

Corporate Parenting Panel report



15 March 2022

OUTCOME FROM MILTON KEYNES INSPECTION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY CHILDREN'S SERVICES (ILACS) BY OFSTED AS RELATES TO CORPORATE PARENTING

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Exempt / confidential / not for publication	No
Council Plan reference	Ref number / Not in Council Plan
Wards affected	All wards / list individual wards

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to give consideration on the outcome of the Ofsted Inspection of Milton Keynes Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) and where it relates to Corporate Parenting. The Inspection took place at the end of October/early November 2021 with the report published on Friday 17 December 2021. It was subsequently fully considered at the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee on 10 February 2022.

The report provided an Inspection grading across three domains concluding with an Overall Effectiveness grade. The report concluded that all outcome grades were judged as 'Requires Improvement to be Good' which is the same as the finding from our previous similar inspection held in 2016.

The grading we are considering in this report relates to the experiences and progress of children in care, and care leavers.

Inspection Report Findings

In relation to Corporate Parenting: the specific areas of Good Practice referenced within the Inspection were:

- Praise by our local Judiciary in relation to our work in the courts and legal approach.

- Services and partners understand exploitation and respond appropriately.
- Missing Arrangements are well monitored.
- Contact/Family time is well applied for Children in Care.
- A wide variety of activities are evident for Children in Care and Care Leavers.
- Adoption is carefully considered and work with children sensitively planned.
- Milton Keynes is ambitious for Care Leavers.

However, areas for improvement were identified in this inspection in relation to Corporate Parenting. Of the eight specific recommendations listed, three would specifically sit within the Corporate Parenting area:

- The quality and frequency of supervision and support of foster carers.
- The understanding and application of placement with parents' regulations and permanence decision-making for these children.
- The clarity and implementation of the Care Leavers offer from 18-25.

However, further references were made in the body of the inspection report which referenced areas for improvement. The key aspects of the report are drawn out below from Paragraph 15-36 of the report:

15. The experiences and progress of some children in the care of Milton Keynes are not consistently good. The work of the fostering service has recently been scrutinised by leaders and found wanting. A development plan has been drafted. There are many strengths in the work with care leavers aged up to 21 but there is a lack of clarity provided to those aged 21 to 24 about their rights and entitlements. Too many children on care orders placed with their parents do not have decisions about permanence made quickly enough or timely action taken when a decision to apply to revoke the order has been made.
16. When children come into care, there is mostly timely and suitable consideration as to whether their needs can be met within the family network. When children are moved in an emergency, the management oversight and rationale for these placement decisions are not routinely evident on the child's record. This does not help a child understand their care history.
17. Most children benefit from well-considered early permanence planning. However, children subject to a care order who live with their parents do not receive the required assessments, planning, management oversight, decision-making and subsequent actions necessary to secure their permanence arrangements, for example by an application to revoke a care order.

18. Most children live in homes that are right for them, where they have achieved stability in their lives and made progress. For some children, the information that is used to find a home for them does not always capture their needs and vulnerabilities well. This means that these needs are not routinely well considered when looking for the right place for a child to live. This leads to children moving in an unplanned way and prolongs the search for a place that they can call home. On rare occasions, the authority has placed children in unregistered children's homes when it has been unable to find a suitable legal alternative. These cases are subject to close management oversight and providers are suitably encouraged to seek registration.
19. Many children's needs are well considered in their reviews by independent reviewing officers who know them well, gain their views and identify actions to progress children's plans. Nevertheless, these actions have not been addressed for some children. The pandemic has meant that others have not had their care plans reviewed effectively and for a minority, their reviews have not taken place on time.
20. Some children benefit from stable and effective relationships with their social workers, who know them well. Others have experienced changes in social worker and so are yet to form these positive relationships. Not all decisions on visiting frequency are sufficiently child-focused. Some social workers engage with children using age-appropriate direct work tools and activities, which enables children to explore their experiences. Other children do not experience direct work from social workers and the records of statutory visits do not convey a sense of meaningful engagement with children.
21. Those children who have accessed life story-work have benefited from the exploration of their identity, history and stories. However, too many have not had this opportunity because there is a high demand for this service and a lack of capacity to provide it.
22. Family time is promoted effectively, and all children are encouraged and meaningfully supported to maintain links with family and friends.
23. Children are not routinely offered advocacy or access to an independent visitor and so they do not have the opportunity to have support, or their views independently represented at meetings. Some care leavers do access mentoring services that help them develop life skills.
24. The local authority celebrates children's achievements and organises a variety of events and activities that children and young people are invited to attend. These activities enable them to participate in and contribute to wider service improvement for children in care and care leavers. These include True Triumph, at which inspectors had the opportunity to meet with children and care leavers at a venue and type of celebration event chosen by them, and the New to the UK Football Group for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Members of the Raise Your Voice group for children in care and care leavers say that they feel heard by senior leaders and managers.

