened and responded to these concerns from children.

Foster carers stated that "they are very happy with the support they are receiving" and spoke highly of both their fostering link social worker and the child-in-care social worker. They spoke about the complex needs of the children they foster and the high level of supports services that had been put in place. They went on to state "there is nothing negative I can say about the support from social workers." Another foster carer praised a previous fostering link social worker, they recently had a change of social worker who they described as having "gone over and beyond, and I always feel that they are there". However, foster carers spoke about the lack of a peer support group and although a national organisation for foster carers had held two coffee mornings, and they spoke of wanting more opportunities for peer support. The foster carers who spoke with inspectors had not been involved in any recruitment campaigns.

Many foster carers had positive relationships with birth parents and supported family contact as appropriate. Parent's view were sought for child-in-care reviews and were recorded in the child's care plan. Parents attended child-in-care reviews and were involved in the care planning for their children. Parents were consulted on family contact plans and suggestions were responded to by social workers. One parent stated that "our children are very well cared for". Reunification plans were in place for families where this was appropriate and social workers case management of these plans were monitored by their social work team leader.

The next sections of the report considers the quality of social work practice in meeting the individual needs of children, including the availability of foster care placements.

Summary of inspection findings

Tusla has the legal responsibility to promote the welfare of children and protect those who are deemed to be at risk of harm. Children in foster care require a high-quality service which is safe and well supported by social workers. Foster carers must be able to provide children with warm and nurturing relationships in order for them to achieve positive outcomes. Services must be well governed in order to produce these outcomes consistently.

This report reflects the findings of the focused inspection, which looked at children's experiences in relation to the promotion of their rights and identity, including recognition of their diverse backgrounds and the support provided to help them maintain relationships with their family and friends. The inspection also considered the quality of their individual assessments of need, including any specialist support children required. It assessed how well children were matched to their foster carers, and the availability of a suitable range of local foster carers to provide good child-centred care.

Prior to the inspection the service area submitted a self-assessment questionnaire (SAQ) of its performance against the seven selected standards. Local managers rated their performance as substantially compliant in all areas. The SAQ provided analysis of organisational priorities and areas of practice they were working to continually improve. These will be further commented on in this report.

In this inspection, of the seven national standards assessed, HIQA found that:

- three standards were compliant, and
- four standards were substantially compliant.

The area manager had a good understanding of the changing child-in-care population and the areas of organisational performance that required improvement to enhance children's experience of child-centred care and a rights based approach. The area manager had been in post for six months and was actively working with the service area management team in improving the quality of the service and developing strategies with clear time frames and performance indicators. The service area's risk management report was reviewed monthly and management tracked progress and analysed identified risks. There were systems and audits in place to track many aspects of the foster care service provided to children and foster carers and these were reviewed by the principal social worker and area manager.

A positive sense of identity for children was promoted by the service area and foster carers. All but one child was allocated a social worker, and they were allocated a social care leader who was supervised by a social work team leader. There were records of good quality visits in which social workers spent quality time with children, playing games, enquiring about how they were doing, enquiring about family contact and always reiterating that if they had an issue they could contact them. Tusla staff and their foster carers advocated well for children. Children's sense of identity was promoted. There was recognition that not all children identify with their culture of origin and this was respected. Inspectors did not find records of children being encouraged or facilitated to access their files.

The service area facilitated regular and appropriate contact between children and their families as set out in their care plans. Children were placed with their siblings when this was in line with their assessed needs. They were placed with family and friends when this was deemed the most appropriate placement to meet their assessed needs. Children's views were actively sought by social workers and any wish to change family contact was respected. Family contact was continuously monitored and reviewed to reflect changing needs of family members. Social workers explained family contact decisions with children. The service area had a family contact working group to improve family contact experience for families. The service area promoted family contact in children's foster homes, where appropriate.

Children's rights to participation and decision-making was respected and promoted by the service area. Children were asked for their opinion and they were supported to give their views about their care in accordance with their wishes and preferences. They were encouraged to be independent consistent with their age, stage of development and ability. Children were provided with information about their rights and an advocacy service for children in care that could further support them in upholding and promoting their rights. Their right to privacy was respected and they had time alone with family and friends where this was in their best interests and appropriate. They were informed of the complaints procedure and complaints were managed in line with policy. However, practice with regard to finding out the views of young children or non-verbal children through the use of creative tools was inconsistent.

Children's diversity should be explored in child-in-care reviews and a plan to support their diversity outlined in their care plan. Some, but not all, children were provided with a care plan that considered their diversity. There was a lack of strategic planning and there were limited service initiatives seen with regard to promotion of diversity. Children with a disability were receiving a coordinated approach to their care in the service area. There were no reports of children experiencing discrimination. Children

were not consistently supported to understand, appreciate, practice or express their religion and culture.

