An Ghníomhaireacht um Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

Alternative Care Inspection and Monitoring Service

Non-Statutory Foster Care Agency

Monitoring ID:	**07**
Year:	**2025**

Alternative Care Inspection and Monitoring Service
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Monitoring Report

Year:	**2025**
Name of Agency:	**Orchard Fostering**
Dates of audit:	**3rd & 4th June 2025**
Monitoring Team:	**Ciara Nangle** **Janice Ryan**
Type of Monitoring Visit:	**Announced Themed**
Date Report Issued:	**9th September 2025**

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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, Disability and Equality.

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 monitoring visits to private foster care agencies in 2025, a thematic review of Standard 16 – training, is being completed from Q1 onwards.

This monitoring visit 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 and the foster carers who took the time to complete questionnaires, for their co-operation during the monitoring process.

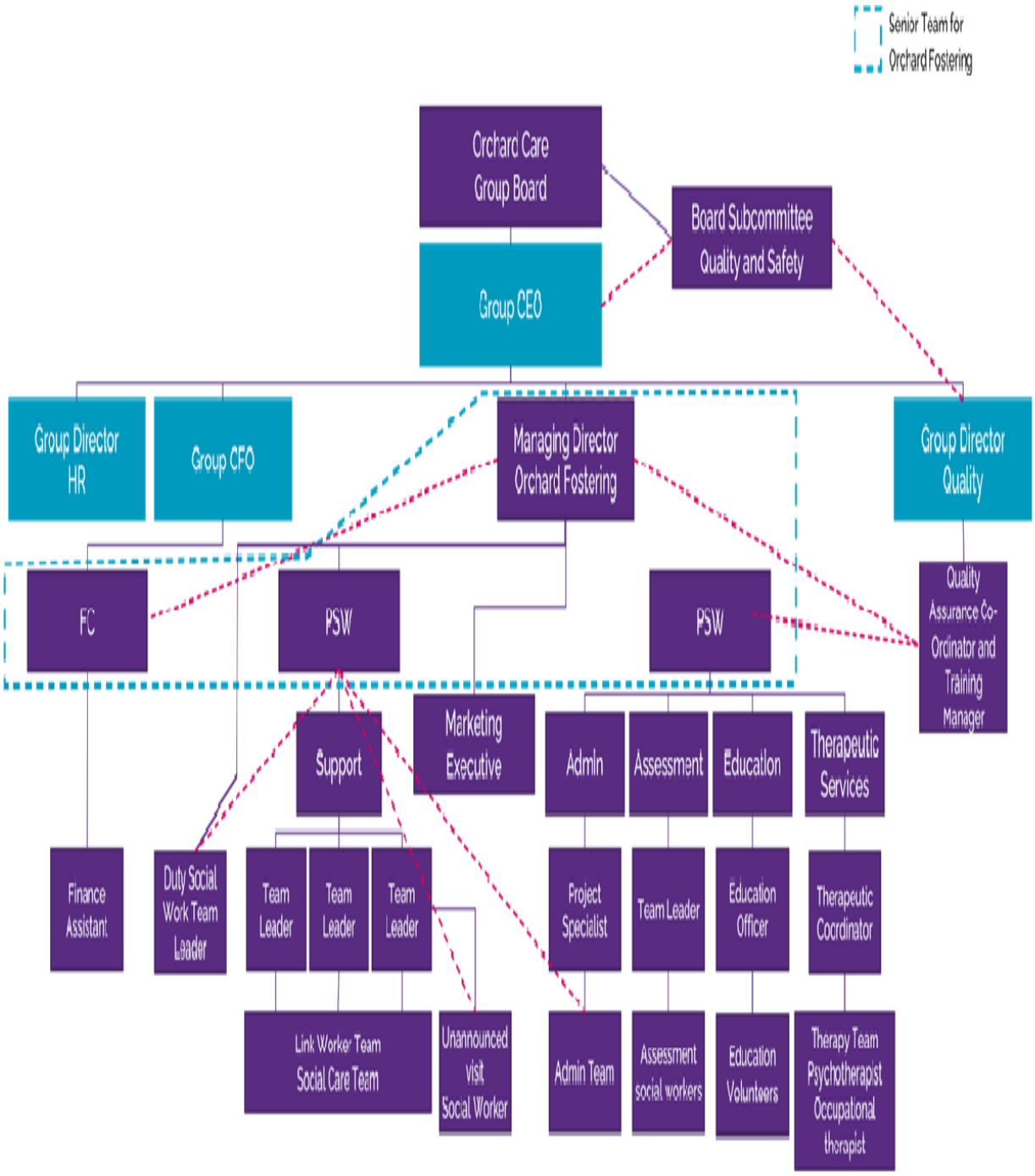
1.1 Profile of the Foster Care Agency

Orchard Fostering is a non-statutory fostering agency that was established in 2008. This foster care agency currently provides nationwide foster care services and offers a diverse range of placements including short-term, respite, general, supported lodgings and enhanced foster care placements for children and young people aged between 0-18 years. The fostering service currently receives referrals from all Tusla regions.

This agency's office is based in Dublin. They undertake the recruitment, assessment, training, supervision and support of foster carers. Figure 1 below sets out the organisational structure for the agency.

As of the 28th May 2025 the data returned by the fostering agency stated that there was 112 foster care households approved with the agency, 102 of these were active foster carers, 5 provided respite placements and 5 were inactive.

Figure 1: Organisational Structure of Orchard Fostering Service



1.2 Methodology

This report sets out the findings of an announced monitoring visit carried out over two days, 3rd and 4th June 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 monitoring visit on the 13th May 2025.

The following documents, data sets and information was requested:

1. Organisational chart for the agency
2. Policies and procedures relating to: Training; including mandatory training programmes and additional training, management of carers who do not attend training and training for carers following foster care review.
3. Tracking of training offered and delivered.
4. Data Set for:
    - Number of carers currently with the agency.
    - Number of newly approved carers – within the last year from 07th May 2024 to 07th May 2025.
