

**Wirral Fostering Service**  
**Annual Report**  
**April 2022 to March 2023**

## Introduction

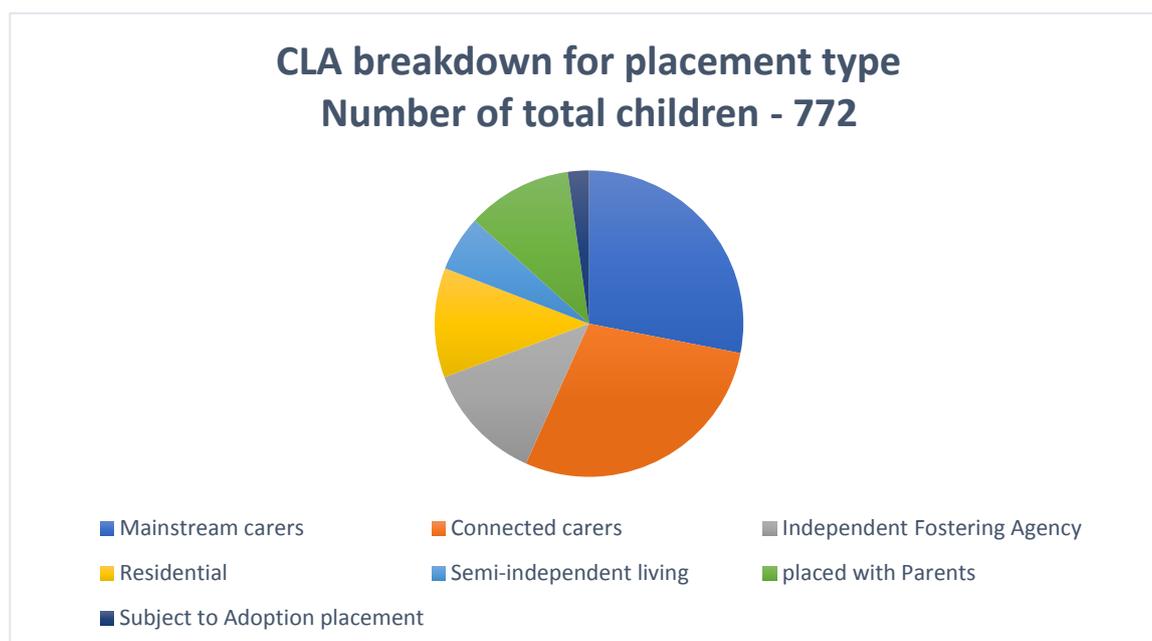
This Annual Report should be read in conjunction with the Fostering Service Statement of Purpose (Appendix A). The Statement of Purpose sets out the legislative and regulatory context under which Wirral Borough Council carries out the functions of the Fostering Service. The Fostering Service is a regulated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

Wirral Borough Council's Fostering Service provide placements for children in the care of the Local Authority with approved 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 2023 there were 772 Children Looked After (CLA) cared for by Wirral Council, of which 533(69%) were in foster care.

Of these children, 436 (57%) were living with Wirral Council approved foster carers, 216 were placed with mainstream carers and 220 with connected carers (family/friends who are foster carers), a further 97 children were living with Independent Agency Foster Carers. Out of the remaining 239 children - 89 children were placed in a residential setting, 45 semi-independent, 85 placed with parents and 17 subject to adoption placements.



**3 Z1 not counted in the above figures.**

## **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 Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011.

The service is responsible for:

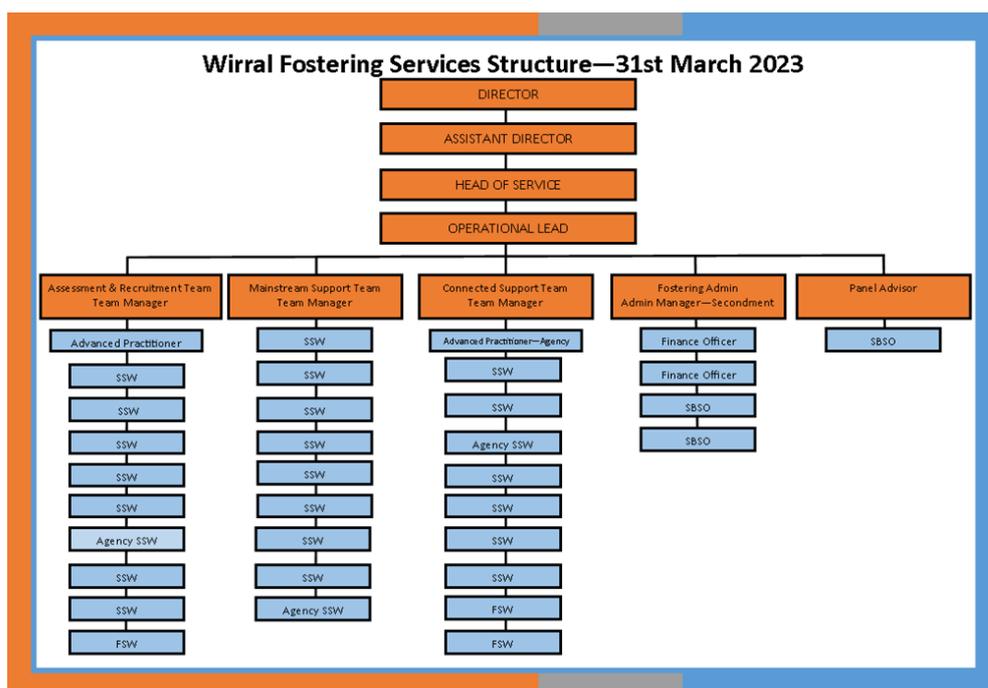
- Support, supervision, and training of foster carers including family and friend carers (connected carers)
- Ensuring provision of local safe and supportive foster placements in accordance with fostering national minimum standards
- Promoting placement stability and permanence planning for our children
- 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 of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 there were 274 approved Fostering Households in Wirral, split down to 143 mainstream households and 131 connected households. 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 qualified supervising social workers within the fostering team, all foster 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 comprises of the Head of Service for Permanence and Fostering, Operational Lead, 3 Team Managers who are responsible for Mainstream, Connected Persons, Recruitment and Assessment Teams. There are 2 advanced social workers, 26.5 supervising social workers(SSW) and 3 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 2 Finance Admin Officers and 1 Business Support Officer, 5 SSW recruited during the reporting period. As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, 4 Agency SSW covering Long Term Sickness or Maternity Leave.



The supervising 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 reviewed annually with first year reviews returning to fostering panel and all subsequent reviews being chaired by independent reviewing officers. Since November 2021, foster carers 5-year reviews are presented to the Fostering Panel.

As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, 57% of our CLA population were placed with Wirral Borough Council 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 during the assessment period and within the first year of being approved. These mandatory training requirements are Recording and Reporting, Safer Care, Equality and Diversity, Safeguarding and First Aid. First Aid is refreshed every 3 years.

In recognising the feedback gained in 2021/2022 training continues to be delivered through a blended approach of virtual and face to face training. Most of 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 Wirral Safeguarding Children Partnership (WSCP). First Aid training is delivered face to face.

Newly approved foster carers complete Equality and Diversity, Recording and Reporting and Safer Care training as part of completing the pre-approval Skills to Foster training. The Recruitment and Assessment team prioritise booking applicants on to the remaining mandatory training sessions First Aid and Safeguarding within the first 3 months of their registration to fulfil the 5 mandatories.

The Fostering Service target aim is 100% compliance. Due to data inaccuracies impacting on the quality of data reporting, it has not been possible to provide training data for this reporting period. Foster Carers who are yet to complete the full set of mandatory training are supported by their allocated supervising

social worker and in their first and subsequent Annual Reviews, time limited support plans are agreed to achieve completion. Every foster carer has an individual professional development plan (PDP) devised and jointly agreed by foster carers and their supervising social worker, to promote career development and areas specific to enhancing children to achieve good outcomes.

