

Wirral Fostering Service

Annual Report

April 2021 to March 2022

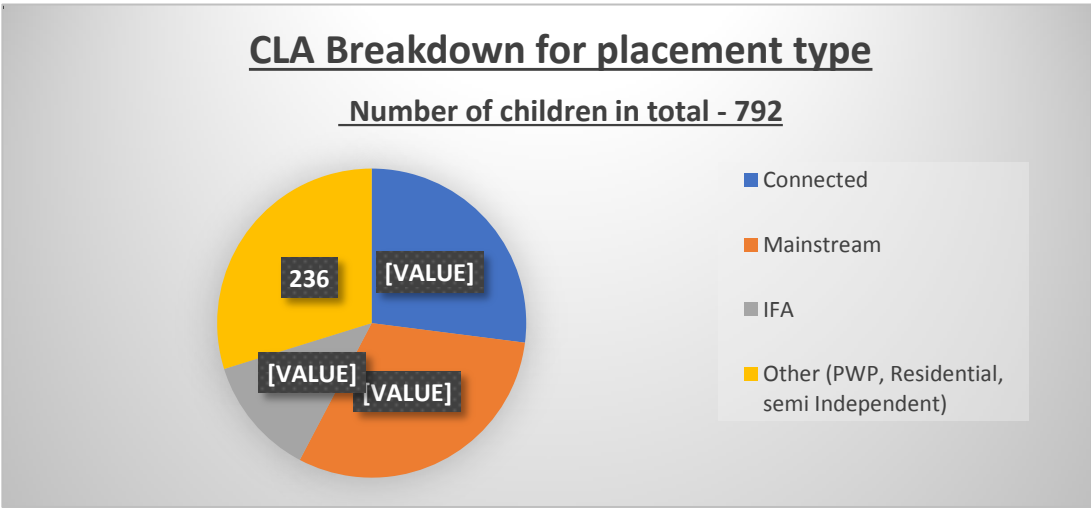
Introduction

This Annual Report should be read in conjunction with the Fostering Service Statement of Purpose (Appendix A). The Statement of Purpose sets out the legislative and regulatory context under which Wirral Council carries out the functions of the Fostering Service. The Fostering Service is a regulated service and as such is subject to inspection by Ofsted under the Care Standards Act 2000.

Wirral Council’s Fostering Service provide placements for children in the care of the Local Authority with foster carers by offering short term placements (normally lasting up to 1 year) and long term placements (which are planned matched placements designed to last until a child turns 18 and beyond). Wirral’s foster carers have a diverse range of skills and experience. Foster carers provide family-based services ranging from weekend respite/short breaks to supporting birth parents and carers, preparing a child for adoption, or providing a permanent home for a child through to independence. Several foster carers also provide mentoring to fellow carers and families accessing services from social care.

Children Looked After Numbers

As at the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 there were 792 Looked After Children cared for by Wirral Council, of which 556 (70%) were in foster care, this is broadly in line with the national average of 71% (based on 2021 Government Data). Of these children 457 (58%) were living with in house foster carers, 243 were placed with in house carers and 214 with connected carers (family members who are foster carers), a further 99 children were living with Independent Agency Foster Carers. , The remaining 236 children were placed in a mixture of residential, semi-independent, placed with parents or subject to adoption placements.



Role of the Fostering Service

The overall aim of the Fostering Service is to provide a range of high quality and safe foster placements that meet the needs of our children looked after in line with the requirements of Care Standards Act 2002 and the Fostering Regulations 2011 including the National Minimum Standards for Fostering 2011.

The service is responsible for:

- Support, supervision, and training of foster carers including family and friend carers (connected carers)
- Ensuring provision of local safe and supportive foster placements in accordance with fostering national minimum standards
- Promoting placement stability and permanence planning for our children
- Recruitment and assessment of new foster carers

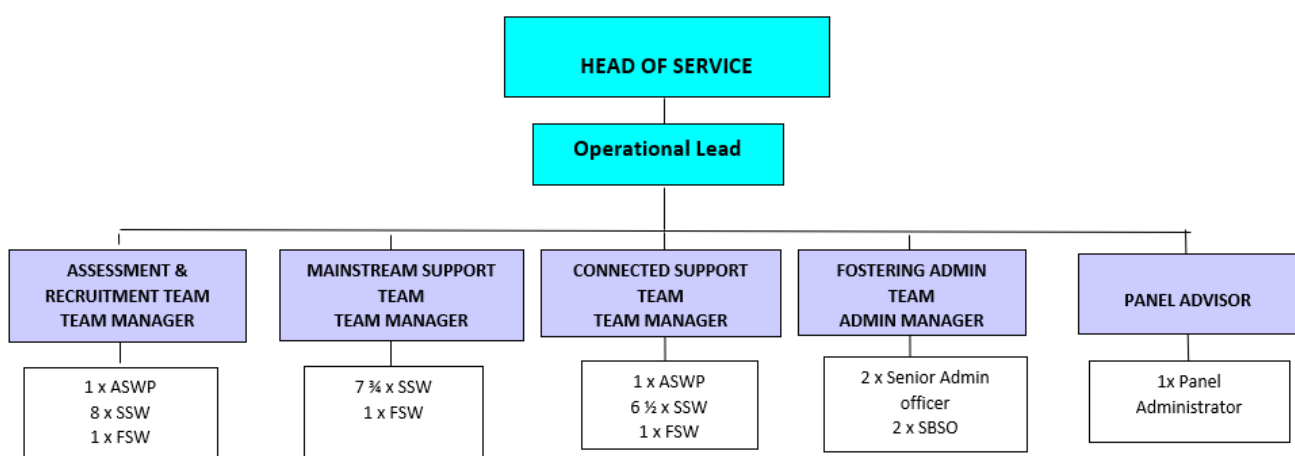
The Fostering Service provides a range of placements with foster carers with a varied skill and experience base, as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 there were 306 approved Fostering Households in Wirral This is broken down to 164 mainstream households and 142 connected households. A further 36 assessments are currently in progress of these 14 are mainstream and 23 are connected persons assessments. There are a range of placements with foster carers dependent upon their skills and experience and this varies from transition to permanence through adoption, return home with family, permanence through long term matching and in some cases supporting children and young people through to independence and staying put. All foster carers are supervised and supported by social workers within the fostering team, all carers undertake regular training in range of specific areas to enhance their skills as foster carers.