25. Children are helped and supported when there is an identified risk of harm to them outside their homes. The effective multi-disciplinary missing and exploited hub service provides children with an intensive level of support tailored to their individual needs, and for some children this reduces risks for them.
26. Most children and young people's physical and mental health needs are being assessed and met through support from specialist services, which is having a positive impact on their well-being. However, some children are not receiving emotional support quickly enough. Care leavers do not routinely gain access to their health histories. There is a plan to address these issues, but the impact is not yet evident.
27. While some children are achieving success in their education, there is an overall corporate lack of ambition for children in care. Not all have appropriate packages of education and there is a lack of evidence of effective support from the virtual school. Children's views are not always considered when planning takes place. The work of the virtual school with young adults leaving care who are not in education, employment or training is not strong enough to promote their engagement effectively. Those who are in education, employment or training are well supported to maintain this, including those accessing higher education.
28. Senior leaders and managers have recognised that work is needed to improve the fostering service. The quality of support provided to foster carers is variable; some are not regularly visited or supervised. This does not provide carers with the support or direction necessary to care for children to the best of their ability. Some foster carers' annual reviews are not taking place on time. This delays the opportunity to fully evaluate the work of foster carers considering children's views, carers' use of the relevant training available and determine their suitability to continue fostering.
29. Social workers' assessments of foster carers are of good quality. However, they are not all completed in a timely manner. For a few children, this means that they are living in unapproved arrangements within their family networks. Some foster carers are caring for children outside their approval status when decisions to place children are made, without recourse to the fostering panel or the agency decision-maker for a change of approval. Children are then placed in homes that have not been fully assessed as able to meet their needs. The new panel chair has identified changes necessary to develop the panel. These include the recruitment of new panel members to increase the breadth of expertise and experience and an update and review of documents and guidance for the fostering team, with the aim of reducing the number of

applications that are deferred. These changes are in the early stages of being implemented.

30. Adoption is carefully considered for all children where it has been decided that they are unable to return home. Work with children is sensitively planned and re-evaluated where necessary. The appropriate assessments are completed to ensure that decision-making is well informed regarding plans for brothers and sisters as to whether they should be together or apart.
31. The local authority has a variety of effective systems in place which support its staff to have good-quality oversight of the work completed by its regional adoption agency. Prospective adopters are thoroughly assessed and trained, which gives them good insight and understanding through their preparation. They are also well supported through the matching and adoption processes. The clear recruitment strategy supports the agency in securing a variety of forever homes for children, in which adoption is the agreed plan.
32. Some children's records and documents are written directly to the child and these will benefit children in their later years when they wish to read their records, although this is not yet consistent practice.
33. Milton Keynes is ambitious for care leavers, as set out in the care leavers' offer. However, some of these ambitions have been stalled because of COVID-19, for example family group conferences.
34. Care leavers say that they benefit from committed social workers and personal assistants who know them well. Their work with young people often helps them to reduce risks and improve their lives. Pathway plans are generally written well and include young people's input, and they are regularly reviewed.
35. Young people who are approaching the age of 21 years are not routinely given the opportunity to continue working with personal advisers. It was not evident to inspectors that all young people are informed about their rights and entitlements from 18 to 25 years of age.
36. Care experienced young people live in a variety of settings that mostly meet their needs. A very small number of young people who need emergency accommodation are put up in bed and breakfast establishments, when they have refused an alternative offer. Leaders recognise that this is not suitable accommodation and are developing an enhanced offer to avoid use of this as a temporary option.

What we know we must achieve:

In good and outstanding authorities, children looked after, adopted children and young people leaving care are provided with outstanding care and support.

Dedicated, experienced staff and carers, who are highly ambitious for children, work

together to ensure that children remain safe and achieve in life with independent reviewing officers being strong and effective champions for children. They know the children well, undertaking monitoring and visiting between reviews, and ensure that plans progress without delay. The use of child-friendly language in review reports ensures that children remain at the centre of planning and explains with sensitivity why children are in care. It is also entirely clear to children what will happen next and when it will happen, and who is responsible for progressing aspects of their plan.

The virtual school is expected to be led by an effective Head teacher, has an embedded culture of supporting all children to achieve their potential. A virtual school's creative and tenacious work leads to good attainment for the majority of children. High-quality personal education plans (PEPs) reflect this aspirational yet realistic ambition and are well understood by the children, and there is good engagement from relevant partners at reviews.

Elected members have high aspirations for children looked after and care leavers. Aspirations are translated into concrete action to improve children and young people's lives, for example, exempting care leavers from paying council tax.

We were disappointed in our inspection in relation to the findings of our Corporate Parenting arrangements although accepted our approach is on a journey to ensuring strong, and purposeful engagement with children to ensure that their views are well understood and was not as advanced as we would have hoped it to be within the service. We know that the work of the Children in Care Council will need to champion the views of all children looked after and care leavers and needs to have a real influence which results in positive change for children looked after.

The service we provide to our carers and our ability to recruit, retain and support them also needs to be further developed to ensure good placement arrangements and opportunity for placement options are available.

The draft Action Plan in relation to Corporate Parenting is attached and is being informed by a Service Review week that is taking place w/c 28 February 2022. This work is being led by the Children's Services Leadership Team and with three external senior social care leaders.

The work due to be progressed in that week will conclude our full response to the Ofsted report and will prepare for a further meeting with Ofsted on 21 March 2022, where we will respond back to Ofsted with our full self-assessment, progress made and direction or travel.

To support the service review week we will also be joined on certain day by Annie Craig, who is the newly appointed Fostering Team Manager, due to join us in March 2022, and by Katie Enser, our new Virtual School Head, who we welcome at Easter.

We also plan within March 2022 to have interviewed and appointed a new Head of Corporate Parenting Service to support the Improvement Plan. These three new

appointments will put us in a strong position to drive forward our improvement across Corporate Parenting and ensure a reset of expectation.

Conclusion and Recommendation

It is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Panel comment and have input into the approach and the draft 'Getting to Good' Action Plan, attached at **Annex A** to the report, and the draft Fostering Development Plan, attached at **Annex B** to the report.