

**Health Information and Quality Authority
Regulation Directorate**



**Compliance and Monitoring Inspection
Report for a Non-statutory Foster Care
Provider under the Child Care (Amendment)
Act 2011**

Name of Provider:	Orchard Children's Services	
Dates of inspection:	25/08/2014 – 28/08/2014	
No. of Fieldwork days:	4	
Lead inspector:	Carol Maricle	
Support inspector(s):	Eva Boyle	
Type of inspection:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> announced <input type="checkbox"/> unannounced	
Inspection ID:	701	

About monitoring of compliance

The purpose of monitoring is to safeguard vulnerable children of any age who are receiving foster care services. 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 continuous improvement so that children have better, safer lives.

The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) is authorised by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs 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 (CFA) including non-statutory providers of foster care.

In order to drive quality and improve safety in the provision of foster care services to children, the Authority carries out inspections to:

- **Assess** if the service provider has all the elements in place to safeguard children and young people and promote their well being while placed with their service
- **Seek assurances** from service providers that they are **safeguarding children** through the mitigation of serious risks
- **Provide** service providers with the **findings** of inspections so that service providers develop action plans to implement safety and quality improvements
- **Inform** the public and **promote confidence** through the publication of the Authority's findings.

Monitoring inspections assess continuing compliance with the regulations and Standards, can be announced or unannounced and take place to monitor compliance with relevant regulations and Standards.

Summary of compliance with the National Standards Foster Care 2003 and relevant regulations

This inspection report sets out the findings of a monitoring inspection:

- ☒ to monitor ongoing regulatory compliance with National Standards
- ☐ following receipt of solicited and unsolicited information
- ☐ following notification of a significant incident or event

The table below sets out the themes that were inspected against on this inspection.

Theme 1: Child Centred Services Services for children are centred on the individual child and their care and support needs. Child-centred services provide the right support at the right time to enable children to lead their lives in as fulfilling a way as possible. A child-centred approach to service provision is one where services are planned and delivered with the active involvement and participation of the children who use the service.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Theme 2: Safe and Effective Services Services promote the safety of children by protecting them from abuse and neglect and following policy and procedure in reporting any concerns of abuse and/or neglect to the relevant authorities. Effective services ensure that the systems are in place to promote children's welfare. Assessment and planning is central to the identification of children's care needs. In order to provide the care children require, foster carers are assessed, approved and supported. Each child receives the supports they require to maintain their wellbeing.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Theme 3: Health and Development The health and development needs of children are assessed and arrangements are in place to meet the assessed needs. Children's educational needs are given high priority to support them to achieve at school and access education or training in adult life.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Theme 4: Leadership, Governance and Management Effective governance is achieved by planning and directing activities, using good business practices, accountability and integrity. In an effective governance structure, there are clear lines of accountability at individual, team and management levels and all staff working in the service are aware of their responsibilities. Risks to the service as well as to individuals are well managed and the system is subject to a rigorous quality assurance system.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Theme 5: Use of Resources Services recruit sufficient foster carers to meet the needs of children. Foster carers stay with the provider and continue to offer placements to children.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Theme 6: Workforce Each staff member has a key role to play in delivering child-centred, effective and safe agency to support children. Services recruit and manage their workforce to ensure that staff has the required skills, experience and competencies to respond to the needs of children.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

1. Methodology

As part of this inspection inspectors met with children, foster carers, link social workers and managers. Inspectors spoke with birth parents and other professionals such as Child and Family Agency social workers for children placed with the provider. Inspectors observed practices and reviewed documentation such as relevant registers, policies and procedures, personnel files, information on the child and carer contained in the foster carers' household files.

During the inspection, inspectors evaluated:

- quality of training and support provided to foster carers
- safety of the service
- assessment of foster carers
- promotion of children's rights
- the effectiveness of assessment and risk management processes
- the extent of focus on the child or young person's needs

The key activities of this inspection involved:

- the interrogation of data
- the review of policies and procedures
- observation and reviews of minutes of various meetings
- the review of 27 foster carers' files by both reviewing and sampling information contained within their files
- meeting with 11 children and six foster carers
- a focus group with nine foster carers
- telephone interviews with two parents
- a focus group with staff employed by the provider
- a focus group with two managers involved in the day to day line management of staff
- an interview with the chief executive officer/principal social worker
- a telephone interview with a company director
- telephone interviews with five CFA social workers
- telephone interview with the chair of two CFA foster care committees
- telephone interview with a CFA monitoring officer
- observing staff in their day-to-day work

Acknowledgements

The Authority wishes to thank the foster carers and children for the openness with which they embraced the inspection process and welcomed inspectors into their homes. Inspectors wish to acknowledge the cooperation of the staff of the Orchard Children's Services and members of the Child and Family Agency with the inspection. Inspectors would also like to thank the parents of children with whom the inspectors spoke.

2. Profile

2.1 The Child and Family Agency

Child and family services in Ireland are now the primary focus of a single dedicated State agency – the Child and Family Agency overseen by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The Child and Family Agency Act 2013 (No. 40 of 2013) established the Child and Family Agency with effect from 1 January 2014.

The Child and Family Agency have responsibility for a range of services, including statutory duties towards children in care including allocation of a social worker, care planning and reviews. Children's foster care services are provided by the Child and Family Agency and may be provided by non-statutory foster care agencies following agreement with the Child and Family Agency. The Child and Family Agency retain their statutory responsibilities for children placed with these services and approve the foster carers through their foster care committees. The foster care provider is required to adhere to relevant Standards and regulations when providing a service on behalf of the CFA. Both services are accountable for the care, safety and well-being of children. This inspection focuses on the specific responsibilities of the service provider under the standards to provide good quality safe care to children.

2.2 The Provider

Orchard Children's Services provided a range of services including foster care services, supported lodgings¹, an out-of-hours emergency placement service² and an assessment service for relative foster carers (supervised by the CFA). The provider has been in operation in Ireland since 2003 and in 2009 commenced the provision of foster care services. The provider is based in Kildare and provides services predominantly in the Leinster region.

Orchard Children's Services was governed by three directors, one of whom is the principal social worker and chief executive officer (CEO) and another is the financial director. The third director was not involved in day-to-day operations.

There were two social work teams: an assessment team and a link support social worker team, line managed by the deputy manager who in turn reported to a team manager for fostering services. The team manager had operational responsibilities as well as maintaining an overview of the service. A consultant practitioner in fostering support was also part of the management team.

