

Inspection of Milton Keynes local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 28 October to 8 November 2024

Lead inspector: Brenda McLaughlin, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children and families in Milton Keynes now receive a consistently good service, and the experiences and progress of care leavers are outstanding. In 2021, all services were judged as requiring improvement; this significant progress reflects the purposeful and systematic approach taken by leaders to continuously put children's needs first. Despite the significant increase in demand, their determination and ambition have led to evidence-based and tangible improvements to early help and social work practice with children and families. Political and corporate commitment has translated into significant financial investment to strengthen services and increase workforce capacity. Leaders recognise that this investment needs to continue if these positive changes for children are to be sustained.

Leaders know themselves well and have an accurate understanding of the local authority's strengths and priorities. Targeted improvement plans, informed by robust performance management information, are focused on improving local placement sufficiency, ensuring consistently high-quality assessments and improving contingency planning for children. The evaluation at a strategic partnership level of the impact of work with children at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation is not sufficiently strong.

What needs to improve?

- Consistency in the quality of assessments for children in need of help and protection and in contingency planning across teams.
- Placement sufficiency for children in care.
- The strategic needs analysis of children at risk of extra-familial harm.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. Children and families in Milton Keynes benefit from a comprehensive range of universal and targeted early help services that are delivered locally by relevant agencies in the reconfigured children's centres. Children are allocated promptly to experienced early help practitioners, who provide sensitive and effective child-centred interventions. Parents receive respectful and thoughtful services, which help them to think differently about how they care for their children. Practitioners are attuned to children's needs, family circumstances and their emotional state. They understand the impact that poverty, debt and unstable accommodation have on families and they work alongside the voluntary sector to support families with these needs. Family members are appropriately included in safety planning. Joint work and visits together with other professionals, for example health visitors, take place routinely.
2. Thresholds of risk, need and harm to children are mostly understood and applied by experienced and knowledgeable co-located health, police, children's social workers, early help advisers and domestic abuse specialists in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). The recent integration of a dedicated out-of-hours emergency social work team within the MASH is a strength, enabling a seamless service, including announced and unannounced visits in the evenings and at weekends. This work is supported by the family assessment support team (FAST), who work flexibly. Tenacious joint work by the police and the out-of-hours team is reducing harm to children.
3. MASH enquiries are thorough, informed by children's previous histories and the views of partner agencies and parents. Children identified as being at risk of significant harm or with more complex needs are fast tracked to social workers in a triage team. Prompt initial child protection strategy meetings are chaired by experienced managers and are well attended by professionals in the child's network. Reports are submitted when partner agencies cannot attend. Consent to share information is obtained when appropriate and careful, respectful language is used by managers in electronic records. There is effective consideration of children and their wider family network. Follow-up strategy meetings are convened to ensure that all agency information is considered before decisions are made and multi-agency plans for future work are agreed.

4. Assessments using the Milton Keynes strengths-based model are sensitively written directly to children and carefully identify the impact of parental mental illness, domestic abuse, substance misuse and neglect on children's well-being and development. In stronger assessments, the voice of the child and the family is evident, with a sense of who the child is, their strengths and what support is required. Workers show great curiosity and sensitivity about children's diverse needs, difference is celebrated, and children are helped to explore their identity. Leaders have recognised through their routine audits that there is still some inconsistency in the quality of assessments, and they are rightly taking action to address this.
5. Most early help, child in need and child protection plans reflect children's needs well. Review and core group meetings are well attended by professionals and parents and information is shared to measure progress and to agree next steps. Records are written in language that makes it easy for children and their families to understand what needs to change, but too many plans lack contingency arrangements if change is not achieved or sustained.
6. Children who go missing or who are at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation receive a proactive response from children's social care and the contextual safeguarding team. Return home interviews consider push and pull factors, and staff work successfully with children to help them to understand risks and make safer choices. Positive relationships with the police and other key partners enable mapping of perpetrators, increased disruption activity and identification of hotspots linked with serious youth violence and exploitation; successful strategies have been deployed to reduce the risk of harm to children.
7. Regular meetings, including complex child protection strategy meetings linked to groups of children, or children who are at risk of harm when they are missing, result in comprehensive actions for each partner agency. The actions are regularly reviewed to assess whether the level of risk to children is decreasing. Direct work with children is regular, purposeful and relationship-based, and children respond well.
8. The highly skilled and well-trained edge of care STEP (supporting teenagers, empowering parents) team provides children and their families with carefully planned interventions. Multidisciplinary staff support children experiencing risks relating to self-harm, poor mental health, exploitation, school refusal and fractured relationships at home. Visiting patterns are bespoke to need and take place during times of crisis, in the evenings and at weekends. Frequent communication and reassurance between visits via phone calls help parents grow in confidence in implementing new techniques to improve their relationships with children. This intensive work has enabled children to live safely with their parents or to maintain children in family placements. In the last 18 months, approximately 40 children have been helped, with only one child entering care.

