

**Health Information and Quality Authority
Regulation Directorate**

**Monitoring Inspection Report -
Non-statutory Foster Care Services under
the Child Care Act 1991 (as amended)**



Name of Agency:	Fresh Start Fostering Services	
Dates of inspection:	20, 21 & 22 October 2015	
No. of Fieldwork days:	2.5	
Lead inspector:	Grace Lynam	
Support inspector(s):	Eva Boyle Ruadhan Hogan	
Type of inspection:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Announced <input type="checkbox"/> Unannounced <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Full <input type="checkbox"/> Themed	
Inspection ID:	738	

About monitoring

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 (the 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.

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

Theme 1: Child Centred Services	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Theme 2: Safe and Effective Services	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Theme 3: Health and Development	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Theme 4: Leadership, Governance and Management	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Theme 5: Use of Resources	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Theme 6: Workforce	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

1. Methodology

As part of this inspection, inspectors met with children, parents and or guardians, other agencies and professionals. Inspectors observed practices and reviewed documentation such as care plans, relevant registers, policies and procedures, foster carers' files, children's files and staff files.

During the inspection, the inspectors evaluated the:

- quality of care and safety of the service
- organisation and management of the foster care service
- assessment of foster carers
- safeguarding processes
- effectiveness of inter-agency and multi-disciplinary work
- outcomes for children.

The key activities of this inspection involved:

- the interrogation of data
- reviewing policies and procedures
- reviewing 12 children's case files
- the review of nine foster carers' files
- review of three fostering assessments
- review of three assessing social worker recruitment files
- review of supervision files
- meeting with six children
- meeting with six foster carers
- telephone conversation with two foster carers
- visiting three foster care homes
- meeting with one link worker
- interview with one support worker
- interviews with three assessing social workers
- telephone interview with two foster carers
- interviews with five child and family social workers
- interview with the director of foster care services
- interview with the company director
- interviews with one external professionals
- interview with monitoring officer

Acknowledgements

The Authority wishes to thank the children and carers for the openness with which they embraced the inspection process and welcomed inspectors into their homes. Inspectors also wish to acknowledge the cooperation of the members of Freshstart fostering services with the inspection.

2. Profile

2.1 The Child and Family Agency

Child and family services in Ireland are delivered by a single dedicated State Agency – the Child and Family Agency (the 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 Agency has responsibility for a range of services, including the provision of a range of care placements for children including statutory foster care services.

Children's foster care services may also be provided by private foster care agencies following agreement with the Agency. The Agency retains its statutory responsibility to children placed with these services and approves the foster carers through their foster care committees. The foster care agency is required to adhere with relevant Standards and regulations when providing a service on behalf of the Agency. Both services are accountable for the care and well-being of children. This inspection focuses on the specific responsibilities of the service provider under the Standards in providing quality and safe care to children.

2.2 The Service Provider

Freshstart fostering service provides respite, short-term and long term foster care placements. It has been in operation in Ireland since 2012 and mainly provides placements to the Agency's Dublin Mid-Leinster region.

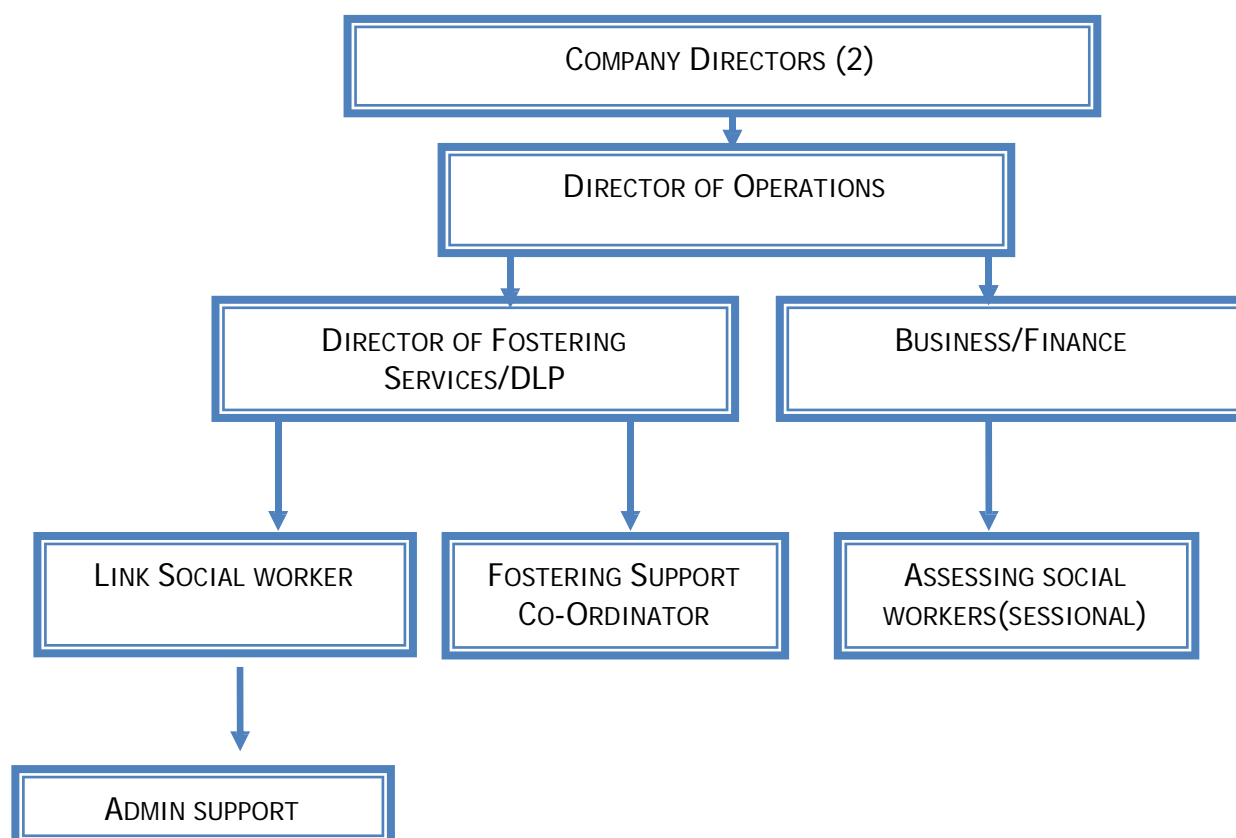
Freshstart fostering service is part of Freshstart Care Solutions, a care provider which provides private residential care placements through a number of residential centres. The parent company had two company directors. The fostering service is a relatively new development for the company and had four assigned staff including a director of fostering who was responsible for the day-to-day operation of the service, a part-time link social worker who worked 12 hours per week, a full-time support worker and an administration assistant. There were six

