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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 on 13 and 14 May 2026. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Penny Ademuyiwa and Steve Bailey.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for placement decision-making for older children in care, which included a specific focus on:

- children, including those who meet the definition of 'eligible', living in or with a plan for living in, supported accommodation;
- children aged 16 or 17 years living in unregistered provision (including on an emergency basis);
- children under 16 years old living in unregistered provision (including on an emergency basis);
- placement sufficiency, including fostering matching practice;
- how local authorities are working in partnership with others to meet their sufficiency duty to older children;
- arrangements for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children;
- the impact of leaders on social work practice in this area of the service.

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

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in October 2024, at which placement sufficiency was identified as an area for improvement, there has been some progress in increasing the number and range of homes for children. However, this has not happened at sufficient pace to keep up with the needs of the child in care population, in particular

the increase in need for homes for older children, including those with additional needs.

Leaders understand the profile and needs of older children, who require stable and loving homes. The local authority has made use of unregistered provision, and some children have experienced multiple short-term placements in unregistered provision. Leaders recognise this and are clear that this is a challenge they need to address, as they do not want to place Milton Keynes children in illegal provision.

At a strategic level, joint working with partner agencies is not sufficiently effective in ensuring that children's all-round needs are identified and met at the earliest opportunity. Support for children's emotional and mental health is variable, meaning that not all children, particularly those with complex needs, get the help they need swiftly and effectively. Social workers have a good understanding of the children they support, knowing their histories, journey into care and current circumstances. Social workers develop trusting, meaningful relationships with children. A high turnover of staff is having a negative impact on children having a consistent social worker and, for some, this has led to delays in their plans progressing.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?[1]

- The range, supply and availability of suitable homes for children in care. (Outcome 4, national framework)
- How effectively partnership working helps to secure timely and consistent support for children's mental health and emotional wellbeing. (Outcome 1, national framework)
- The effectiveness and consistency of governance and oversight of the use of unregistered children's homes, if used. (Outcome 4, national framework)
- Consistency of social worker for children in care, to enable children to develop trusting relationships with their social workers. (Enabler 3, national framework)

Main findings

Older children only enter care when other options have been thoroughly explored and it is in their best interests. Decisions take account well of children's wishes and feelings, their relationships, location and the type of home that is most likely to meet their needs. Children are seen regularly by their social workers; their voices are valued and support is adjusted in response to their views.

Leaders are working to increase the availability of homes for older children through the implementation of a new sufficiency strategy that includes measures to increase the number of and support to foster carers, and through opening a local authority

[1] The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the Children's Social Care: National Framework. This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

owned and managed residential provision. These initiatives have had political and corporate support, but it is too early to see the full impact for children.

Unregistered children's homes are used in emergencies and as a last resort, and only if generally wide-ranging placement searches to seek to identify appropriate registered provision for children prove unsuccessful. When children are placed in unregistered children's homes, there are some inconsistencies in the oversight arrangements. While initial decisions are overseen by senior leaders, there was not consistent evidence of systematic ongoing senior management oversight and consistent due diligence checks from the commissioning team. Leaders recognised during the inspection the need for oversight and assurance activity to be strengthened, alongside a focus on reducing the use of unregistered provision.

Children living in unregistered placements are visited more frequently by their social workers. These visits are well recorded, with an appropriate focus on the child and their progress.

A trauma-informed multi-agency response panel has been developed with health partners to improve oversight of arrangements for children, increase stability and find more bespoke solutions to meet children's needs. However, the multi-agency panel is not consistently effective in its impact to ensure timely progression of plans for some children.

Family networks are fully explored and prioritised in an attempt to keep children living within their wider family network when this is safe and in children's best interests. However, the quality and consistency of support to some kinship families is not sufficiently matched to the needs of children and adults, which has a negative impact on the stability of these arrangements for children.

When decisions are made for older children to return home, their wishes and feelings are carefully considered, alongside the changes that parents have made to enable them to meet the needs of their adolescent child. Appropriate and effective management oversight of placement with parent arrangements is provided by senior leaders.

Social workers explore children's needs through assessments, plans and visits, building a holistic understanding of needs. For some children, this happens too slowly, which means their needs are not well understood to inform decision-making and how well children settle into their homes.

Children's physical and emotional health and wellbeing needs are prioritised. Those with more enduring mental health and emotional wellbeing needs receive a more variable response.

There is currently no corporate parenting strategy, however, senior leaders know this and have plans to develop one in the coming months. The absence of a joined-up strategy that can be used to hold all partner agencies to account for their delivery of services to children in care has hindered progress for these children. The corporate

parenting board has oversight of performance and specific areas of practice but has not been impactful in driving sufficiency priorities for older children. The board is not attended by a wide range of partner agencies and system leaders to oversee this work.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive a compassionate service from social workers who recognise the trauma they have faced. Social workers are ambitious for these children and provide bespoke support to help them to settle in the UK.

Independent reviewing officers (IROs) build effective relationships with children in care and act as a consistent presence for them. Children are supported well to take part in their reviews, with minutes clearly reflecting their wishes, feelings and discussions about issues that are important to them. IRO oversight of children's day-to-day care is captured in detailed review records. While the oversight of IROs helps to ensure that key actions and practical tasks are completed, they are less effective in meaningfully challenging when progression of children's plans is delayed or in challenging the appropriateness of unregistered placements.

Quality assurance activity provides leaders with an understanding of practice that is currently more focused on quantitative measures than the quality of practice. While the data that the local authority does collect and analyse is helpful, there is more to do to ensure that audit activity becomes an effective tool for continually developing social work practice. Currently, there is a focus on compliance, with less evidence of evaluation of the impact that practice is having on children's lives. Auditors collaborate with practitioners when undertaking audits and gather the views of children and parents. When feedback from children is obtained, it adds value to the overall understanding of the quality of relationships children have with their social workers.

Recent changes to the structure in the child in care team have created additional management capacity. These changes are welcomed by social workers, although it is too soon to see the full impact. Social workers say that they feel supported by their team managers and find the senior leadership team to be both approachable and visible.

The child in care team has struggled to maintain a consistent and stable workforce. This has created instability for children, who have experienced several changes in social workers. For some children, this has had a negative impact on the speed at which plans are progressed or deciding what the next steps are for them.

Social workers receive regular supervision, which they describe as supportive. They can articulate the progress children have made in becoming more independent and in risk of harm reducing. However, records of supervision lack reflection and depth of analysis about what has helped make the difference and what this means for ongoing future support and planning for children.

Social workers benefit from a wide range of training opportunities. Plans for their personal development are made with them, are bespoke to their individual learning needs and linked to their work with children.

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

Yours sincerely

Penny Ademuyiwa
His Majesty's Inspector