At the time of the inspection, the team manager was on leave and some management duties had been reassigned in the interim. The deputy manager was

¹ Supported lodgings placements offer supported accommodation for vulnerable teenagers who are not ready to live independently for a variety of reasons.

² Out-of-hours emergency placement service is a service provided by the agency to the Crisis Intervention Support Program (CISP) Focus Ireland/CFA team in Dublin and West Wicklow

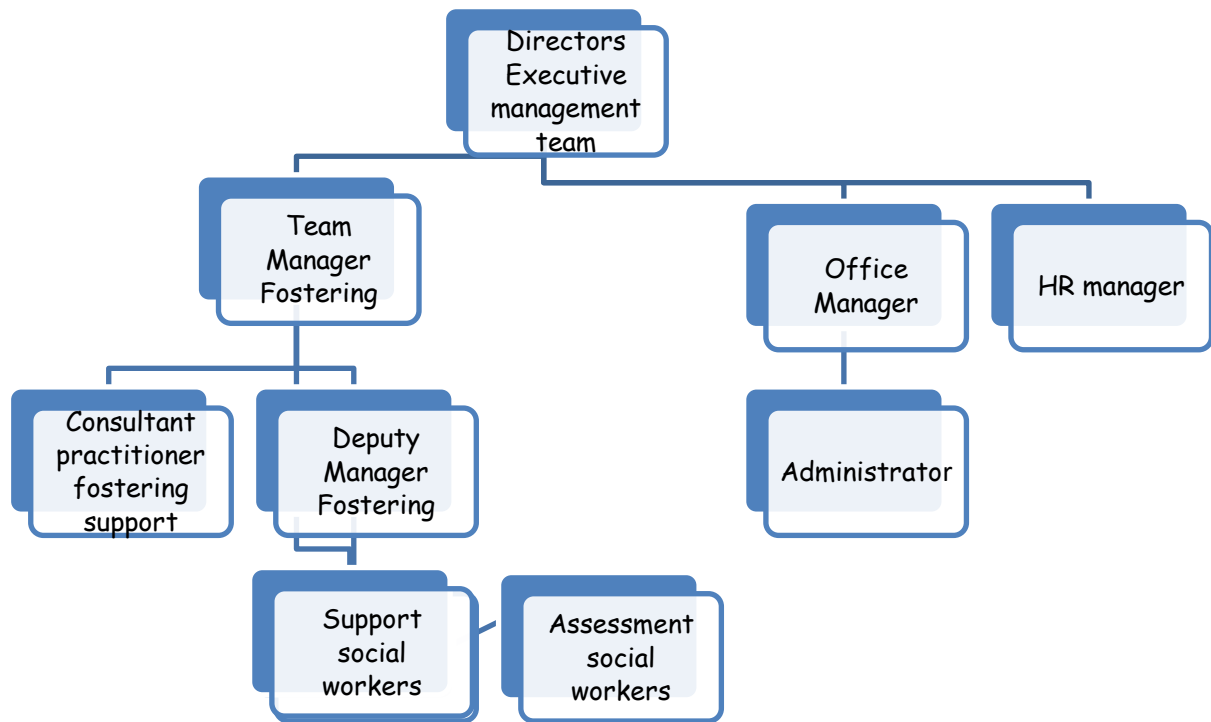
acting as the team manager and was line managed by the CEO. The consultant practitioner was managing link support social workers and the principal social worker and chief executive officer line managed the assessment team.

According to the data set returned by the provider to the Authority, there were 75 children placed by the Child and Family Agency in 50 foster care and supported lodging households. The total number of foster care and supported lodging households in the service was 57.

The service dealt with a number of Child and Family Agency foster care committees as required under the Standards and predominantly liaised with committees in Kildare, Wicklow and Dublin North West. A service level agreement for 2014 was not yet in place between the provider and the Child and Family Agency.

The organisational chart in Figure 1 on the following page describes the management and team structure as provided by the service.

Figure 1: Organisational structure of the Orchard Children's Services



3. Summary of Findings

Children in foster care require a high quality service, which is safe and well supported by social work practice. Foster carers must be able to provide children with warm and nurturing relationships in order for children to achieve positive outcomes. Services must be well governed in order to produce these outcomes consistently.

In the inspection the Authority found that out of the 19 Standards assessed, the provider met 10 Standards, and improvements were required for 9 Standards. No significant risks were identified. The findings are set out in the body of this report and the action plan is published separately.

Children received a good quality of care. All of the children attended school and some were preparing to attend third level education. Their health needs were met. The children were supported to keep in regular contact with their birth families. Children were involved in a variety of social and leisure activities in their community and had opportunities similar to their peers. The emotional and physical needs of children were met and specialised supports were provided to children with challenging behaviour and complex needs.

The rights of children were promoted, valued and respected by this service. Children were involved and participated in planning for their future and their voices were heard. A significant proportion of children in receipt of services from this provider were separated children seeking asylum whose legal status was being processed by the State during their placement. These children were valued by the service and their foster carers and there was evidence that they advocated on their behalf with external agencies.

Children were safeguarded by the appropriate systems in place for the assessment of foster carers, supervision of foster carers and supervision of staff by their line managers. These systems were supported by the provider's policies and procedures that were developed in line with relevant national policies, legislation, standards and regulations. Inspectors met with children who told them that they felt safe in their placements and they had people they could talk to if they had any concerns. There was evidence of prompt notification of child protection and welfare concerns to the Child and Family Agency in accordance with Children First (2011).

Aspects of record keeping were in need of improvement. The provider needed to demonstrate a more pro-active approach in obtaining statutory documents for children such as care plans and minutes of child in care reviews in order to improve planning for children.

The service was managed well but there was no robust quality assurance systems and significant improvement was needed in the identification and management of organisational risk. There was no robust system in place to gather outcomes for

children placed with this service. Managers made the best of the resources they had and showed good leadership. There was a qualified and experienced staff team in place and staff members were provided with opportunities for training and were supported in their professional development.

Foster carers were appropriately assessed by the service and approved by foster care committees. Reviews of foster carers needed to improve in order for managers to be assured about the ongoing quality of care provided to children. The quality of support to foster carers was good and all foster carers had an allocated link worker.

4. Summary of judgments under each Standard – Please note that findings and judgments relate to standards that are directly within the remit of the agency inspected but also how the service has implemented their responsibilities in relation to the statutory duties of the Child and Family Agency to the child (denoted*)

During this inspection, inspectors made judgments against the National Standards that relate to the care of children provided by the provider. They used four descriptors:

Exceeds Standards – services are proactive and ambitious for children and there are examples of excellent practice supported by robust systems.

