



An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

Alternative Care Inspection and Monitoring Service

Non-Statutory Foster Care Agency

Monitoring ID: 03

Year: 2025

Alternative Care Inspection and Monitoring Service
Tusla - Child and Family Agency
Units 4/5, Nexus Building, 2nd Floor
Blanchardstown Corporate Park
Ballycoolin
Dublin 15
01 897685

Monitoring Report

Year:	2025
Name of Agency:	Five Rivers Ireland
Dates of audit:	3rd and 4th March 2025
Monitoring Team:	Anne McEvoy, Ciara Nangle and Joanne Cogley
Type of Monitoring Visit:	Announced Themed
Date Final Report Issued:	1st May 2025

Contents

1. Foreword

1.1	Profile of the foster care agency	6
1.2	Methodology	8
1.3	Summary of Monitoring Findings	9

2. Analysis of Findings

2.1	Standard 16: Training	10
2.2	Recommendations for service improvement	15
2.3	Actions required for compliance with the standard	15

1. Foreword

The Child and Family Agency is responsible for providing services for children who require care outside of their homes of origin. This care is provided in a variety of settings, and TUSLA is responsible for ensuring that this care is of a high standard for the protection and support of these children. Tusla may also commission the provision of foster care placements by non-statutory, voluntary or private, fostering agencies. The non-statutory foster care agency is required to adhere to the legislation, regulations and standards in respect of the provision of foster care within the state and demonstrate adequate knowledge of same.

Tusla- Child and Family Agency was established on the 1st January 2014, legislated under the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, and is now the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. The Child and Family Agency is overseen by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Tusla has responsibility for a range of services including provision of alternative care placements for children requiring protection and support including statutory foster care services. For both statutory and non-statutory foster care services Tusla retain their statutory responsibilities to children placed with these services. The approval of foster carers is the responsibility of the Tusla Foster Care Committee. Tusla and non-statutory foster care agencies are accountable for the provision of safe and effective care to these children.

The internal responsibility for governance is the ultimate responsibility of the non-statutory agency providing the foster care service. The non-statutory foster care agency will, however, be subject to the normal monitoring and inspection arrangements as outlined in the regulations and legislation, undertaken by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and where appropriate by HIQA.

The monitoring of non-statutory foster care agencies by Tusla, Child and Family Agency is required by the Department of Health and Children's "National Standards for Foster Care, 2003" Standard 24.6 to ensure compliance with the Placement of Children in Foster Care Regulations, 1995. The objective of the monitoring process is to provide assurance about the quality of care, challenge poor performance and promote improvement and safeguard the rights of young people in care.

This duty is undertaken by the Alternative Care Inspection and Monitoring Service as part of the Children's Services Regulation which is a sub directorate of the Quality and Regulation

Directorate within TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency. The service is committed to carry out its duties in an even handed, fair and rigorous manner.

As part of the Alternative Care Inspection and Monitoring services schedule of audits of private foster care agencies in 2025, a thematic review of Standard 16 – training, is being completed from Q1 onwards.

This monitoring audit will set out to determine if foster carers participate in the training necessary to equip them with the skills and knowledge required to provide high quality care in line with Standard 16, Training, National Standards for Foster Care (2003).

Information was gathered through reviews of the foster carer files, interviews with relevant people and through a review of questionnaires returned by active foster carers within the agency.

