

Children in Care Strategy – Review

Author: Charles Greer
Title: Head of Delivery Corporate Parenting
Division: Children & Families Integrated Support & Social Care

Report Summary

Purpose:

This paper seeks to provide a brief review of the Children in Care Strategy 2009 -12 and outlines the progress and continuing challenges in relation to the identified priorities within that strategy. It seeks to inform Corporate Parenting Panel of the work undertaken and planned to review this framework document. The council is building upon the lessons from recent inspections, messages from children and young people and consultation with key stakeholders to finalise the Milton Keynes Children in Care strategy for 2013-16.

Background:

The Milton Keynes Children in Care strategy 2009 -12 set out how Milton Keynes Council, together with partner agencies, intended to meet the needs of all children in the Council's care. The strategy set out the broad aims for children in care and the guiding values and principles that have shaped children in care service. It sought to ensure that children and young people in Milton Keynes Council's care had the best possible life experiences, were safe, happy and healthy, and achieved their full potential at school and in the future. As detailed in previous reports to Corporate Parenting Panel, much has been achieved (e.g. a reduction in the use of residential and distant placements) but there are clear areas for future attention, including a focus on CiC educational achievement, placement stability and continuing the improvement of Milton Keynes adoption and leaving care services.

Corporate Priorities:

Improving the outcomes for Milton Keynes' Looked After Children is central to our corporate parenting responsibilities. The Children in Care strategy is the overarching framework document for identifying key priorities and how they are to be addressed. This is in line with the council's Children & Families 2012/13 priority 4: To develop and maintain effective intervention that prevent the most vulnerable children and young people in our communities from experiencing additional difficulty and prevents them from suffering significant harm.

Performance Information:

See performance update report.

Equality and Diversity Impact:

The Corporate Parenting Service is provided for children from across the Milton Keynes community. It therefore needs to provide services that can meet the diverse needs of all the children and young people in the Council's care.

Recommendations /Proposals:

Corporate Parenting Panel are asked to note the report, to agree to the proposed consultation and to advice on how they can best be involved in shaping the Children in Care strategy 2013-16.

Summary of Children in Care Strategy 2009 -12

The Children in Care strategy recognises that the vast majority of children and young people are most likely to thrive and achieve good outcomes if they are cared for within their own family. We have therefore sought to provide preventative services and early intervention to support children and their families and prevent children becoming looked after.

Where children cannot be supported within their immediate family, the emphasis of our strategy for children in care is that placements with a relative, friend or other person connected with the child will be explored as the preferred alternative arrangement. In accordance with this, family group conferences are well established as part of our processes and are offered to families where there is a risk that the child or young person may need to be accommodated.

The demographics of Milton Keynes over the last decade have impacted heavily on Children in Care services; the dramatic rise in the 0-17 population over that period has included a significant proportion of disadvantaged families. Despite the success of our family support strategy, the numbers in care have consequently significantly increased over the last 3 years.

When it is not possible to keep young people at home, and provided it is in the best interest of the child, they are placed with foster carers, predominantly through direct council provision. Through our fostering recruitment strategy, we have worked towards increased capacity within our in-house services.

Residential placements are only used where the complexity of a child's needs mean they cannot live in a family setting or where a child expressly will not or can not accept an alternative family. While we have proactively reduced the overall number of residential placements, we recognise that for a small number of children and young people, family placements are not suitable, and their needs are best met within residential care. For this reason, the provision of residential care continues to be a small but important part of our strategy and planning,

In all cases, it has been our strategy that placements should be sufficiently local to enable children in care to remain in their communities, maintain their networks and minimise disruption in their lives. Out of area placements are only be considered when all local options have been explored.

The primary purpose of the Children in Care strategy is to enable a focus on this vulnerable group of children and to seek to close the gap between their life outcomes and those of their peers in the community. There has, both nationally and locally, been an improvement in outcomes for Children in Care. In Milton Keynes, there remain challenges, particularly in relation to placement stability and educational achievement. Both remain improvement priorities.

Our practice for commissioning residential and foster care placements is more robust and has moved towards a more targeted approach. We are developing more strategic relationships with both providers and other local authorities with a focus on ensuring sufficient capacity and the choice of high quality local placements at the best price possible.