social workers who were employed on a sessional basis to assess applicants for fostering and present them for approval to the relevant Child and Family Agency foster care committee.

Freshstart fostering service provided foster care placements for children in the care of the Agency and had 17 children in foster care who were placed in 15 foster care households. These households were located across Ireland in counties Laois, Wexford, Wicklow, Limerick, Galway, Kilkenny, Kildare Meath and Dublin. The majority of children placed were 14 years or under. Half of the children came from the Dublin Mid Leinster region of the Child and Family Agency and the remainder came from other regions such as the West, the South and Dublin City North.

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

Figure 1: Organisational structure of the foster care agency¹



¹ Provided by the Foster Care Agency

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.

Freshstart Fostering Service is a 'for profit' organisation and its services are monitored by the Child and Family Agency.

In this inspection, the Authority found that of the 18 Standards assessed, the service met four standards, and required improvement in 14 standards. This report makes a number of findings which the provider is required to address in an action plan. The findings are set out in Section 5 of this report and the provider's action plan is published separately.

Children presented as happy and content in their foster homes and confident that their views mattered. Freshstart staff were respectful when referring to children and demonstrated good knowledge of children's needs and concern for their welfare. Foster carers were respectful and caring in their communications and interactions with children.

Overall, Freshstart fostering service was providing good quality care through its foster carers - when children were matched with carers who could provide for their needs. These children were in good placements in which their welfare was promoted and their development progressed by the foster carers. However, there were a high number of placements that were not successful for the children and carers and this was concerning. The majority of fostering assessments were carried out in a timely way and good quality support was provided to some foster carers. However, the availability of support to all foster carers - and first time foster carers in particular - needed to improve. Practice in supervision and training of foster carers also required improvement.

The foster care service provided was safe for children and foster families were providing good quality care to children. Children's needs were being met and their rights were promoted by foster carers who demonstrated commitment to the children's welfare and development. Children's day-to-day educational and health needs were met by the foster carers and when children required extra support services they received them. Consultation with children was not recorded so the

extent to which children were listened to was not evident. Children's care plans were not on their files so the Freshstart Fostering Service could not be sure that the care it provided through its foster carers was in line with the child's care plan.

Foster carers were assessed and received an initial training package prior to being approved. Foster carers received some support from the fostering team and from attending a support group organised by Freshstart Fostering Service. However, overall there was a lack of resources allocated to the fostering service by the company and this impacted on the ability of the service to provide sufficient training, support and supervision to its foster carers.

Governance was poor and while there were some management systems in place they were not well developed, documented or embedded into practice. The company had identified as a priority the need to revise management systems within the fostering service in order to best deliver its strategic objectives going forward. Overall, the service lacked sufficient resources to provide an integrated service to children and carers. There were insufficient foster carers to provide care for all children for whom a placement was requested.

There had been a large number of placements (25%) that ended in an unplanned manner and there was no documentation setting out the reasons for this or plans to prevent it happening in the future. This meant that a number of children had been in placements that were not secure and this would have impacted on their security, their continuity of care and their ability to form trusting relationships in the future. The relationship between unplanned endings, training needs of foster carers and matching of children with foster carers had not been explored for possible learning and improvement of the service.