Acknowledgements

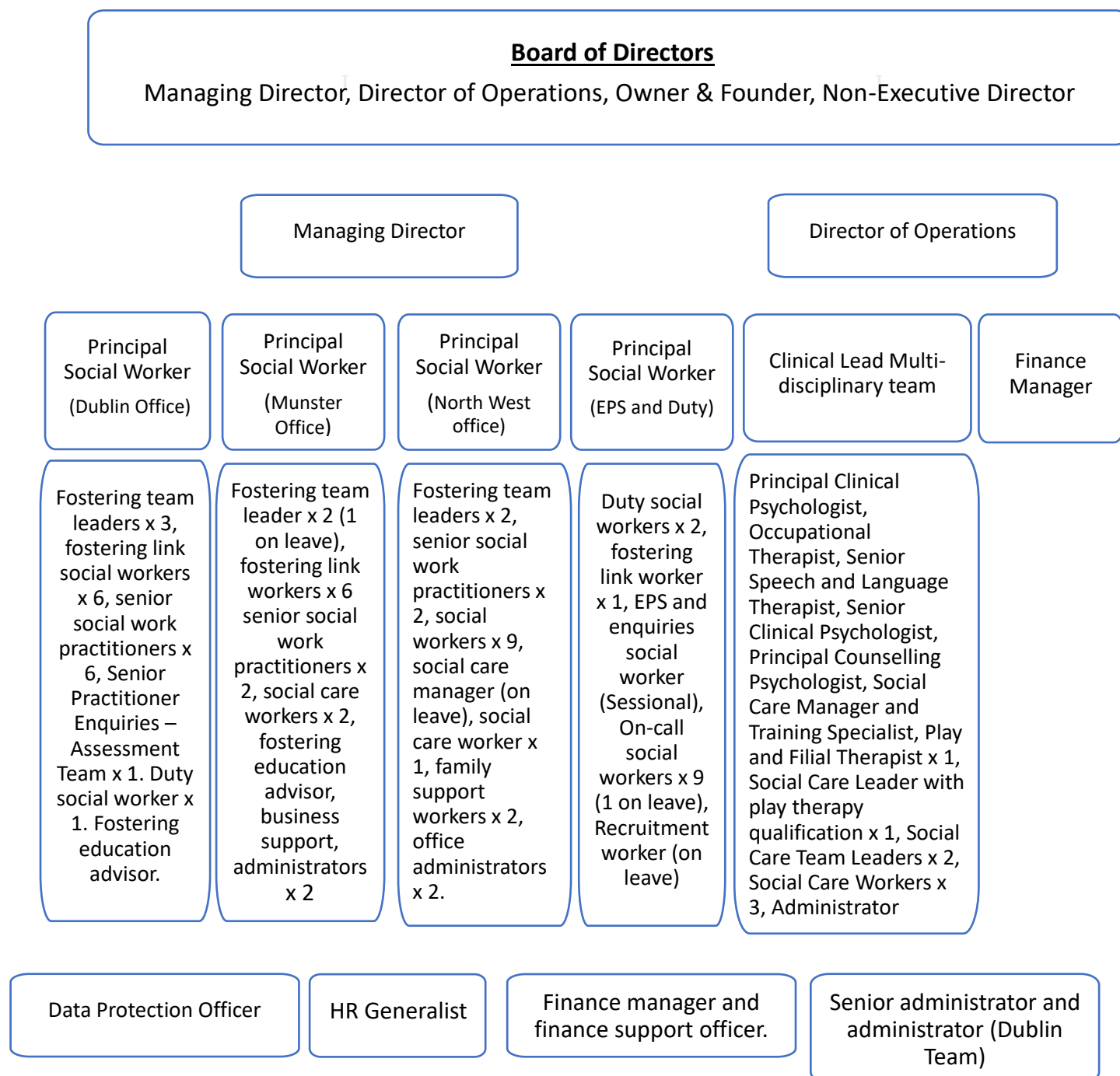
The monitoring officers would like to acknowledge the staff and management of Five Rivers Ireland fostering agency and the foster carers who took the time to complete questionnaires, for their co-operation during the audit process.

1.1 Profile of the Foster Care Agency

Five Rivers Ireland is a non-statutory foster care agency and has been in operation in Ireland since 2002. This foster care agency currently provides nationwide foster care services and offers respite, short, long term and emergency place of safety (EPS) placements to children in statutory care on behalf of Tusla. Five Rivers Ireland operates from three offices in Dublin, Cork and Donegal, each with oversight by a principal social worker (PSW). There is also a number of social workers working remotely across Connacht, Cavan, Monaghan and the midlands. The managing director and operations manager are co-located in the Dublin office. The organogram of this agency is represented under Figure 1 in this section of the report. The agency has an established multi-disciplinary team to support the foster carers, their children and the children placed in care. This team comprises of psychologists, social care workers, speech and language therapists, an occupational therapist, play therapists and is directly managed by the clinical lead.

Data returned by Five Rivers Ireland showed the service had 208 foster care households, with 180 of these active foster carers at the time of audit on the 03rd March 2025. The provision of placements was contractually agreed between Five Rivers Ireland and Tusla, Child and Family Agency. A separate contract specific to the provision of Emergency Place of Safety placements accessed by the Tusla Crisis Intervention Service was also in place. As a result of the provision of EPS placements, the number of children placed was subject to change daily.