Children in Care Strategy 2009-12 Priorities – Impact summary

Detailed data of the following areas has been included in separate reports to Corporate Parenting Panel.

1. Strengthen governance arrangements for corporate parenting

The Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP) is a non party based panel with regular and committed membership. It meets quarterly and considers and commissions reports around issues relating to Children in Care. The terms of reference for the panel were reviewed in May 2010 and confirmed to be in place in the 2011/12 CPP Annual report. The members are strongly linked with the Children in Care council (TCTF) and participate in routine (Regulation 33) visits to the council's children's homes. The corporate parenting annual report 2011-12 outlines the activities and involvements of the CPP.

2. Develop our corporate parenting responsibility with the involvement of young people supported by the corporate parenting officer, IROs, and advocates

We have developed a robust pattern of links between TCTF and the CPP to support the delivery of this priority:

- Quarterly meetings between TCTF and CPP Elected Members;
- Annual 'getting to know you' event with TCTF members and elected members;
- All CPP members have profiles completed that all CIC have access to;
- TCTF deliver a training session for newly elected CPP members within the induction training for new CPP members;
- TCTF members attend Regional and National CIC Council meetings looking at issues of corporate parenting responsibility and share their experiences and views with CPP members at the quarterly meetings.

3. Establish Children in Care Council/ Forum and agree the 'Pledge'

- The CIC Council – TCTF – is well established.
- The CIC website (KIC: MK) was refreshed in Jan 2012, providing information on the CICC to all LAC and access to the recently updated Pledge.
- All Young People in Care were sent a copy of the pledge.
- Various stakeholder forum groups and consultation events/days are held.
- In September 2012 a termly 'life learning group' for CIC aged 14 plus replaced the previous 'stake holder groups'. Young people identified this as a need. This group now runs over a period of 6 to 9 sessions each term and includes life skills, cooking skills, DIY, budget skills, etc.

4. Increase the percentage of children in care who are fostered in or close to Milton Keynes

Details of how we are delivering this priority are given in our sufficiency strategy:

- We seek to place young people who are entering care in Milton Keynes, preferably through our in house fostering service.
- Where this is not possible, we use well-commissioned independent foster placements within a 20 miles radius of MK.

- In 2011/2012 the Fostering Service approved 40 new foster carers, giving a net increase of 12 new foster homes. The net increase in foster care is expected to continue in 2012/3
- On the 31st March 2012, there were 212 MK CiC in foster care, 163 (76.9%) of whom were placed with “in house” MKC approved carers in MK and surrounding areas.
- On the 31st March 2012, 227 of the 278 children in MKC care (81.7%) were placed within 20 miles of MK.

5. Develop culturally appropriate services locally for black & minority ethnic children

- The MK fostering service recruits foster carers from diverse cultural backgrounds. We currently have 13% Black and Ethnic Minority foster carers and continue work to increase this percentage.
- Every effort is made to match children appropriately, taking into account their cultural background.
- All Milton Keynes foster carers have had access to the resources for children from minority ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds provided by EMASS (Ethnic Minorities Advisory & Support Service); in the event that we are unable to make a cultural match, for example if a child’s other needs take precedence, we identify what resources the foster carers require to enable them to meet the child’s cultural needs and ensure that these are available

6. Reduce the number of children in external residential placements

Milton Keynes council seeks to keep children with their birth families or wider families whenever possible. When this is not achievable, the preferred option is to place children in an alternative family placement such as foster or adoptive care. Residential care or school placements are identified as being the most appropriate placement for a few young people in care who have particular or complex needs.

- Plans for admissions to residential care are presented to a weekly Resources Panel or, where children have complex needs, the inter agency Complex Needs Panel. These panels formalise senior management challenge to and provide an overview of the use of residential care.
- If residential care is agreed, it is accessed through the placement commissioning staff, where contracting and service specifications are in place, including a focus on the required placement outcomes.
- All placements in external residential homes are reviewed at a monthly external placements panel to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of the young person, that the young person is progressing and that the placement is delivering value for money.
- The current use of residential care in Milton Keynes is low. On the 31st March 2012, 25 children (8.9% of the MK CiC population) were in residential care. This includes secure accommodation, residential school, full-time residential placements for children with disabilities and children’s homes.