There were significant gaps in records which impeded the progress of the inspection. Some files were good, but others lacked relevant information such as records of support provided and details of placements made. The limited information on files read by inspectors made it difficult to review children's placements with the service and to get a picture of how the system worked in practice.

4. Summary of judgments under each Standard

During the inspection, inspectors made judgments against the National Standards². They used four descriptors:

Exceeds Standard – 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.

National Standards for Foster Care (April 2003)	Judgment
Theme 1: Child Centred Services	
Standard 1: Positive sense of identity	Requires Improvement
Standard 2: Family and friends	Meets the standard
Standard 3: Children's rights	Requires Improvement
Standard 4: Valuing diversity	Meets the standard
Standard 25: Representations and complaints	Requires Improvement
Theme 2: Safe and Effective Services	
Standard 8: Matching carers with children and young people	Requires Improvement
Standard 9: A safe and positive environment	Meets the standard
Standard 10: Safeguarding and child protection	Requires Improvement
Standard 13: Preparation for leaving care and adult life	Not applicable
Standard 14: Assessment and approval of foster carers	Requires Improvement
Standard 15: Supervision and support	Requires Improvement
Standard 16: Training	Requires Improvement

² Please refer to Appendix 1 for full description on National Standards for Foster Care (April 2003) and Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations, 1995

Standard 17: Reviews of foster carers	Requires Improvement
Standard 22: Special Foster care	Not applicable
Theme 3: Health and Development	
Standard 11: Health and development	Requires Improvement
Standard 12: Education	Meets the Standard
Theme 4: Leadership, Governance & Management	
Standard 18: Effective policies	Requires Improvement
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	Requires Improvement
Theme 6: Use of Information	
Standard 20: Training and Qualifications	Requires Improvement

5. Findings and judgments

Theme 1: Child Centred Services

Services for children are centred on the individual child and his/her 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 services.

Inspection findings

The provider was child-centred in its approach and promoted children's rights through their training of foster carers and through the work of the link social worker. However, children in foster care were not actively involved in decisions about the service and there was no evidence of them being consulted.

Children's Rights

The rights of children were recognised and this was reflected in the provider's social work practice and in the care they received from foster carers. Children received personal care appropriate to their needs and were encouraged and enabled to develop their skills and interests. There was a good policy on children and young people's access to information. Information on rights was included in training provided for foster carers as part of their assessment process and foster carers demonstrated an awareness of children's rights. Foster carers facilitated children's rights to education and their right to access with their families. They helped children with homework and brought them to sporting activities to encourage social development.

Children had access to Guardian ad Litem services and foster carers acted as advocates on their behalf in accessing services such as speech and language therapy. One child demonstrated an awareness of their rights and was clear that the foster carer would advocate on their behalf. Another outlined a right to be safe, be heard and to take part in the care planning process. One young person told inspectors that they exercised their right not to attend a care plan review meeting but expressed their views through a written submission to the meeting. Some children had used advocacy services such as Empowering People in Care (EPIC) and had found this useful and this was recorded on their files.

Foster carers offered choices to children in their day to day lives. Inspectors observed this in practice while on visits to foster carers homes. Children were afforded privacy and had their own bedrooms. One young person told inspectors they “loved” their placement and the best thing about it was having their own room and their own “things”. Children and young people were treated with dignity and respect. The fostering team and foster carers spoke respectfully about children. However, there was limited evidence of link workers including children in decisions about their care or seeking their views. There was no evidence that children had accessed their records but this may have been due to the young age of many of the children placed with the agency and therefore did not negatively impact on their welfare.

Diversity

Children were not always placed in their local communities. Fourteen out of 17 children were in placements that were long distances away from their homes. This meant that they lived away from their local communities, friends and families. This is often the nature of private foster care provision which is sought when the local areas cannot provide placements for children in care from their own panel of foster carers. Inspectors did not find any issues in relation to children’s ethnicity or religion.

Disability

Children with disabilities had the necessary supports to help them reach their potential. Freshstart fostering service had three children with a disability placed with foster families. Inspectors sampled files and visited the foster homes where some of these children were placed and found that their needs were being met and that their development had improved significantly due to the quality of care provided by the foster carers. Child and Family Agency social workers confirmed that children with special needs were receiving care that promoted their welfare and progressed their development.

Family and Friends

Children were supported by the provider and foster carers to maintain positive relationships with parents, siblings and other people that were significant to them. Children had regular access with family members. Foster carers brought children to access and were supported in doing so by both the link worker and the support worker. No family access took place in the foster carers home. Foster carers were clear about their role in promoting and facilitating access for the children in their care and were proactive in assisting the children to develop and maintain

relationships with family members. This included encouraging telephone contact with family members. There was good evidence of this on children's files. Inspectors found that where added support was required to facilitate access the agency offered extra supports to the foster carer to ensure that access was a positive experience for the child. There was some evidence that the support worker was also involved in facilitating children's access visits with their families.