Meets Standard - services are safe and of good quality.

Requires improvement – there are deficits in the quality of services and systems. Some risks to children may be identified.

Significant risk identified – children have been harmed or there is a high possibility that they will experience harm due to poor practice or weak systems.

Theme	National Standards for Foster Care (April 2003)	Judgment
Theme 1: Child Centred Services	Standard 1 Positive sense of identity	Meets Standard
	Standard 2 Family and friends	Meets Standard
	Standard 3 Children's rights	Requires improvement
	Standard 4 Valuing diversity	Meets Standard
	Standard 4 Valuing diversity	Meets Standard
Theme 2: Safe and Effective	Standard 8 Matching foster carers with children and young people	Requires improvement
	Standard 9 A safe and positive environment	Meets Standard
	Standard 10* Safeguarding and child protection	Requires improvement
	Standard 13 Preparation for leaving care and adult life	Meets Standard

Theme	National Standards for Foster Care (April 2003)	Judgment
	Standard 14a* Assessment and approval of non-relative foster carers	Requires improvement
	Standard 15 Supervision and support	Meets Standard
	Standard 16 Training	Requires improvement
	Standard 17 Reviews of foster carers	Requires improvement
Theme 3: Health & Development	Standard 11 Health and development	Meets Standard
	Standard 12 Education	Meets Standard
Theme 4: Leadership, Governance & Management	Standard 18 Effective policies	Meets Standard
	Standard 19 Management and monitoring of foster care agency	Requires improvement
Theme 5: Use of Resources	Standard 21 Recruitment and retention of an appropriate range of foster carers	Meets Standard
Theme 6: Workforce:	Standard 20 Training and Qualifications	Requires improvement

5. Findings and judgments

Compliance with the National Standards for Foster Care 2003

Theme 1: Child Centred Services

Services for children are centred on the individual child and their care and support needs. Child-centred services provide the right support at the right time to enable children to lead their lives in as fulfilling a way as possible. A child-centred approach to service provision is one where services are planned and delivered with the active involvement and participation of the children who use the service.

National Standards for Foster Care (2003)

References:

Standard 1

Positive sense of identity

Standard 2

Family and friends

Standard 3

Children's rights

Standard 4

Valuing diversity

Standard 25

Complaints

The provider took a child-centred approach to the provision of care to children and this was reflected in their social work practice. Services for children were centred on the individual child and their care and support needs. Children were provided with services that took into account their culture and ethnicity. Children were not actively involved or participated in decisions about the service but were consulted about their individual care and planning for their future. Improvements were needed to ensure that children were more aware of their rights including how to make a complaint and access records.

Children's Rights, Dignity and Privacy

The rights of children were recognised and respected by the provider but improvements were needed in ensuring children knew about their rights.

Children's rights to dignity, respect, privacy and confidentiality were respected. Practices were sensitive to the privacy of children such as the secure management of records about children. The handbooks for carers contained specific guidance for

carers on confidentiality. Inspectors met carers who showed them their filing system for all information pertaining to the children in their care and this was found to be appropriate, secure and well organised.

Children rights were promoted in their care. Inspectors found from interviews with children and review of records that in their day-to-day life their key rights were promoted, such as their right to spend time with their birth family and their right to education. Some of the children had contact with an advocacy services such as Empowering Persons in Care (EPIC) and found this useful. Other children had advocates from other services, such as from the Irish Refugee Council. Inspectors also found that some children had a court appointed Guardian at Litem (GAL). A policy was developed by the provider specifically in relation to the role of the GAL and how GALs worked with children. During telephone interviews with social workers from the Child and Family Agency they told inspectors that they were satisfied that the rights of children were upheld and promoted. For example, foster carers actively promoted school attendance for a young person and other foster carers facilitated access by driving considerable distances to ensure that children spent time with their birth family.

Foster carers and staff members had a good understanding about the rights of children. Foster carers told the inspectors that they advocated on behalf of the children and communicated frequently with the child's social worker about a range of rights such as access with birth family, health, schooling and issues pertaining to after-care services or leaving care plans. When a child was placed with foster carers, link workers were responsible for ensuring that carers upheld these rights and they monitored this issue when supervising foster carers. For example, inspectors reviewed records where the rights of children to spend time with their birth parents were a key area of discussion in supervision records between link social workers and carers. On-going training opportunities on children's rights were provided to foster carers and EPIC also delivered training in 2014 to both foster carers and staff.

However, children did not know about their rights. Information on the rights of children in care was referenced in a number of key policies and procedures such as the handbook for foster carers and foster carers providing supported lodgings. There was an information booklet for children entitled 'Info 4 U' but it was not in a format suitable for children of all ages or for those with literacy difficulties. Despite the availability of such information, children did not know about their rights and would not be able to identify any infringements on their rights.

There was evidence of older children being consulted about their lives. For example, inspectors met children that had participated in their child in care reviews. An inspector viewed an after-care plan that took into account the views of the child and their plans for the future.

Diversity

The provider met children's rights and needs in relation to their, diversity, disability, communication and literacy needs and facilitated children with disabilities to access appropriate services.

The rights of children in relation to their identity, disability, diversity, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and religion were upheld by the service. An equality and diversity policy set out the ethos of the provider with regard to the value it placed on difference. Inspectors met with foster carers who spoke respectfully about children and their families in a non-judgmental way. A significant percentage of children were from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds and a number were separated children that had sought asylum in this country. The service had a specific policy on working with separated children that outlined their engagement with specialist agencies such as the Child and Family Agency, the Irish Refugee Council, the Red Cross and international social services. The purpose of this engagement was to promote the rights of these children and ensure correct information was correlated about them to inform their care. Inspectors met children and foster carers who confirmed they had engaged with some of these services. Inspectors also met foster carers who described how they advocated for the rights of separated children and this included liaising with schools, third level institutions and local politicians and councillors.

Some, but not all children were placed with carers from the same cultural background. The matching policy considered a child's racial, religious, cultural and language needs when matching children to foster carers. Inspectors found from interviews and household files that this policy were reflected in practice and decisions to match children with foster carers considered the diverse background of children. The service recruited foster carers from a diverse range of backgrounds. Foster carers had an understanding of the cultural needs of children in their care but some improvements were required. There was some evidence from files that appropriate information was given to foster carers on the cultural and religious needs of children. Inspectors spoke with parents who were satisfied that the care their children were receiving also promoted their children's culture and sense of identity. An inspector viewed evidence written by a young person of how their religious and cultural needs were met by their carers.