7. Continue to provide support to young person and their family when they have returned home.

Routine care plan reviews, wherever possible, identify what support is required to return children home or to “ friends and family” placements both at the beginning of their time in care and when a child’s needs or home situation have changed over a more extended care period.

- In 2011/12, the MKC Fostering Service undertook 50 Viability Assessments in partnership with Family Support Team colleagues. This is expected to increase in 2012/13.
- The use of Special Guardianship Orders continues to increase, providing permanency for young people within their extended families.
- A number of children and young people who had been in care for an extended period have been returned to the care of their families.
- This pattern of activities has continued and increased in 2012/13

8. Support more young people to chair or take a more active role in their reviews

- A number of MK young people continue to chair/lead their reviews (practice in MKC since 2002).
- A consultation event with young people and IROs was held on 16th July 2012, the agenda for which was set by TCTF, and included 'young people leading/chairing their own reviews and developing guidance and support for young people to do this'.
- The Fostering Team run a training course for foster carers called "Care Planning and Preparing Children and Young People for Reviews".

9. Support more young people in care and those leaving care to engage in wider activities, in line with the Milton Keynes youth participation strategy

- A TCTF member has been co-opted onto the wider 2012/13 MK Youth Cabinet.
- There has been considerable engagement by MK young people in care with the MKC youth participation strategy. For example, CIC and Care Leavers were part of the young people's Participation Charter conference in November 2011, along with other young people from the MKC Youth Cabinet and YOT.
- The wider youth cabinet has become more aware of specialist children's services. For example, the 3 person young people's panel for the 2012 appointment of the Assistant Director, Children's Social Care included a member of the youth cabinet whose personal experience of children's services was confined to universal provision, alongside two young people with personal experience of family support services and being in MKC care.

10. Ensure the Education Service for children in care is effectively working with young people, schools, college, libraries and other learning resources to improve attainment at Key Stages of the National Curriculum and beyond

Whilst much work has been done in this area, it remains a key strategic priority, with an acknowledgement that further targeted work is required to raise the attainment of each individual CiC:

- The team and the virtual school for children in care is now established and feedback indicates that it is valued by carers, schools and young people.
- The Virtual school head was appointed in May 2010 and this role has been enhanced through the transfer of responsibility to a senior manager in Education Effectiveness & Participation.
- The team has an annual team plan, agreed and overseen multi-disciplinary group (the virtual school management meeting - VSMM) that was established to lead, support and raise the profile of the virtual school, to ensure shared ownership of the virtual school and to oversee and bring challenge to the progress of the virtual school improvement plan.

- The team provides a range of support for the education of children in care, with the overall objective of improving their attainment. In particular, they:
 - seek to outline the roles and responsibilities of those involved, providing information about relevant processes and provision within MKC.
 - provide a practice handbook for the education of Children in Care to social work teams and Foster Carers.
 - track and monitor the progress, attendance and attainment of each child in care in school to enable targeted intervention for specific young people, for example, coaching support and, for some young people, commissioning supplementary specialist teacher input.
 - work with social work teams to ensure that all children in care have an effective personnel education plan (PEP) and regularly audit PEP completion.
 - provide access to programmes designed to increase aspiration
 - offer a range of extra-curricular opportunities to support learning and widen social and cultural experience
 - monitor attendance and exclusion data, (permanent and fixed term). This data is used to trigger a timely respond on an individual basis from the school inclusion service. Direct support is offered to schools and children close to or already subject to exclusion, to avoid or minimise the impact of time lost.

11. Monitor school attendance and exclusion to ensure that these issues are addressed promptly.

- School attendance of MKC CiC is routinely monitored on our behalf by a commissioned third party (Welfare Call).
- Attendance information is shared in a timely fashion with key staff to facilitate appropriate intervention.
- Attendance figures as of April 2012 are primary 96.49% and secondary 93.01%
- The Fostering Service work closely with the Education service for children in care to ensure that intervention and support is put in at the earliest opportunity.
- The Children in Care Education team monitor exclusions and work with SW and schools to avoid permanent exclusion and minimise the numbers and impact of exclusions for individual children.
- The Team seek to put support in place from the second day of any exclusion.