All sibling groups were placed together in line with their care plan. The provider had two sibling groups placed together and foster carers told inspectors they received extra support from the support worker in facilitating travel to access visits. The Child and Family Agency's social workers were positive about foster carers willingness to facilitate access and the benefit this was to the children. Parents told inspectors they were satisfied with the amount of access they had with their children.

Complaints

The complaints system was not well developed and complaints were not managed effectively. Freshstart had a complaints policy but it did not clearly name the person to whom complaints should be made. The director of operations told inspectors that complaints would be made to him but inspectors found that this did not happen in practice as the director of fostering services was managing the current complaint. There had been one complaint in the 12 months prior to the inspection which was ongoing. While appropriate action had been taken by Freshstart initially they had not been timely in their communication with the Child and Family Agency and the complaint had not been closed off.

Foster carers told inspectors they would make a complaint to the director of the fostering service if the need arose. There was no evidence that children were aware of how to make a complaint.

Theme 2: Safe and Effective Services

Services 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.

Inspection findings

Children in stable placements received the emotional and physical care they required. They received good quality care from assessed, trained and approved foster carers. Foster carers were supported to some extent. Some reviews of foster carers had been carried out but a number were outstanding. Information gathering prior to placement required improvement.

Assessment and Care Planning

The quality of assessments of children's needs was mixed. Freshstart fostering service did not consistently get sufficient information on children's needs prior to placements being made. Freshstart had a good quality template for recording information about the child's needs but this was not completed and was not available on any of the children's files reviewed by inspectors. Inspectors reviewed a sample of children's files and found some contained good background information on children but there were few comprehensive assessments of children's needs held on the files.

Requests for foster care placements were made by telephone to the director of foster care services who decided whether or not there was a suitable placement available. There were no written records kept of these discussions or the decisions made. The director of fostering services told inspectors that the level of information provided on children was mixed. The limited information on the children placed meant that foster carers may not have sufficient information to inform their care of the child. One foster carer told inspectors they did not have all the relevant information about the children they were caring for prior to the placement being made. Another said they got information about the child from the child's parent. This meant that foster carers may not have fully appreciated the extent of a child's needs or what would be expected from them in caring for the child.

The quality of the matching process was varied and recording of this process was poor. Freshstart fostering service had a good policy on the matching process which outlined the considerations for matching a foster family with a child's needs. However, this policy was not implemented. Social workers told inspectors that foster carers were met with as part of the matching process and described some placements where good matches were made between the foster carers skills and competencies and the needs of the child placed. These placements were ensuring good outcomes for the children. Foster carers described meetings they had with social workers and the support worker to discuss placements. External professionals told inspectors about collaboration with the support worker on matching considerations.

However, there was no recording in the children's or the foster carers files of a matching process taking place prior to placements being made. Therefore there was no evidence that a matching process occurred or that it was based on the assessed needs of the child. This meant that there was potential for children to be placed with carers who could not meet their needs and this in turn could lead to placements ending in an unplanned manner. Out of a total of 41 placements Freshstart had 10 placements which ended in an unplanned way in the 12 months prior to the inspection.

Freshstart fostering service had a written placement commencement procedure which outlined a process whereby all relevant parties would meet prior to a placement being made. The purpose of this was to facilitate the sharing of information and to support the placement going forward. However, this procedure was not recorded on files.

The role of Freshstart fostering services in planning for children was poorly recorded. There was limited information on children's files about planning processes: there were no assessments of the child's needs, no copies of up to date care plans for children and no placement plans. Therefore the provider could not be assured that the placement of the child was in keeping with the care plan for the child. Foster carers told inspectors that the care plans were sent directly to them. Inspectors found references to child in care meetings having taken place and foster carers told inspectors that the support worker attended these meetings with them as a support. There were no minutes of these meetings on the foster carers' files.

Foster carers were supported by the link social worker and the support worker to attend child in care reviews but this support was not consistent. Social workers told inspectors that the link social worker or the support worker attended child in care reviews. Inspectors read some good quality reports in relation to placements that were prepared for these meetings. However, inspectors read about one review at

which the attendance of the link social worker was specifically requested but s/he did not attend. There was no record on the file to explain the reason for the non-attendance or if any efforts were made to provide information to the review. This meant that the review may not have had all the relevant information about the placement, the foster carers were not supported to participate in the review and the link social worker had no record of decisions made at the review. The link social worker told inspectors that s/he had not known about the review taking place.

Quality of Care

Children received good quality care from foster carers. Inspectors visited foster carers homes and found them to be warm and welcoming and free from obvious hazards for children. Children presented as happy and content and interacted easily with inspectors. One child told inspectors s/he loved it in the foster home. Foster carers were observed interacting warmly and appropriately with children and giving young children positive and playful attention and affection. They were also observed providing appropriate boundaries about behaviour to younger children such as not hitting each other. Foster carers demonstrated care and concern about the children's day to day lives and were actively involved in promoting children's attendance at school and social activities. Parents told inspectors they were satisfied with the care their children received from the foster carers.