There was guidance for foster carers when their background differed from the children they were caring for. Inspectors found that specific training was provided to foster carers caring for separated children seeking asylum. However, placement plans did not describe children's cultural needs and there was a risk that individual children's cultural needs might not be identified or met.

Children with disabilities were supported by the provider and foster carers to receive appropriate services. Inspectors met foster carers who cared for a young person with a learning disability. They were pro-active in ensuring that their needs were met and that they had access to appropriate services and support. Inspectors viewed records of multi-disciplinary planning to meet the needs of children with disabilities placed in the service.

Communication

The service communicated well with children in their care but some improvements were needed. Inspectors observed staff and foster carers speaking positively and respectfully about children. Staff were observed sharing updates with managers of school examination results of the children in their care released the week of the inspection and they talked about their hopes and aspirations of the children in light of these results. Foster carers spoke highly to inspectors of children in their care. Inspectors observed foster carers speaking appropriately to children with due regard to their age and developmental stage.

Written information was not routinely shared with children. Foster carers kept the service informed about the children in weekly or monthly progress reports. These reports were forwarded on to the Child and Family Agency social worker for the child. Inspectors viewed a sample of these reports. The handbook for foster carers provided guidance to foster carers on these reports and explained that a child might request to see these reports in the future. The handbook did not encourage foster carers to complete the progress report with the child, where the child expressed an interest and or was of an appropriate age. There was little evidence in household files to suggest that children were actively encouraged and permitted to view records about themselves.

Family and Friends

Children were supported by the provider and their foster carers to spend time with their parents, siblings and significant others.

Children had regular access with their families. During a focus group, children told inspectors that they had face to face contact with their parents and where this was not possible, for example, where parents lived in a different country, they were facilitated to telephone their extended family abroad. Foster carers had a clear understanding about their role in facilitating and promoting access. Guidance for foster carers on access was set out in the handbooks for foster carers. The progress sheet that foster carers submitted on a weekly or monthly basis prompted the carer to describe the progress of the child including contact with families. An inspector viewed samples of these weekly progress sheets and foster carers had written comprehensive notes on the child. During a focus group, foster carers told inspectors that they placed value on maintaining contact between children and their birth families and considered the time it took to drive or bring children to access as a key component of their role.

Child and Family Agency social workers told inspectors that children placed with the service maintained positive relationships with their parents and siblings and reported no concerns in this area. An inspector spoke with two birth parents and both told the

inspector that they were able to spend time with their children or that their child could choose to spend time with them. A birth parent told an inspector how s/he made regular telephone calls to the foster carer household and spoke with their children over the telephone in between access.

Children were living with their siblings in accordance with their care plan. An inspector met the referral co-ordinator who described how placing siblings together was an important consideration upon point of referral.

Children were not always placed in their own community and this could impact on their links with family, friends and their emotional well-being. The referral co-ordinator and CEO explained that placing a child in their own community was a priority but for a variety of reasons this did not always take place. In some cases children were placed away from their own communities in their own best interests, but in others, there was no available placement. An inspector spoke with two social workers from the Child and Family Agency where children were placed outside their community and found that children were facilitated to spend time with their birth parents. Some children who lived at distance from their homes told inspectors they had regular contact face to face and over the telephone contact with their birth family. One carer talked about a child who had not been happy in their placement as they missed their friends from their local community.

Complaints

There was a system in place for the recording, managing and resolving of complaints but improvements were needed to ensure that children had a better awareness of the complaints policy and procedure.

Children did not know how to make a complaint. There was a complaints procedure in place and it was outlined in the information booklet for children and the handbooks for foster carers. The information on complaints in the child's information booklet was lengthy and detailed. This meant that a child might need support in understanding the procedure and might not be able to make a complaint independently of an adult. This was reflected in the focus group with children, who said that they did not have an understanding of the complaints procedure. They told the inspector that they would contact a range of people if they had worries and this included their Child and Family Agency social worker.

Complaints were well managed by the service, when they were made. The inspectors reviewed two complaints received by the service in the 12 months prior to the inspection. These complaints were responded to by the service in a timely manner and were managed appropriately. One of the complaints was resolved and one was ongoing at the time of the inspection.

Standard	Judgment
Standard 1 Positive sense of identity	Meets Standard
Standard 2 Family and friends	Meets Standard
Standard 3 Children's rights	Requires improvement
Standard 4 Valuing diversity	Meets Standard
Standard 25 Complaints	Requires improvement

Theme 2: Safe and Effective Services

The service promotes the safety of children by protecting them from abuse and neglect and following policy and procedure in reporting any concerns of abuse and/or neglect to the relevant authorities. Effective services ensure that the systems are in place to promote children's welfare. Assessment and planning is central to the identification of children's care needs. In order to provide the care children require, foster carers are assessed, approved and supported. Each child receives the supports they require to maintain their wellbeing.

National Standards for Foster Care (2003)

References:

Standard 8

Matching carers with children and young people

Standard 9

A safe and positive environment

Standard 10

Safeguarding and child protection

Standard 13

Preparation for leaving care and adult life

Standard 14a

Assessment and approval of non-relative foster carers

Standard 15

Supervision and support

Standard 16

Training

Standard 17

Reviews of foster carers

This inspection found that services were delivered in a safe and effective manner. Children were cared for safely and well by assessed and approved foster carers. All foster carers were supported by link social workers. Foster carers were reviewed but improvements were needed in the management and monitoring of these reviews.

The provider implemented the actions required of them in care plans. The service appropriately reported any concerns about children to the Child and Family Agency as per Children First (2011) guidelines. However, the provider was not consistently aware of the outcome of the reported concerns following investigations by the Child and Family Agency.

Matching of children and carers

All of the children in the service had an allocated link support social worker and were living with assessed and approved foster carers.

The service had an effective formal matching process in place. The provider had a dedicated staff member who co-ordinated referrals from the Child and Family Agency. Inspectors found that the referral co-ordinator had a clear understanding of the operational processes in managing referrals. Referrals were only accepted from the Child and Family Agency when the provider determined that they could appropriately match a child to a carer. The majority of household files that the inspectors reviewed had evidence that the capacity of the foster carers was considered at point of placement. Inspectors reviewed records relating to the referral and matching process and found that it considered the strengths of the match between each child and foster carers and generally most, but not all children experienced stable placements.