9. Significant improvements have been made with regard to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO). These improvements have ensured that families are successfully diverted from court, or that proceedings are issued promptly, preventing drift and delay for children. Letters before proceedings are written with a clear focus on the concerns about children's experiences. Monthly reports for court and pre-proceedings activity prepared by the principal lawyer provide a comprehensive overview of performance against court-related practice. Leaders have shown a continued commitment to the Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC), resulting in higher numbers of children returning to the care of parents compared with standard proceedings, and this commitment has been commended by the judiciary.
10. Disabled children benefit from consistent relationships with experienced and sensitive social workers, who quickly identify the best way to understand how children communicate, including those with no speech. This is captured in records of visits in a way that includes observations, use of play, pictures and triangulation with adults who know the children well. Interpreters are used when necessary. Brothers and sisters in the family are given equal attention, especially when there are risks of harm and parental dispute or violence. Holistic child protection and care plans are clearly written.
11. The commissioned service for young carers delivers a wide range of activities to children and young people. These include support in schools and one-to-one trips and group activities, along with running regular specific youth clubs for young carers and young adult carers. Data about young carers is captured on the children's electronic recording system. Managers are working to ensure that more young carers are identified at an earlier stage.
12. Children who are privately fostered benefit from well-informed assessments that incorporate necessary checks and provide thorough social work analysis about their care. Effective work with partner agencies, including schools, GPs and increased engagement with faith groups, is helping to identify other children in private fostering arrangements.
13. Experienced local authority designated officers safely manage the increase in demand that is, in part, linked to the population growth and to an increase in referrals from a local young offender institution. Thresholds for decision-making and action are correctly applied and feedback about the service is universally positive.
14. Children aged 16 or 17 who present as homeless are provided with a sensitive, child-centred and prompt response. Children's vulnerabilities are central to assessment. Efforts are made to listen to children, checks are made with family and other agencies with their permission, and previous history informs decisions. Children enter care appropriately if they cannot live at home, and they have access to independent advocates.

15. Effective arrangements are in place to identify the number of children not in full-time school education or who are electively home educated and to respond if there are concerns about their welfare. Milton Keynes inclusion partnership is integral to the work in this area. Schools' support of the partnership is strong. This well-established way of working ensures that information is shared widely about school attendance and children missing education and for agreeing access to education for children excluded from school.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

16. Children come into care in Milton Keynes when this is the right action to keep them safe and to ensure that their needs are properly met. Extensive efforts are made for children to live within their extended family, and family members participate in decisions, including through the use of family group conferences. Detailed and thorough kinship care assessments are undertaken by the fostering service. Family members receive extensive support, including through the family assessment and support team, to meet children's needs. Formal agency decision-maker approval and effective matching arrangements provide assurance for children that they can remain with adults whom they trust and with whom they have an emotional bond, when it is safe to do so.
17. Children are supported to participate in planning for their care. Plans make clear how children's needs will be met, but contingency planning is not consistently in place. Advocates and independent visitors are used effectively when children need them. Children's views and aspirations are listened to and acted on. Children's time with family and friends is appropriately promoted in their care plans so that relationships are sustained. This enhances the children's sense of identity and their understanding of their birth family, and the reasons why they are in care. Children are encouraged and supported to maintain relationships with former carers or family members, including when they are living outside of Milton Keynes.
18. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) write to children, helping them to understand decisions that have been made that affect their lives. IROs know most children well and maintain oversight of children's progress through mid-point reviews. Effective oversight means that concerns regarding increased risks to children are escalated, including for children living outside of Milton Keynes. IROs visit children when needed, particularly if they have had multiple changes in placement.
19. Visits to children in care are aligned to the needs of the individual child. Social workers complete sensitive, carefully planned and child-friendly direct work that helps children to understand their journeys into care. Additional visits take place when children go missing or need to move from where they live. Most social workers know children well but, due to staff changes, foster carers report that this is not consistent. Records are skilfully written to children using child-friendly language, even when discussing challenging and distressing topics.

Children's special interests and future ambitions, such as in sport, art, music and outdoor activities, are supported well by staff and carers.