Children with complex behaviours were well supported. When children required specialist support they received it. The director of foster care services spoke of the availability of a childcare worker to carry out individual work with children who required emotional support. Social workers told inspectors about extra supports provided to children including the services of a private specialist, the cost of which Freshstart fostering service had financially contributed towards. There was evidence that children attended a range of multi-disciplinary services provided by the Health Service Executive. These included psychology, child and adolescent mental health services, occupational therapy and disability services. Social workers told inspectors about the positive impact on children of the care they received from foster carers. They described foster carers as reasonable, balanced, warm and supportive to children. The quality of family relationships had improved for some children, children's development had progressed and the services provided by Freshstart were good. These included the provision of counselling for young people, aftercare services and the availability of an external professional for consultation.

There were no children placed with the provider at the time of inspection that required support and planning for leaving care.

Safeguarding and Child Protection

There were measures in place to safeguard and protect children from abuse but they required improvement. All the foster care households had a link worker assigned to them and Freshstart had a child protection policy. This was in line with Children First 2011: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (Children First, 2011). There had been two child protection concerns in the 12 months prior to the inspection. These concerns did not relate to the children's current placements and there were appropriate safeguarding measures in place for both children. While both had been reported to the Child and Family Agency, one had not been reported in line with Children First (2011) using the standard report form.

Children were safe in their placements. There had been four occasions in the 12 months prior to the inspection when children had gone missing from care for short periods of time. Foster carers had appropriately informed the out of hours service provided by Freshstart. The Child and Family Agency had a missing in care protocol which outlined what should be done when children were missing from care and Freshstart followed this protocol. Foster carers had been given information in their initial training on what to do if children in their care went missing. The support worker told inspectors that foster carers had received training on the protocol. Inspectors spoke with foster carers who demonstrated appropriate knowledge of practice in this area.

The agency had good guidelines on safe care which included a child specific risk assessment being carried out prior to placement. However, inspectors did not find any of these risk assessments in children's files.

Foster Carers – Assessment, Training and Support

The quality of assessments of foster carers was good and when commenced were carried out in a timely way. Foster carers were assessed by independent social workers whose work was well supervised by the director of fostering services. Assessment reports were written and presented to the Freshstart foster care committee for approval as foster carers. Assessments were carried out in line with the Child and Family Agency's guidelines. Foster carers told inspectors that assessments were thorough. Health and safety assessments were carried out as part of the assessment process. Records viewed identified that An Garda Síochána vetting was sought for adults in the foster care households and this served as a safeguarding measure. However, inspectors were not assured- due to poor recording mechanisms- that all adults living in or with significant unsupervised access to foster homes had been vetted. Out of five files reviewed by inspectors only three had evidence of An Garda Síochána vetting for adults other than the foster care applicants.

Assessment reports were also presented to the Child and Family Agency foster care committee of the area placing the child. There was evidence of this approval on foster carers assessment files. The records for the agency's own foster care approvals committee were not provided to inspectors though requested a number of times. Inspectors found that one applicant had been waiting up to a year to be assessed. The director of fostering services explained that this applicant was being assessed for a particular child due to cultural considerations of the matching process. The assessment had been delayed due to the lack of availability of an assessing social worker.

Foster care contracts were on file but were not consistently signed by both foster carers.

Foster carers received some support and supervision but it was not sufficient. Foster carers were supported through the work of the link social worker, the support worker, an out of hours service and a support group. There was evidence on foster carers files of the support they received from the link social worker. There was a high level of telephone contact recorded and a limited number of home visits carried out by the link social worker. Foster carers told inspectors that the link social worker telephoned them regularly and visited less often but that the support was consistent and reliable. Foster carers told inspectors they felt supported and that they appreciated the support they received from Freshstart.

Formal supervision of foster carers was sporadic. Freshstart had a good template for recording the supervision carried out with foster carers but this was a recent practice development. Inspectors read a small number of the completed supervision forms and found they were comprehensive. The supervision record included discussions on safe care, placement issues, practical issues, and training and development for the foster carers. However, these forms were not completed on all foster carers. This meant that formal supervision of foster carers was not being carried out consistently and being recorded.

The out of hours service was available twenty four hours a day seven days a week and was provided by telephone by the support worker. The director of fostering services told inspectors that if foster carers could not contact the support worker they could contact him. Foster carers told inspectors they felt supported and appreciated the availability of the out of hours service. There was no documentation available to inspectors regarding the out of hours service or the out of hours support provided by the support worker. The director of fostering services told inspectors that they did not keep a record of the out of hours calls which meant that the link worker had no records of which foster carers required support out of hours.

When foster carers required extra supports such as assistance with access this was provided by the support worker. There was also an option for a care worker to work individually with children when required. Inspectors found evidence that some foster carers received extra supports with placements that were challenging. These placements were further supported by the availability of respite care to the foster carers. Foster carers told inspectors that this was helpful in supporting them to maintain the placement. When children received respite care they went to the same family each time so as to provide some stability for them.