There were a number of newly approved foster carers in attendance at a carer focus group and they were satisfied with their first placement and the considerations given to the match which included their lack of experience. Inspectors met four sets of foster carers at their home during the inspection and it was clear that these foster carers had the capacity to meet the assessed needs of the children currently placed with them.

Children generally experienced stability in their placements with the service. There were four placement breakdowns in the service in the 12 months prior to the inspection. Reviews were carried out by the service on placements that ended in an unplanned manner and a report submitted to the relevant Child and Family Agency foster care committee. An inspector reviewed these reports and found that there were some common factors in these placements. While there was individual reviews there was no evidence of a systemic analysis of these placement breakdowns to inform practices in the service. The impact of unplanned endings is extremely upsetting for both children and foster carers and all opportunity to learn from such events to prevent their reoccurrence should be taken.

Planning the care of children

The provider actively participated in the Child and Family Agency statutory care planning and review process for children. Both link support social workers and foster carers attended Child and Family Agency child in care reviews. During the inspection, the inspectors observed frequent communication taking place by telephone with social workers from the Child and Family Agency and it was clear that there was a good communication back and forth between the two organisations. Social workers from the Child and Family Agency spoke highly of the link support social workers and their willingness to engage with them and work with them for the benefit of the child.

The service implemented actions assigned to the carers or to the service from care plan reviews for children. Inspectors reviewed records that demonstrated that these actions were monitored through the supervision process. The provider had specific placement plans for children but these plans were quite general and not specific or measurable. This meant that foster carers and children might not know about the expected goal of the placement or actions required to meet the needs of children. Copies of placement plans were not issued to foster carers or children.

Foster carers were not always provided with information prior to placement. This meant that carers might not have sufficient information to inform their care of children. The referral co-ordinator told inspectors that referrals forms were generally received from the Child and Family Agency prior to placements or in emergencies, immediately following placement. An inspector met foster carers, who were still awaiting written information on a child placed with them in an emergency a week previously. In mitigation, they had received information over the telephone from the Child and Family Agency social worker but this was not ideal. From the focus group with foster carers, inspectors were told that the receipt of information about children needed improvement but delays may be due to the Child and Family Agency social worker attempting to secure this information. Foster carers expressed confidence that staff from the service passed on all relevant information to them once received from the Child and Family.

There were some children living with foster carers whose placement status was recorded as short-term but the children were living in the placement on a long-term basis. The Child and Family Agency social worker was responsible for seeking the review of the status of the placement with the local foster care committee. Inspectors interviewed two Child and Family Agency foster care committee chairpersons who confirmed this was the case. Initially placements were approved in the short-term only by the Child and Family Agency and when the placement was going well the foster carers could then be approved for a long-term placement. There was no process to guide practice by link workers to formalise this change of status. There were a number of children living with carers for over six months but were categorised as living in short term placements. The impact of this may result in anxiety for children and foster carers due to concerns about the security of the placement.

Quality of Care

Children received the emotional and physical care that they required. Inspectors visited a number of children and their homes were warm, comfortable and free from obvious hazards thereby minimising risk of injury to children. Health and safety assessments were carried out by assessing social workers as part of the application process. Foster carers were observed interacting with children warmly, respectfully and appropriately. Children that met with inspectors spoke positively about their experiences. Foster carers were observed giving very young children plenty of positive attention and physical affection. Foster carers told inspectors there were concerned for the children's well-being, their day-to-day needs and their future. Foster carers spoke proudly of the various achievements of children in their care

such as the milestones that babies and toddlers had reached and the achievements of young people at school. Inspectors met with children who spoke positively about their involvement in various social and leisure activities. Children with whom the inspectors met were appropriately dressed.

Some children were provided with specialist support services from the provider. A childcare worker provided one to one support service to children who were in need of emotional support. This worker was supervised in their role by a member of the managerial team. From a review of records inspectors found that children received specialist external support services such as child and adolescent mental health services and in some cases, the provider had contributed to the cost of these services. Foster carers facilitated access to specialist services. Inspectors reviewed records and found good engagement between foster carers and other professionals providing specialist support to children.

Children were supported and prepared by the service for leaving care and moving into adult life. Foster carers and link social workers played an active part in the creation of leaving care plans and after care plans in conjunction with the Child and Family Agency. Inspectors found a number of young people over 18 years living with their foster carers with the approval and funding of the relevant Child and Family Agency after care service. Foster carers described to inspectors the range of activities they did with children to prepare them for adult life such as encouraging them to cook their own meals and wash their own clothes. Inspectors found that preparation for adulthood was not recorded in placement plans for children and there were no clearly defined goals to inform progress in this regard.

Foster carers - Assessment Training and Support

All foster carers were assessed and approved in line with the regulations and standards but some improvements were needed.

According to the data returned by the service there were no children at the time of the inspection living with foster carers whose application was not formally approved by a Child and Family Agency foster care committee in line with the Child and Family Agency foster care committee guidelines of 2012.

Foster carers were appropriately assessed by qualified social workers. A suite of policies and procedures informed the assessment process. From a review of records the majority of assessments took place in a timely fashion. There was evidence of some delays in approval of foster carers by Child and Family Agency foster care committees. Inspectors found from review of records and interviews with chairpersons of Child and Family Agency foster care committees, that some delays were due to further information being requested following submission of application by the service. An inspector viewed evidence of a lengthy delay in an application for approval. Extra information was sought by a Child and Family Agency foster care committee and the required information was not submitted in a timely manner by the provider. This was surprising as carrying out assessments of foster carers is one of this provider's core activities.

From the review of files inspectors found that foster carers and adults living in the household had been appropriately vetted.

Reviews of foster carers were carried out by the service but improvements were needed. Inspectors found that the majority of foster carers were reviewed but often outside of the recommended one year time-frame from the time of the first placement. At the time of the inspection, there were three foster care households who had not received their first review within the time-frames set out in the carer handbook. This meant that a formal appraisal of the quality of care provided by foster carers was not conducted in a timely manner with supports put in place at an early stage if required. Some of the reviews viewed by inspectors had no entries in the section on training or training was referred to generally, rather than recommendations for specific courses. Not all reviews were signed and dated. Outcomes of reviews were not analysed to inform operational planning in the service.

