



Vital Signs MK

11th Edition



Vital Signs is an annual publication designed to identify and spotlight issues facing the communities of Milton Keynes.

The concept of ‘Vital Signs’ was pioneered by the Community Foundations of Canada. The aim is to support local Community Foundations to create fairer communities by using evidence-based data* and insights into local needs and priorities.

Vital Signs focuses on 12 major themes and combines published data with observations from local community organisations to shed light on the lived experience in Milton Keynes. In this edition we update information on four themes:

Environment	6
Poverty and Disadvantage	13
Education	22
Health and Wellbeing	31

Each theme includes a view of the implications for our diverse communities.

The themes addressed in Vital Signs are aligned with the goals of the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development blueprint.

This is a call for countries to take actions to help reduce global poverty, reduce inequality, and at the same time tackle climate change. There is thus a close alignment between these goals and those themes reported on in Vital Signs showing how local actions contribute to global change.

Vital Signs is produced by Milton Keynes Community Foundation, a grant-giving charity that is sending funding to where it is needed most in the city.

We are dedicated to making a difference and improving the lives of people within the local community by funding a diverse range of projects and providing affordable spaces in Milton Keynes for the voluntary Sector.

In the past year, Milton Keynes Community Foundation distributed over £1.8 million in grant funding and rent subsidies to Voluntary, Community and Cultural Sector organisations.

Vital Signs

- **Health and Wellbeing**
- **Disadvantage and Poverty**
- **Education**
- **Environment**
- **Transport**
- **Strong Communities**
- **Diversity**
- **Housing**
- **Crime and Safety**
- **Arts and Heritage**
- **Work**
- **Local Economy**

***Notes on data.**

Some government statistics have been updated from December 2022 to be based on 2021 population estimates from the 2021 Census, and so cannot be compared with previous years when data sets and criteria have changed.

Data shown is the most up-to-date available and can refer to different time periods.

Milton Keynes Vital Signs 2024

Each year at the Milton Keynes Community Foundation, we look at data from across Milton Keynes in key areas.

This year, we have focused on the cost-of-living crisis and the longer-term impact of lockdown and COVID-19. The report focuses on our young people and their education; the increasing number of people affected by issues around their mental health; families and the increasing living costs and the growing climate emergency.

This report helps us to identify our strategic priorities and the areas we need to focus, our grant giving and rent subsidy goals, to enable us to continue our mission of Funding Fairness.

“We know that grassroots organisations and charities are struggling, and we can only continue to support their vital work with the help of our donors. Using the information in this report, we advise individuals, families, and businesses on how to make their philanthropic aims more impactful.”

Ian Revell CEO



2024 and beyond

This year will see local and national elections, funding priorities may therefore change around public sector funding.

The Institute for Employment Studies, December 2023 briefing, envisages a slowdown in the labour market, as well as pay rises. Employment appears to be falling for young people, down 1% over the last year. This is often an early indicator of falling demand, as young people are those most affected by slowdowns in hiring. [Title \(employment-studies.co.uk\)](https://employment-studies.co.uk)

People are more likely to be out of work, but less likely to be looking to get back into work, as lockdown enabled people to reflect on their work life balance.

2024 is likely to be more challenging than 2023, as interest rates although currently stable, continue to remain relatively high, causing large increases in mortgage and rent payments. The impact of the weaker demand and slowdown in hiring will have a detrimental effect on the ability for young people to get into employment.

Milton Keynes still has more people out of work than before the pandemic, pay has barely risen above where it was in 2009. There are still significant disadvantages in the labour market for disabled people, those with long-term health conditions, the lowest qualified (often disproportionately from ethnically diverse communities).

The Charities Aid Foundation in their Giving Report for 2023, highlighted the issues around volunteering levels, which are seeing a sustained decline over the last 5 years. Giving went up in 2022, with donations surging due to the conflict in Ukraine, but are yet to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Demand for support from funders is likely to increase as small organisations have used their reserves to maintain services over the past 3 years.

25%

Of givers have changed their charitable behaviour because of the cost-of-living crisis.

This highlights more than ever; how vital it is to give locally.

Environment

The environment theme encompasses the natural and built environment including access to clean air and green spaces. This section looks at the extent to which Milton Keynes is progressing to becoming carbon neutral by 2030, a stated aim of Milton Keynes City Council.

Overview

There is a strong relationship between health of the environment and residents. A government report highlights that measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions also help improve public health, such as active travel, improving availability of less processed and sustainably produced food and improving air quality.

www.gov.uk/government/publications/climate-change-applying-all-our-health/climate-and-health-applying-all-our-health

However, making many of these improvements requires residents to make some changes to their habits and lifestyles.

The challenge for Milton Keynes continues to be reducing the elevated levels of emissions from fossil fuels used in transport, which are contributing to air pollution and climate change. Uptake of electric and hybrid vehicles is now comparatively high in Milton Keynes compared with other cities.