An assessment of children's needs was carried out prior to a child's placement in foster care. Children placed in emergency foster placements had a timely and comprehensive needs assessment. The decision-making regarding a child's placement was recorded on their case file and communicated to children and their family. There was a multidisciplinary approach to care planning that included children, their family and foster carers. Copies of assessments were provided to children, their family and foster carers. There was good collaborative work between agencies to meet the assessed needs of children.

Most children benefited from being matched with foster carers who were capable and experienced in meeting their needs. The service area had introduced a comprehensive placement request and matching tool. The matching process was embedded into practice and the quality of the records was good. Placement requests were reviewed by a matching panel that met on a fortnightly bases. There was a strong emphasis on placing children in their community and in relative foster care. The service area endeavoured to ensure children had a transition plan before moving into a proposed foster placement. However, the pool of available foster carers was small which made matching challenging for the area. There were delays in securing long-term placements for children that were cared for in short term foster care.

The service area had a retention strategy and recruitment strategy for 2023 that reflected current research, feedback from foster carer's exit interviews and a foster carer needs analysis conducted in January 2023. The recruitment strategy was aligned with Tusla's national foster care campaign. The experience of foster carers was positive and they reported feeling supported. There was a good range of training for foster carers. However, the service area had limited involvement of foster carers in promoting and recruiting potential new foster carers. The recruitment of new foster carers was low in the last 12 months, with a greater number leaving the service than joining. The fostering team had faced capacity challenges in undertaking its own assessments of applicants, and had relied on an external assessor.

Standard 1: Positive sense of identity

Children and young people are provided with foster care services that promote a positive sense of identity for them.

The service area judged themselves to be substantially compliant with this standard. Inspectors agreed with this judgment.

A positive sense of identity was promoted for most children by the service area and foster carers. All but one child was allocated a social worker, and they were allocated a social care leader who was supervised by a social work team leader. Tusla staff and their foster carers advocated well for children. There was recognition that not all children identify with their culture of origin and this was respected. Inspectors reviewed 21 children's care records and found that the religious status of three children was not included in their care plan and seven children had no plan or a limited plan to support and promote their cultural background. One child told inspectors that they had requested an item in their child-in-care review meeting to help them support their culture but this was not followed through on by their social worker.

The service area placed children with their siblings, relative foster carers or locally with general foster carers, when possible and appropriate. All children that were assessed to be placed with their siblings were successfully placed. Of the 141 children in foster care, 127 remained in their community, and eight children who did not continue to live in their community were placed with relative foster carers. Children's contact and relationships with their families was supported where possible and appropriate. The best interests and views of children were respected with regard to contact arrangements. Where children requested a break from family contact, inspectors found that social workers maintained contact with family members. This ensured that if a child decided to return to family contact the line of communication remained established.

Children's sexual identity was supported and promoted. The service area had an established LGBTQ+ group that care experienced children attended. This group was promoted by social workers and foster carers. The service area had developed a youth group for children who were care experienced. This gave children the opportunity to share their experiences, ideas and participate in plans for the group. Inspectors met with children who attended this group and they were positive about their experience. An external youth group ran a number of programmes that promoted positive sense of identity, positive relationships and social awareness. Inspectors found that there was a range of groups that children attended that were for both care experienced children and children from the wider community.

This assisted in the strengthening and expanding of their social network and sense of belonging.

Children's families were involved in decisions about their care where appropriate. Parents' views were recorded in children's care plans. Children were listened to, their view was recorded in their care plans and they were involved in decisions regarding their care. Social workers spoke with children prior to their child-in-care review and children were offered a review form to complete. Some children chose not to attend their reviews and not to fill in review forms, however, inspectors found efforts were made to seek children's views. These views were listened to and were reflected in the action plans of the child-in-care review minutes.

Children were supported to understand events in their lives and their family history. Inspectors found examples of creative and age appropriate methods to convey information to children with complex family history. Life story work and managing difficult conversations with children was supported by consultation work between Tusla psychology service and social workers. Inspectors found that foster carers and social workers were strong advocates for children who were seeking information on family history. Foster carers understood the importance of keeping items that belonged to children safe, such as family photos, medals and other memorabilia. Foster carers shared photos and other memorabilia with children's families. However, inspectors did not find records of social workers facilitating or encouraging children's access to their files. The principal social worker advised that any requests made by children to see their file would be facilitated by social workers.