During a focus group with foster carers, the majority of foster carers told the inspector that they were familiar with the review process and had undergone a review. The chairpersons of Child and Family Agency foster care committees confirmed receipt of review reports for foster carers.

The service provided good care to children with complex needs. Link support social workers and foster carers attended multi-disciplinary meetings organised by the Child and Family Agency about specific children. The findings of these meetings informed the work of the link support social worker and carer with children. An inspector reviewed a number of household files where the children presented with complex needs and behaviour that challenged and found that comprehensive and regular support was provided by link social workers to foster carers. This guidance and support was recorded in supervision records. A childcare worker employed by the provider was also available to support children who presented with complex needs. During telephone interviews with social workers from the Child and Family Agency, they expressed a high level of satisfaction in the way in which foster carers supported children with complex needs. One social worker stated that there was excellent follow through by the link support social workers to foster carers and positive outcomes for children in their placements.

A range of training was provided by the service to foster carers but was not consistently attended by carers. Training was described by the service as an essential element of the support offered to foster carers. Foster carers were required to attend five training courses a year in line with their contract. During the focus group with foster carers, inspectors were told that the service facilitated their attendance at training by organising activity groups for their children while training took place. These groups took place in a child-centred room at the offices of the provider which was available for use by Child and Family Agency social workers.

However, inspectors reviewed training records and found that attendance at training was inconsistent and some foster carers had not attended training in the previous 12

months. There were minimal links between attendance at training courses and reviews of foster carers. Inspectors found from review of records that some foster carers with a poor history of attendance at training did not have this explicitly set out in their review. There was a potential risk that foster carers might not have the up-to-date skills and knowledge to provide quality care to children.

There were sufficient supports for foster carers to ensure effective delivery of care. All foster carers had an allocated link social worker. Foster carers received regular supervision, as evidenced by documentation reviewed by inspectors in household files. There was an on call service provided to foster carers and inspectors were told by foster carers that this support was highly valued. A respite service was available for foster carers and information on this service was contained in an up-to-date policy. The information given to foster carers was very specific and placed a strong emphasis on foster carers thinking through why they required respite, the impact this might have on a child and the procedure that had to be followed. Respite for children under the age of three years was strongly discouraged given their attachment needs at this age but allowances were made for exceptional circumstances.

Safeguarding and Child Protection

There were effective measures in place to safeguard and protect children from abuse. Guidance from Children First (2011): National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children was referenced in the policy on child protection, which was up-to-date. A separate policy on safe care was also available. There was a dedicated liaison person for child protection as required under Children First (2011). Foster carers were given information on child protection and safe care in their handbooks and in their preparatory training. Children that met inspectors told them that they felt safe in their placements and could identify someone they could speak to if they had any worries or concerns.

The service appropriately referred child protection and welfare concerns to the Child and Family Agency as required under Children First (2011). There had been 15 referrals in the 12 months prior to the inspection. Inspectors reviewed a sample of these concerns and found that they were appropriately managed, recorded and notified to the relevant social work department. The designated liaison person kept a central logbook of concerns but there was no system to monitor the outcomes of these referrals to the Child and Family Agency. Information on outcomes was provided to inspectors but was not consistently recorded on files or on the central logbook. This meant that the service had no concise record on file of actions taken following referrals to the Child and Family Agency.

Allegations against foster carers were managed in line with Children First (2011). An inspector reviewed the manner in which an allegation made by a child in the 12 months prior to the inspection was managed and was satisfied that the allegation had been investigated appropriately and in accordance with Children First (2011).

Staff and foster carers followed policies and procedures when children went missing from their care. Information for foster carers on missing from care procedures was contained in the handbooks for foster carers. Inspectors reviewed some records about children that went missing from care in the 12 months prior to the inspection. Foster carers followed the appropriate procedures and accurate records were kept. According to the handbook for foster carers, absence management plans were developed for children where there was an assessed risk of a child going missing. From a review of records inspectors found that some children did not have an absence management plan in place as required. This meant that there was no plan of what to do for an individual child should they go missing and no plan to prevent this from happening.

Staff members told inspectors they were confident in raising any issues about the quality of care provided in the service but did not know about whistle blowing or protected disclosures processes. An inspector observed a staff team meeting and noted that staff felt comfortable raising issues and concerns in this meeting. During a focus group inspectors found that staff were not clear about the policy on whistleblowing or protected disclosure. This meant that staff members might not raise concerns about the quality of care to children due to a lack of knowledge about the various processes in place to do so.

While foster carers were trained in child protection as part of their assessment, not all carers attended Children First (2011) National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children training. From a review of records and interviews with foster carers, inspectors found that not all foster carers had training in this guidance. This meant that foster carers might not have sufficient knowledge in child protection and welfare to ensure children were cared for safely and well.

The provider did not provide a special foster care service. This was confirmed in data returned to the Authority prior to the inspection and in conversation with the CEO.

Standard	Judgment
Standard 8 Matching foster carers with children and young people	Requires improvement
Standard 9 A safe and positive environment	Meets Standard
Standard 10 Safeguarding and child protection	Requires improvement
Standard 13 Preparation for leaving care and adult life	Meets Standard
Standard 14a Assessment and approval of non-relative foster carers	Requires improvement
Standard 15 Supervision and support	Meets Standard
Standard 16 Training	Requires improvement
Standard 17 Reviews of foster carers	Requires improvement

Theme 3: Health and Development

The health and development needs of children are assessed and arrangements are in place to meet the assessed needs. Children's educational needs are given high priority to support them to achieve at school and access education or training in adult life.

National Standards for Foster Care (2003)

Reference:

Standard 11

Health and Development

Standard 12

Education

Children's health needs were met by the service. Foster carers facilitated children to receive the healthcare services they required. Children's educational needs were given a high priority by the service to enable children to access education or training in adult life.

Health Needs

Foster carers looked after the health needs of children in their care. Inspectors found that there was timely access to general practitioner services, treatment, therapies and specialist services but the recording of which needed to improve. Foster carers organised medical appointments for children with professionals such as general practitioners and dentists. Foster carers were very clear about their role in facilitating children to attend healthcare services.

Link support social workers demonstrated to inspectors a good understanding of the responsibilities of the foster carers for children's health care. Parents told an inspector that they were satisfied that their child's health was being attended to by their foster carers and did not have any concerns in this area. An inspector viewed a sample of progress reports completed by foster carers and found there were written comprehensive notes on the health of the children in their care.