## **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 16 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 historical Wirral Family Link Fostering scheme which has been running for many years.

Foster Carers providing mentoring are fully assessed and registered as foster carers. 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 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.

Due to capacity mentors do not currently offer any overnight support. Developing this element of the service is something that remains ongoing to extend the service offer.

## **Feedback**

### **Foster Carer Feedback**

22.11.2022

*T is a fantastic supervising social worker. Nothing is too much trouble for him. He is accommodating and timely with his visits and is only ever a phone call or email away with advice and support if and when we need it. T is very supportive of our family and I feel reassured working with him. He ensures we complete required training and has delivered this in formats best suited to our needs. He considers the views of the children who also feel reassured with T and takes an interest in them. He has known A since he was a baby and this continuity is an overwhelming positive. A has developed a relationship with T that cannot be replicated by his own social worker.*

22.2.2023

*I have just completed the Skills to Foster training delivered by (FSW):*

*The structure of the course was excellent. FSW is a skilled, knowledgeable trainer.*

*His messages were clear and learning outcomes met. His style and delivery made it easy for people to contribute and be involved. I really enjoyed it.*

### **Children's Feedback**

Children's feedback in relation to their care experiences is actively sought through a range of methods, including children's independent reviewing Officer (IRO) during their children looked after reviews, children's social workers statutory visits, direct work and also at any point in time outside of these planned visits. Children's views are also actively requested as part of foster carers annual reviews.

There has been previous work undertaken by the Participation and Engagement service in 2019; however, there is a clear need to revisit this work with children and young people who are being cared for in foster care to gain more understanding about their experiences. A survey questionnaire is likely to be the most appropriate form to gain children's views. Participation and Engagement service will be consulted, and the survey result expected by 29<sup>th</sup> September 2023.

### **Fostering payments**

The cost-of-living crisis continues to impact on foster carers within Wirral. Up to March 2023, UK Fuel and energy price inflation was among the highest across G7 (Office for National Statistics) and the current inflation rate is approximately 10.1%. The uplift in foster carers allowance was 2% for 2021 to 2022. Various options to support foster carers were explored and Senior leadership team were presented a new fostering payment schedule on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 2023. Further information was requested on the financial impact. The proposed uplift averaging 11% was hopeful to being introduced in the new financial year 2023-2024.

### **Kinship**

The kinship commission has been a shared partnership with Sefton Council. A joint decision was reached by Wirral and Sefton councils not to recommission Kinship, due to resource not being fully accessed as anticipated. A total of 30 referrals were bought to further support connected carers in offering practical and emotional support: offering expert advice and support across a range of issues from benefits, housing, education and family relationships and support groups. For the reporting period out of the 30 referrals bought a total of 11 referrals were received. 43 carers accessed the service for advice and support, with 42 being self-referrals and 1 being an LA referral. 24 bi-weekly afternoon and evening virtual support groups were held on alternative weeks and a total of 2 carers attended on 16 occasions. Full end report in Appendix B

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

#### **Mainstream Team**

The mainstream 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 training provided to foster carers has been a blended approach of online, face to face. Some of the training courses that are provided for foster carers include, Trauma informed practice, online safety, wellbeing and resilience, and conflict resolution. Regular drop ins face-to-face sessions have been introduced and foster carers are being actively encouraged to attend.

### **Connected Carers Team**

The Connected Carers Team are responsible for providing supervision and support to the increasing number of Connected Carers, upon approval 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**

The team are responsible for all Fostering assessments for family and friends in relation to families who are subject to pre proceedings and care proceedings. This includes viability assessments, Regulation 24 assessments (temporary approvals of family and friends) and Form C assessments (family and friends' carers). The team also undertake BAAF Form F assessments of recruited, perspective foster carers, using a skills-based model that is child-centred and utilises task-centred methods with analyses of applicant's social history, family dynamics, motivation to foster, and suitability of the applicant to foster. All staff within the team receive Form F and Form C training, providing them with the skills to produce high quality and analytical assessments. The Foster Panel's quality assurance function continues to note a marked improvement in assessments being presented to panel. The assessment and recruitment team deliver the Skills to Foster training which provides all fostering applicants with information and the practical, day-to-day skills that all foster carers need. It links into Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care (TSD Standards) England and other professional development qualifications. This course is provided for all mainstream and connected foster carers and is delivered as part of the assessment process.