Ultimately the role of a foster carer is all about children, caring for children, keeping children safe, making children feel wanted, supporting children in education, supporting their friendships, their family relationships, helping young people understand their experiences, and preparing young people for independence. It is the job of the fostering service to make sure we have foster carers who can consistently support children with all these aspects of the role

### Service Structure

The Fostering Service underwent a structure change in October 2022 and now comprises of Head of Service for Fostering and Permanence, Operational Lead, 3 Managers who are responsible for Mainstream, Connected Persons and Recruitment and Assessment Teams. There are advanced social workers, supervising social workers and family support workers across the teams. The administration side of the service has an Administration Manager, Panel Advisor, panel administrator 2 business support officers and 2 finance admin officers.

There has been a concerted effort to increase the number of permanent employees within the service with 1 TM and 4 SSW recruited during the reporting period. This has resulted in the reduction of agency workers over the last 12 months with 4 posts being covered by agency as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, (interviews are scheduled for May 2022 for remaining agency posts).



The social workers main roles and responsibilities are supervising and supporting Foster Carers whilst ensuring that Foster Carers meet the Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011. All carers are subject to an independent review annually by an external Independent Reviewing Officer. In November 2021 as a good practice model in line with some Good and Outstanding Fostering Services 5-year reviews at Fostering Panel for all foster carers. This additional measure provides further scrutiny of the quality of care provided by foster carers by Fostering Panel

At the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 the Fostering Service was responsible for a total of **306** mainstream and connected Fostering Households.

As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, 58% of our CLA population were placed with Wirral Foster carers. The remainder of our children in care were placed with Independent Fostering Agencies, residential provision, semi-independent accommodation, placed at home with parents and number of children are placed for adoption.

### **Foster Carer Training**

Foster carers are required to complete 5 mandatory training modules every 3 years. This is then to be refreshed every 3 years. These training requirements are recording and reporting (R&R), safer care (SC), equality and diversity (E&D), safeguarding and first aid. In the previous reporting period (2020-2021) foster carers undertaking the 5 mandatory training requirements were recorded as 3%. The service have focused on this as a major priority and we have now shown increases in all the 5 key areas to 92% of carers have completed safer care, 63% recording and reporting, 59% safeguarding, 57% equality and diversity and 45% first aid.

First aid must be delivered face to face as per OFSTED requirements which has been difficult to achieve during the pandemic period. A new provider for first aid has been commissioned who is more flexible in offering evening and weekend sessions with 2 sessions booked in each month between now and end of March 2023 which will result in an uplift of carers completing this mandatory training.

The impact of Covid restrictions and a switch to online training has been cited by carers as a significant factor in them being unable to attend training, this is especially relevant for our older carers and also family and friends and carers for whom technology is seen as more of a challenge. There are however some carers who also state that online training is also more flexible. The balancing of caring for children full time and work commitments is also often cited as reasons for being unable to attend training.

In recognising the feedback noted above we have adopted a blended approach to delivering training going forward by adopting a blended approach to delivering, The mandatory training can be completed virtually or face to face by a family support worker who has been trained to deliver this training using resources provided by WSCP. We are working towards 100% compliance by September 2022. Foster Carers who are yet to complete the full set of mandatory training are challenged in their Annual Review and a bespoke training plan is now an outcome from this for the carers from their supervising social worker.

In order to prevent training being outstanding for newly approved carers moving forward, recording and reporting and safer care has been implemented into the skills to foster program so 2 out of the 5 mandatorys have been completed before registration and the assessment team are now prioritising getting applicants booked on to the remaining 3 mandatory training sessions within the first 3 months of their registration.

### **Mentoring schemes**

The Fostering service have a skilled set of foster carers who are keen to support other carers and families who are involved with social care who could benefit from experienced carers sharing their knowledge, skills and experience with them. To facilitate this, we operate two well established mentoring schemes outlined below, both schemes are extremely successful for both recipients and those carers who provide the support. We have 20 fostering mentors currently.

## Peer Mentor

Peer mentoring refers to approved foster carers in a structured one-to-one relationship with other approved foster carers. Peer mentoring is delivered by a more experienced foster carer (the mentor) to a less experienced foster carer (the mentee), outside of any line management relationship. Mentors can offer emotional and practical support and advice from a position of understanding as foster carers themselves. Peer mentoring is a method for guiding and supporting and not managing or directing. It is a method to motivate and empower mentees to identify issues and goals and to resolve or reach them.