    - Number of placement breakdowns that have occurred within the year from the 07th May 2024 to the 07th May 2025.
    - Number of reviews that have occurred in the last year from the 07th May 2024 to the 07th May 2025.
    - Number of reviews that occurred due to child protection concerns/disruptions from 07th May 2024 to the 07th May 2025.
    - Number of carers who do not have up to date mandatory training
5. Training needs analysis.
6. Any internal trackers of training to evidence quality assurance oversight.
7. Any evaluations of training programmes delivered.

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

- A sample of foster carer household records. Monitors reviewed 11 foster carer records- this equated to approximately 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 monitoring visit
- 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 2
  - Fostering link worker x 1
  - Quality assurance and training manager x 1
  - Foster carers x 2

1.3 Summary of Monitoring Findings

In summary, the monitors found that Orchard Foster Care were committed to the provision and facilitation of training for 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, training databases maintained by the agency, and through interviews with relevant personnel, including foster carers. 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. The relevant people interviewed were clear of their roles and responsibilities and the policies and procedures they operated under regarding the training of foster carers. 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.

The agency had a policy in place that outlined their requirement for the provision of and participation in training by foster carers. The policy clearly set out the mandatory training requirements for foster carers and identified the expectation that foster carers will participate in on-going learning throughout the fostering journey. At the time of this monitoring visit, all carers with the agency had completed the required mandatory training. All interviewed were familiar with this policy and its implementation. The policy identified that foster carers should undertake at least one additional learning opportunity per year outside of their mandatory training and the commitment to completing this was signed off on a yearly basis through a personal learning plan (PLP). While undergoing the process of assessment foster carers were also required to sign a PLP to demonstrate their commitment to the training expectations of the agency. Monitors saw evidence of these PLPs on file for all carers in the sample reviewed. For this upcoming year the recording of this plan had changed, and rather than specific learning opportunities being identified at the beginning of the year, the carers committed to completing one with the expectation that training would be discussed and identified during support visits by link workers.