There was an emphasis on providing continuity of care with regard to the use of respite foster care. Inspectors found that respite foster carers were sometimes sourced from the foster carer and the child's family and friend network. This was a naturally forming continuity of care that allowed for children to be cared for by people they were already familiar with. Other children had consistent general respite carers that were part of their care plans.

The particular needs of children with disabilities or medical needs were recognised in decisions made about their care. Inspectors found that there was strong collaborative work between Tusla, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and Mayo Mental Health Services. There were regular meetings to discuss children's access to supports and services and this gave the opportunity for Tusla management to escalate any concerns or further discuss complex cases that may not meet the threshold for available services. At times, access to private services were deemed necessary, however, it was clear from minutes reviewed that public services were the preferred choice by all stakeholders.

A positive sense of identity was promoted for some children by the service area and foster carers. There was recognition that not all children identify with their culture of origin and this was respected. Inspectors did not find records of children being encouraged or facilitated to access their files. Care planning for children with regard to cultural background and religious status required strengthening. For these reasons, this standard was deemed substantially compliant.

Judgment: Substantially compliant

Standard 2: Family and friends

Children and young people in foster care are encouraged and facilitated to maintain and develop family relationships and friendships.

The service area judged themselves to be substantially compliant with this standard. Inspectors did not agree with this judgment, and found it was compliant.

The service area facilitated regular and appropriate contact between children and their families as set out in their care plans. Children were placed with their siblings when this was in line with their assessed needs. They were placed with family and friends when this was deemed the most appropriate placement to meet their assessed needs. Children's views were actively sought by social workers, and any wish to change family contact was respected. Family contact was continuously monitored and reviewed to reflect changing needs of the child and family members. Social workers explained family contact decisions with children and complex decisions were revisited with children to ensure they understood.

The service area had a family contact working group to improve family contact experience for families. This group looked at the purpose of family contact and how this was being achieved. For example, a family with a plan for reunification would require the family contact arrangement to build up in frequency over time to work towards achieving reunification. The group reviewed family contact arrangements in terms of space, location, transport, resources, supervision needs and experience for family members. This group had expanded the number of locations for family contact by working collaboratively with other agencies with suitable premises.

There were procedures for agreeing, monitoring and reviewing family contact arrangements. Where family contact was supervised there was consideration of the child's views, it was monitored, observations were recorded, the quality of

interactions were recorded and ways to improve the quality of family contact were identified.

The views of parents were sought on how they felt family contact was going and improvements that could be made. Inspectors found that the rationale for supervised family contact was clearly recorded and was regularly reviewed. There were records of work done with children explaining the rationale for supervised family contact and any time limits.

The service area promoted family contact in children's foster homes, where appropriate. Within relative foster carers, there were higher levels of informal family contact arrangements as agreed within the children's care plans. General foster carers had built relationships with children's families and facilitated family contact in the foster home or other locations, where appropriate. Children also met with siblings who were not placed together in social and sports clubs, and this helped to build naturally-forming connections. Children also maintained contact with their family through phone and video calls.

All children were placed with their sibling group where this was in line with their assessed needs. There were 36 sibling groups placed together by the service area. Inspectors spoke with three sibling groups that were placed together. They spoke about having family celebrations together and attending youth club together. Some children had siblings placed outside of the service area. Foster carers facilitated contact outside the service area and outside Ireland. Inspectors found challenges were experienced for a siblings group placed in another service area. Following the inspection, the principal social worker advised that this was being followed up by social work team and contact would be made the principal social worker in the other service area.

Children were encouraged and facilitated to maintain and develop friendships. Most children remained within their community which allowed them to maintain and develop existing friendships. Most children that were school going age were able to remain in their school, or transitioned to secondary school. Children were facilitated and encouraged to join youth groups, sports and social clubs. Older children were facilitated to go on trips away with youth groups. Children attended support groups that gave them an opportunity to meet with children with similar life experiences and build on their social networks.

Overall, the service area facilitated regular and appropriate contact between children, their families and friends. Children were placed with their siblings and in relative foster care when this was in line with their assessed needs. Family contact was

continuously monitored and reviewed to reflect the changing needs of children and family members. Family contact decisions were discussed and explained to children. For these reasons, this standard was deemed compliant.

Judgment: Compliant

Standard 3: Children's rights

Children and young people are treated with dignity, their privacy is respected, they make choices based on information provided to them in an age-appropriate manner, and their views, including complaints, heard when decisions are made which affect them or the care they receive.

The service area judged themselves to be substantially compliant with this standard. Inspectors did not agree with this judgment, and found it was compliant.