However, first time foster carers did not receive sufficient support. Inspectors sampled files of first time carers and found that although they had telephone support from the link social worker, visits were months apart and were not sufficient to support these first time placements that were often challenging. This impacted on the stability of the placements and on the ability of the foster carers to meet the needs of the children.

There was a support group run by the agency for its foster carers but it was not effective. The director of foster care services told inspectors that the support group included a training component but whilst there were attendance records for the support group there was no evidence to demonstrate the training aspect of the group. The group had met three times since 2014 with six or seven foster carers in attendance. The session focused on operational matters such as setting up emails and recording logs. Foster carers told inspectors they appreciated the availability of the support group but some found they could not attend due to distance from the venue or times being inconvenient to children's routines.

The training programme for foster carers was insufficient. While all foster carers received the national foster care association training course prior to their assessment being conducted there was no other ongoing training programme in place. Some of the foster carers had received training in a therapeutic crisis intervention method used as a response to behavior that challenged. The link social worker told inspectors that s/he supported foster carers in the appropriate use of this response and gave advice and guidance on managing behaviour and keeping children safe. Inspectors read foster carers files and found evidence that the link social worker asked foster carers about issues with the placement and offered advice and support to foster carers both during home visits and when telephoning them.

Inspectors read records of discussions between the director of foster care services and the link social worker where they had identified a number of topics on which training could be provided for foster carers. These included training on recording practices, attachment theory and doing life story work with children. However, this had not been developed into a formal training strategy and a programme of training had not been developed for foster carers. Inspectors read about one case where

foster carers would have benefitted from special training on the specific needs of a child before his/her placement but this was not provided. By the time the training was made available, the stability of the placement was in jeopardy. In another case, information was provided to the carers and the placement was supported by the link social worker. The link social worker told inspectors that training was a vital component of support to foster carers but it was not easy to put in place. The national standards state that one of the responsibilities of the link worker is to organise training, but the link worker said that this was not part of his/her role.

Not all reviews of foster carers were completed one year after the first placement was made. Some foster care reviews had been carried out but a number were still outstanding. Three of the foster carers had been reviewed within the timeframe required by the standards. The link social worker told inspectors that there was a format for the foster care review which included several meetings with key people such as the foster carers, the children's social worker, the director of fostering services and foster carers children. Inspectors reviewed a sample of reviews of foster carers and found one that was comprehensive and included an updated medical and vetting by An Garda Síochána. The others were not. There was good consultation between the director of the fostering service and the link social worker and issues were explored in detail. However, it was not clear from the file whether the resulting report had been presented to the foster care committee for ratification. The director of fostering services was aware of the deficit with regard to reviews of foster carers and told inspectors that the link social worker's hours were being extended for a limited period of time to ensure that outstanding reviews of foster carers were carried out.

There were two children living with foster carers outside of their approval status. This meant that the long term placement of the children was not approved by the foster care committee as required by the Child Care (Placement of children in Foster Care) Regulations 1995 Part 111, Article 5 (3).

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.

Inspection findings

Children's health needs were met and they received the healthcare services they required. All children attended and were doing well at school. Children's files did not contain all relevant medical and health information.

Health Needs

There was some evidence that children's health care needs were being met by the foster carers but the written records held were poor. There was limited medical information on children's files and while some had medical assessments prior to admission to care, there was no comprehensive and consistent recording of medical information on children's files. Foster carers files contained some references to children attending medical appointments but the information recorded was insufficient to determine the adequacy of the interventions. Foster carers told inspectors of how they facilitated children to attend medical appointments and to avail of services and demonstrated the knowledge and skills to promote children's health, encourage exercise and a healthy diet. Inspectors observed foster carers appropriately guide young children in their eating habits.

Education Needs

Children received appropriate education and support in order to maximise their potential. Education was valued by the provider, the foster carers and the social workers and they worked together to ensure the child's educational needs were met. All the children inspectors visited were attending school. One young child proudly showed the inspector his/her homework folder which s/he had completed with his/her foster carer. There was evidence that the link social worker had attended meetings in schools about children. This demonstrated good working relationships between Freshstart and other professionals. Foster carers told inspectors about meetings they had with school teachers regarding a child's ability and that children were making progress in school. Social workers told inspectors they were satisfied with the progress of the children.

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 agency levels and all staff working in the agency are aware of their responsibilities. Risks to the service as well as to individual systems are well managed and the system is subject to a rigorous quality assurance system. Services are robustly monitored.

Inspection findings

Governance was weak and management systems required development. It was not clear how staff were held to account. Paperwork was poor and information systems required improvement. There was a lack of resources which resulted in services being provided in an ad hoc manner rather than in a planned and cohesive way.

Management Structures and Systems

Freshstart fostering service had a management structure. The director of fostering services was responsible for the fostering service and he reported to the director of operations, who owned the company. There was a part time link social worker and a support worker both of whom reported to the director of fostering. Social workers who were employed on a sessional basis to undertake fostering assessments were also supervised by the director of fostering services. The company director told inspectors that he did not have a role in the day to day running of the foster care service but that he met with the director of foster care services fortnightly. There were no records of these meetings.