20. Most children in care live in stable, long-term, matched placements with carers, family members and in children's homes that are best suited to meet their assessed needs. Nevertheless, the rapidly changing profile of older children entering care with highly complex needs remains a significant challenge and contributes to higher numbers of children who experience multiple placement moves. Despite evidence of extensive placement searches, a small number of children were living in unregistered children's homes at the time of the inspection. Leaders are actively working with providers to support them in their applications for registration. Assiduous management oversight and increased visits by social workers and IROs ensure that the children's needs are constantly monitored. When children have court-ordered restrictions on their liberty, social workers help them to develop the skills that they need to be able to live safely.
21. Children's physical, emotional and mental health needs are prioritised and leaders routinely commission services to avoid long waits for health services. For example, the local authority employs health practitioners directly to support highly vulnerable children and to prevent placements from breaking down.
22. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive a warm welcome, strong advocacy for their rights and equal access to both the local offer and statutory services. Adroit and respectful work by caring staff is helping these children to recover from the trauma they have suffered, at their own pace.
23. Children in care receive exceptionally strong support from the headteacher of the virtual school and her team. Staff have an in-depth knowledge of children's needs and the barriers to accessing school, with evidence of positive impact on individual children, including those living out of the area. The local authority uses well-established partnerships with a range of organisations to secure good progress from children's starting points. This includes support with mental health, employability, vocational pathways and higher education. Robust oversight and intervention are reducing the numbers of children not accessing education, employment or training, and planning for adulthood starts early. Schools are overwhelmingly positive about their engagement with the virtual school. They value the flexible and sensible approach to personal education plans and planning, the access to training opportunities, and the speedy and meaningful communication.
24. The recently appointed permanent fostering manager knows her team well and has in-depth knowledge of the fostering households. Foster carers spoke positively about the quality of support and guidance that they receive from supervising social workers. While foster carer recruitment is increasing, the current number of households is unable to meet the increasing demand. A high number of exemptions are used to increase foster carer capacity and a clear

rationale is provided for each decision. Effective revised trauma-informed training and the development of a project to support groups of fostering households are positive. The fostering panel provides appropriate challenge and scrutiny.

25. Recruitment of adopters continues to be a challenge. There is a shortage of adopters who can meet the needs of brothers and sisters, older children and children with more complex needs. The regional adoption agency (Adoption Connects) is reporting an increase in applications and managers expect that the central list will increase. Adoptive parents report a mixed experience of preparation for the adoption process. They have been impacted by changes to their social worker and to children's social workers. Once children have been placed, there is greater consistency of effective support.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

26. Substantial improvements facilitated by senior leaders to expand the service for care leavers are underpinned by clear practice standards. This has created a culture of excellent and early support for most care leavers. Consequently, 16-year-olds approaching leaving care benefit from bespoke, thoughtful joint care and pathway plans that capture their voices, ambitions, needs, strengths and worries. These plans are exceptionally well written and provide a genuine snapshot of what is important to care leavers, the small things and the big dreams, in their own unedited and unfiltered language. Social workers ensure that applications for housing and benefits are in place in good time. They help children apply for passports and driving licences and the children are introduced to their personal advisers (PAs) while still supported by social workers, enabling them to build trusting relationships before they reach 18.
27. PAs know the care leavers well, sometimes for years, and have a thorough understanding of their individual needs and circumstances. They maintain regular and effective contact and offer practical support when needed, such as accompanying them to health appointments and to college interviews. Care leavers spoke with warmth and gratitude about the consistent support provided by their PAs. Staff at all levels are extremely ambitious for care leavers and advocate strongly on their behalf. Care leavers who are parents receive effective emotional and practical support.
28. Culture and religion are respected and encouraged, to give care leavers a secure identity that is valued. If care leavers live elsewhere in the country, then PAs successfully advocate on their behalf to achieve the same level of support as their peers, especially in terms of finding appropriate housing if it is not safe for them to return to Milton Keynes. Visits, plans and supervision dovetail seamlessly and demonstrate progress in real time. Success is celebrated and care leavers enjoy a full range of leisure activities, including going to the gym, karate, swimming, cooking, football and driving.