### The main objectives of peer mentoring are:

- To support the recruitment and retention of foster carers
- To provide a problem-solving resource for foster carers in difficulty
- To offer personal development for experienced foster carers
- To enhance the quality of care to children through increased skills, confidence, and motivation of carers
- To improve placement stability

## Family mentor

The Family Mentor Scheme is a development of the Wirral Family Link Fostering scheme which has been running for many years. Family Link Foster Carers, offer planned overnight stays for short periods of time. Family mentors can offer the short overnight stays, but offer other support to children and their families, examples will be given below.

The Family Mentor Scheme is not restricted to those carers registered as family link carers, as it has been clear other fostering families want to use their skills and resources to assist children within their families.

Foster Carers providing mentoring are fully assessed and registered as foster carers, with all agency checks and references completed. Their practice is formally reviewed annually, as required for all foster carers. Each Family Mentoring Foster carer has a Supervising Social Worker, supervising them and their work on the scheme.

Referrals for the scheme are made by Social Workers through the duty process, completing a referral for fostering form and risk assessment, and refer specifically for the scheme.

The Aim of the Family Mentor scheme is to make it possible for children where Social Care has already intervened, to step down the tariff, or at least not step up into being looked after, or return from being Looked after. A 'Family Mentor' foster carer can also support care leavers moving into independence.

There are currently 15 family mentors however due to capacity they do not offer any overnight support at present but they do not currently offer overnight support Developing this element of the service is something that will be reviewed going forward however introducing this additional service may impact upon placement capacity in the future.

## Feedback

### Examples of Foster Carer Feedback Regarding the Service (anonymised)

*'It is great to have the continuity of the same supervising social worker as at the last review. I feel I have developed a good working relationship with the SW. We have regular supervisions but I know that I can contact her in between times if the need arises. I find her to be very supportive and approachable and it is lovely that we are now able to meet face to face again.'*

*We would like to thank (the SW) for all his help and support during the fostering application, we found him to be very encouraging and supportive during this time. He made us feel relaxed when asking us certain questions, regarding our past and childhood. He was confident in his role and seemed very knowledgeable when we asked him questions regarding fostering, he also put our minds at ease when we felt overwhelmed especially after the "skills to foster" training. The report was very detailed and he captured everything we spoke about in our earlier meetings. He presented it well, we are very grateful for the final report.*

*I'm not sure who thought of giving me such a wonderful surprise , but whoever it was ,can you please pass on my sincere thanks . Gestures like this mean the absolute world to Foster carers . To recognise and value the work that we do in this way, is really lovely and very ,very much appreciated .*

### **Children's Feedback around the service**

The Participation and Engagement team completed some work with children in 2019 and their overall feedback was very positive. Key skills they felt foster carers required included being listened to, been cared for, having a sense of fun, being honest, being happy and being trustworthy.

There is a clear need to go back to children and young people who are being cared for in foster care and gain more views from them about their experiences. A survey monkey questionnaire is likely to be the most appropriate form to gain children's views in the next few months.

Children do provide feedback in relation to foster carers to their Independent reviewing Officer during their children looked after reviews, as well as their social worker through statutory visits, and also at any point in time outside of these planned visits.

Some contemporary feedback from the children in care council:

*"I think that foster homes have become more supportive of the children who have difficulty of finding out who they are"*

*"Foster Carers have focused more on the children's wellbeing"*

*"Out of all the foster carers I have lived with, these foster carers I'm with now are the best. They make me feel part of the family and include us with everything the family is doing"*

### **Fostering payments**

The cost-of-living crisis has had an impact on foster carers within Wirral. Fuel and energy costs have risen exponentially in recent times, and the current inflation rate is approximately 10%. The uplift in foster carers allowance was 2% for 2022 to 2023. Various options to support foster carers are being considered currently and will be outlined to the Senior Leadership Team and also corporate parenting board in the near future. However it is noted that the average North West Skills Local Authority payments to foster carer are anything between £20-80 per week higher than those that our Wirral foster carers receive.

### **Kinship**

The council has recommissioned Kinship, which is a charitable organisation previously known as 'Grandparents Plus'. The focus of this organisation is on supporting connected carers. Kinship has been commissioned by Wirral to offer practical and emotional support. It offers expert advice and support across a range of issues from benefits, housing, education, housing issues and family relationships. There is access to peer support groups, and training. The commission this year also incorporates Kinship 'Reach' which offers for up to 30 connected carers, bespoke one-to-one sessions virtually for up to 6 sessions. The commission has been in partnership with Sefton and has thus reduced the costs by 50% as we are sharing the resource. Quarterly monitoring meetings are in place, and the fostering service is taking the lead on the interface with the Kinship team to ensure children and families that need the service the most receive it as soon as possible. Last year we had a different membership level and 49 carers accessed the service for advice and support, with others engaging in the online webinars as well as the peer support groups.

### **Family Toolbox**

Family Toolbox has been designed with Wirral families, for Wirral families, and is made up of digital tools and resources, brilliant people and welcoming places. The Family Toolbox way of working prioritises building families' confidence and skills so they can make the most of their own strengths and support networks.

The online side of the model is a mobile-friendly website that Wirral's parents and carers can use to find resources, people and places to help them with anything specific they want to work on.

They can:

find ideas and information to help them, through a searchable bank of tools

find out about local support services through a searchable directory of organisations and available support

introduce themselves to an organisation they'd like support from

identify their own goals and what they want to learn about, monitoring their progress along the way

find out what's happening in their area through a dedicated 'what's on' section.