Children were provided with information about their rights and an advocacy service for children in care that could further support them in upholding and promoting their rights. All children were given an information pack when they moved to their foster care home. This pack contained an information booklet about the role of their social worker and their responsibility to ensure children's rights were respected. There was space provided for children to write the names of other people they may wish to contact if they were worried, not happy with the social work service or wanted to make a complaint. There was another booklet that gave greater details of the complaints procedure within Tusla and external agencies. This included how to request a review of a complaint decision. There was a booklet that detailed the services that were available from an external advocacy service with contact details and social media platforms. The pack also contained a booklet about being in foster care and the standard of care children should expect to receive. All the children that spoke with inspectors understood their rights, how to make a complaint and were aware of an advocacy service for children in care.

Children were encouraged to be independent consistent with their age, stage of development and disability. Some of the examples found by inspectors were accessing school transport, adapting a foster home to make it more accessible, facilitating contact with peer groups and promoting self-care routines. Children also travelled independently to see family and friends, where appropriate.

Children's right to recreation was promoted and supported by the service area and children's foster carers. Inspectors found that children were engaged in a wide range of activities and attended discos with their friends. Children were encouraged to develop their hobbies and skills in sports and in the arts. The youth clubs children

attended gave them opportunities to meet their peer group and develop confidence and learn skills to create healthy relationships.

There was an emphasis on children's participation in decision-making about how they lived on a day-to-day basis. Inspectors found many examples of when children exercised choice and had been encouraged to develop their values, beliefs and preferences. For example, children made decisions regarding how they spent their free time, the clothes they wished to wear, who they spent time with and who was made aware of their care history. Children were treated with dignity and respect. Their right to privacy was respected and they had time alone with family and friends where this was in their best interest and appropriate.

Statutory visits by social workers and child-in-care reviews were held in line with regulations. Children were given the opportunity to express their view on their care planning by meeting with social workers, completing a review form and attending their child-in-care review meeting. Children in care, in collaboration with the social work team, developed an online child-in-care review form for the 16+ age group. Other children were given a child-in care review form to express their views and share their experience with their social worker. This form could be completed with support of an adult if the child needed. They shared their likes, dislikes, any worries, what made them happy or sad, about where they live, their daily routine and wishes for the future. Information was conveyed in the form contained words, pictures and symbols.

Inspectors found most children's views were sought and considered in their care planning. Social workers spoke with children on their own during statutory visits. Social workers had a good understanding and were clear on ways to seek younger children's views about their care, such as creative tools used in social work practice and interactive play. Inspectors reviewed files of young and non-verbal children and found children's views were not consistently sought as part of their care plan, noting that the child was too young to express their view or noting through observation how the child was getting on. The use of creative tools or interactive play were not used in these instances.

Children were aware of the right to complain and how to make a complaint. There was only one complaint made by a child in the 12 months prior to the inspection and this was at the early stages of local resolution. The service area had a complaints and compliments tracking system to capture those that were made by all interested parties. There were nine complaints and 54 compliments recorded in 2023 made by people other than children. All complaints were being progressed as per their policy. The tracker was reviewed monthly and discussed at senior manager meetings. This

ensured senior manager's maintained good oversight of the quality of the service and monitored complaints for emerging issues or themes.

The service area promoted children's right to education by working collaboratively with other professionals to ensure children had a positive experience that best met their needs. Inspectors found examples of social workers working together with educators to ensure children had a positive school experience. For children with disabilities there were examples in records reviewed of specialist support and assistive technology being provided to ensure children were supported to meet their educational needs.

A senior psychologist collaborated with the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) and delivered a presentation to all schools in the service area called '*what do educators needs to be aware of when working with children in care and how we can build resilience and wellbeing*'.

The service area provided rights-based, child-centred practice. Children's right to participation and decision-making was respected and promoted. Children were supported to understand their rights and were treated with dignity and respect. Their right to privacy was respected. They were informed of the complaints procedure and complaints were managed in line with policy. For this reason, this standard was deemed compliant.

Judgment: Compliant

Standard 4: Valuing diversity

Children and young people are provided with foster care services that take account of their age, stage of development, individual assessed needs, illness or disability, gender, family background, culture and ethnicity (including membership of the Traveller community), religion and sexual identity.

The service area judged themselves to be substantially compliant with this standard. Inspectors agreed with this judgment.

Children's diversity should be explored in child-in-care reviews and a plan to support their diversity outlined in their care plan. Some but not all children were provided with a care plan that responded to their diversity. Inspectors found that while an individualised care planning approach had benefits for some children, there was a lack of strategic planning for the service area and there were limited service initiatives seen with regard to promotion of diversity.

The service area sought to place children with foster carers from their own cultural, ethnic and religious groups, and from the data received this was achieved for 115 children out of the 141 children in foster care.