29. Monthly 'preparing for adulthood' meetings provide an effective forum to explore and agree how best to meet care leavers' ongoing care needs through adult social care support if required. Care Act assessments are routinely completed for children aged 16 or 17. Options to support parents and families or to identify suitable accommodation, such as shared living or residential provision, are explored, along with consideration of the best employment, training or education options. These meetings enable resources to be identified and services to be put in place to support young adults. There remain ongoing difficulties in identifying suitable adult health therapeutic options, as many have long waiting lists. The local authority has identified and paid for resources to ensure that the right support is put in place promptly. All avenues for accessing therapeutic support are explored, including using adoption support funding and identifying community resources when relevant.
30. Personal education plans are explicit about the support needed to ensure that care leavers are engaged in education, employment or training. Plans are ambitious for care leavers, based on their strengths and interests, and scaffolded by practical support, including additional tuition and travel payments. Additional support in line with education, health and care plans is accessed in college; decisions not to offer a college place are actively challenged.
31. Most care leavers live where they prefer and in accommodation that is suitable and right for them. Pathways to independent living are individually assessed by PAs who know the care leavers' strengths and vulnerabilities and are persistent in their efforts to stay in touch and provide support. Supported accommodation, applications for social housing and 'staying put' arrangements when care leavers go to university are sustained.
32. PAs provide responsive and thoughtful support to care leavers in custody. Resettlement is considered early and discussed with them in detail. Records provide evidence of frequent and detailed engagement with prison officers, probation, housing, health and other professionals, and family. This helps to secure better outcomes for care leavers on their release.
33. Care leavers have influenced the introduction of the new 'hub' and are actively involved in the development of the local offer, which is routinely shared with care leavers and used to its full potential. They participate in staff interviews, and their voice is central to how the service is delivered, with views gathered in creative ways during trips and conferences, online and at sporting events. Family connections are promoted, including with family members who live outside the UK. Persistent and creative efforts are made to stay connected with adult care leavers. As young people approach 21, PAs hold meaningful conversations with them about their ongoing support needs and provision is agreed to ensure that those needs continue to be met. Care leavers are provided with support beyond the age of 25 if required.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good

34. Since the last inspection, the director of children's services and the senior team have worked diligently to develop and support a culture of continuous learning and improvement. They have consciously created a supportive environment for staff and their model of practice ensures that children's needs are prioritised. These carefully executed and incremental systemic changes have accelerated in the past 18 months, resulting in substantial improvement to the lives of vulnerable children in Milton Keynes. Staff have welcomed the leaders' approach to change, and report that they have been consulted, listened to and involved in implementing the reconfiguration of services.
35. Senior managers and leaders have an accurate, balanced and reflective self-assessment of their services. This is reinforced by a comprehensive understanding and analysis of the changing needs and increasing demands presented by the growing population and diverse communities in their area. They recognise that they have more to do, as some of the changes are recent and need to be embedded. Effective corporate and political support has translated into significant financial investment to strengthen services, to provide increased workforce capacity and to ensure that progress is sustained.
36. The revised early help strategy has been informed by conversations with children, young people and relevant professionals and provides a clear framework for delivering services together with partner agencies. Most children receive services from caring staff across all teams that are tailored to their individually assessed needs. A resolute focus on protecting children living with neglect and parental domestic abuse and children who are criminally and sexually exploited or missing from home is beginning to ameliorate children's circumstances before risk of harm escalates. Leaders accept that the partnership approach is not fully underpinned by a clear strategic needs analysis or plan that focuses resources sufficiently well on the rapidly changing demographics of the city.
37. Sufficiency of foster carers and local accommodation to meet the complex needs of children in care remain a challenge. Senior leaders know individual children well and are directly involved in managing risks. Leaders are unwavering in their efforts to work collaboratively across the region to find solutions. Early prevention and investment in edge of care services and rigorous permanence planning involving family members are making a positive difference.
38. The introduction of a comprehensive performance management strategy and access for all staff to reliable real-time data systems is playing an important part in driving continuous improvement and is a core element of their success. This is underpinned by routine audits focused on children's safety and well-being. Consequently, senior leaders and managers across teams understand

their strengths and areas for improvement. The appointment of dedicated practice development leads ensures that learning from audits is disseminated and actions arising from audits are monitored for most children.

39. Leaders are fully cognisant of the challenges in recruiting qualified and experienced social workers. This had previously led to multiple changes in staff, which impeded the development of trusting relationships with children. A comprehensive and effective workforce recruitment and retention strategy includes a successful initiative to support non-qualified staff to qualify through the social work degree apprenticeship programme.
40. All staff spoke with enthusiasm about their training and development opportunities and the access to visible leaders who care about children. Agency staff are increasingly applying for permanent posts and social workers are returning to work for the local authority as they appreciate the level of support. Caseloads are manageable and supervision is regular and mostly effective in driving forward progress for children. Stability of leadership and a strong culture of constant learning and support to staff are bringing greater consistency of management oversight across all teams and are key factors in the improvement across all aspects of the service.

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