It aims to make resources and support more readily available, and it puts the power right in the hands of families to work out what they want to change for themselves, and what steps they want to take to do that. This is an additional resource that Foster Carers can access.

### **Supervision and Support to Foster Carers**

#### **Mainstream Team**

The team is responsible for supervising and supporting our mainstream foster carers ensuring that our foster carers meet the standards and the aspirations of the service. There is a training programme in place which provides experienced Foster Carers and newly approved Foster Carers further opportunities to learn how best to meet the needs of children who are often presenting with more complex needs. During the last 12 months the wide range of training provided to foster carers has been mainly online, this is now moving to a blended approach of online, face to face and evening and weekend training where possible to support those carers who also work. Some of the training courses that are provided for foster carers include, Trauma informed practice, online safety, wellbeing and resilience, conflict resolution and complaints.

Regular online drop ins have been in place during the restriction of Covid 19 these are now moving back to face-to-face sessions, however some carers have asked to maintain the online sessions too, so these will be continuing to be facilitated by the team.

#### **Connected Carers Team**

The Connected Carers Team are responsible for providing supervision and support to the large number of Connected Carers once they have been approved by Fostering Panel. Supervising Social Workers provide a high level of support to Connected Carers to improve placement stability and ensuring that carers are being supported to meet fostering standards.

Connected Carers have the same access to all training that mainstream carers can attend, there are also monthly Connected Carers Support Group providing training in smaller groups for Connected Carers. To support the differing needs of our connected carers some 1-1 training is also provided within the team to carers.

### **Assessment and Recruitment Team**

All the Fostering assessment work for children who are subject to pre proceedings and care proceedings sit within the team, this includes viability, Regulation 24 assessments (temporary approvals) and Form C assessments (for family and friends carers). The team also undertake the assessment of mainstream foster carers to assess whether they meet the National Minimum standards to foster Children in Care. All staff within the team have received form F and form C training providing them with the skills to produce higher standards of assessment and recent quality assurance information from fostering panel is showing that there is an improvement in the analysis, robustness and decision making for the completed assessments. The assessment and recruitment team also runs the Skills to foster training provision which provides all fostering applicants with the practical, day-to-day skills that all foster carers need. It links into the training, support and development Standards in England and other professional development qualifications. This course is provided for all mainstream and connected foster carers and is now delivered as part of the assessment process, so all carers complete the mandatory training courses during their assessment.

### **Panel Approvals and Resignations**

During the 2021/2022 period 51 Wirral fostering panels were held, all were virtual due to risks surrounding covid 19, all panels held have had quorate attendance. During this period, two new experienced panel chairs have been appointed and the central list of panel members has been increased .

Panel business routinely consists of:

- Considering applications to be approved as a foster carer
- Considering the ongoing approval of foster carers following their first review, 5 yearly review and post allegations
- Change of the terms of approval of foster carers
- Regulation 25 request to extend temporary approval of Regulation 24 carers
- Exemptions, and
- Resignations

The annual foster panel report is currently being authored by the panel chairs and will be available in June 2022.

### **Feedback from Panel**

*Attendees- carers/applicants*

‘When It was my turn to go on panel and I seen all them people on teams I felt nervous but as soon as the chair of panel explained to me what was going to happen I felt calm and the rest of panel made me feel welcome ‘

‘I was nervous to start off but once the panel members introduced themselves and chatted away I was put at ease instantly and whole really enjoyed the experience’

At my panel everyone was very welcoming and positive. All were very informative and professional in giving me feedback following their discussion. Thanks everyone ‘

‘Panel members were really nice and listened to everything being said, I am really grateful that I had such understanding members and they gave me time to talk and ask any questions if I needed too ‘

#### *Social Workers*

‘ I like the style of this panel. It's professional and very focused on the applicant attending panel which I think is very good’

In addition panel members report that the overall quality of assessments being presented to panel from the assessment team has significantly improved over the last 12 months

#### **Assessments of prospective carers**

<b>01/04/2021-31/03/2022</b>	<b>Households assessed during reporting year</b>
<b>Total number of assessments recommended for approval by Panel</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Number of assessments approval agreed by ADM</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Of the total, number who were friends and family applicants</b>	<b>62 (70 last year)</b>
<b>Of the total, number who were mainstream applicants</b>	<b>19 (11 last year)</b>
<b>Number of assessments deferred by panel</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Total number of assessments not recommended for approval by Panel, all of whom were F&amp;F</b>	<b>10 (8 last year)</b>
<b>Number of assessments not approved by ADM</b>	<b>12</b>

<b>Deregistration's &amp; Resignations 2021-2022</b>	<b>Number of fostering households</b>
Connected foster carers who secured permanence via a SGO Mainstream carer secured SGO	17
Mainstream Carer resigned/ retired	19
Carer deceased	3
Carer resignation or deregistered during the Reg 24 Assessment	16
Child turned 18 years old	8
Deregistered due to allegation/practice concerns	2
Placement not required or child placed with alternative family member	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>



Previously In Wirral the picture has been as below (NB there was no published data from all LAs 2020 as it was not formally required).