The roles of the director of fostering services, the link social worker and the support worker overlapped. The director of fostering services was involved in operational matters: he was familiar with all the families and the children placed with them. He was known to Child and Family Agency social workers and to foster carers. He also had a role in the out of hours service and had visited foster families. He had a role in training of foster carers. However, he needed to take more managerial oversight of the fostering service and this was something he acknowledged.

The system for holding staff to account was not transparent and the director did not have key written information about staff activities. There were no written records of the support workers activities with foster carers and the director of foster care services did not know where these were held.

Management systems were weak and required development. Freshstart fostering service had a number of good policies. These included an administration and care file policy, a whistleblowing policy, a supervision and support policy, a matching policy,

and a child protection policy. Many of these provided good guidance to staff but were not being fully and consistently implemented.

The director of fostering services made decisions in relation to the fostering service. The decision making process was not clear at a number of levels because of the lack of documentation. There was no adequate system of recording the rationale for decisions or the decision making process itself.

Communication was good between Freshstart staff who shared information through informal methods of communication such as telephone contact and informal discussions. However, written records did not reflect the level of communication reported by staff.

Planning the Service

The service had a strategic plan which outlined its aspirations for the future but there was no operational or business plans in place for 2015 or 2016. Information systems were poor and were not used to plan and deliver effective services. Future plans included doubling the number of available foster carers and maintaining the numbers of children in placement. The director of fostering told inspectors that the company considered international trends in foster care, legislative changes and the corporate plan for the Child and Family Agency when planning their services. However, there was no documentation of this process.

Risk Management

Risk management systems were poor. The capacity of the organisation to identify risk was limited: there was no risk management framework and no risks had been identified for the fostering service. For example, unplanned endings and the lack of recording systems had not been identified as risks to the organisation.

Quality Assurance

There was no monitoring of the quality of the foster care service. There were no formal reviewing processes in place or a quality management system. There was no evidence of auditing of the service for quality and improvement purposes. There had been no analysis of the placements which had ended in an unplanned manner and therefore Freshstart was missing an opportunity for learning from these events. There was no evidence of an internal analysis of the performance of the service against the standards.

A focused inspection of the Freshstart foster care service had been carried out by a foster care monitoring officer for the Child and Family Agency in 2014 but no report was produced.

Theme 5: Use of Resources

Services recruit sufficient foster carers to meet the needs of children. Foster carers stay with the agency and continue to offer placements to children.

Inspection findings

The foster care service was not sufficiently resourced to meet the demand for placements. There was a recruitment strategy in place but no retention strategy to ensure that foster carers continued to offer placements to children.

Recruitment and Retention of foster carers

The agency did not have sufficient numbers of foster carers to meet the demand for placements or to ensure a stringent matching process that was based on the needs of the child. There were 15 enquiries about fostering each of which was responded to within 24 hours by the director of services. Six applications had been received and while enquiries were followed up in a timely manner there were some delays in assessments being allocated to an assessing social worker. Four new foster carers had been recruited and approved in the 12 months prior to the inspection and six applicants were awaiting assessment. At the time of the inspection there were 17 children placed with 12 families and three families who did not have children placed with them. On the first day of the inspection inspectors heard the director of fostering services refuse three placement requests on the basis that there were no suitable families available.

There was no plan in place to retain foster carers. The service had a strategic plan which focused on increasing the numbers of foster care households and children but it was not clear how this would be achieved. There was also a recruitment and retention policy which noted that retention of carers would be assisted by an emphasis on supporting foster carers. Freshstart reported that no foster families had left the service voluntarily in the last 12 months.

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 agency recruit and manage their workforce to ensure that staff has the required skills, experience and competencies to respond to the needs of children.

Inspection findings

The foster care service was provided by a small team who demonstrated commitment to their responsibilities but who were not receiving enough support to fulfil their roles and responsibilities to the foster carers and the children they were caring for.

Recruitment

Recruitment practices were not in line with legislation, standards and policies. While there were full employment histories and references on staff files there was only one containing proof of professional registration. One file had no copy of An Garda Síochána vetting. The job description was not contained in the link social worker's staff file and there was no job description for the support worker. The director of foster care services had been vetted by An Garda Síochána but there was no job description of his role and responsibilities, no professional registration and no evidence of qualifications.

Sufficient staff and skill mix

There were insufficient staff to adequately deliver the service. The agency had 2.25 posts and one full time vacancy for which they were actively recruiting. The link social worker worked part time hours and this was not sufficient to fulfill the responsibilities of the role set out in the job description. The support worker worked full time. The service had not met the regulatory requirement to carry out reviews on foster carers. This meant that foster carers were not receiving the level of support, formal supervision and training they required to ensure they could always meet children's needs and maintain placements. The director of fostering services outlined difficulties that Freshstart had encountered in recruiting suitable staff for the link worker role. The lack of sufficient assessing social workers resulted in delays in assessments taking place which in turn resulted in fewer numbers of approved foster care families.