There were six foster care households from diverse backgrounds and one potential foster carer from a diverse background undergoing the assessment process. The majority of children in foster care in the service area were from a white Irish heritage.

There were 19 children with a disability in foster care, with some foster carers receiving an enhanced payment given the high and complex support needs of the children they were caring for. Inspectors found that adaptations to foster carer's homes were completed in many cases, or were in progress allowing children greater accessibility and independence.

Children with a disability were receiving a coordinated approach to their care in the service area. There were quarterly meetings held jointly with the HSE senior management and regular meetings of the area joint working group, which consisted of managers from the HSE, Tusla and Mayo Mental Health Service. At these meetings children's care needs were followed up and actions assigned to the relevant manager. In terms of future planning for children with a disability, Mayo aftercare steering committee met on a regular basis. Complex cases were discussed and followed up. The status of assessments of need for children working towards independence was tracked. Inspectors found from reviewing a sample of minutes from these meetings, that children's wishes were considered and required actions, such as referrals to appropriate supports, were agreed to achieve these wishes. If necessary parallel plans were put in place to provide security for children as they moved onto greater independence.

There were no reports of children experiencing discrimination. Children had an advocacy service for children in care available to them, as well as local support groups. Some children had a guardian ad litem appointed to them. Additionally, through youth clubs, Tusla Psychology and some individual social workers, children were supported and encouraged to develop skills to deal with all forms of discrimination. Inspectors found that foster carers were empowered to be important advocates for their foster children, questioning waiting list times for operations, appealing decisions made and encouraging and facilitating children to manage their disability. Foster carers encouraged and facilitated children to join youth groups, social clubs and local support groups.

There was one incident of bullying reported to the service area, this had been investigated in the setting that it occurred and all relevant parties were informed of the outcome.

Children were not consistently supported to understand, appreciate, practice or express their religion. Inspectors found children's religious status was not always recorded in their care plans and plans were not consistently in place to meet their religious needs. There were examples of children receiving their religious sacraments and for others their choice not to receive their religious sacraments was respected.

Children's cultural background was recorded on their care plans. Inspectors found limited work was done with some children around their cultural identity. There was inadequate support for foster carers to enable children to develop positive understanding of their origins and backgrounds when children were placed outside of their cultural background or religious group. Foster carers had not received training to develop cultural awareness and there was no training in this area planned. One foster carer told inspectors that they received no support from their social worker on how to meet their foster child's cultural needs and instead their family network gave them advice. Inspectors found some good examples of work being completed by social workers with children from a Traveller background that was supported by the child's family members.

Some but not all children were provided with foster care services that responded to their diversity. There was a lack of strategic planning and limited service initiatives seen with regard to promotion of diversity. Children were not consistently supported to understand, appreciate, practice or express their religion. There was limited work done with some children and their foster carers around their cultural identity. For these reasons, this standard was deemed substantially compliant.

Judgment: Substantially compliant

Standard 6: Assessment of children and young people

An assessment of the child's or young person's needs is made prior to any placement or, in the case of emergencies, as soon as possible thereafter.

The service area judged themselves to be substantially compliant with this standard. Inspectors did not agree with this judgment, and found it was compliant.

An assessment of children's needs was carried out prior to a child's placement in foster care, where possible. Children placed in an emergency foster care placement had a timely and comprehensive needs assessment. The decision-making regarding a child's placement was recorded on the case file and communicated to children and their family. There was a multidisciplinary approach to care planning that included

children, their family and foster carers. Copies of assessments were provided to children, their family and foster carers.

There were 56 children placed in foster care in the 24 months prior to the inspection. A total of three children had been placed in foster care in an emergency in the 12 months prior to the inspection. In line with standards, an initial assessment of the children's needs were completed within one week of placement and a comprehensive assessment within six weeks. Additional supports were provided to the children, their families and foster carers based on their assessed needs. Inspectors found the needs of children continued to be assessed by social workers and a multidisciplinary team throughout their placement, and changing needs were responded to appropriately.

The assessment of needs of children were detailed and comprehensive with a multidisciplinary approach. The assessments considered the emotional, psychological, medical, educational and other needs of children in line with standards and took account of any previous assessments of the children, such as child protection case conference reports and court reports. There were complex case reviews held for children whose assessed needs required the input of a multidisciplinary team to ensure interventions put in place, resulted in the best outcomes, in the best interests of the children. Inspectors found that decision-making at these reviews was based on good analysis of children's overall needs, with careful consideration of outcomes and supports required. There were good records on file of social workers consultation with children, their families and foster carers.