A comprehensive EV charging point structure on streets, homes and at workplaces is essential to facilitate the uptake in electric vehicles. This is being supported by Milton Keynes City Council which has been allocated £1.6m by the government to expand its EV charging infrastructure.

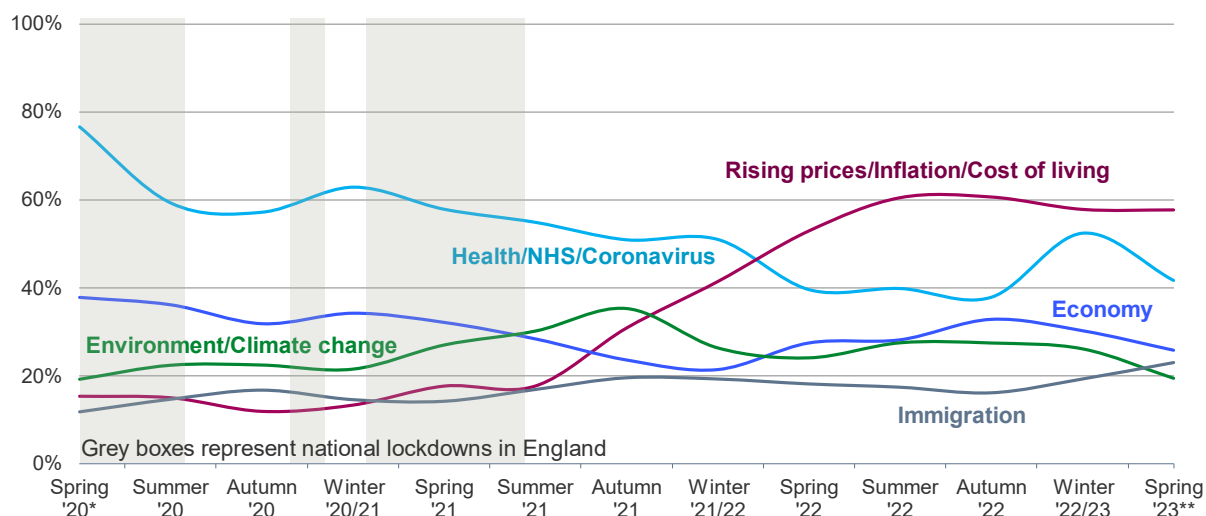
In terms of home energy consumption, Milton Keynes performs better than the average for England as, being a new town, there is a higher proportion of recently built homes which are more energy efficient than older homes.

Although Milton Keynes households create more waste than the average for England there are higher rates of recycling. In 2021/22 the percentage of household waste sent for recycling was 51.9% in Milton Keynes, which is above the average of 42% of all English Unitary Authorities.

Attitudes to the environment and climate change

A survey of adults' attitudes to environmental issues at national level found that 86% said that protecting the environment was important. However, when mapping attitudinal changes over time the most recent survey (March 2023) found that the environment had moved into fifth position, with the cost of living, the economy and immigration seen as more important.

Changing importance of the environment (Natural England, 2023, People and Nature Survey Dataset from April 2020 – March 2023).



Air pollution

Air pollution is the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK with between 28,000 and 36,000 deaths a year attributed to long-term exposure. Certain groups are at highest risk including the young, the elderly, those with cardiovascular or respiratory diseases, pregnant women, and low-income communities. ([Air pollution: Applying All Our Health - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/air-pollution-applying-all-our-health))ⁱ

A measure of the impact of air pollution on public health is the percentage of the causes of adult deaths attributable to particulate air pollution. In Milton Keynes this was 5.7%, which is above the average for all English Unitary Authorities of 5.3%. ([Office for Health Improvement and Disparities 2021 \(OHID\)](https://www.miltonkeynes.gov.uk/office-for-health-improvement-and-disparities-2021)).

Transport

37% of greenhouse gas emissions are from transport which is above the England average of 31%. (2021 data). A contributory factor is likely to be the low levels of usage of bus transport. In Milton Keynes, the average number of bus passenger journeys per head in 2021/22 was 19.3, compared with the average for local authorities in England of 50.2.

Milton Keynes City Council runs a scheme, MK Connect, which enables residents to book a shared space on a vehicle, at a time to suit them. Milton Keynes City Council reported that around 13% of all trips on MK Connect would previously have been taken by car. Additionally, feedback from users suggests that disabled users who previously did not have access to affordable public transport now use this service. ([MK City Council Cabinet Report Feb 2023 Sustainability Action Plan update](#))