Figure 1: Organisational structure of Five Rivers Ireland Fostering Service



1.2 Methodology

This monitoring report sets out the findings of an announced audit carried out over two days in March 2025, to assess the agency's compliance with Standard 16 of the National Standards for Foster Care, 2003. The agency was notified of the intention to conduct this audit on the 14th February 2025.

The following documents, data sets and information was requested:

1. Organisational chart for the agency
2. Training offered including mandatory training programs and additional training.
3. Tracking of training offered and delivered.
4. Data set: Number of carers currently with the agency.
5. Data set: Number of newly approved carers –from 14th February 2024 to 14th February 2025.
6. Data set: Number of placement breakdowns that have occurred from the 14th February 2024 to the 14th February 2025.
7. Data set: Number of foster carer reviews that have occurred from the 14th February 2024 to the 14th February 2025.
8. Data set: Number of reviews that occurred due to child protection concerns/disruptions from 14th February 2024 to the 14th February 2025.
9. Training needs analysis.
10. Number of carers who do not have up to date mandatory training.
11. Any internal trackers of training to evidence quality assurance oversight.
12. Evaluations of training programs delivered.

This report is based on a range of monitoring activities including review of the following information on the 3rd and 4th March 2025:

- ◆ A sample of foster carer household records. Monitors reviewed 18 foster carer records- this equated to 10% of the active foster carers within the agency.
- ◆ Relevant policies, procedures, audits and trackers.
- ◆ Foster carer questionnaires completed and submitted during the timeframe of the audit. All foster carers were afforded the opportunity to submit a questionnaire and return via post or email. A total of 28 completed questionnaires were returned and reviewed. This equated to a sampling of a further 14% of foster carers.

Interviews with relevant persons that were deemed by the monitoring team as to having a bona fide interest in the operation of the service;

- ◆ Managing director
- ◆ Principal social worker x 1
- ◆ Fostering link worker x 1
- ◆ Training co-ordinator x 1
- ◆ Senior clinical psychologist with input to training x 1
- ◆ Social Care Manager and Training Specialist x 1

1.3 Summary of Monitoring Findings

In summary, the monitors found that Five Rivers Ireland placed a strong emphasis on the provision and facilitation of training to foster carers and were operating in compliance with standard 16 of the National Standards for Foster Care 2003. This was evidenced in foster carer records such as supervision records, foster carer reviews, and in foster carer questionnaires returned to the monitors. There were structures in place to support foster carers, through the delivery and facilitation of good quality, diverse and relevant training to ensure the delivery of safe and effective care for children placed on behalf of Tusla. Relevant persons interviewed were clear of their roles and responsibilities and the policies and procedures they operated under. Monitors found that the agency was operating in line with good practice and relevant standards.

2. Analysis of Findings

2.1 Training

Standard 16

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

Monitors found that the agency provided a comprehensive training schedule. In May 2024, the agency had appointed a fostering link worker to incorporate the responsibilities of training coordinator into their role. This aspect of their post was to oversee and manage the roll out of training to carers. In interview, the training coordinator discussed the provision of training across several fora. A training calendar was compiled three times per year and forwarded to carers. Copies of these calendars were provided to monitors and evidenced that a variety of both mandatory and additional training was offered to carers. Mandatory training was found to be provided regularly and in different locations across the country to facilitate attendance. Where training could be facilitated online, this was made available to carers and at varying times of the day to facilitate those carers who were unable to attend during the day. Monitors found that training was provided both from trained professionals within the agency and from external agencies with specific knowledge on topics and issues relevant to the needs of the children being cared for. All carers contracted to Five Rivers Ireland also had paid subscriptions to both the Irish Foster Carers Association (IFCA) and to an online training company. The training calendar forwarded to carers highlighted a variety of courses being facilitated by both external agencies which carers could access free of charge. Additionally, the training coordinator identified that some carers highlighted that they enjoyed listening to podcasts and following from that feedback subsequent training calendars listed several podcasts and books that some carers may feel was appropriate to their foster child's needs and to their learning style. Each course offered and facilitated by the agency was concluded with the provision of an evaluation sheet which foster carers were encouraged to complete. A sample of those evaluation forms were forwarded to the monitors. Foster carers were encouraged to offer suggestions on how to improve the training that was delivered and provide feedback on which aspects of the course best met their needs. Monitors found that feedback provided was incorporated into future training provided, such as the provision of online training where foster carers found it difficult to attend in person training.