Social work assessments of children with complex needs or disabilities were informed by a multidisciplinary approach. Children's assessments included referrals for speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and psychological support. Tusla psychology service provided therapeutic support to children in care which included psychology service, play therapy and art therapy. Social workers were recently provided with training from Tusla psychology with regard to psychological assessments, key assessment considerations, types of assessments and using assessment recommendations.

Inspectors found that children, their families and foster carers were encouraged and facilitated to participate in the assessment process. Assessment outcomes were shared with the children in an age-appropriate manner and copies of the assessment were given to their families and foster carers. There were examples of creative ways in which children were supported to understand their assessment outcomes and their feelings about their care plans. This support was often given to children over multiple visits from their social worker.

Overall, children had comprehensive assessments of need completed. Assessments used a multidisciplinary approach and considered the previous assessments of the children. The assessment outcomes were shared with children, their families and foster carers. There was good collaborative work between agencies to meet the assessed needs of children. For this reason, this standard was deemed compliant.

Judgment: Compliant

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.

The service area judged themselves to be substantially compliant with this standard. Inspectors agreed with this judgment.

Overall, most children benefited from being matched with foster carers who were capable and experienced in meeting their needs. Over one third of all children in foster care were placed in relative foster care. At the time of the inspection, there were no children waiting for a foster care placement. There were five children approved for long-term foster care in previous 12 months and seven children waiting on a long-term placement and they were all being cared for in short term foster care. There was no availability in private foster care agencies. There were three foster care households where the number of unrelated children exceeded the standards.⁴ Additional supports were put in place to support the placements and improve the outcomes for the children placed there. The service area experienced challenges to matching children with foster carers with the capacity to meet their assessed needs as the pool of available foster carers was small.

The service area had introduced a comprehensive placement request and matching tool approximately two years ago. The child's social worker was responsible for detailing the child's assessed needs, known risks and care history, if applicable. The efforts made to place a child with family or friends and the outcome of these efforts were outlined in this tool. The view of children and parents were sought and recorded. When a placement was agreed or placement proceeded the fostering social worker and allocated fostering link social worker detailed the rationale for the

⁴ *National Standards for Foster Care* (2003) Standard 10.6. Generally, no more than two children are placed in the same foster home at any time, except the case of sibling groups and these are not placed with other foster children. The foster care committee must approve any departure from this practice in advance of placement.

decision. Inspectors found from reviewing matching records that this tool was embedded in practice.

Placement requests were reviewed by a matching panel that met on a fortnightly bases. The panel was made up of the principal social worker, fostering link social work team leaders, fostering link social workers, and child-in-care social workers, and their role was to consider and decide if the proposed foster carers had the capacity to meet the child's assessed needs. If a child had been placed in an emergency then this placement would be considered for suitability of the match. This panel reviewed the outcome of placement requests, disruptions, discharges and exit interviews.

The panel tracked ongoing assessments and any assessments on a waiting list.

Inspectors found that while this was a comprehensive process, the low availability of foster carers within the service area's pool of available foster carers, resulted in short-term placements for children requiring long-term care. The lack of long term foster care placements for children impacted on their stability and caused disruption by having more than one foster care placement.

The service area endeavoured to ensure children had a transition plan before moving into a proposed foster placement. This allowed for children to express an informed view of the proposed placement. Inspectors found transition plans that spanned a two week or longer period, with overnights included. There were records of social workers seeking children's views and discussions on their experience. Inspectors reviewed the records of a child moving from a short- term placement to a long-term placement without a transition plan in place. The social worker advised that while it was not an emergency placement there was time pressure for this placement to begin.

Matching was recognised as an ongoing process for both general and relative foster care placements. Inspectors found records of supervision and support visits that detailed observations of how children were interacting with their foster family, how they were settling in and of their relationships with birth or other foster children. Children's views were sought on their placement and this was recorded on their file. These visits also provided fostering link social workers with a greater understanding of the day-to-day life in the home and any possible risks previously unknown that would impact on a placement. Inspectors found that the service area reconsidered the appropriateness of a match and made alternative plans for children in these instances.

When matching children with foster carers, consideration was given to children remaining within their community. From the data provided prior to the inspection there were 141 children in foster care, and of these children 127 were placed in their

community. There were 11 children placed outside of their community, however, they were placed in relative foster care. Most children were matched with foster carers who had the capacity to meet their assessed needs. The matching process was embedded into practice and the quality of the records was good. There was a strong emphasis on placing children in their community and in relative foster care. The pool of available foster carers was small which made matching challenging for the area. There were delays in securing long-term placements for children that were cared for in short term foster care. For this reason, this standard was deemed 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.

