

Child Protection in Milton Keynes

A summary of child protection conference and consultation activity 2020/21

1. Introduction

This report will provide an overview of the activity and effectiveness of Child Protection activity between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021.

In the often stressful, high risk environment of children's social care, it is easy to lose sight of our purpose and our values and to behave in punitive, risk averse ways towards vulnerable children and their families. The Milton Keynes approach aims to work with families in a way which enables us to stop, listen and reflect on what has been said and the impact on the child's welfare. The Family Support Approach promotes family centred solutions, ensuring a more proactive, child centred role for our workers with a clear focus upon the safety of the child. This means that, wherever possible, child protection concerns can be safely and effectively managed without entering formal child protection processes.

The year has clearly been an unprecedented time for everyone given the global pandemic and it has had a particular impact on some of our families. Since the start of the first national lockdown in March 2020 almost all Child Protection Conferences have taken place virtually which has necessitated the use of technology to ensure participation.

It has been a challenge for Children's Social Care and our partner agencies to deliver a comprehensive and robust service to ensure that children are properly safeguarded while observing the necessary restrictions. Despite this, there has been good throughput to ensure that plans are not in place unnecessarily.

A key objective has been to prepare families for conference. Under the current arrangements, Independent Chairs are making contact with families in advance of the meeting, usually by telephone and sometimes in person. Although this is time consuming, it has been well received and has assisted in ensuring conferences go ahead with the involvement of all where possible.

Throughout the pandemic Independent Chairs have continued to provide a valuable service in offering objective, expert consultation to Social Workers and other professionals in relation to identifying and managing risk appropriately with children on Child in Need Plans to ensure that the right children are being managed effectively within both Children in Need and Child Protection Processes.

Independent Chairs are pivotal in the overview of the service in a scrutiny role to ensure the quality, safety and effectiveness of safeguarding practice and policy. Challenge is provided where appropriate and identified themes and trends reported to senior management in several ways, including regular formal reporting to Performance Management Meetings.

2. The Safeguarding Service

Sitting within the wider Safeguarding Service, Child Protection Conferences are chaired by 7.5 permanent Independent Chairs supported by Business Support colleagues. Agreement was given in 2019 to recruit a one-year fixed term Independent Chair to increase capacity within the service. A fixed term Independent Chair commenced employment on 1 April 2020. This post has since been made permanent which takes effect from 1 April 2021. This reflects the increase in demand across the service which will be detailed in this report.

For much of the year, the service has operated with reduced Business Support capacity as one Business Support Colleague left the department. This has had a significant impact on the service and existing colleagues have worked tirelessly to make up the shortfall.

The dual role of Independent Reviewing Officer and Child Protection Co-ordinator is fully embedded, and this sees the Independent Chairs chairing Child Protection Conferences and Childcare reviews as well as Disruption Meetings and Managing Allegations Meetings where required. It is an enormously experienced and settled team of professionals, some of whom have previous management experience and most of whom have been working with children and families in Milton Keynes for many years.

Independent Chairs are expected to support the LADO on a routine basis. They continue to lead in relation to quality assurance activity. They undertake investigations, produce high quality reports for senior management and represent the service at a variety of meetings and forums.

3. Child Protection Consultations

Child Protection Consultations (CP Consultations) are routinely offered by Independent Chairs who are available on a duty rota. Prior to a Strategy Meeting being convened, the Social Worker is expected to complete a referral on the LCS system outlining the concerns, using a Signs of Safety approach which explains the work undertaken and the plan of work agreed with the line manager. This forms the basis for discussion.

The purpose of a consultation is to ensure that full consideration is given to all cases where a child protection concern is raised. The emphasis is on working collaboratively with the Social Worker to make a joint decision about how best to work with the family.

In the event that an Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) is agreed, a Strategy Meeting will be convened if not already arranged, to trigger the S.47 enquiries. This requires a conference to be held within 15 working days.

