

Sufficiency Strategy Children in Care 2026 to 2031.

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Foreword

We are proud to present our Sufficiency Strategy, which sets out our commitment to ensuring that every child and young person in our care has access to the right support, in the right place, at the right time. At the heart of this strategy is a simple but powerful ambition: to be relentlessly aspirational for all children, regardless of their background, identity, or circumstances.

Children and young people who are looked after, face significant and complex challenges. Many have experienced trauma, instability, and loss. They deserve safety, stability, love, opportunity, and hope. Our role as Corporate Parents is to ensure that every child in our care is supported to thrive and achieve.

We must also confront the uncomfortable truths about disproportionality in our system. Children from the global majority are overrepresented in care. This is not acceptable. We are committed to understanding and addressing the structural and systemic factors that contribute to these disparities, and to working with communities to co-design culturally responsive and anti-racist services.

Similarly, children who are disabled or have complex needs often face barriers to accessing the support they need. Too often, their voices are unheard and their needs unmet. We must do better. This strategy outlines how we will strengthen our provision for children with disabilities, ensuring that services are inclusive, responsive, and tailored to individual needs.

We also acknowledge the significant financial pressures we face in securing appropriate placements for children and young people, and our strategy sets out a proactive, evidence-informed approach to stabilising costs while improving outcomes through better planning, commissioning, and partnership working.

This strategy is not just a document; it is a call to action! It reflects our shared determination to build a system that is fairer, more compassionate, and more effective. We are grateful to our partners, carers, and most importantly, to the children and young people who continue to inspire us with their resilience and strength.

Together, we will ensure that every child in our care is supported to lead a life of dignity, purpose, and possibility.

Dr Mac Heath
Director of Children's Services

Councillor Joe Hearnshaw
Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Introduction

Our sufficiency strategy sets out the requirements for sufficient placements for children in care for the next five years. With the collaboration of partners, Milton Keynes City Council is committed to providing high-quality, local, and safe provision for children and young people in care.

Our strategy recognises the importance of listening to the voices of children and young people, as well as those who care for and work alongside them. By prioritising meaningful engagement and ongoing dialogue, we aim to ensure that our sufficiency strategy remains relevant, responsive, and rooted in the real needs of our community.

Our primary objective is to provide effective early help and intervention for children. We are committed to keeping children safely within their families whenever possible, supporting whole-family wellbeing with strength-based approaches. In circumstances where children require protection through care; we will offer a range of high-quality, stable, and locally based provisions.

Our goal is to gain a comprehensive understanding of community demographics, as well as, taking market shifts and challenges into account. By doing so, we can plan more effectively and provide sufficient support that addresses the diverse needs of children and young people in care.

There has been a notable rise in the number of children entering care since 2024, this rise was partly due to the change of practice model, moving from Family Support to Child First. We saw rise particularly among adolescents with complex needs. This trend has resulted in an increased demand for specialist carers and placements. As a result, for some children, suitable provision has not been available at the outset of their care journey, leading to multiple placement changes.

Our strategy will acknowledge and respond to the presenting challenges to ensure we have sufficient supply and build strong relationships with providers going forward.



Our Vision

To create a **supportive, inclusive** and **thriving** environment where every child and young person in Milton Keynes can **achieve** their full potential.



Children's Voices

What our children and young people tell us

Care Leaver – Being made to feel like it wasn't a hostel or an office building converted to a living space. When it felt like a home, my home, they were the best days….

My foster carer shows me better ways, she understands me, and helps me with important things. Foster child aged 15.

Less staff turnover – less people getting involved in my personal affairs would have made it much more comfortable. Care Leaver, residential home.

My Foster Carers say yes to things, I've got to learn. Male, 13 Kinship Care

My Foster Carer helps me with schoolwork; they protect me and help to keep me safe. Foster child aged 6

Though I do not regret my time in a hostel, I wish I had been supported more directly and had been taught more things. I really found it hard once I moved out to maintain bills, my home and money. Care Leaver, supported accommodation /hostel

Involving social worker/PA as much as possible. Sometimes it's hard to get to a social worker early hence placement dealing with everything alone. Care Leaver, residential home.