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total number approvals	127	114	91	N/A	101
Number above friends and family cares	107	89	55	N/A	89
Number of above mainstream carers	20	25	36	N/A	12
Number of deregistration's	135	112	92	N/A	104
Net change each year	-8	+2	-1		-3

This matches the small overall decrease in LA registered carers nationally. The reasons for De registration in Wirral were

De-registrations in the year by reason	2021
Ceased fostering because family took out Special Guardianship Order for the Child/Children	1
Initiated by Foster Carer	44
Initiated by Fostering Service	44
Unknown	15

### **Recruitment and retention of foster carers**

To be able to meet the needs of the diverse range of local children that need foster placements, recruiting and retaining our carers has to be one of the main priorities of the fostering service, It is imperative we recruit new local foster carers from in and around Wirral, local carers for local children. This includes not just long- and short-term foster carers but also those who can provide support in the form of short break, respite, fostering plus and parent and child placements.

Wirral like many Local Authorities face a significant challenge from Independent Fostering Agencies when trying to attract new foster carers, due to their constant marketing activity and higher pay schemes for carers. Following a review of our recruitment activity and assessment processes in October 2021, the service now links in with our

colleagues from marketing more closely and have increased our recruitment activity and online presence quite significantly. In line with this a review of the timeliness of our assessment processes has also been undertaken with mainstream assessments now aiming to be completed and ready for panel within a 12-week period, which is in line with our IFA competitors.

The review of the recruitment and assessment processes and renewed focus has increased our enquires and numbers of mainstream applicants being assessed and approved over the last 6 months (as outlined below). However, to maintain this increased recruitment activity and alongside focus on retention of our skilled base of foster carers, investment in a marketing officer and an increase in carers allowances is required to achieve this.

### **National Comparison of Recruitment (Ofsted 2022)**

This year, although record levels of enquiries were received from prospective fostering households, the proportion that convert into applications is at an all-time low (6%), and half of what it was in 2014 to 2015 (12%). There continues to be a large difference in conversion rates from initial enquiries to applications between both sectors. Although the majority of initial enquires (79%) came from the IFA sector, fewer of these IFA enquiries converted into applications. IFAs reported a ratio of 25:1 initial enquiries to applications, whereas LAs reported a ratio of 7:1.

The conversion rate for Wirral is currently 9:1 so slightly lower than average but an improvement on last year when it was 10.5:1

The conversion rate of enquiries to applications in England is at the lowest level on record, 16:1. This marks a continuation of a steady decline since 2014 to 2015, when the ratio was around 8:1.

As at 31 March 2021, the number of approved foster carers was 76,640. This continues the slow increase in number of foster carers over the years, with a 4% increase from 2014 to 2015 (73,845 carers). Despite this increase in foster carers, the number has not kept up with demand in the sector, which has had an increase of around 11% in the number of fostered children over the period to March 2020.

In comparison in Wirral whilst there was an increase in the number of mainstream approvals at panel to 19 there was also 19 resignations/de registrations in the same period effectively cancelling out the increase in approvals.

### **Recruitment and retention activity over the last 6 months**

#### **Foster Carer Press release January 2022:**

#### ***More people urged to step forward and become foster carers***

*Foster carers are urgently needed to step forward to help look after children across Wirral.*

*The council is seeking more people from all walks of life to become foster carers.*

*Nationally there are rising numbers of children who need foster care and an ever-increasing need for individuals and families willing to support some of our most vulnerable children.*

*In Wirral there are 794 children who need foster care, who desperately need families and individuals willing to help them and give them a home.*

*Without this help these children may face the prospect of having to move away from everything that is familiar to them.*

*Cllr Wendy Clements, chair of Wirral Council's Children, Young People & Education Committee, said: "When we don't have foster carers who can help provide a loving home and place of safety, we face having to place children outside of Wirral or into residential care.*

*"For a child who has something happen in their family and who can't stay at home it is even more distressing to then also be told they have to move somewhere else to be safe, that they can't stay at their school or see their friends because we have to place them dozens, even hundreds of miles away.*

*"That is why we need more people with different skills, backgrounds and ages from large families to single carers to help us - the more carers we have the better we can match them with the right child or young person.*

*"And the more children we can keep in Wirral, who we can provide foster care for and ensure are well supported, the better chance of those children growing up and being the adults that we want and need them to be in Wirral.*

*"As we get into the new year it is the perfect time if you have been thinking about fostering to get in touch and really make a difference and help provide a new start for local children in Wirral."*

*Some foster carers offer a long term 'forever home', while some offer short breaks to support a child staying with their family. However you choose to help, all Wirral foster carers are supported through a team of experienced social workers and full training and support is provided to help foster carers develop the skills to ensure the children and young people they care for can flourish. We also have a network of local foster carers who have vast experience and are happy to share experiences and knowledge.*

*We need to recruit more foster carers than ever before. If you or someone you know has room in their home and heart to foster, or even if you are thinking about it and have questions and just want an informal chat, get in touch.*

*You can email [fosteringadmin@wirral.gov.uk](mailto:fosteringadmin@wirral.gov.uk) or call us on 0151 666 4616 or visit the website [wirralfostering.org](http://wirralfostering.org) for more information.*

### **Social Media: Facebook / Instagram**

Overview for visibility on the social media ads with 568 clicks through to the website over a 2.5-week period:

### **Linda Wilde – ITV Christmas Advent heroes' campaign:**

Granada reports contacted us early November wanting to know if we had anyone, we'd like to nominate for their Advent Heroes feature. Each day in December they do a 90 second video featuring someone who has done amazing things during the year. SSW Rachael Price nominated foster carer Lynda Wylde and we whole heartedly agreed with the nomination. Lynda is a credit to the fostering service.