Monitors reviewed trackers maintained by the principal social workers (PSW) for each area and found that they were sufficient to identify carers who had completed the training and were in date with refreshers, carers who were approaching dates of refresher and carers who were out of date and in need of training. However, each tracker was devised differently and was not shared with the training coordinator. This was identified by the coordinator, and they spoke about improvements they were in the process of implementing to the roll out of training across all carers. They were planning to hold an integrated tracker incorporating the training required, offered and availed of across the three geographical offices. They were in the process of implementing a system where they could know in advance which mandatory training was required and the area it was required in, to improve the training calendar and ensure it was an efficient system. Monitors recommend that this system be implemented to strengthen the effectiveness of the training calendar and target training modules where they are most required.

Monitors found that from the enquiry visit through to approval, foster carers were advised of the expectation that they undertake mandatory and additional training. This was evidenced in the contract signed between foster carers and Five Rivers Ireland. As part of that contract foster carers also signed a declaration of intention to attend training. This specified that foster carers were required to attend at least three training workshops per year.

The foster carer handbook highlighted that there were specific mandatory training sessions that were required and refreshed on an ongoing basis. Five Rivers Ireland have foundations for fostering training, children first e-learning and child protection training, first aid training, and social media training as mandatory training requirements. Foundations for fostering training was the required training to be undertaken prior to approval and needed only to be completed once. Monitors found, through the sample of foster carers records reviewed and through the questionnaires returned, that all prospective foster carers had completed foundations for fostering training. A review of foster carer records evidenced that the facilitator and observer conducting the training undertook an analysis of each carers participation and identified further training that would benefit the carers following approval. Monitors were informed that all identified follow-up training was notified to the newly appointed link worker for progression, where carers were re-allocated following approval.

Social media training was recently introduced as a mandatory training module for foster carers to undertake. This was based on identified need and best practice considering the role of social media in the lives of children currently. The agency was in the process of rolling this training out to all carers. At the time of this audit, 59 carers required an initial or refresher

course in the social media training with 38 booked to attend the training before the end of March 2025. There was a discrepancy between the timeframe provided to the foster care committee (FCC) and the timeframe understood by staff members regarding the completion of Tusla e-Learning module: Introduction to Children First 2017, child protection training and first aid. Monitors found that Form F reports submitted to the FCC indicated that these training modules would be undertaken within six months of approval, however in interview monitors were advised that the timeframe for the completion of these training modules was one year. It is recommended on foot of this audit that the agency agree across its offices nationally what the agreed timeframe is and to incorporate this into their handbook for foster carers to avoid confusion and generate uniformity. While there was a discrepancy regarding the timeframe for completion of mandatory training following approval, monitors found that all carers were up to date in the Tusla e-Learning module: Introduction to Children First, 2017. There was significant compliance with most foster care households having at least one carer in each household having completed the child protection training and first aid training modules. 37 carers were found to need initial or refresher child protection training with the majority of these booked to attend this training between March and April 2025. 84 carers were required to complete either initial or refresher first aid courses with 55 booked to attend this training in upcoming planned first aid training courses.

Monitors found that all carers who were approved as EPS carers had completed a training module on the provision of emergency placements and this included a component on recognizing potential signs of child sexual exploitation (CSE). In addition, the agency provided CSE training to staff members to alert them to possible indications of sexual exploitation.

As prospective foster carers attended foundations for fostering training, the agency used to provide the “New Beginnings” training for their children. An evaluation of that group found that the attendance was quite low and the training was not achieving its desired purpose. At the time of this audit, this training was provided individually to the children of prospective foster carers by a social care worker. The agency designed a booklet, and as prospective foster carers reach the point of potential approval, this work was done individually with the carers birth children to prepare them for fostering.

At the time of this audit, the agency was focused on the roll out of dyadic developmental psychotherapy (DDP). The purpose of this training was to assist fostering link workers and foster carers understand, work with, and support children with developmental trauma. It

was designed to prioritize the internal world of the child and provide carers a clear rationale why they cannot be behaviour focused. This training was being delivered by trained members of the multidisciplinary team, alongside social workers and a foster carer over a period of ten weeks, each session three hours long. At the time of the audit there was a DDP training for carers in the south west of the country. This was being run weekly on Thursdays. A second foster carer group was taking place on Saturdays from the Dublin office. This was to accommodate carers who cannot do training on weekdays. The agency had facilitated all staff to be trained in DDP also to ensure that the concepts within the training were brought into every facet of supervision and support.

