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13 November 2020

Dr Mac Heath  
Director of Children's Services  
Milton Keynes Council  
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Dear Dr Heath

### **Focused visit to Milton Keynes children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Milton Keynes children's services between 29 September and 1 October 2020. The inspectors were Joy Howick, Tracey Scott, Julie Knight, Rachel Griffiths and Kathryn Moles, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out partly by remote means. Two inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority social workers, managers and leaders, and three inspectors were primarily on site, in local authority offices, speaking to social workers, managers and leaders who were office-based. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

### **Overview**

There has been a relatively low rate of COVID-19 infection in Milton Keynes. The partnership has planned and delivered a well-coordinated and effective response to the pandemic. Its actions have been swift and well considered, with an appropriate focus on supporting the most vulnerable. Despite the council facing a considerable financial shortfall, with concerns about long-term sustainability, it has consistently prioritised children's services. A small recovery fund has been created to mitigate

some of the additional costs due to COVID-19.

Senior leaders and councillors have promoted the development of good social work practice, supported by a comprehensive range of specialist and targeted support services. Practice in Milton Keynes and across the partnership is underpinned by a strong ethos of supporting children early and keeping families together safely, known as the 'golden triangle'. Overall, this focus has been adapted and maintained effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, children and families have continued to receive the same swift and appropriate response from the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Assessments are thorough and, once support is provided, the lives of many children improve. However, the local authority has experienced capacity issues in the family support teams, compounded by increased demand due to COVID-19 and difficulties recruiting agency staff during the period of disruption caused by the pandemic. As a result, there has been delay in allocation to case-holding social workers. Consequently, some children in need experience a delay in receiving help to improve their lives or reduce risk.

Committed and caring social workers and personal advisers have maintained positive relationships with children in care and care leavers. They use creative approaches to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of children, families and care leavers. The use of regulatory flexibilities as a consequence of COVID-19 has been minimal. Where used, this has been appropriate and child-centred, with detailed records of associated risk assessments.

During the COVID-19 period, staff have felt listened to, supported in their day-to-day practice and valued by accessible and visible leaders and managers. However, performance management and management oversight require further development to ensure that leaders and managers have a good understanding of, and a strong influence over, all areas of frontline practice.

### **What needs to improve in this area of social work practice**

- Case allocation and progression, by ensuring that all children transferring from the MASH are quickly allocated and revisited and their plans are progressed.
- The quality and recording of supervision and management decision-making, including the rationale for these decisions.

### **Findings**

- Children and families receive a prompt and proportionate response to initial contacts made to the MASH. Managers make timely and appropriate decisions to help ensure that children are safeguarded.
- Child protection enquiries are mostly effective and timely in identifying and

reducing risk to children. Managers and social workers in the MASH understand thresholds and appropriately apply these when deciding on next steps. Thresholds in the family support teams are less consistently applied, with the rationale for decisions not always being clear within the child's records.

- Assessments undertaken in the MASH are timely. Social workers routinely see children face to face, they ensure that partner agencies are engaged, and that information is shared proportionately to promote child-centred decision-making. A range of specialist parenting and attachment-based assessments help to inform the next steps for children.
- Despite the challenges of COVID-19, child in need and child protection plans have remained focused and direct support has continued to be provided to reduce risk. Flexible and responsive support provided by the Family Support Team (FST), including at weekends and evenings, helps to improve children's circumstances.
- For some children, planning has been hindered by reasons other than, but exacerbated by, COVID-19. A combination of factors, including a lack of capacity in the family support teams, has resulted in too many children who have been seen and assessed to be 'in need' having to wait to be allocated a social worker. This has led to delays in some plans being progressed to improve children's lives, and a few children in need have waited for a number of weeks after the completion of the assessment before being visited again. While the local authority's ethos to work with families at the lowest level of intervention possible is largely effective, a lack of robust planning and monitoring to mitigate risk has left a small number of children in need in situations where delays in reviewing their circumstances or in providing help have increased the harm they face.
- Once allocated, social workers visit children regularly and work hard to build strong and positive relationships with them. This makes it easier for children to share their worries with someone they have learned to trust and provides an additional layer of protection for children. COVID-19 has not been a barrier to social workers maintaining relationships with children. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers quickly ensured that children received equipment such as laptops to minimise isolation and support their learning.
- For children who go missing or who are at risk of exploitation, strong strategic and operational multi-agency partnerships ensure effective information-sharing. This common understanding of concerns and subsequent joined-up planning reduces risk effectively. Work is under way to improve the quality and timeliness of return home interviews to better identify and respond to risk.
- Leaders have successfully promoted school attendance during the period of COVID-19, with figures steadily increasing. The problem-solving approach adopted has been helpful for schools to manage a challenging and constantly changing situation.
- Numbers of children missing from education and being electively home educated have increased. Leaders have insight and understand the reasons behind this, which are in part linked to the impact of COVID-19. The monitoring process

enables officers to act swiftly where concerns arise about a child's access to suitable education.