Here was Rachael's nomination – *"Linda Wylde, first started fostering with her husband in 1994. She has fostered countless children over the years and is still a lifeline for many of them as they've now become adults themselves. She continues to care for one teenager and is an adult carer for one of our previous looked after children, after he suffered life changing injuries in a car accident as a child. Fostering within her family is being continued by her daughter and son in law, as they also foster after being raised in a fostering household. Linda sadly lost her husband but continued to foster teenagers, by herself. Linda battled cancer two years ago, and had covid on top of this, and yet she faces everything with positivity (a bit of realism thrown in there), and good grace. She's been an asset to the fostering team for 27 years. Well done Linda."*

## Granada Reports Advent Heroes: Day 17 - Meet foster carer Linda Wylde from Wirral

GRANADA | ADVENT HEROES | CHRISTMAS | ⌚ Friday 17 December 2021, 5:44pm



- Granada Reports Advent Heroes - Day 17: Linda Wylde.

Every day in December we're opening a door of our Granada Reports Advent Calendar of local heroes.

Each day, we'll be meeting someone who has gone above and beyond in what has been a very difficult year.

Behind Door 16 is Linda Wylde, a foster carer from the Wirral.

(right click on the link and select open Hyperlink to view the video) [Granada Reports Advent Heroes: Day 17 - Meet foster carer Linda Wylde from Wirral | ITV News Granada](#)

**Foster Carer case studies on our website that have also been published in Wirral view:**



(right click on the link and select open Hyperlink to view the webpage) [Let's talk fostering | Fostering \(wirralfostering.org\)](https://www.wirralfostering.org)

**Latest Case study January 2022** – (right click on the link and select open Hyperlink to view the fostering campaign videos) [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1hitb8t-SanY-d1\\_1\\_G3JdeFIVY5\\_0cnf?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1hitb8t-SanY-d1_1_G3JdeFIVY5_0cnf?usp=sharing)

#### **Julie McLean Case study January 2022:**

*"If you have love in your heart, I'd say go for it – that's all kids want."*

*That's the message from Julie McLean, a foster carer in Wirral for the last 15 years, who initially stumbled into the role due to a family crisis and then came to realise that what her and her family were doing was life-changing – and not just for the children they cared for.*

*"It was never something I had thought of doing," says Julie. "I owned two shops and a café and we had two young children of our own, so I was quite busy already."*

*It was only when Julie and her husband, Ross, became foster carers for their niece for two years that they realised the difference that care makes to the lives of young, often vulnerable people in need of the kind of love only a family home can give. It also changed their own lives.*

*"I was getting more satisfaction from helping children than I was from running my businesses," Julie recalls, "so with the support of my family, I decided to sell my businesses and concentrate fully on fostering."*

*And over the last 15 years, she has become a mentor to other carers and an enthusiastic advocate for the foster care scheme in Wirral.*

*"The social care team in Wirral were so helpful and supportive when we were going through the process to take care of my niece, that when the time came to apply to become mainstream carers, we contacted Wirral Council again.*

*"The support foster carers receive in Wirral is second to none, with supervising social workers and the rest of the fostering team always just a phone call or email away – even at night!"*

*Julie and her family have provided care in a wide range of circumstances over the years – from short-term fostering, day care, respite and bridging placements. They have also cared for children of all ages from babies up to teenagers, although in recent times they have concentrated on caring for very young children up to five years old. They do, however, still provide respite care for older kids.*

*Every placement is memorable for Julie "as each child has a different story and we have been fortunate to have been part of their story, seeing them progress knowing that we have played even a small part in that process. It is so rewarding and something we are very proud of."*

*However, there is one placement in particular that does stand out all from the others – the one they just couldn't let go of...*



*"As foster carers, we knew our role," Julie explains. "We have been involved with looking after children until they found adoptive parents, or until they were able to return to birth parents; we knew it would be a lot of work and we were ready for it... or so we thought!"*

*"What we didn't think would happen is that we would all fall so much in love with one of our foster children that we ended up actually adopting him! We'd be taking care of him from birth, but we realised over time that we just couldn't let him go."*

*"He is now 10 years old and loves us fostering the babies and toddlers. He knows he is adopted and is happy to talk openly to people about it; we are hugely proud of him and the way he approaches it."*

*"If we hadn't have become involved with fostering, we would never have met him - we know we are so lucky and grateful for that."*

*Her experience as a foster carer has opened up other doors for Julie as she finds new ways to demonstrate her passion for the scheme. As well as mentoring, she has been active in the recruitment of new foster families and was at the forefront of setting up a group called Kids For Caring, which aims to support the birth children of foster carers, acknowledging that fostering is a journey the whole family has to be part of.*

*When asked about why people should consider becoming new foster carers, Julie is effusive about the opportunities she has been given through the scheme.*

*"I always tell people, 'This isn't a job, I don't have a job'. Being a foster carer is a pleasure and a privilege," Julie says.*

*"The purpose for me is to care and give the children the chance just to live as children, not having to worry about any of the bad stuff they might have experienced. We nurture them, show them how valuable they are and to appreciate how incredible they are as individuals."*

*"There can sometimes be bumps in the road, but it is then that we appreciate the support of the fostering team and social workers at the council."*

*"We have seen the difference in the children that we have fostered over the years. In some cases, they might seem minor to us, but to the child those changes are massive. We take pride in their development and when they meet their milestones, but mostly being a foster carer is about giving them a home and making them feel part of the family from the moment they come through the door."*

**Tree planting event December 2021** – (right click on the link and select open Hyperlink to view the article) [‘Fostering Woodland’: Tree planting tribute to Wirral’s foster carers and children | Wirral view](#)



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## ‘Fostering Woodland’: Tree planting tribute to Wirral’s foster carers and children

📅 14 December 2021



Council staff, foster carers and volunteers took part in transforming the space into a 'fostering woodland'

## Newsletter to carers

(right click on the link and select open Hyperlink to view the newsletter) [Foster Carer News - December 2021 \(campaign-archive.com\)](https://campaign-archive.com)

### Foster Carers Coffee Morning



We had a fantastic turnout for our Christmas Coffee Morning on the 6th December. Over 70 foster carers attended along with staff and services such as Oomoo and Leisure Services.