Number of Child Protection Consultations each year

| Year | Number of CP consultations | Consultations with outcomes of ICPC (%) |
|---------|----------------------------|---|
| 2018/19 | 321 | 39.6 |
| 2019/20 | 420 | 38.3 |
| 2020/21 | 505 | 39.7 |

There has been a further rise in the number of consultations which rose from 420 in 19/20 to 505 in 20/21 a rise of 20%. We know that practitioners highly value the consultation discussion with the Independent Chair and it is embedded in the process.

Once again there is a consistency in relation to cases progressing to ICPC immediately following consultation (just under 40%). In a further 27.7% of cases there is a recommendation for a strategy meeting and a number of these subsequently progress to ICPC.

CP Consultation by category:

| Category | Percentage of consultations (%) |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| Neglect | 65 |
| Emotional Abuse | 39.9 |
| Physical Abuse | 19.3 |
| Sexual Abuse | 6 |

*figures will add up to over 100% because cases may have multiple categories.

CP Consultation prevalent issues:

| Identified issue | Percentage of consultations (%) |
|---|---------------------------------|
| Domestic abuse | 43.9% |
| Parental mental health | 38% |
| Parental drug misuse | 18% |
| Parental alcohol misuse | 14.3% |
| Person posing a risk to children | 15.5% |
| Parental learning disability | 3.6% |
| Parental physical disability | 4.2% |
| Parental ill health | 4.2% |
| Child Sexual Exploitation / Child Criminal Exploitation | 3.5% |
| No issues identified | 3.3% |

*figures will add up to over 100% because cases may have multiple prevalent issues.

Domestic abuse remains the most prevalent issue in relation to Child Protection consultations followed closely by parental mental health with drug misuse, persons posing a risk and alcohol misuse as the next three categories.

Outcomes of Consultations

Following discussion with the Social Worker, the Independent Chair will ensure that the outcome of the consultation is clearly recorded on LCS. There are occasions when more than one recommendation is made.

| Outcome | Percentage of consultations (%) |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Initial Child Protection Conference | 39.7% |
| Continue with child in Need plan | 28.1% |
| Strategy meeting to be held | 27% |
| Legal advice/PLO | 8.9% |
| Review following further information gathering | 18.8% |

| | |
|-------------------------|------|
| Mapping to be completed | 6.9% |
| Other | 5.2% |

*figures will add up to over 100% because cases may have more than one outcome.

In 2020-21 the data indicates that 39.7% of consultations progress straight to an Initial Child Protection Conference. This compares to 37.8% in 2019-20 and 39.6% in 2018-19 which demonstrates a consistency in approach.

Where a strategy meeting is recommended, a significant number of these will also progress to conference. It is important to note that a strategy meeting is always required to trigger a S.47 and a conference. In the period 2020-21 a strategy meeting was recommended in 27% of cases which is a slight reduction from 34.6% the previous year.

There has been a significant reduction in cases progressing to a mapping. This is in line with expectations as mappings are integral part of Signs of Safety and should inform the C&F assessment undertaken prior to conference. This option will not be used going forward.

The challenge is to ensure that cases are brought to consultation in a timely manner. The Social Worker will demonstrate the work that has already been undertaken with a family to effect change and will present the plan for intervention going forward. It is important to ensure that families have been given an opportunity to respond positively to a Child Protection Plan before any legal route is pursued, if at all possible. The Safeguarding Manager routinely attends the PLO panel to ensure that all cases where PLO is proposed have been reviewed by the safeguarding service. In exceptional circumstances it is necessary to progress to proceedings very quickly in response to serious safeguarding concerns as this is the only safe course of action to protect children.

4. Child Protection Conferences

Children subject to Child Protection Plans at 31 March 2020 (N12)

As of 31 March 2021, a total of 185 children were subject to Child Protection Plans.

This represents 24.4 children per 10,000 of the 0-17 year-old population. This is a slight increase in the number of plans at year end from 2019-20 which accords with the lived experience of the service and possibly reflects the unique challenges of working during the pandemic.