The service area judged themselves to be substantially compliant with this standard. Inspectors agreed with this judgment.

The service area had a small pool of foster carers to meet the needs of the children in the area. From the data received prior to inspection, there was no child waiting for a foster care placement, seven children were awaiting for a long-term match and there were ten available placements and seven respite placements. Over a third of all children were placed in relative foster care. Increasing the pool of foster carers and retaining foster carers was a clear focus of the management team. It was acknowledged by management that having a small pool of available foster carers had caused challenges for the service area in terms of matching children with foster carers to meet children's assessed needs. There was limited involvement of foster carers in recruitment efforts of the service area, however, this was an area the management team were endeavouring to develop.

The service area had a recruitment strategy for 2023, with the overall aim that children who enter care would have a range of placements available to allow for the most appropriate match. The strategy reflected on what research had found regarding people who were successful foster carers and the area's strategic efforts focused on these groups. Performance indicators outlined how this strategy would be reviewed at the end of 2023. The strategy was aligned with Tusla's national foster care campaign. A recruitment action plan was developed and agreed by the service

area management team. Inspectors found that many of these actions were completed or progressing well. For example, the principal social worker had a radio interview with a local radio station, an information campaign focused on those working in the caring professions was completed, and building capacity of relative foster carers was evident, as over one third of all foster care households were relatives.

Recruiting foster carers from minority and new community groups was a focus of the recruitment strategy. There were six foster carers from diverse backgrounds and one potential foster carer from a diverse background completing the assessment process. There was progress being made on the recruitment of a support worker whose role would include promoting the recruitment of foster carers from the Traveller community. The target for the successful recruitment of this support worker was by the end of 2023.

There was one recruitment campaign and six information meetings held in the 12 months prior to the inspection. There were three relative foster carers in the past 12 months whose foster children had become adults, and their applications as general foster carers were successful. There were 23 enquiries to become a foster carer, with five of these progressing to application stage. All enquiries were responded to within three days. The principal social worker spoke about the high level of work that went into each enquiry that did not always result in a person becoming a foster carer.

Outside of the screening process, some of the obstacles they face can be a change in personal circumstances, or during the training programme deciding that fostering was not right for them. The fostering team had faced capacity challenges in undertaking its own assessments of applicants, and had relied on an external assessor for this important engagement and relationship-building work. The fostering team would shortly return to full capacity allowing for assessments to be completed internally. The service area had a retention strategy for 2023, with the overall aim that foster carers would have a positive experience of supports that respond to their needs and supports their ability as foster carers. The importance of retaining skilled and experienced foster carers was clear in the strategy.

All foster carers who had a child placed with them were allocated a fostering link social worker, had access to therapeutic support and training. At the time of the inspection, there was a pool of foster carers to meet most of the demands of the service, however, the service area was aware that capacity to meet the demands of the area can change quickly.

The service area conducted a foster care needs analysis in January 2023, which provided the service area with a clear analysis of 2022 to support the retention strategy for 2023. This identified specific needs in the area and highlighted the priority to retain existing foster carers. With regard to retaining foster carers, there was significant importance placed on the delivery of high quality social work practice by fostering teams, the children in care team and the child protection team. Inspectors found the quality of the social work practice was reviewed at regular supervision sessions and discussed at team meetings. There was responsibility by all teams to ensure foster carers were supported, felt satisfied with the service they received, and thus remained as foster carers.

Inspectors found that there were high quality therapeutic supports provided through Tusla psychology service that responded to the needs of children and foster families. This included one-to-one parenting support sessions and support for foster children and birth children. A senior psychologist guided some work completed by fostering link social workers with foster carers. There were regular support and supervision visits from fostering link social workers. There were supports available from other relevant external agencies depending on the assessed needs of the foster child.

The retention strategy set out ways to acknowledge the value of foster carers. The service area was committed to ensuring the voice of foster carers were part of their reviews, in children's care planning and other meetings. Inspectors found that foster carers were empowered to be strong advocates for their foster children at their care planning meetings. Milestones in fostering experience were acknowledged by the fostering team, such as thank you letters and flowers. There were plans progressing to hold an event later in the year for all foster carers, foster children and birth children. Foster carers choosing to leave the service were acknowledged for their contribution by Tusla and the Chair of the Foster Care Committee.

The service had a training needs analysis for foster carers 2021 – 2024. This was based on feedback from foster carer's questionnaires on training needs in 2021. Outside of the mandatory training, additional training took place such as: circle of security, which is trauma informed training; internet safety; and safe care and allegations training. Foundations in Fostering training took place for newly-approved foster carers.