Mince pies and treats were in abundance with many carers remarking how nice it was to be able to meet up for the first time in nearly 2 years and also meet new carers and staff. The Christmas raffle was very popular with over 20 prizes such as meat and fruit hampers, vouchers for meals out and free gym passes. All carers were allocated a raffle number regardless of whether they were at the event, your supervising social worker will have been in touch if you won a prize on the day but weren't there to collect.

As we go into 2022, we will hopefully be looking to organise similar events to this so look out for our next newsletter with details of our Easter event.

### Special 'Thank You'

## Coffee mornings – December 2021, March 2022

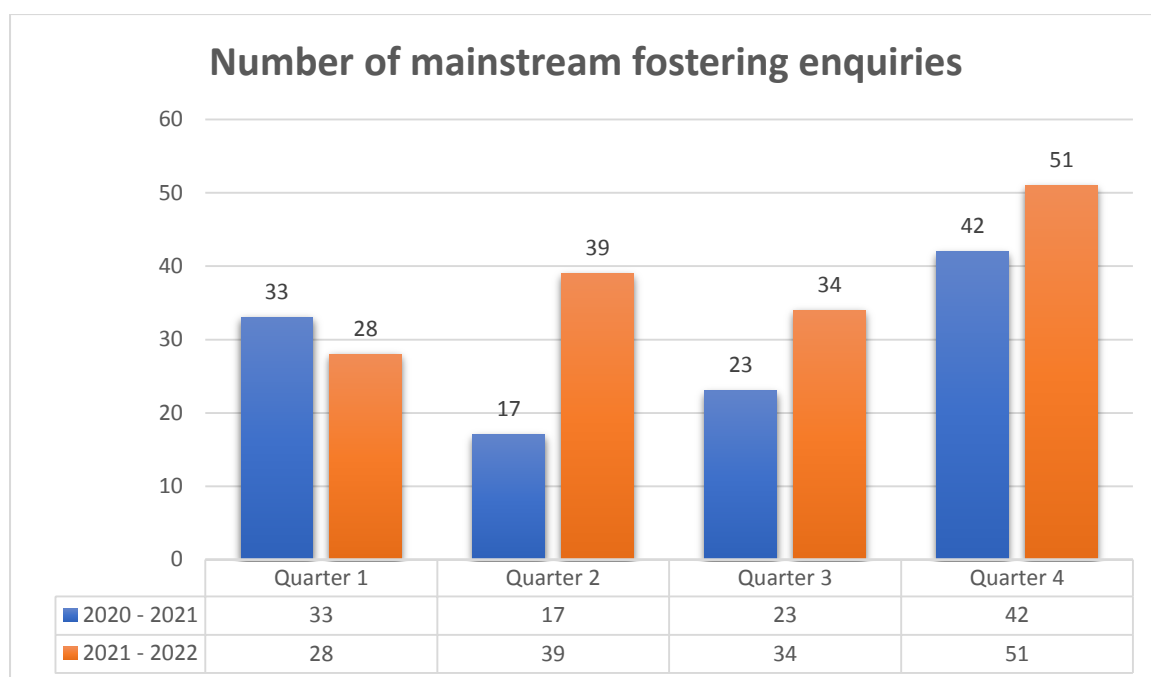
The December drop in coffee morning was the first face to face event since covid which was very well received and attended by over 70 foster carers. These are an opportunity for carers to meet up with fellow carers and have a chat and also receive updates from the service and meet up plans for the future and also to discuss any issues or ideas they had themselves.

## Regular emails communication

Carers are sent regular newsletters and updates via email about various upcoming events, training alongside any major service updates are emailed to all carers. Carers are sent service contact details quarterly, so they know all emails / contact numbers for SSWs, admin & duty. Emails are sent securely and sent using BCC for GDPR. Also, a dedicated fostering phoneline has been created 0151 666 4616.