Our Objectives

Prevention

We recognise all children deserve to grow up safely within their families and own communities. Our 'Child First Family Led' initiative is to ensure families are supported early to prevent escalation; our ambition is to keep children with their families, where it is safe to do so, reducing any identified harm to a child with the support of wider family and partner agencies, enabling more children to stay at home. Our new model will empower families to be supported to make changes to safely care for their children at home.

We have introduced several initiatives to support our prevention objective:

Newly formed Family Help Teams –family help practitioners and social workers with the support of partners and family help manager will identify, support for families in need early, to prevent an escalation of matters.

Staying Together Team – Is a new pilot initiative to support children on the edge of care and those children who can be rehabilitated home.

Repeat removals Project – Supporting parents who have had multiple removals, helping them to break the cycle and enable them to parent their child safely.

Protection

Where we have identified children who are unable to remain within their families, either through Public Law Outline meetings, Child Protection or who have been police protected These children require safe provision. The type of placement will be based on thorough assessment of the child's needs, taking into consideration the child's wishes and views. Where we can, we will always look within the wider family/friends through Kinship arrangements to care for the child, thus enabling them to remain within their communities and continue to attend school. However, where this is not possible, our ambition is to provide the child with a substitute foster family or for older children appropriate supported accommodation. For some children, it is appropriate to source a more specialist provision, such as residential children's home or residential school.

Safety and risk reduction: To ensure all children in care are safe from any further harm, including where there is known risk outside of the home.

Good quality assessments to identify needs and understand the child: Introduction of a single assessment has been launched. Additionally, a more specialist assessments maybe required to understand the child more fully.

Effective Care Planning: We will ensure social workers effectively plan for children as soon as they enter care, with the aim of securing legal permanence at the earliest opportunity.

Permanence

For children who are unable to return home at the conclusion of Care Proceedings or at the second childcare review, our plan is to secure a permanent placement arrangement. We want to ensure each child has a sense of belonging within a family (where appropriate), in a community, where the child's identity, religion, culture and heritage are promoted and celebrated. We will support children to have secure lifelong links and maintain relationships with those people that are important to them. We will work with partner agencies to ensure all children have access to the right support at the right time to address any presenting trauma from early harm from abuse.

Placement Stability: We aim to reduce the number of children who have 3 plus placement moves, currently this is above the national average, to support a greater number of children to have long term stability in care where they are unable to return to their families.

Building strong relationships with children and young people: Social Workers, wider professional network, foster carers, and keyworkers are critical to modelling positive relationships with our children. We want children to feel secure, and to trust those that they are working with.

Permanent homes: We will ensure choice, good quality and local accommodation is available to all children.

Outcomes for Children and Young People



Legal duties and responsibilities

The Children's Act 1989 requires local authorities to ensure we secure and provide a range of sufficient accommodation that meets the varying needs of our children in care.

Section (22c) Children Act 1989, sets out additional factors that local authorities must take into consideration when deciding the most appropriate placement.

- allowing the child to live near his/her home; –
- not disrupting the child's education or training; –
- enabling the child and a looked after sibling to live together; –
- meeting the needs of disabled children; and –
- providing accommodation within the local authority's area unless that is not reasonably practicable.

Statutory Guidance on Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked-After Children and Provision for Care Leavers (DfE, 2010) requires councils to:

- Assess current and future demand for placements.
- Shape the market to ensure range, quality, and capacity.
- Prioritise local placements to maintain education and family links.
- Publish a Sufficiency Strategy or statement and review regularly.



National Children in Care Current Picture

As of early 2025, there were approximately 81,770 children looked after by local authorities in England, a slight decrease from the previous year, with most living with foster carers (67%). Key data shows children in care are often older (over half aged 10+), with over-representation of Black, Mixed, and Other ethnic groups, and a significant proportion experiencing placement instability, though specific outcomes vary widely.