### **Panel Approvals and Resignations**

During the 2022/2023 period 47 Wirral fostering panels were arranged, out of the 47 panels 3 were cancelled, 2 due to no cases to be heard and 1 due to panel not being quorate meaning 44 panels in total were held. Out of the 44 panels 3 were held face to face and the rest of the panels took place virtually. Face to face panels were due to be held twice a month, however the venue was cancelled, moreover due to some panels having small numbers of cases being held it was more cost effective to hold panels virtually.

Panel business routinely consists of:

- Considering applications suitability 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 in the terms of approval of foster carers

- Regulation 25 request to extend temporary approval of Regulation 24 carers.
- Exemptions.
- Resignations.

## Feedback from Panel

**42 carers / applicants responded to Panel's request for feedback.**

*"I was really nervous before the meeting, but the panel members were really nice and friendly and we got some really nice feedback about how we are doing with the children, thankyou Very professional and very polite"*

*"Very friendly experience overall. Any nerves put at ease straight away by panel members."*

## Social Workers Feedback

*"I found the panel members to be respectful of myself as a professional and my applicant. There was an appropriate length of time to listen to the answers of the applicant and respect shown to her dedication and care of her child looked after."*

## Assessments of prospective foster carers

01/04/2022-31/03/2023	Households
Total number of assessments presented to Panel	82
Number of assessments deferred by panel	4 Connected
Number of assessments considered by panel	78
Number of connected applicants presented	53
Number of mainstream applicants presented	19
Number of assessments not recommended for approval by Panel.	6 Connected
Number of assessments not approved by ADM	6 Connected
Number of assessments approved by ADM	72

In this reporting period, the total number of assessments presented to the fostering panel totalled 82 households, due to 4 assessments being deferred and presented at a later panel date. 26% recruited mainstream carers and 74%connected carers approved within this reporting period.

The number of mainstream carers recruited in 2022/2023 reporting period has remained the same as the previous reporting period, with 19 mainstream applicants being approved. Confirming the responsiveness of the recruitment and assessment team, and quality of initial enquiries.

## Reviews

A total of 61 Reviews have been presented to the Panel. These Reviews breakdown as follows:

First Reviews, some were also early reviews, requests for a change of approval and reviews following an allegation.	27
Reviews following allegations	9
Reviews requesting a change of approval.	3
Early Reviews	3
5-yearly Reviews	21

## Analysis

Reviews deferred at Panel.	0
Reviews recommended as not suitable to continue fostering	3
Households approved as not suitable to continue fostering by the ADM	2

The number of 5-year reviews has been welcomed by Panel. Often foster carers have not attended Panel for several years and such reviews provide an opportunity to clearly focus on their development, progress and the quality of the current placement offered. It is often a celebration of foster carers 'hard work and commitment to the children and young people they care for. In addition, it provides additional safeguarding for children and young people.

There were 101 other items presented to Panel itemised in the table below.

OTHER ITEM	CASES
Exemptions	17
Resignations	48
Brief Reports	2
Appeals to Panel	1
Reg 25 requests	33

The fostering panel data for resignations does not capture all resignations/deregistered during this reporting period. This is due to a process error resulting in all resignations not being reported to the fostering panel. It is best practice for all resignation/deregistration within the service to be shared with the fostering panel, to keep members informed of the service delivery. Improvements have been made and processes are effective, and all resignation/deregistration are now shared with foster panel. The actual data is captured in the following table:

### Resignations/De-resignations 2022/2023

<b>MAINSTREAM AND CONNECTED</b>	<b>70 IN TOTAL</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>MAINSTREAM</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>43%</b>
<b>CONNECTED</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>57%</b>
<b>Mainstream</b>		
Retired	7	23%
Adopted child in care	3	10%
Allegation or practice concern	2	6%
Change in circumstances	4	13%
Resigned – not recorded	2	6%
Fostering not what expected	2	6%
Transferred to IFA	2	6%
Special Guardianship	2	6%
Returned to full time employment	1	3%
Unhappy with service	1	3%
Ill Health	2	6%
Deregistration	2	6%
<b>Connected</b>		
Allegation or practice concern	2	5%
Child moved to residential due to complex needs.	1	2.5%
Child returned home	6	15%
Placement not needed	5	12.5%
Placement End	5	12.5%

Special Guardianship	16	40%
YP turned 18	3	7.5%
Unhappy with service	1	2.5%
Deregistration	1	2.5%

Previously in Wirral the number of cases and total approvals has been as below (**NB** there was no published data from all LAs 2020 as it was not formally required due to the pandemic).

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total number approvals	127	114	91	N/A	101	72
Number of above friends and family cares	107	89	55	N/A	89	53
Number of above mainstream carers	20	25	36	N/A	12	19
Number of resignations/deregistration's	135	112	92	N/A	104	70
Net change each year	-8	+2	-1	N/A	-3	+2

Full Foster panel annual report 2022/2023 available in Appendix C

### National Comparison of Resignations

Government statics for England report, in 2021 to 2022, more mainstream fostering households deregistered (5,435) than were approved (4,035), leading to a net decrease in fostering capacity since last year. The split between the 2 sectors of all deregistration's was relatively even, with 54%of deregistration's occurring in LAs and 46% in IFAs. LA services reported that 31% of deregistration's were within 2 years of approval, while 28% had been with their services for 10 or more years. In contrast, a higher proportion of deregistration's were within 2 years among IFAs (34%), and a lower proportion had been registered for 10 or more years (15%).

### Recruitment and retention of foster carers

To be able to meet the needs of the diverse range of local children that require foster placements, recruiting and retaining our foster carers must 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, and parent and child placements.

Wirral like many Local Authorities face a significant challenge from Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) when trying to attract new foster carers, due to their marketing activity and advertised higher pay schemes for carers. Ofsted support this statement within their national statistics 2022 “The proportion of children in mainstream foster care looked after by IFAs has increased by 5 percentage since 2018. In 2018 IFAs accounted for 40% of all filled fostering places and in 2022 this had risen to 45%.”

Wirral Fostering Service continue to work closely with our colleagues from marketing to increase our recruitment activity and online presence, to achieve a continuous presence in the Wirral Community. The timeliness of our assessment processes is a key element and mainstream assessments aim to be completed and ready for panel within a 16-week period, which is in line with our IFA competitors.

### **National Comparison of Recruitment (Ofsted 2021/2022)**

In 2022 the proportion of approved applications (England) in the LA sector was 29%, down from 36% in 2017 to 2018. Proportionally, fostering households approved are at its lowest level in several years. With 8,280 mainstream fostering applications; a decrease compared to 10,520 fostering applications in 2018. Conversion rates of enquiries to applications in England, IFAs 23:1 and LAs 8:1. Both sectors’ ratios suggest a significant number of enquiries are not converting into applications.

This year, in England only 6% of those who made initial enquiries about becoming a foster carer went on to apply, compared with 9% in 2017 to 2018 highlighting a decreasing trend in conversion from initial enquiry to application.

The conversion rate remains different for the LA and IFA sectors. Actual applications were equivalent to 4% of initial enquiries for IFAs and 12% for LAs. The total number of initial enquiries was much higher in the IFA sector (107,030) than the LA sector (31,045), but this translated to a total number of applications for IFAs (4,615) that was just 950 more than the LA sector (3,665).

The conversion rate from initial enquiry to approval for Wirral Fostering service is currently 4.1 ratio. 28% conversion rate which is higher than the national average and an improvement on 2021/2022 ratio of 9:1.