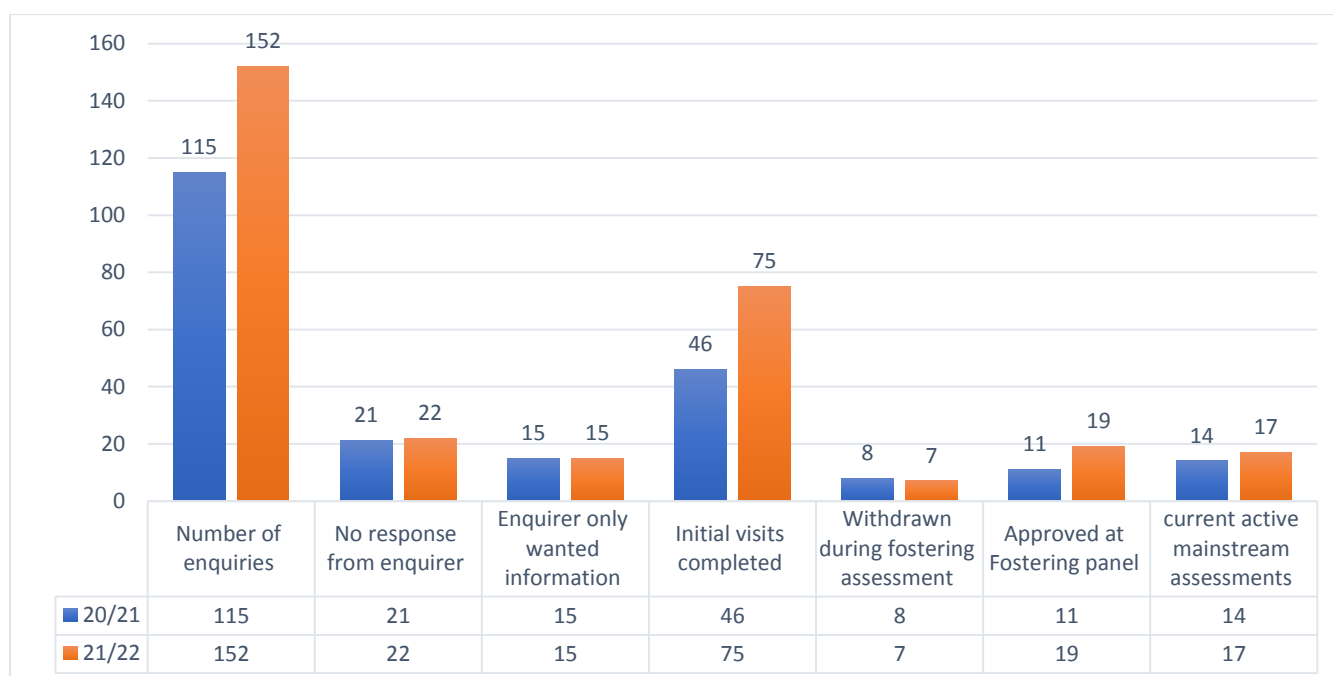
## Evaluation of Recruitment Activity

In considering whether we have been effective in increasing the interest shown from people who want to foster the below table represents an overview of the enquiries received to be a foster carer per quarter of the financial year April 2020- March 2021.



The number of enquiries for the reporting year was 152 which is an increase of 37 on the previous year, as the table above shows the majority of the increased enquiries has been seen in the last 6 months since there was a greater focus on recruitment and assessment timescales across the service. This is also recognised in the increase of mainstream assessments to 19 compared to 11 in 2020/2021. The spikes in enquiry number are directly attributable to the marketing activity, case studies and radio advertising during this period.

The chart below helps to explain how these enquiries have been managed. (Blue 20/21 – orange 21/22)



This shows us that of the 152 household enquiries to fostering 22 did not respond to any contact from Wirral fostering service. A further 15 only wanted information and took their enquiry no further. What we know is that many enquiries are received late on a Friday night and over the weekend meaning that people may reconsider their expression of interest when they are back in their normal routine i.e. their working week. The service responds to all



enquiries within one working day and where applicants cannot be contact will continue with a maximum of three contacts made.

There was a total of 75 initial visits completed to households who were showing an interest in becoming a foster carer. The timescale from enquiry to initial visit is dependent on the prospective foster carer, some wish to consider their decision in greater detail following information received at initial enquiry stage and before they provide consent for a visit from the fostering service. The fostering service aims to meet these individuals within five working days, but this is solely dependent on the enquirer.

As the data above explains the increase in enquiries in quarter 2, 3 and 4 has resulted in the significant increase in mainstream approvals in the reporting year. Due to timescale that assessments take to complete and be heard at panel and Agency Decision Maker approval it is not unusual for the enquires that have been received in Q4 to not be converted to approvals until the following year. This is reflected in the higher number of assessments that are currently being undertaken at present.

### **Service Priorities for 2022-2023**

- To continue to increase our number of skilled foster carers our approach we will need to adopt a multi-faceted marketing approach utilising various channels to reach our key target areas.
- Develop recruitment partnership working with local businesses, community groups as well as schools and colleges,
- Promote the Council as a Fostering Friendly organisation and encouraging other employers to become Fostering Friendly employers. The focus of this will be to:
- Ensure the Wirral Fostering brand is visible in and around Wirral.
- Provide our Foster Carers with benefits and payments that are comparable with our colleagues in other local authorities (Wirral has one of the lowest rates of foster carer pay in the Northwest).

Raise our online presence through social media and digital media.

- Raise awareness of the need for more foster carers as well as to educate people on the role of foster carers, what they can achieve, who can foster and the differing types of fostering.
- Convert more people thinking about fostering by engaging with these people (either face to face, on the phone or via the website) and communicating the strengths of being a Wirral Council foster carer.
- Attract people with work experience in managing complex behaviours and transferring these skills to fostering.
- Recruit to all vacant posts by end of Quarter 2 2022 . Ensure that all foster carers are attending mandatory training
- Continue the approach of valuing our current skilled group of foster carers to support our retention levels
- Introduce foster carer forums alongside foster carer coffee mornings to ensure that carers have access to managers and senior managers
- Increase capacity in the family mentor scheme to enable overnight stays for children and young people at risk of coming into care