Supervision and support

Support and supervision of staff was not adequate. There was a supervision policy which stated that staff should receive supervision every four to six weeks and that supervision contracts should be in place. The director of fostercare services supervised the link social worker and the support worker. There was a comprehensive supervision form used for supervision with the link social worker. The template was a good tool to aid supervision but it had only been used once.

The link social worker told inspectors that s/he was formally supervised by the director of fostering services approximately every three months and had regular telephone contact with him. Inspectors found that the link social worker received formal supervision on two occasions in the 12 months prior to the inspection. However, there was no documentation available to inspectors of the supervision with the support worker.

The link social worker was newly qualified but there was no evidence of induction into the role or training specific to the role.

Training

Staff did not receive adequate training. There was no evidence of training or professional development of staff. Information provided for the inspection indicated that all staff were trained in Children First (2011) but there were no records to support this.

Appendix 1

National Standards for Foster Care (April 2003)
Theme 1: Child Centred Services
<p>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.</p>
<p>Standard 2: Family and friends Children and young people in foster care are encouraged and facilitated to maintain and develop family relationships and friendships.</p>
<p>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 have their views, including complaints, heard when decisions are made which affect them or the care they receive.</p>
<p>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.</p> <p><i>Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations, 1995</i> <i>Part III Article 8 Religion</i></p>
<p>Standard 25: Representations and complaints Health boards have policies and procedures designed to ensure that children and young people, their families, foster carers and others with a bona fide interest in their welfare can make effective representations, including complaints, about any aspect of the fostering service, whether provided directly by a health board or by a non-statutory agency.</p>

Theme 2: Safe and Effective Services
<p>Standard 8: Matching carers with children and young people</p> <p>Children and young people are placed with carers who are chosen for their capacity to meet the assessed needs of the children or young people.</p> <p><i>Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations, 1995</i> Part III, Article 7: Capacity of foster parents to meet the needs of child</p>
<p>Standard 9: A safe and positive environment</p> <p>Foster carers' homes provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment for the children or young people.</p>
<p>Standard 10: Safeguarding and child protection</p> <p>Children and young people in foster care are protected from abuse and neglect.</p>
<p>Standard 13: Preparation for leaving care and adult life</p> <p>Children and young people in foster care are helped to develop the skills, knowledge and competence necessary for adult living. They are given support and guidance to help them attain independence on leaving care.</p>
<p>Standard 14a: Assessment and approval of non-relative foster carers</p> <p>Foster care applicants participate in a comprehensive assessment of their ability to carry out the fostering task and are formally approved by the health board prior to any child or young person being placed with them.</p> <p><i>Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations, 1995</i> Part III, Article 5 Assessment of foster parents Part III, Article 9 Contract</p>
<p>Standard 15: Supervision and support</p> <p>Approved foster carers are supervised by a professionally qualified social worker. This person, known as the link worker, ensures that foster carers have access to the information, advice and professional support necessary to enable them to provide high quality care.</p>
<p>Standard 16: Training</p> <p>Foster carers participate in the training necessary to equip them with the skills and knowledge required to provide high quality care.</p>
<p>Standard 17: Reviews of foster carers</p> <p>Foster carers participate in regular reviews of their continuing capacity to provide high quality care and to assist with the identification of gaps in the fostering service.</p>

Standard 22: Special Foster care

Health boards provide for a special foster care service for children and young people with serious behavioural difficulties.

Theme 3: Health and Development**Standard 11: Health and development**

The health and developmental needs of children and young people in foster care are assessed and met. They are given information, guidance and support to make appropriate choices in relation to their health and development.

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

Part III, Article 6 Assessment of circumstances of child

Part IV, Article 16 (2)(d) Duties of foster parents

Standard 12: Education

The educational needs of children and young people in foster care are given high priority and they are encouraged to attain their full potential. Education is understood to include the development of social and life skills.

Theme 4: Leadership, Governance and Management
<p>Standard 18: Effective policies</p> <p>Health boards have up-to-date effective policies and plans in place to promote the provision of high quality foster care for children and young people who require it.</p> <p><i>Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations, 1995</i> <i>Part III, Article 5(1) Assessment of foster carers</i></p>
<p>Standard 19: Management and monitoring of foster care agency</p> <p>Health boards have effective structures in place for the management and monitoring of foster care services.</p> <p><i>Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations, 1995</i> <i>Part IV, Article 12 Maintenance of register</i> <i>Part IV, Article 17 Supervision and visiting of children</i></p>
Theme 5: Use of Resources
<p>Standard 21: Recruitment and retention of an appropriate range of foster carers</p> <p>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>
Theme 6: Workforce
<p>Standard 20: Training and Qualifications</p> <p>Health boards ensure that the staff employed to work with children and young people, their families and foster carers are professionally qualified and suitably trained.</p>