12. Providing training for foster carers, designated teachers and social workers so they can address the issues that give rise to poor attainment for children in care

The education of CiC is a high priority for the fostering service. This is reflected in the annual training directory. Education is covered as part of the Core training which must be undertaken by all foster carers.

The following courses are included in this year's (2012/13) training directory:

- Promoting Educational achievement in children and Young People in Foster Care (core training).
- Helping My Child Learn (5 sessions)
- Getting Teenagers to Revise (short course)
- Encouraging children to write correctly

In addition, the CiC Education team provide support to governors and designated teachers through an annual training day and supplement this within the school when requested. Forums have been held, but have been poorly attended and other approaches have therefore been pursued.

13. Increase support to care leavers who are in further education

- The Options for Independence (OFI) team provide personal and emotional support through Personal Advisors (PAs).
- PAs facilitate disruption meeting with colleges when a young person is struggling.
- OFI provides bursaries to supplement student loans and laptops for care leavers who require these for educational reasons.
- Education incentives (£200) are offered to those care leavers who remain in education on their 19th birthday.
- An identified link worker from the Connexions service provides information and guidance to care leavers on opportunities in higher education.
- In conjunction with the CIC education team, extra tuition has been provided for care leavers who have learning difficulties.
- The team have successfully accessed universal funding to complement LA funding to support care leavers in education (for example from the Buttle trust).
- PAs escort care leavers to college and university open /taster days.
- The service offers financial support for child care for care leavers who are young parents who face additional barriers to accessing education.
- It also encourages and facilitates young people's participation in educational trips in the UK and abroad, including exchange programmes.
- The MKC staying put policy facilitates care leavers staying with their foster carers post 18 while attending education courses.

14. Further develop initiatives to increase the number of care leavers who are in education or employment

This is an on-going priority for the service. We recognise that those young people who leave care at age 18, are particularly vulnerable to becoming NEET, and so to having reduced life chances. Currently, we have a wide range of activities to address this local and national priority, including:

- Engagement with care leavers to develop specific initiatives and the overall strategy
- Work with a number of voluntary and community sector partners to deliver targeted projects
- Support and challenge to care and post-care placement providers to improve support and preparation for young people as they prepare for and move to independent living
- Work to ensure that the ETE needs of care leavers are fully considered and prioritised in the universal and targeted provision designed to address the needs of Milton Keynes' young people.

Review of Children in Care Strategy

The Children in Care strategy review provides an opportunity to reevaluate our approach to delivering the shape of services to children in care and to identify the priorities for those children and young people over the coming 3-5 years.

The Director of Children's Services (DCS) and Lead Member for Children and Young People's Services are responsible for ensuring that the Local Authority is an effective corporate parent and for securing the commitment of local partners in meeting the identified and agreed needs of children in care.

The new strategy will set out the council's strategic intentions in respect of children and young people who are looked after in Milton Keynes. It is required to specify the means by which those strategic intentions will be realised and the actions that will be taken to ensure that we achieve the best possible outcomes for the children and young people in the council's care.

This paper opens the dialogue with the Corporate Parenting Panel in relation to this review. Consultation will continue through January and February 2013, led by the Council (Children and Families) with the full range of local partners across health, schools, youth offending, the Police, Probation and the voluntary and community sectors and children and young people. The consultation will engage with existing partnerships, including the Milton Keynes Children & Families Partnership.

The consultation seeks to identify the key priorities for each partner in relation to their contribution to, and expectations of, services for children in care. The resultant strategy will include the inter agency:

- Vision
- Values and principles
- Key challenges
- The national context
- The Milton Keynes context
- Key priorities for each agency including:
 - Assertive prevention of care
 - Placement stability and range of high quality placement provision
 - Health issues of children and young people in care
 - Educational attainment and achievement
 - Leisure and interests outside of school
 - Effective care planning
 - Working to our promises in the Pledge
 - Sufficiency

Information from a programme of consultation workshops will be used to inform the new strategy, for consideration by the Children and Families Leadership Team in March 2013. An interagency meeting will be held in March to consider the draft and propose amendments and seek agreement from partners. The final draft will be presented to Corporate Parenting Panel in April 2013 for consideration and approval.

Members of Corporate Parenting Panel are invited to discuss the proposed above scope of the review and indicate how they would best wish to be involved in its progress.