Whilst the number of 19 mainstream approvals remained the same as previous reporting year, the effectiveness of the additional foster carers gained for service delivery is negatively impacted as a result of the net loss of 11 mainstream fostering households due to 30 deregistration’s in the same reporting period.

As of 31 March 2022, there were 43,905 fostering households in England. Of these, 36,050 were mainstream fostering households and 7,855 were family and friends’ households, providing care for around 11,210 children. The number of approved family and friends’ households has increased by 29% since 2018 (6,100). The proportion of total approved fostering households that are family and friends’ households has increased from 14% in 2018 to 18% in 2022. (Ofsted National Statistics).

The number of Wirral Council approved connected carer households account for 48% of fostering households, highlighting the priority given to ensure children remain within their families where this is possible.

At this time a national comparison is not possible due to Ofsted data for March 2023 not published until November 2023.

## Recruitment and Retention activity samples

### Wirral foster carer Julie shares her story of fostering siblings

01 September 2022



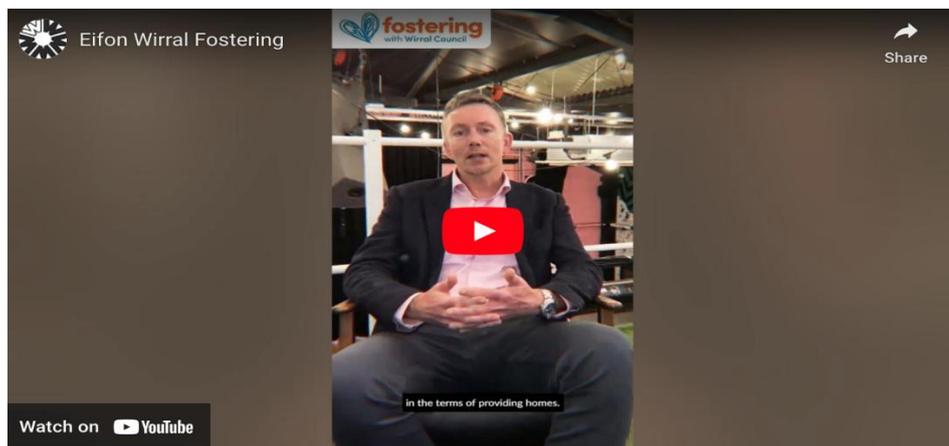
Wirral is in need of more foster carers to help keep siblings together by offering them room together in their hearts and home.

Foster carer, Julie Robinson, has been making a difference to the lives of the children she's fostered for more than 20 years. Julie has shared her story with us to encourage more potential carers to do the same.

If you have room in your home and heart to foster, or even if you are thinking about it and just want an informal chat, please get in touch. You can email [fosteringadmin@wirral.gov.uk](mailto:fosteringadmin@wirral.gov.uk), call us on 0151 666 4616, or visit the [fostering website](#) for more information.



## Film sends message home about the positive impact of fostering | 3.11.22 & 23.11.22 The Quiet Girl film – Promoting fostering



**Dedicated foster carers awarded for their hard work in Wirral | 7.12.22**



**2022 Children's Christmas Party | 22.12.22**



## LGBTQ+ Adoption and Fostering Week: 6th-12th March

08 March 2023



**Adopting or fostering a child can be an exciting experience, but if you are LGBTQ+, you may be worried that this isn't something you can do yourself. This is not the case, as long as you can provide a loving home then you can adopt or foster a child. In fact, in 2022, almost a quarter of approved adopters were part of the LGBTQ+ community.**

### Adoption

Adoption in Merseyside (AiM) provides a full adoption service for people wanting to grow their family. A regional adoption agency covering four local authorities including Wirral, they help children find loving families across Merseyside.

As part of the process, they offer free membership for New Family Social, a support network which allows adoptive parents to connect with over 5,000 adopters across the UK within the LGBTQ+ community. They also have experience with LGBTQ+ adoption, helping people like Kathryn and Lisa who have been a couple for 17 years.