The multidisciplinary team (MDT) was also available to provide guidance and additional individualised training to foster carers through a referral process via fostering link workers. The MDT met weekly chaired by the principal clinical psychologist and referrals were discussed and directed to the most appropriate professional within the MDT. An educational and support plan was devised to assist the carer understand the nature of the behaviour and sustain the placement.

Monitors reviewed a sample of 18 foster carer records. Monitors found that each link worker maintained a record of all training undertaken by each carer. This was captured in several ways; supervision and support visits, foster carer reviews, annual supervision records and additionally all certificates were uploaded to a training section on the digitalised foster carer record and recorded on the trackers held by the PSW.

On review of the foster carer supervision and support records, monitors found that these were occurring monthly for carers who were caring for children on a full-time basis and every three to four months for carers engaged in respite or EPS placements. Training was a standing item on the agenda for supervision and support visits. These visits were crucial to the oversight and follow through of training needs identified by all facets of the fostering agency, ie. training needs identified from the initial foundations for fostering training, from the foster carer reviews and training needs identified while discussing the child or children placed with the foster carers during supervision and support visits. Monitors found evidence of correspondence from fostering link workers to the training coordinator following supervision and support visits of training needs identified in the visit. This was tracked to the provision of training for that carer, in one instance, specific training was provided to support the placement. While monitors found good examples of training being discussed with carers regarding training that required updating or training that was considered to be beneficial to the carer and relevant to the needs of the child, there were numerous examples where the

details recorded within the support and supervision records remained unchanged from month to month, making it difficult to determine when these discussions had actually occurred. Monitors acknowledge that while training may not necessarily be a required issue for discussion every month, the records saved to the carers file must be a true and accurate account of the discussions that took place. It was noted in interview that there was no policy or protocol regarding the frequency with which both carers (where applicable) attend the supervision and support visit. Monitors recommend that consideration be given to this issue to ensure that both carers are afforded the opportunity to discuss any presenting issues, concerns or identified training needs they may have.

Of those carers whose first foster child was placed with them over one year, monitors found that they had all received a foster carer review in line with the National Standards for Foster Care 2003. These reports evidenced that training was discussed as part of the foster carer review and recommendations, where required, were agreed by the foster carers and made to the FCC. To strengthen the discussion on training during supervision and support visits, there needs to be consistent follow up on training needs as identified in foundations for fostering training and foster carer reviews. The training coordinator would be best placed as the pivotal point for fostering link workers to advise on training deficits arising from foster carer reviews and foundations for fostering training. Monitors were advised that this was not the current practice within the agency and recommend that consideration be given to this aspect of the training coordinator role to add cohesion to the overall roll out of training to meet identified needs as well as the roll out of mandatory training.

28 foster carer questionnaires were completed and returned to the monitors. Each carer identified that they had always had an allocated fostering link worker to support them and had regular contact with their link worker. Several carers provided examples of how they were supported by their link worker in their fostering journey. Each carer identified that they were aware of the training calendar and had received a copy of same. All 28 carers stated that they were facilitated to attend training through a variety of fora - both online and in person, at varying times to facilitate carers who work and in locations close to them. All carers stated that training requirements were discussed in their supervision and support visits and 50% of those who completed the questionnaire stated that they had received specific training relevant to the needs of the child they were fostering. The other 50% did not feel that specific training was required for the child or children they were fostering. Any carers who noted that they had requested specific training confirmed that this was provided to them.

2.2 Recommendations for service improvement

- The development of an integrated tracker, designed and held centrally by the training coordinator incorporating the training required, offered and availed of across the three geographical offices.
- Agreement by senior management of the timeframe within which all mandatory training will be completed post approval and dissemination of the decision to all staff and foster carers moving forward.
- Senior management to give consideration to the frequency with which both carers (where applicable) are engaged in the supervision and support visits and afforded the opportunity to discuss any presenting issues, concerns or identified training needs they may have.
- Strengthen the discussion on training during supervision and support visits by consistent follow up on training needs as identified in foundations for fostering training and foster carer reviews as well as mandatory training and refreshers.
- Consideration be given to appointing the training coordinator as the pivotal person for fostering link workers, in collaboration with their line management, to notify in terms of training deficits to add cohesion to the overall roll out of training to meet identified needs as well as the roll out of mandatory training.

2.3. Actions Required to be compliant with the standard

- None identified.