Conferences and plans:

| Year | Number MKC | Number South East | Avg. per 10,000 populational Statistical Neighbours | Number England |
|---------|------------|-------------------|---|----------------|
| 2017/18 | 104 | 8980 | 394.5 | 53790 |
| 2018/19 | 136 | 8110 | 352.6 | 52260 |
| 2019/20 | 131 | | | |
| 2020/21 | 185 | | | |

The benchmarking data for England in 2019 is 43.7 children per 10,000. For the South East the figure for the same period was 41.4 children per 10,000 making the Milton Keynes figure significantly lower than the national average and that of our statistical neighbours.

Milton Keynes consistently has lower CP figures per population due to our Family Support approach, which is fully embedded in our practice. This approach has been subject to independent scrutiny over the years and the strength of the Family Support Approach has been recognised.

Rate of ICPC's and children who became subject to Child Protection Plans in 2020-21 (N13)

During 2020-21 a total of 222 children were made subject to Child Protection Plans. This is compared with 225 for the previous period. Of these, 11% had previously been subject to a Child Protection Plan.

A total of 769 Conferences were held during 2020-21. This is a significant rise from the previous year where there were 319 conferences.

- Initial Child Protection Conference – 259
- Review Child Protection Conference – 510.

Category of initial Child Protection plans for each child:

| Category | Percentage of CP plans (%) |
|-----------------|----------------------------|
| Emotional Abuse | 22 |
| Neglect | 78 |
| Physical Abuse | 0 |
| Sexual Abuse | 0 |

The main category under which children were made subject to Child Protection Plans during 2020-21 was neglect which accounts for 78% of the total and is slightly higher than the figure for last year where 71.1% were made subject to plans under the category of neglect.

As in previous years, Milton Keynes has a higher than average proportion of children subject to plans where the category is neglect (and slightly lower for emotional). It is noted that there are significant variations between Local Authorities. Research (NSPCC) suggests that neglect is prevalent in serious case reviews; it affects approximately 10% of all children and occurs across all age groups. We know that neglect can be life threatening and must be treated very seriously.

The view of the SE Benchmarking groups is that Neglect and Emotional abuse are due to local judgements and that generally most LAs have a high overall percentage of the two categories combined with varying ratios between them. 2018/19 figures showed that Neglect ranged from 100% to 20% across councils with Emotional abuse anything between 65% to 5%.

There is always an element of subjectivity in deciding upon a category for a Child Protection Plan. It is the responsibility of the professionals in attendance to carefully consider the categories and make recommendations where there is no clear evidence of physical and sexual abuse while acknowledging that these issues will be present. We know that the issues impacting on children are frequently domestic violence, mental health and drug and

alcohol issues and the Independent Chair must make the final decision about the category in this respect.

Of key importance is the fact that the plan should robustly address the identified risk and that all efforts are made to promote a positive working relationship between Social Work professionals and families to help them effect change. It is the responsibility of the Independent Chair to ensure that the views of all key agencies are carefully considered and that the plan is tested and challenged. The Independent Chair will work closely with the Social Worker to develop and clarify the plan and ensure that it is reviewed regularly and that changes in a family's circumstances are noted and appropriate action is taken.

Independent Chairs work closely together and meet regularly. As part of the wider service they work effectively with Business Support colleagues who are instrumental in supporting the process. The Safeguarding Service is committed to ensuing consistency, high standards and a common approach. Risk is understood and managed. Issues relating to categories and interpretation of the guidance are routinely raised and discussed amongst the Safeguarding Team to ensure a common understanding and consistent approach.

Initial Child Protection Conferences which were reviewed within timescales (N15)

During 2020-21, 90.5% of Initial Child Protection Conferences were held within 15 days of the S.47 being triggered. This is very similar to the previous year when the total was 90.4%. During the same period 98% of Review Child Protection Conferences were held in timescales.

While the Safeguarding Service works tirelessly to ensure that conferences are held within timescales, regrettably there have been occasions when this has not been achieved for a number of reasons. Occasionally conferences are delayed due to issues of quoracy or a Social Worker/Independent Chair being unavailable due to ill health. In very exceptional circumstances an Initial Child Protection Conference has had to be held slightly outside timescale for reasons of chair and/or Business Support availability. The increase in the overall number of meetings has placed great pressure on the service which has responded very positively. A spreadsheet continues to be maintained to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the reasons for delay.