Lisa said:

"The process was very thorough, but we had lots of support. The training course was interesting, and it made us reflect on our own childhoods, our relationships, and how we would parent in the future. It took just over 12 months, and we now have a beautiful little boy. We adore our little family and we are still able to get support if needed."

If you could consider growing your family, visit [adoptioninmerseyside.co.uk](https://adoptioninmerseyside.co.uk) and request an information pack.

### Fostering

If fostering is something you're interested in the dedicated team at Wirral Council helps to match children who need loving, local foster homes with local people who can provide this support.

It's a myth that you can't foster if you're LGBTQ+. All that matters is that you can provide a safe, secure, and caring environment for a child. Jamie and Kevin moved to Wirral a few years ago and decided to foster and now care for two teenage boys.

Jamie said:

"The biggest learning point about fostering for us was finding out that, yes, we can do it! There are challenges but we've learned that the opportunities to make a difference have made a big and positive impact on us all."

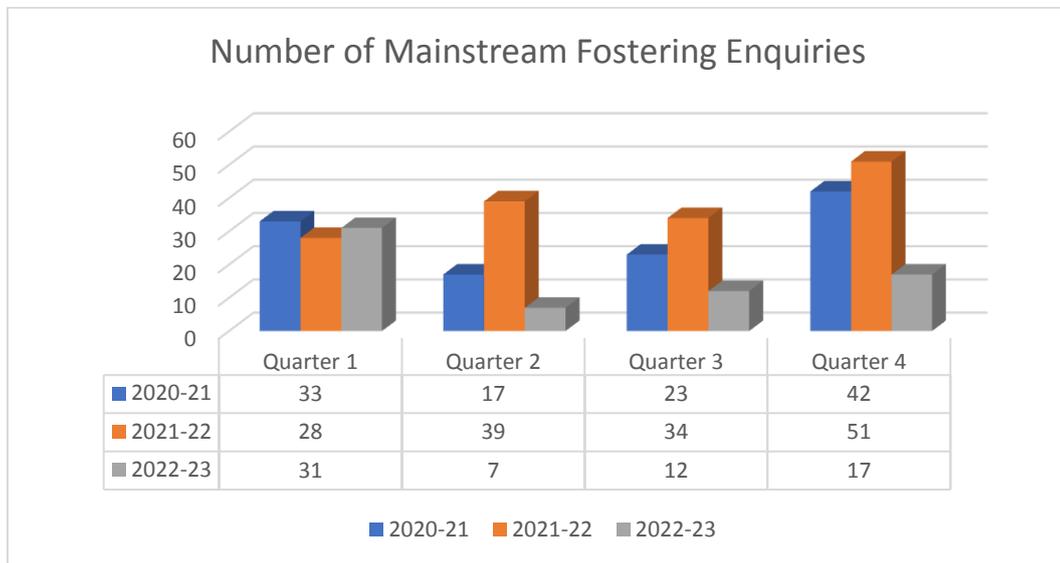
The number of children who need support in Wirral is rising and we are urging people with room in their home and their heart to get in touch. Email [fosteringadmin@wirral.gov.uk](mailto:fosteringadmin@wirral.gov.uk), call 0151 666 4616, or visit [wirralfostering.org](https://wirralfostering.org) for more information.