Key Figures (as of March 2025/latest data):

- Total Children Looked After: 81,770.
- Entry into Care: 32,270 children entered care in the year.
- Leaving Care: 34,450 children left care in the year.

Demographics & Characteristics:

- Age: 38% are aged 10-15, and 27% are 16+, showing an aging population in care.
- Gender: Males are slightly over-represented (56%).
- Ethnicity: Black, Mixed, and Other ethnic groups are over-represented compared to the general child population.
- Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC): Around 6,540 in March 2025, many with significant trauma.

Placement & Stability:

- Placement Type: 67% live with foster families; the rest are in children's homes, with relatives (kinship care), or independent living.
- Instability: 10% experienced high instability (3+ placements) in 2024, with 22% placed over 20 miles from home.

Outcomes:

- Education: Poorer educational outcomes are common, with lower attainment in English & Maths compared to peers.
- University: Only 14% progress to university by age 22, significantly less than the general population.

Local Children in Care Current Picture

We had seen an increase in children in care population in early 2025, this was primarily due to change of practice in 2024, from a Family Support approach to a Child First approach. However, since mid-2025, our children in care population have begun to reduce and showing signs of stability.

Key figures:

Children in Care: 482 (December 2025) 65.4 per 10,000
Entering Care: Over last 6 months 84 new entrants into care (November 2025)
Leaving Care: 121 children ended over last 6 months (November 2025).

Demographics and characteristics:

Age: 40% 10 to 15 and 27% 16+, confirms older population of children in care with younger children more likely to secure legal permanence
Gender: 50% male, 47% female and 3% transgender
Ethnicity: 63% white, 12% dual heritage, 23% global majority and 2% not stated
Disability: 17% of children in care with a registered disability. Over 74% of children in residential care with a diagnosis of neurodiversity or are awaiting diagnosis.
UASC: 39 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Placement and Stability:

Placement type: 65% foster care, 14% residential care (including secure, schools), 7% placed at home, 10% supported accommodation, 2% unregulated, 1.6% adoption, 0.4 % hospital and remand.
Instability: 16% experience 3+ placement moves and 49% are placed outside of Milton Keynes

Outcomes:

Education: 67% Young People with care experience are in employment, education or training, which is higher than national average. English and Maths is above national, but below non looked after peers (2023). We do well in securing post 16 destination for looked after children.
University: 19 young people are currently accessing University, which is broadly in line with statistical neighbours. Positively, in 2024, over 92% of children in Year 11 had a confirmed destination. This demonstrates, not only the effectiveness of Virtual School, but also the effective planning with partners and agencies to ensure children move into education, employment or training that is right for them.

Current Position

Our current structure within Children's Social Care is being updated, in line with government Family First strategy. The newly formed Family Help Teams and Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams will launch early 2026. The teams will align with education quadrants to cover the whole city. We are merging our Targeted Early Help with Child in Need into a seamless Early Help service, newly formed Family Help Team will focus on emerging problems within families early to support reducing demand within safeguarding and children in care.

Our fostering service is also under review through Corporate *Change Because We Have To* strategy, considering 'Diversifying Fostering'. We acknowledge the current challenges to increase placement sufficiency and keep up with local demand. Milton Keynes City Council has, and will continue to be, part of the Local Authority Fostering Southeast Hub (LAFSE), to support recruitment and retention of foster carers. However, we anticipate further development of LAFSE alongside the development of Regional Care Cooperative.

We recognise that the increase in external placement costs is not financially sustainable and therefore have created a pilot project to focus on supporting children at the edge of care, and those in care, who may be able to return home. Our Staying Together Team works intensely with children and their families to address any presenting issues. The team is made up of social workers, support workers and Primary Mental Health Workers and works collaboratively with partners.