Fourteen foster carers left the foster care panel in the 12 months prior to the inspection. There were exit interviews offered to all foster carers and four were completed. Some of the reasons given were that foster carers were retiring from foster care or had adopted their foster child. Inspectors found that the support given by the fostering link social workers and the therapeutic supports provided were

highlighted by the foster carers as very beneficial. There were a high number of 18 year old foster children that were in aftercare but remained in the foster family's homes.

The service area had a retention strategy and recruitment strategy for 2023 that reflected current research, feedback from foster carer's exit interviews and a foster care needs analysis conducted in January 2023. The experience of foster carers was positive and they reported feeling supported. However, the service area had limited involvement of foster carers in promoting and recruiting potential new foster carers. The recruitment of new foster carers was low in the last 12 months, with a greater number leaving the service than joining. The fostering team had faced capacity challenges in undertaking its own assessments of applicants, and had relied on an external assessor. For these reasons, this standard was deemed substantially compliant.

Judgment: Substantially Compliant

**Appendix 1:
National Standards for Foster Care (2003)
and
Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care)
Regulations,⁵ 1995**

Standard 1	Positive sense of identity
Standard 2	Family and friends
Standard 3	Children's rights
Standard 4	Valuing diversity
Regulation Part III Article 8	Religion
Standard 6	Assessment of children and young people
Regulation Part III, Article 6	Assessment of circumstances of child
Standard 8	Matching carers with children and young people
Regulations Part III, Article 7	Capacity of foster parents to meet the needs of child
Part III, Article 7 ⁶	Assessment of circumstances of the child
Standard 21	Recruitment and retention of an appropriate range of foster carers

⁵ Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations, 1995

⁶ Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations, 1995

Compliance Plan for Mayo Foster Care Service OSV – 0004379

Inspection ID: MON_0039830

Date of inspection: 4-6 July 2023

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 judgment 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 judgment 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 that 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 the timeframe.

Compliance plan provider’s response:

Standard Heading	Judgment
Standard 1: Positive sense of identity	Substantially Compliant
<p>Outline how you are going to come into compliance with Standard 1: Children and young people are provided with foster care services that promote a positive sense of identity.</p> <p>We ensure the views of nonverbal children are explored and recorded as per their needs. This will be recorded in their care plan and audited through our file audit process.</p> <p>Children will be informed of their right to access files by Social Workers. This will be facilitated where requested, in an age appropriate manner. Audited through file audit process.</p> <p>Cultural background will be explored in each child’s child in care review. Evidence of discussion & any plan arising in respect of this will be clearly documented in the care plan. Audited through file audit process.</p> <p>Religious status will be explored in each child’s child in care review. Evidence of discussion & any plan arising in respect of this will be clearly documented in the care plan. Audited through file audit process.</p>	
Standard 4: Valuing diversity	Substantially Compliant
<p>Outline how you are going to come into compliance with Standard 4: Children and young people are provided with foster care services that take account of their age, stage of development, individual assessed needs, illness or disability, gender, family background, culture and ethnicity (including membership of the Traveller community), religion and sexual identity.</p> <p>Diversity will be explored in each child’s child in care review. The plan for this will be clearly documented in the care plan. Audited through file audit process.</p> <p>All staff will attend Diversity in Modern Ireland and LGBTQI+ training</p> <p>All foster carers will be offered training in Diversity in Modern Ireland.</p>	

Standard 8: Matching carers with children and young people	Substantially Compliant
<p>Outline how you are going to come into compliance with Standard 8: 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.</p> <p>Recruitment campaigns have already started and will continue in order to recruit a wider pool of foster carers.</p> <p>Assessments of potential foster carers will take place in a timely manner. This will be audited through supervision.</p>	
Standard 21: Recruitment and retention of an appropriate range of foster carers	Substantially Compliant
<p>Outline how you are going to come into compliance with Standard 21: 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.</p> <p>Area is in the process of recruiting fostering peer support worker. This worker will support with recruitment. Fostering team will also identify other foster carers that will support with recruitment campaigns.</p> <p>Peer support worker will examine the need and local interest in a fostering peer support group. This will be facilitated if there is enough interest.</p> <p>(Also includes Standard 8 actions)</p>	

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 compiled with
Standard 1	Children and young people are provided with foster care services that promote a positive sense of identity.	Substantially Compliant	Yellow	Q4
Standard 4	Children and young people are provided with foster care services that take account of their age, stage of development, individual assessed needs, illness or disability, gender, family background, culture and ethnicity (including membership of the Traveller community), religion and sexual identity.	Substantially Compliant	Yellow	Q4
Standard 8	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.	Substantially Compliant	Yellow	Q4
Standard 21	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.	Substantially Compliant	Yellow	Q4