Outcomes of CP Conferences

During the period 2020-21 a total of 198 child protection plans were discontinued, a reduction from the previous year.

It is encouraging that the majority of cases have, as in previous years, successfully stepped down to CIN. The percentage has risen from 73.3% to 74% in the previous year and this is positive. Together with a reduction in children being made subject to plans for a second or subsequent time, this is evidence of the effectiveness of the family support approach using Signs of Safety to support families and ensure that children have good outcomes which are sustainable over time.

Outcome of CP conference:

| Outcome | Percentage of cases (%) |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Child Protection Plan transferred to another local authority | 2% |
| Child Protection Plan ends to Child in Need Plan | 74% |
| Child Protection Plan end to Child Looked After | 24% |

Percentage of children starting CPPs for a second or subsequent time (N18):

| Year | MKC (%) | South East (%) | Statistical Neighbours (%) | England (%) |
|-------------|----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| 2017/18 | 8 | 22.6 | 18.8 | 20.2 |
| 2018/19 | 13.9 | 21.1 | 22 | 20.8 |
| 2019/20 | 9.8 | | | |
| 2020/21 | 11 | | | |

The number of plans starting for a second or subsequent time has increased slightly to 11% from 9.8% last year. This is compared to the national indicator of 20.8% for 2019 (the most recent figure). Generally families are appropriately supported and the risks managed in a long term way in Milton Keynes and there is evidence of the efficacy of the Family Support approach.

Duration of CP plans ending in 2020/21:

| Duration | Percentage of cases (%) |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| 0-3 months | 23 |
| 3-6 months | 19 |
| 6-12 months | 40 |
| Over 1 year | 17 |
| Over 2 years | 1 |

The vast majority of Child Protection plans are in place for less than 18 months with most lasting less than 9 months. This is entirely consistent with the previous year and broadly comparable with the years preceding that. This is encouraging as concerns were expressed that plans might increase in duration as a result of covid and the fact that support services and school were responding to children and families in a very different way.

Percentage of CPP's lasting 2 years or more at 31 March 2021:

| Year | MKC (%) | South East (%) | Statistical Neighbours (%) | England (%) |
|-------------|----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| 2017/18 | 0 | 4.8 | 3.6 | 3.4 |
| 2018/19 | 0 | 4.7 | 3.5 | 3.3 |
| 2019/20 | 2.1 | | | |
| 2020/21 | 1 | | | |

The data suggests that 1% of cases in Milton Keynes in 2020-21 were subject to CPP for more than two years, a reduction from last year.

There are a number of reasons why there are some cases where children remain subject to plans for longer periods of time. This may include significant changes in a family's life for example pressure around housing, birth of a new baby or change of partner. A small number of cases need to progress to PLO or proceedings and these will remain on Child Protection until the risks reduce or the child becomes Looked After.

Scrutiny of the figures for 2020-21 indicate that there is a percentage which relates to older children where there are concerns about exploitation. Responding to the needs of this group of children is a growing challenge in Milton Keynes and there are many conversations taking place about contextualised safeguarding and how best to ensure this cohort of children is properly protected. There is a growing concern about exploitation and how we respond to the needs of these children and young people. Discussions around contextualised safeguarding have resulted in a change of approach and the development of the Missing and Exploitation Panel to review and scrutinise plans for these young people. The impact of this is likely to be seen in this financial year and will be subject to audit to demonstrate its effectiveness.

Child Protection Plan categories at 31 March 2021:

| Category | Number of plans |
|-----------------|------------------------|
| Neglect | 139 |
| Physical Abuse | 0 |
| Sexual Abuse | 0 |
| Emotional Abuse | 46 |
| Total | 185 |

It is fundamentally important to ensure that families fully participate in Child Protection Conferences. In the case of children and young people it is the role of the chair to ensure that their wishes and feelings remain central to the process. Consideration should be given to children and young people attending the conference if it is appropriate for them to do so and so long as it can be managed effectively and safely. All children of secondary school age are automatically referred to an advocacy service who will liaise with them and help represent their views.