Current identified challenges

We face significant and evolving challenges in supporting looked after children. These can be categorised into the following themes:

1. **Financial Constraints:** Significant budget pressures limiting investment in early help
2. **Rising Demand and Complexity:** More children entering the system with complex and overlapping needs, including trauma, SEND, and mental health issues.
3. **Placement market:** Lack of local, suitable placements — especially for children with complex needs — leading to increased out-of-area placements which contributes to placement instability.
4. **Agency ownership**: When partner agencies do not fulfil their responsibilities, the onus for supporting children with complex needs can fall exclusively on children's social care services.



Children with complex needs

Nationally, there is a reported increase of children entering care who present with more complex needs. This is placing strain on social care, health and education services, leading to agencies feeling overwhelmed. Additionally, we have been challenged by such complexities in relation to sufficiency of provision that can support the child appropriately. This has led to an increase in children being placed in unregulated provision or subject to deprivation of liberty. To better address these complexities for children, a collaborative approach with health is being implemented through the introduction of a trauma panel where clinical support can be considered, provided, and monitored to ensure effective intervention for a child to reduce risks and potential for harm.

Definition of complex needs

We define complex needs as children with the following:

- Behavioural
- Mental Health
- Learning
- Safeguarding
- Physical

This may include a combination of the above, rather than severity of any one type of need.

Financial Challenges

Like many councils, Milton Keynes has experienced significant financial challenges, with the increase in demand of children entering care with more complex behaviours, late entries into care, the need for more specialist placements, and lack of sufficiency within the fostering market. The financial demands are unsustainable and therefore an urgent review and response to how services can be more efficiently and effectively delivered is necessary.

Snapshot of challenges:

- Increase in children in care, with more complex needs who require more specialist residential provision, sometimes with additional staffing, which has led to significant pressure on the external placements budget.
- The overall unit cost of residential provision has increased over the last five years.
- Lack of specialist residential provision, leading to some children entering unregulated arrangements at a significantly higher cost.
- Lack of fostering sufficiency both in house and within the IFA market, resulting in some children entering residential care, who's needs could be met within a fostering arrangement.



Fostering (including supported lodgings)

MKCC currently runs an in-house fostering provision which provides 56% of current fostering placements. The other 46% are commissioned via Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs). Of these, half are commissioned through a framework agreement, purchased as a consortium with other Local Authorities, and the remaining are spot purchased. There are currently four IFAs with active OFSTED registration within Milton Keynes and a further ten in neighbouring authorities.

83% of in-house fostering placements are in Milton Keynes but only 22% of IFA placements are. This is due to both an overall lack of local provision, but also a lack of appropriately skilled and supported carers who can work with older children with more complex needs.

There is a national shortage of Foster Carers which is reflected locally. MKCC is part of the Local Authority Fostering South-East regional fostering recruitment hub.

Challenges:

- Insufficient local provision
- Insufficient skills within available provision
- Lack of strategic partnerships with IFAs to secure available provision
- Inconsistent placement support to enable complex needs to be met and to sustain placements.

Residential Placements

Milton Keynes City Council currently has five residential in-house placements in one setting with the potential to increase the capacity by an extra placement being explored. There is also a block commissioned two placement setting being mobilised (Fenny House).

We also commission two block residential placements outside of Milton Keynes through the Cross-Regional Project, a collaborative contract with three other local authorities.

MKCC is a partner local authority on the South-Central Children's Residential Care framework, offering access to 45 providers and 264 homes across the south of England and nationwide. However, few homes are located within Milton Keynes or neighbouring LA's and only approximately 20% of our residential placements are with framework providers. The rest are spot purchased.

There are 14 independent homes in Milton Keynes, offering a total of 44 placements. Of these, 30 are for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, nine for children with disabilities, and five for parent and child placements. Strategic partnerships need to be formed to ensure we have early awareness of any upcoming vacancies and that available provision matches local need.