## International Women's Day | 8.3.23

Full Marketing report in Appendix D

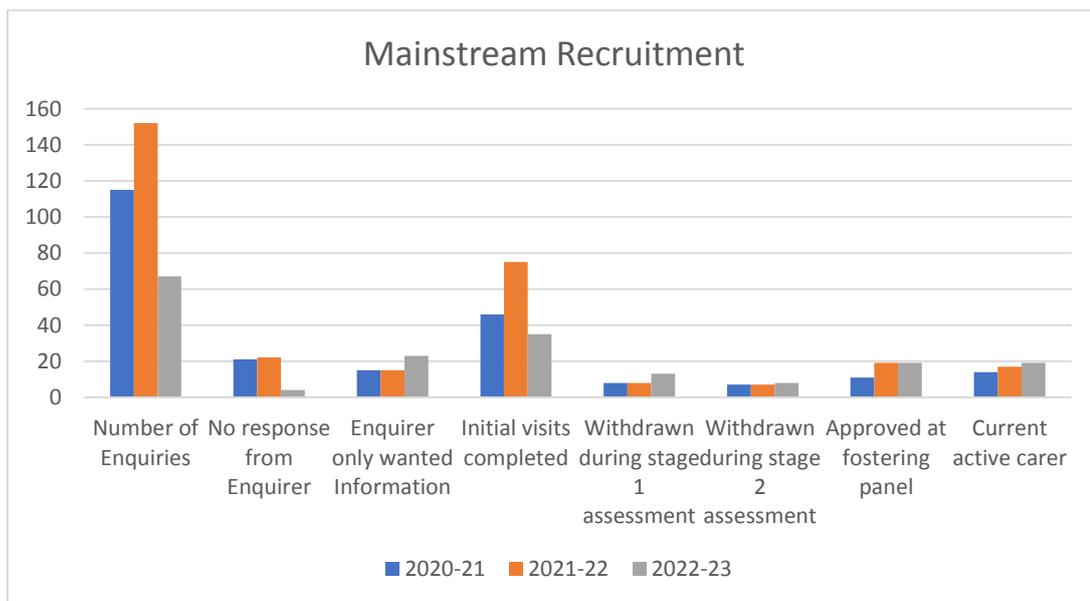
### Evaluation of Recruitment Activity

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 quarters in the financial year April 2022- March 2023.



The number of enquiries for the reporting year was 67 which is a decrease of 85 on the previous year, as the table above shows most of the decreased enquiries has been within Q2 and Q3 which includes summer months and children returning to school or moving onto further studies or independence. Additionally, in March 2022 most COVID-19 restrictions came to an end. It could be hypothesised; people are spending their time engaging in activities that they have previously been unable to do.

The chart below further explains how enquiries have been managed. (Blue 20/21 – orange 21/22 – Grey 22/23)



This table shows us that of the 67 household enquiries to foster, 4 did not respond to any contact from Wirral fostering service. A further 23 were information only and took their enquiry no further. The service

responds to all enquiries within one working day and where applicants cannot be reached, contact will continue with a maximum of three contacts made and then the enquiry will be closed.

There was a total of 35 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 quarter 1, and 4 produced the highest number of referrals. Despite the significant reduction in initial enquires, the number of enquires that converted into approved foster carers has been maintained and comparable to 2021/2022. Ofsted national statistics for 2021 in England reports an uncommon high number of initial enquiries and applicants for both LA's and IFA's. A possible hypothesis for Wirral conversion rates of approval in this reporting period is the quality of enquires, based on individuals who have considered fostering as a life vocation.

The focus on recruitment has produced the same numbers of mainstream applicants being assessed and approved as 2021/2022. To improve this in 2023/2024, increased recruitment activity is required, alongside focused retention of our existing skilled base of foster carers. To achieve this, it would require investment in a marketing and recruitment officer, bespoke website for the Fostering Service, social platforms, digital marketing and an increase in foster carers allowances and other benefits.

### **Service Priorities for 2023-2024**

- Retention of existing foster carers to continue, including benefits and incentives that are comparable with independent fostering agencies.
- Recruitment to continue to increase our number of skilled foster carers. A multi-faceted marketing approach is required to utilise various channels to reach our key target areas and maintain a continuous cycle.
- Mandatory training data reports being amended for the purpose of reliable data to track progress of foster carers attendance.
- Develop recruitment partnership working with local businesses and community groups.
- Continue to promote the Council as a Fostering Friendly organisation and encouraging other employers to become Fostering Friendly employers.
- Increase online profile through bespoke fostering website and social media platforms and digital marketing.
- Raise awareness of differing types of fostering.
- Increase conversion rates of expressions of interest to approval, through responsive reactions to initial enquiries and timely assessments.