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Dr Mac Heath
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Dear Dr Heath

Focused visit to Milton Keynes City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Milton Keynes City Council children's services on 23 and 24 November 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Nhlanganiso Nyathi and Tracey Scott.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

The quality of practice for children in care has improved since the last inspection in 2021. There is increasing evidence of a strong family support ethos and a clear focus on keeping children safely at home whenever possible. Most children in care live in homes that meet their needs and they are making good progress. Senior managers know their services well. They have a clear vision and appropriate priorities, which they are pursuing through a comprehensive improvement plan. Political leaders are committed to ensuring the availability of resources required to make these improvements. The recent appointments of key staff in children's services, and the development of new systems, policies and procedures, are starting to have a positive impact on children in care.

However, more remains to be done to improve the progress and experiences of children. The frequency of changes in social workers leaves the independent reviewing officers (IROs) as the only consistent professional in the lives of some children in care. Children's voices do not yet come through consistently in planning and records. The new quality assurance framework is not fully embedded to inform performance management and quality assurance arrangements.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Consistency of social workers for children and timely allocation of personal advisers.
- Accuracy and completeness of children's records.
- Quality of assessment and plans.
- The reach and impact of quality assurance activity.

Main findings

Social workers in Milton Keynes know their children in care well. For most children, visits by social workers are in line with their needs. However, the desirable outcomes and progress for some children are adversely affected by the frequent changes in social workers.

Social workers use age-appropriate direct work to gain children's wishes and feelings. However, the quality and impact of this work are too variable. While social workers listen carefully to children's voices, in some children's records their voice is absent. This means that social workers do not always understand every child's situation when developing their plans.

Timely reviews ensure appropriate planning for many children in care. However, some children's plans are too broad and lack specificity. The recording of these documents is also significantly delayed for some children. This means that care plans for some children in care are not based on a clear and current understanding of their needs.

IRO oversight of practice and dispute resolution are improving and this is helping to progress plans for many children. IROs send warm and sensitive letters to the child after each review. For some children, the IRO is an important and consistent figure in their lives; this mitigates the impact of changes of social workers.

Regular reassessments as children's needs and circumstances change are becoming more routine. Most assessments are updated regularly, although their quality is variable. Many are too broad, the child's voice is lacking, and there is not enough direct work to ensure a good understanding of the child's experience.

Most children in care live in homes that meet their needs and they are making good progress. There is increasing evidence of careful matching for children, which ensures stability in children's lives. However, a small number of children experience many carers before they achieve permanence. These include children living in special guardianship arrangements. Some children live temporarily with family members in homes that do not meet the fostering regulations. Senior managers recognise these challenges and have taken steps to strengthen support to these carers. Senior managers report that there are currently no children living in unregistered provision.

There is a wide range of effective services and support to help maintain placement stability for children. Arrangements for children to spend time with those people who are important to them are carefully considered. Children who live out of county, including disabled children, have access to appropriate support to meet their needs.

A greater proportion of children in care in Milton Keynes go missing than the national average. While most children are offered return home interviews, many do not take up the offer. Improving the take-up of return home interviews continues to be a priority for senior managers. Children at risk of or experiencing exploitation receive an inconsistent response. Senior managers have recognised this; they have secured funding and are now recruiting to a new multi-disciplinary service.

Senior managers take appropriate action to ensure that all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive the same care and support as citizen children, and this is evident in most cases. The religious, cultural or language needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are met, even if the placement is not an exact match.

Pathway plans are completed in a timely way. However, a lack of capacity is causing delays in some children being allocated personal advisers. This undermines support for some children's transition to adulthood. Senior managers are aware of this and have made recruiting to these posts a priority.

Most children in care attend appropriate educational settings and make good progress. The investment in children's education, support to carers and dedicated social workers is having a positive impact on the educational achievements of children in care. Many children engage in hobbies and family activities, which they enjoy.

Most children's health needs are addressed effectively. However, since the pandemic, there have been delays and gaps in dental appointments for some children, meaning that their dental care needs are not being met. Where appropriate, parents are involved in decision-making about the health of their children.

Senior managers have introduced a new quality assurance framework. However, it is not sufficiently embedded to achieve a significant impact on strengthening practice. The number of audits concerning children in care in recent months is low; the accuracy and impact of these audits are too variable. This means that audits are not informing management oversight as they should. Senior managers are taking appropriate steps to remedy these weaknesses through recruiting additional staff to the audit team.

Senior managers have a shared vision and a clear line of sight of their improvement journey. Since the last inspection, the council has invested significantly in strengthening services to children in care through key appointments to the corporate parenting panel, the head of corporate parenting, the virtual school head and a new Chair for the Children in Care Council. These appointments provide the service with greater capacity to work more effectively to meet the needs of children in care.

The council's commitment to corporate parenting and the aspiration to be a 'Foster Friendly Council' are reflected in the work which has strengthened the engagement and participation of children, and the recruitment campaigns which are beginning to achieve an increase in foster placements. The strengthening of corporate parenting has also seen increased attention to achieving permanence for children. Some children achieve permanence through adoption and special guardianship, and others through long-term matching with their foster carers.

Most social workers have manageable caseloads. Social workers feel well supported by managers. Regular clinical supervision supports staff well-being. Some managers hold cases for a short period of time, although this is being addressed through the prioritisation of recruitment and retention of social workers. Senior managers have introduced an on-boarding process, which supports new employees with their integration, as part of the managers' new approach to recruitment. This is having a positive impact on attracting and retaining new staff. Staff also have access to a wide range of training and opportunities for career progression.

The frequency and quality of case supervision are inconsistent. Some case supervision records are written with the child as the potential reader. Other records do not have key documents that will help children in care to understand the rationale of some decisions made about them, later in their lives.

External scrutiny and support are welcomed by senior managers. Partner agencies contribute to improvement plans to inform the changes that have been identified. This contributes to developing a strong learning culture.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Nhlanganiso Nyathi
His Majesty's Inspector