At the end of each year, the carers in conjunction with their link worker reflected on what training had been completed and a record of this was maintained on their case file. The training detailed in the PLPs and the learning opportunity that carers committed to completing was not linked to training identified within foster care reviews or other fora. The completing of training required as a result of those processes was tracked to completion through other mechanisms. This will be detailed further in this report.

The agency had a designated quality assurance (QA) and training manager in place. They reported directly to the group quality director, with reporting channels to the principal social worker who had responsibility for assessment and to the managing director. The QA and training manager oversaw the development of the training schedule for the year. They also tracked the training completed by carers and collated the feedback from the training

provided. Additionally, they had responsibility for overseeing the bi-annual training needs analysis, the biannual carers satisfaction survey and the tracking of training needs arising from foster carer reviews, assessments and the ongoing discussions that occurred during supervision visits with carers.

The QA and training manager played a pivotal role in ensuring that training within the agency was effectively delivered and aligned to the National Standards for Foster Care, 2013. The training calendar provided by the agency had previously been developed on an annual basis and shared with carers. However, the agency had found that it was more beneficial and that they could provide more targeted training to the needs of the carers if this was developed on a six monthly basis. From January 2025, this was to be shared in January and July with carers, with dates of training for the upcoming six months. The training calendar offered a broad range of training courses, covering a variety of topics including internet safety, topics on trauma, relevant mental health topics presenting within placements and aftercare for separated children. Training was also provided for carers in relation to policy changes that would directly impact on them. This calendar was sent directly to carers by the QA and training manager. In the sample of carer files reviewed, monitors saw evidence of the training calendar being discussed and referred to during link worker supervision visits with foster carers and carers being encouraged to attend.

As noted above, the collating of training needs and planning relevant training was the responsibility of the training manager. Most of the training provided by the organisation was online. This had consistently been identified as the preference by carers during the carer satisfaction survey completed in 2024 and the training needs analysis completed in 2023. Online trainings were provided through a live webinar however the agency maintained a recording of the training so carers could access these at times convenient to them if required. However, to access the recorded online training, carers must request the access link from the training team. This ensures that the agency is aware of the training being completed by each carer and support can be provided post training to facilitate understanding and implementation if required.

Certificates of attendance at training were maintained by the fostering link worker on the carers profile of the agency's filing system. On the sample of files reviewed, monitors found that all completed training was recorded on the file. A register of training attendance was also maintained by the QA and training manager which provided for governance and oversight of training attendance and ensures carers adherence with the training policy. The

QA and training manager highlighted to carers and their link worker when mandatory training was required to be completed and there was an escalation process within the agency should carers not attend. At the time of this monitoring visit all carers had completed their mandatory training.

Training was sourced externally when required and was also provided from members of the team who were qualified to do so. Foster carers also provided training when appropriate and were supported and encouraged to do so. This allowed for a broad range of topics relevant to foster care to be provided to carers. Where training was provided online, a member of the team, either the QA and training manager or someone from the social work team, attended the training. Feedback was sought by the team member in attendance at the end of each training session and provided to the QA and training manager. This informed the analysis of the quality of the training provided and ensured that foster carers had someone available to them should an issue present during training.

During interview with members of the team, they identified the supports that were available should a carer have difficulty accessing online training. This included the link worker either completing the training online with them, or a member of the social care team completing in person training with the carer on a one to one basis. Additionally, there was an option for carers to be supported to access in person training through external services such as Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA) or other relevant agencies. All carers within the agency were provided with membership of IFCA once approved. As training continues to be provided predominantly online, on-going development of the procedures to support carers who have difficulty with accessing online training is required to ensure that they continue to have equal opportunities to access training.

This year, 2025, the agency had provided a learning day for their carers. This was set up to facilitate foster carers and young people to attend. Activities were organised for the young people during the times carers attended training. This was again something carers had requested as they identified childcare as a barrier to attending in-person training. The training provided on this day was relevant to all carers and the agency reported good attendance at the event. Positive feedback on this training day was received from carers and it was planned that, moving forward, this will be facilitated annually.