Challenges

- Insufficient local provision
- Insufficient breadth of local provision to meet diverse and complex needs
- Lack of market diversity with for-profit providers supplying 90% of external residential placements.

- Limited market availability and spot purchasing enabling private providers to hold market power and drive-up prices.
- Lack of partnership arrangements with not-for-profit providers.
- Variable transparency making it harder to see true cost drivers and workforce stability across the market.

Supported Accommodation

MKCC has 47 young people living in Ofsted-registered supported accommodation homes (16+ supported accommodation). The vast majority of these are within Milton Keynes and the neighbouring authorities.

There are currently 52 Ofsted-registered supported accommodation settings in Milton Keynes. We have block contracts with four providers to support up to 25 young people with the option to increase this capacity to 31 beds if needed. We also use a Dynamic Purchasing System framework arrangement to secure placements. There are only a small number of spot purchased placements, which include Care Quality Commission registered supported living placements where appropriate.

Challenges

- Ensuring sufficient move-on accommodation
- Managing an overprovision of care and associated costs when step-down accommodation is not immediately available
- Inconsistent quality of provision and lack of consistent outcomes

Future Demand

Projecting future demand

Milton Keynes is one of the fastest growing cities in England, and we recognise the importance of planning proactively to meet the changing needs of children in our care. Ensuring that looked after children have timely, stable, and appropriate placements is central to supporting their individual needs and long-term outcomes.

By forecasting demand using trend data on demographics, levels of need, age profiles, entries to care, and placement stability, we can plan the right mix of homes, foster carers, and support services. This helps children remain connected to their schools, communities, and families, improving stability, wellbeing, and educational progress. We consider these projections alongside current capacity to identify gaps in provision and to inform our commissioning intentions.

This strategic approach enables us to shape local markets, work collaboratively with providers, and commission services that reflect emerging patterns of demand, supporting investment in the right types of provision.

Over the years, the number of looked after children has continued to grow and within our existing population we are seeing an increasing number of children requiring placements that can manage complex

trauma, behavioural needs, and mental health challenges. It is important that our projections are continually reviewed to account for these changes over time to support strategic policy development - the projected impact of which is then factored into our projection methodology and monitored.-after children has continued to grow and within our existing population we are seeing an increasing number of children requiring placements that can manage complex trauma, behavioural needs, and mental health challenges. It is important that our projections are continually reviewed to account for these changes over time to support strategic policy development - the projected impact of which is then factored into our projection methodology and monitored.

Our new city plan outlines our vision up to 2050 and the plans seek to provide an additional 60,000 homes over this time period. A significant proportion of this new housing is planned for new development areas of Milton Keynes. We continue to work with planning colleagues and developers to consider the timing of this growth and the need, timing and locations of additional provision to support it to ensure that our children continue to have access to local high quality provision as the city grows.

To support our work and meet our statutory sufficiency duties, we have established a Looked After Children Place Planning Group. This multi-disciplinary group assesses current and future capacity and demand, making recommendations to the Director of Children's Services regarding place planning matters. It meets monthly to review plans and update projections using the latest available data.

Our Priorities

- Development of early help through our newly formed Child First, Family Led initiative
- Increase local sufficiency of foster care, residential, and specialist provisions.
- Enhance the standard of care provided across the board
- Improved and develop collaborative working with partners

Next Steps

This five-year Sufficiency Strategy will remain dynamic and responsive through a structured cycle of annual delivery planning and a formal refresh. Each year, we will produce an updated Delivery Plan that translates strategic priorities into actionable steps aligned with emerging needs, market conditions, and legislative changes. Progress will be monitored through a stakeholder group, ensuring transparency, challenge, and co-production. This group will review performance data, placement trends, and feedback from children, families, and providers to inform adjustments. Where significant shifts in demand or policy occur, interim updates will be made to keep the strategy relevant and effective. This approach guarantees that our vision is underpinned by continuous learning and agile responses to the evolving landscape of Children's Services.


Milton Keynes
City Council