There is no doubt that challenges around covid 19 and the restrictions put in place as a result have had an impact on participation. Chairs continue to make every effort to meet children before a conference where possible and appropriate. Home visits have continued to take place where this has been risk assessed and can be managed safely.

Independent Chairs routinely complete monitoring forms following conference on LCS. This ensures that information is captured for performance reporting purposes.

5. Participation

Children's attendance and participation in CP conferences

| Reporting period | Children's Attendance (%) | Children's Participation (%) |
|----------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| Quarter 1 Apr – Jun | 15.3 | 90.2 |
| Quarter 2 Jul – Sept | 5.5 | 85.9 |
| Quarter 3 Oct – Dec | 10.9 | 83.1 |
| Quarter 4 Jan – Mar | 7.8 | 91.4 |
| Total | 9.9 | 87.6 |

From April 2016 children over the age of 10 have been automatically referred to the advocacy service. Where appropriate an advocate will attend the conference.

Figures for 2020-21 indicates that the numbers of children attending conferences has reduced to 9.9%. However the numbers of children participating conferences has significantly improved for a second year running and now sits at 87.6% which is very positive and is testament to the efforts of chairs and Social Workers to involve children and young people fully in the process.

6. Service user feedback

| Reporting period | Mother's attendance (%) | Mother's participation (%) | Father's attendance (%) | Father's participation (%) |
|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Quarter 1 Apr – Jun | 86.1 | 95.7 | 54 | 74.7 |
| Quarter 2 Jul – Sept | 81 | 88.6 | 65.6 | 87 |
| Quarter 3 Oct – Dec | 88.2 | 91.9 | 58.1 | 76.2 |
| Quarter 4 Jan – Mar | 87.7 | 92.5 | 49.7 | 72.7 |
| Total | 85.7 | 92.2 | 56.8 | 77.6 |

It is encouraging to note that attendance and participation figures for both mothers and fathers have increased for a second year. This is testament to a clear approach to working collaboratively with families and encouraging transparency and openness. Chairs work closely with Social Workers to ensure that parents attend and will give thought to how best families may be able to contribute to the process. Chairs have consistently telephoned parents and other family members to ensure they are included. They adopt a flexible approach in relation to timings of conference which have taken place on a virtual platform.

Service user feedback is routinely sought following conference. However, since conferences moved to a virtual platform the forms have been sent out via email and consequently far fewer have been completed and returned. Efforts are being made to ensure good feedback can be gathered. This may involve utilising our participation colleagues.

7. Summary

What has worked Well?

- Despite the unprecedented challenge of the global pandemic, conferences have been held.
- Chairs have used a creative approach in facilitating conferences and promoting participation.
- There are some examples of some very good collaborative working between Chairs and Social Workers.
- Relationships with partner agencies are generally good.
- There is evidence of appropriate use of consultations
- Fewer children are subject to CPP per 100,000 of the population in MK which is evidence of our effective family support approach.
- Despite rising numbers of CPP's there is good evidence of throughput.

What are we worried about?

- Lack of feedback is a challenge
- We have seen a rise in the number of children subject to CPP's
- The number of conferences has significantly risen.
- Virtual conferences have presented a challenge for our families in particular given the vulnerabilities around technology.
- Staff absence due to sickness has put considerable strain on the service.

Objectives for 2021 to 2022

- The service is committed to returning to conferences in person where this can be managed safely. In the first instance the proposal is to introduce 'hybrid' conferences.
- CPP's which have a duration of in excess of 10 months will continue to be scrutinised on a monthly basis by the Safeguarding Manager and the Head of Service.
- A holistic approach to gathering feedback for the Safeguarding service alongside other services is being considered alongside our participation colleagues.
- A creative approach to contextualised safeguarding is being developed in conjunction with colleagues from the YOT and partner agencies. A proposal will be developed for consideration by senior management.
- The Safeguarding Manager will attend PLO panel to ensure that all cases have been discussed with safeguarding in advance.