The agency also facilitated carer groups, which occurred in a variety of regions and aimed to occur three times per year. These groups were support groups for foster carers to come

together to share experiences and provide peer support to each other. They were not intended to be formal learning groups or training. However, they provided valuable support and learning to carers through peer-to-peer support. In an interview with one carer they reported positively on the learning they had gained through attendance at these groups as they reported they were learning from other carers with lived experience. These groups were also attended by a member of management to answer any queries or provide any feedback that carers may request during the group session.

A training needs analysis survey was completed with foster carers every second year, and a carer satisfaction survey was completed every other year. Within both of these surveys information was sought on training opportunities for carers. Retention visits were also completed yearly with foster carers by members of senior management, either the principal social workers or the managing director. A standing item for discussion during these visits was feedback on training and this was recorded within the sample of carers files reviewed during this monitoring visit. The agency also had a carers board, which was made up of foster carers and members of management. The purpose of this was to ensure that carers voices were heard and their views and requests were expressed to the agency. Carers views or feedback on training was discussed within this forum. Feedback from all of these forums informed the training program for the upcoming year. As detailed previously, this information was all collated and tracked by the QA and training manager.

Within the files sampled, foster care reviews occurred in line with statutory requirements. Within this sample there was evidence of training being considered as part of the review. In general the review provided an overview of the training the carers completed with recommendations for them to continue with training in line with the training policy. However, in certain circumstances where necessary, specific training was identified for carers. When this occurred, the recommendations from reviews, including training needs were tracked by both the principal social worker and the QA and training manager. The progress of these actions was reviewed weekly by the principal social worker in meetings with the social work team leaders. Monthly meetings occurred with the QA and training manager and the managing director and during these the training needs of the agency were reviewed, including review of progress of completion. Training identified from placement disruptions or within assessment were tracked in a similar way, with registers in place for all recommended training and updates on the progress of their implementation tracked. There was also evidence of recommendations from foster care reviews, being discussed as a standing item within supervision between the link worker and team leader with updates on

progress being recorded. There was good oversight and governance regarding the provision of training when identified within foster care reviews.

In the sample of carers files reviewed, monitors did not see occasions where training was provided specific to a young person prior to them being placed. However, the agency had identified the need for new carers to receive training in the provision of trauma-informed care and this was something the agency was striving to provide to all new carers. This was tracked by the QA and training manager to ensure that it was completed. Additionally, the social care team within the agency provided one-to-one training to carers when a need was identified specifically for a young person in placement, if the training was not readily available within the training calendar or externally. Carers' feedback in relation to the one-to-one training was generally positive and in one file reviewed, the carer had identified within their foster care review that the one-to-one training had been impactful on the care they were providing to the young person.

There was a template in place for the recording of supervision visits with a designated section relating to training. Within this template there was guidance notes indicating specific details to be discussed. Within the sample reviewed, there was evidence of training being discussed at almost all supervision visits with carers. However, the level of detail recorded varied from carer to carer. Within some records, there was good quality recording in relation to training, including how completed training was being applied to practice, the planning for completing training and discussions around the carer's own areas of interest and how they could be supported to access training on these. In other records the detail recorded was brief and the record remained unchanged from one month to the next which resulted in monitors finding it difficult to ascertain to what level training was being discussed. Improvement in the recording of discussions regarding training is required to ensure that accurate records are maintained on the carers files and training needs are identified and supported.

Overall, monitors were assured that the agency was operating in line with Standard 16 of the National Standards for Foster Care, 2013 and were providing a wide range of training to their carers aligned to identified needs, relevant policies, regulations and best practice.

2.2 Recommendations for service improvement

- Improvement in the recording of link worker supervision visits to ensure they accurately reflect the discussions that take place regarding training to support the provision of relevant training in line with carers needs.

2.3. Actions Required to be compliant with the standard

- None identified.