Not all medical and health information was available on children's files. Some foster carers told inspectors of occasions when they did not have all the required medical information upon the commencement of the placement such as a child's immunisation history. The inspectors reviewed records and found that not all medical information or medical interventions were recorded. This meant that an up to date medical history was not available for each child. Placement plans did not specifically address the health needs of children and were not updated as the health needs and interventions changed. This meant there was no mechanism to monitor specific progress and outcomes for individual children.

During the focus group, foster carers showed that they were aware of and had an understanding of consent issues in relation to medical care.

Training in first aid was scheduled to take place in 2014 as part of the annual training schedule for foster carers.

Education Needs

Children were supported and encouraged in their education. At the time of the inspection, all children were in full-time education. The value that the service placed on education was set out in the foster care policy, handbooks for foster carers and in a booklet developed for children in foster care. Foster carers gave examples of instances where the provider had advocated for the children including securing educational assessments and assisting with the funding of education costs. Foster carers spoke highly of the educational attainments of children in their care and gave examples of where children had done well in examinations and or had gone on to third level education. The foster carers played an important role in the facilitation of children attending school and birth parents said they were satisfied that their children's needs in this area were met. Inspectors spoke with Child and Family Agency social workers about education and they reported a high level of satisfaction in this area with one social worker giving very specific feedback on the efforts and interest that a carer had made with a child in this area. It was clear that foster carers and the service were ambitious for children and aimed for them to go on to third level education.

Recording needed to improve on capturing educational attainments and goals as this information was not consistently recorded. This meant progress and educational outcomes could not be adequately monitored in order to drive improvement in this area.

Standard	Judgment
Standard 11 Health and Development	Meets Standard
Standard 12 Education	Meets Standard

Theme 4: Leadership, Governance and Management

Effective governance is achieved by planning and directing activities, using good business practices, accountability and integrity. In an effective governance structure, there are clear lines of accountability at individual, team and management levels and all staff working in the service is aware of their responsibilities. Risks to the service as well as to individuals are well managed and the system is subject to a rigorous quality assurance system.

National Standards for Foster Care (2003)

Reference:

Standard 18

Effective policies

Standard 19

Management and monitoring of foster care services

The service was well managed with clear lines of accountability and responsibility but there was no robust system to identify and manage organisational risks and drive quality assurance. There were clear policies and procedures that guided the operation of this service.

Management Structures and Systems

A stable, consistent management team demonstrated leadership and accountability in this service. Managers described to inspectors their roles and responsibilities and how they were held accountable for decisions at formal supervision meetings. They demonstrated knowledge about the foster care standards and regulations with which the service had to comply. The CEO was aware of the day-to-day business of the service and had detailed knowledge of the children in receipt of services. During a focus group, staff expressed confidence in the management team although there was a lack of clarity for some staff regarding the role of all the directors of the service.

Staff had a good understanding about their own roles and responsibilities. In addition to the assessment and link support social workers, inspectors met a referral co-ordinator, a childcare worker and a senior social work practitioner who were clear about their role and how they inter-faced with the rest of the team.

There were some management systems in place to ensure that the delivery of a quality service. Policies and procedures governed the work of all staff and the majority of staff had regular formal supervision. A Child and Family Agency monitoring officer with responsibilities for monitoring the service told inspectors that he was satisfied regarding the way in which notifications were made to his office. The provider held an up-to-date register. This informed the foster care panel kept by the Child and Family Agency in accordance with statutory requirements.

There were no formal systems or frameworks in place to measure risk other than risks to children at point of placement and a generic risk register for hazards in the office. There was no oversight of aggregated or organisational risk. Inspectors identified some risks during the inspection period, such as inconsistent attendance at training by foster carers.

There were delays in the provider receiving some care plans and minutes of care plan reviews from the Child and Family Agency. It is the statutory responsibility of the Child and Family Agency to develop and review care plans in consultation with children, parents and carers. This lack of care plans for some children impacted on the development of individualised placement plans. The lack of care plan, care plan reviews and comprehensive placement plans for some children meant that there no common agreed goals or expected outcomes to guide their care.

Everyone involved in the care of a child should have a shared understanding of his or her needs. While inspectors found some attempts by the provider to seek care plans from the Child and Family Agency, further improvement is required so that the provider can be assured that the care they provide meets the individualised needs of each child.

There were good communication systems in place including regular staff team meetings, face-to-face conversations and email and information was shared between all staff in timely manner. Staff were situated in close proximity to each other and was observed sharing information and discussing cases with each other. The managers were observed keeping their office doors open and staff were seen interacting with them frequently.

A robust mechanism for formal management meetings was not in place. There was evidence that management meetings took place but the regularity of these meetings fluctuated from year to year. Three meetings had taken place in 2014 and from a review of minutes, these meetings considered key operational issues including staffing and practice issues with clear decision making and action taken to address key issues and drive improvements.

Two adverse events had taken place in the 12 months prior to the inspection and details of these events were provided to the inspectors. In both cases, the events were adequately recorded, investigated and key parties such as the Child and Family Agency informed. However, it was not clear how these events were reviewed and learning shared (where appropriate) with staff members in the service. There was no formal action plan following the investigation to make any required changes to practices.

Planning the Service

The provider had operational plans but they lacked detail. These plans stated the business objectives and key strategies of the company over the next three to four years. The goal of the service was that it would become a leading independent fostering agency within Ireland with a plan to expand over the next three years. However, the manner and timeframes in which these objectives and strategies were to be achieved were not set out. Key performance indicators were also in this document. However, the decision-making process used in determining the key performance indicators was unclear and for some key processes, no indicators had been set. For example, staff members told the inspectors that they were aware that the attendance of foster carers at on-going training needed to improve as well as the timeliness of the completion of reviews. Indicators were not set in this regard.

The board of the company was kept informed of key issues pertaining to the delivery of the service. There were regular board meetings between the directors of the company and from a review of the minutes a range of operational and strategic planning matters were discussed.

Information was not used consistently to inform planning. There were systems in place to gather information and data on referrals, enquiries, assessments, children placed with the provider and about foster carers. While the CEO was aware of key performance indicators and data applicable to the service, inspectors found no written evidence on how the analysis of key performance indicators informed operational and strategic planning.

Quality Assurance

There was no robust quality assurance system in place to identify areas for improvement. On a day-to-day basis, there was managerial oversight of practices by the management team. A supervision process was in place and this gave staff an opportunity to meet formally with their line manager and discuss their practice, training needs and management of their caseloads.