- Children only come into care when it is necessary and appropriate. Social workers and specialist practitioners support families to make positive changes, giving families the best opportunity to stay together.
- When concerns escalate for children, and all support options have been exhausted, children's cases progress appropriately to the pre-proceedings phase of the public law outline. Letters issued to parents before proceedings outline what needs to be done to prevent court proceedings and to improve children's circumstances. The local authority is prompt in escalating children's cases to court to seek orders to safeguard them.
- Social workers regularly update assessments to identify the changing needs of children in care. Assessments contain children's views and relevant information from others who are involved in their lives, to support planning.
- Social workers ensure that care plans for children in care include actions that are logical and child-focused. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) maintain regular oversight of these plans. It is too early to see the impact of the recently introduced midway reviewing process by IROs to improve permanence planning. Ensuring consistent, rigorous challenge to promote permanence without any delay is a work in progress.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers and personal advisers have shown care and commitment to the children and care leavers they are responsible for. They see them regularly, either virtually or face to face, dependent on the child's preference and assessed level of need.
- Social workers and personal advisers complete and update pathway plans with care leavers. Some pathway plans are not comprehensive enough. They do not consistently have clear action plans to help achieve positive change or to mitigate potential risks. Pathway plans do not always sufficiently capture future plans for care leavers who are NEET (not in education, employment or training). Leaders of the virtual school have taken initial steps to streamline how pathway plans align with personal education plans, with the aim of ensuring that care leavers are better supported to access education, employment or training.
- The virtual school provides useful educational support and advice to children in care and their carers. Children's personal education plans are of variable quality, not always reflecting the views and academic needs of the child.
- Children in care have been supported well to access appropriate education while schools were not all fully open. Schools and carers have worked in useful partnership, with additional helpful advice from the virtual school.
- Senior leaders, in partnership with local schools, have effectively overseen and promoted school attendance for children who are vulnerable during the period of COVID-19, with figures increasing week on week. This collaborative approach has supported schools to manage a difficult and fluid situation.

- Social workers and personal advisers continue to ensure that children's and care leavers' physical and mental health needs are promoted, and family time has been prioritised. This benefits children in care and care leavers, reducing isolation and increasing their well-being and sense of identity during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Placement sufficiency is a challenge in Milton Keynes, particularly for care leavers. Leaders and politicians are working to address this within the council, for example by working with the housing department to create new accommodation in Milton Keynes specifically for care leavers.
- Shortfalls in the quality of the recording of management oversight across the service make it harder to understand why managers have made certain decisions at key points in children's lives. This hinders future effective planning as a clear record of past decisions is not available to inform future actions. Importantly, children trying to make sense of their lives will not be able to understand why decisions were made by managers and social workers.
- Social workers are positive about the quality of supervision and support they receive from managers, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. While supervision takes place regularly, the quality of recording is variable. For some children, supervision records lack detailed actions with timescales to prevent drift in progressing plans.
- Social workers report that their workloads are manageable, and they wholeheartedly believe in the 'golden triangle', a set of approaches that are used consistently to keep children safe and well supported in Milton Keynes.
- Strong, strategic and operational partnerships have enabled continued effective support to children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Feedback to inspectors from partners was overwhelmingly positive about the strength of partnership working during these challenging times. The judiciary was very positive about the consistently high quality of social work practice in Milton Keynes.
- The local authority's recently revised quality assurance framework is a work in progress. In one aspect, performance reporting has not provided a good enough understanding of the quality and effectiveness of social work practice: reporting processes failed to alert senior managers to an unacceptable number of children allocated to deputy team managers, without meaningful social work being undertaken for too long. This was a measure used to ensure continued transfer of work from the MASH and assessment teams, and to keep workloads manageable in the FST teams. However, the consequence was that some children in need plans were not progressed due to a delay in children being allocated. For a small number of children, this left them vulnerable to harm due to unassessed risk. When this was brought to the local authority's attention, leaders immediately reviewed children's records, and took appropriate action to address the shortfall.

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

Yours sincerely

Joy Howick  
Her Majesty's Inspector