There were mechanisms set out in the quality assurance policy to monitor the quality of the service but these were not consistently implemented. For example, service user feedback was described as a central part of this strategy. Placement evaluation forms were sent to social workers following the end of a placement but inspectors found that these were not always returned. An inspector viewed three placement evaluation forms returned in 2013 and these contained positive feedback from Child and Family Agency social workers. As the rate of return was low, there was a risk that not all feedback, positive or negative was recorded, analysed and used for learning purposes.

Feedback from birth parents was not collected despite this being referenced in the policy. Inspectors viewed a number of the evaluation forms completed by foster carers following on-going training and these were generally positive. Evaluations

were also sought from foster carers upon completion of the assessment process to include their birth children. Feedback in this regard was positive.

Formal monitoring of the quality of service by the management team needed improvement. For example, there was no management oversight of the quality of placement plans drawn up by link social workers. There was also no escalation policy in place for issues that affected the quality of service provided to children, such as the lack of care plans for children received from the Child and Family agency. Therefore, management could not be assured about the how the placement improved outcomes for children.

Records management needed to improve with numerous records on file not dated or signed. A staff member was nominated as the data officer for the service. An inspector read guidance provided to staff by this staff member on a range of data governance issues, such as document safekeeping in open plan offices. File audits were described as quarterly events by the management team but from the review of files by inspectors, audits did not occur with this frequency. The auditing of files needed to improve as inspectors found significant number of documents that were not dated or signed despite an audit of household files taking place prior to the inspection. The provider maintained household files. Information pertaining to a child who historically was in their care or was currently in their care was all placed in the one household file. This meant that some files were very large and information was difficult to retrieve which could affect analysis and planning for current children.

Standard	Judgment
Standard 18 Effective policies	Meets Standard
Standard 19 Management and monitoring of foster care services	Requires improvement

Theme 5: Use of resources

The service recruits sufficient foster carers to meet the needs of children. Foster carers stay with the provider and continue to offer placements to children.

National Standards for Foster Care (2003)

Reference:

Standard 21

Recruitment and retention of an appropriate range of foster carers

There were effective recruitment and retention strategies to maintain an appropriate range of foster carers. Enquiries about becoming a foster care were followed up in a timely manner.

The provider provided quality care through a group of experienced and consistent foster carers. The majority of children whose household files the inspectors reviewed lived in stable placements with the same foster carers. The provider had strategies in place for the recruitment and retention of an appropriate range of foster carers.

The service did not maintain a wait list of children in need of placement and rather accepted referrals based on the availability of foster carers. This meant that there were no children awaiting care placements. The CEO was aware of the demand for services and therefore recruited all year around maintaining a regular presence on relevant web-sites, evidence of which was viewed by an inspector. During a focus group with staff, they discussed the ways in which all staff were involved in the recruiting of foster carers and they gave examples of the marketing opportunities they were involved in, such as manning stands in shopping centres.

Foster carers all spoke highly of the way in which they were recruited and articulated the reasons that they stayed with this service. They told an inspector that they were all responded to very quickly at the point of enquiry to the service. They understood the application process and although it appeared very detailed at times they appreciated the seriousness of the role that they were applying to undertake.

Some foster carers told the inspector that they appreciated the support provided to them, the children they cared for and ongoing support if their link support social worker was not available. There was evidence found in household files of the service being used outside of office hours and guidance and support provided to foster carers.

Standard	Judgment
Standard 21 Recruitment and retention	Meets Standard

Theme 6: Workforce

Each staff member has a key role to play in delivering child-centred, effective and safe services to support children. Children's services recruit and manage their workforce to ensure that staff have the required skills, experience and competencies to respond to the needs of children.

National Standards for Foster Care (2003)

Reference:

Standard 20

Training and Qualifications

There was a skilled and supported staff team that had the capacity to meet the needs of children. Some improvements were required to ensure that the service was aware of training needs of staff and training completed by staff. Aspects of record - keeping required improvement.

Staff were recruited in accordance with legislation, standards and policies. Managers had access to staff files held by the human resources manager. Inspectors reviewed a sample of personnel files, the majority of which were up-to-date and well organised. There was evidence of staff qualifications on file. All staff members had been appropriately vetted. There were records of induction in some, but not all, staff files. Copies of job descriptions were on file for the majority of staff. All staff members with qualifications in social work had evidence of appropriate registration with the relevant registration body. Evidence of continuing professional development for all staff was not located in personnel files but held by the individual staff members.

Staff were appropriately qualified and there was an appropriate mixture of experience with newly appointed staff and staff with a number of years experience. At the time of the inspection, a significant percentage of staff had recently left the provider to take posts in the statutory sector. This rate of turnover of staff could result in inconsistency in practices due to frequent changes.

Managers had line management experience and sufficient experience for the type of service that they delivered. Inspectors reviewed personnel files, interviewed managers, and confirmed their previous experience in the sector. There was evidence of management training in the personnel file of the CEO. A senior social

work practitioner had responsibilities for the out-of-hours service. This staff member had specialist knowledge in this area.

Staff received good quality monthly supervision. From a review of supervision records inspectors found that supervision addressed a range of issues including practice and professional development. The management team told the inspector that they placed a high value on the supervision of staff. There were decisions about cases made at supervision but there was some inconsistency in how these decisions were recorded. This meant there might be a risk that staff may not follow through on actions. The CEO supervised line managers.

A system for performance management appraisals was in place. An inspector reviewed a sample of appraisal documents and found that the quality of the appraisals was inconsistent. Some were comprehensive, dated and signed but other appeared to be in draft format, un-signed and not dated. This meant that the quality of practices of staff members might not be flagged in a timely manner and training requirements identified. Social workers at the Child and Family Agency told inspectors of their satisfaction with the staff employed and their flexibility.

Staff received adequate training but there no strategic plan to identify and address training needs. A training allowance was provided to staff each year for conferences and on-going training opportunities. This meant that staff could seek out courses of interest to them and update their skills and knowledge accordingly. Staff also had opportunities to attend on-going training offered to foster carers but there was no overall training needs analysis or plan for the staff team. There were also some gaps in training. A member of the management team had received training in child protection but had not completed training in Children First (2011).

The service was not able to demonstrate where practice had improved because of the training attended by staff members. This meant that managers could not be assured that staff members had the necessary up-to-date knowledge and skills to meet the needs of foster carers so that they could deliver good quality care to children.

Standard	Judgment
Standard 20 Training and Qualifications	Requires improvement