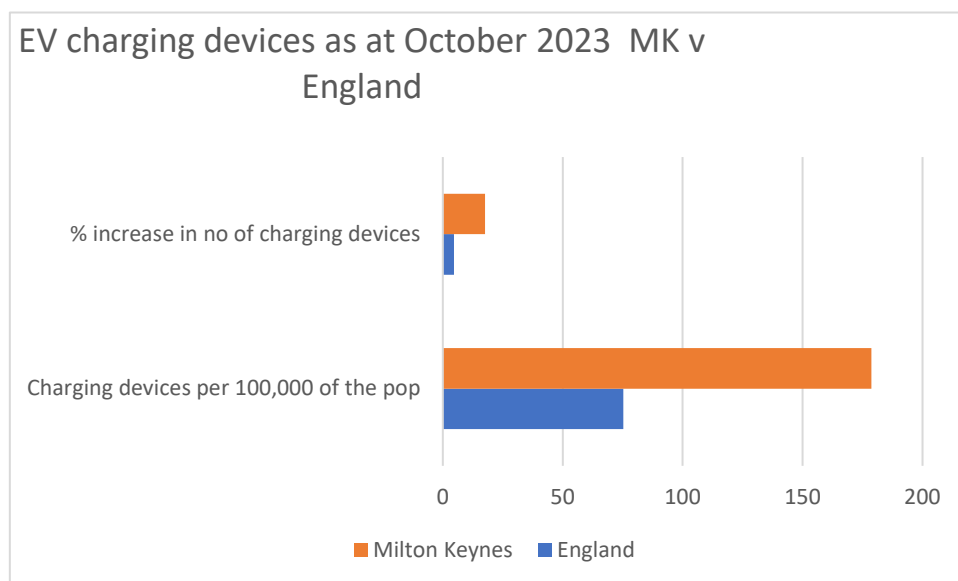
Electric vehicles

Uptake of electric and hybrid vehicles is strong in Milton Keynes compared with Great Britain as a whole. The number of private Plug-in vehicles per 100,000 population in Milton Keynes is 1,073 compared with of 778 for the UK (data for England only not available).

There were 43,784 private plug-in vehicles as at March 2023, a 30% increase on the previous year ([Local Authority data: Electric vehicles and charging points \(parliament.uk\)](#)).

One initiative is to increase workplace electric vehicle charging points. Milton Keynes has government-funded support towards the costs of EV charging points at workplaces that have dedicated off-street parking. As a result of the investment In April-June 2023, the number of socket installations as part of the scheme was 433, which is above the average for English Unitary Authorities of 204 ([Climate Change in Milton Keynes | LG Inform \(local.gov.uk\)](#)).

Table 1: EV charging points per 100,000 of the population MK compared with England (Oct 2023) ([ONS/Zapmap](#)).



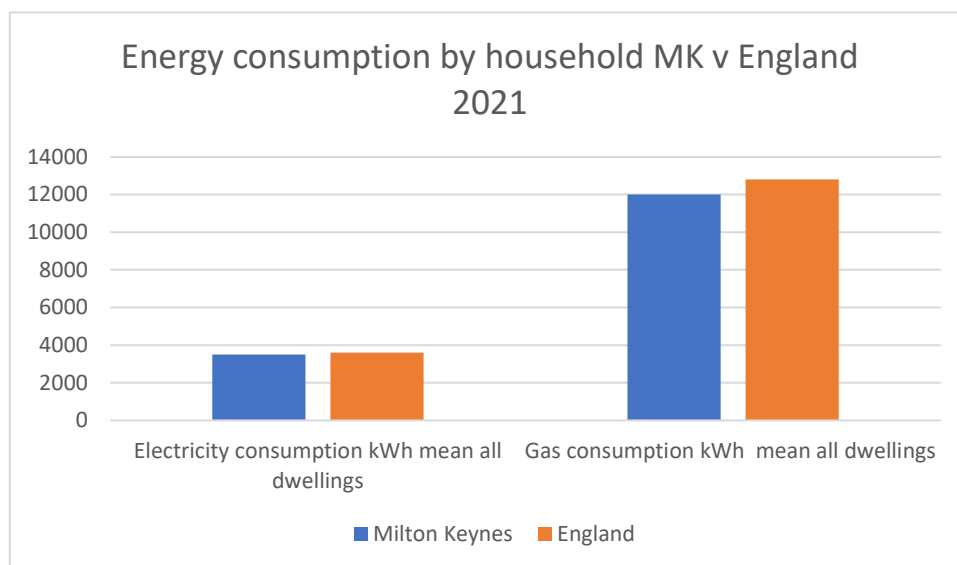
Home energy consumption

Milton Keynes performs comparatively well in relation to mitigation measures to reduce home energy consumption and thus environmental impact (and costs). 59% of its housing stock has an Energy Performance Certificates (EPC) in Band C or above, compared with the average for England of 42%. More recent homes are built to be more energy efficient than older homes, and as a new town, there is a higher proportion of recently built homes than many other English towns and cities. (Energy Performance Certification is a rating that summarises the energy efficiency of a building).

The amount of gas and electricity consumed per average household is less than the average for England: 2.8% less for electricity, and 6.6% less for gas.

Energy consumption varies with age of homes in Milton Keynes. Houses built after 2011 have average gas energy consumption per household of 9,700-kilowatt hour (KWh) whereas for houses built between 1945 to 1964 average gas energy per household is 12,900 KWh.

Table 2: Energy consumption by household Milton Keynes v England ([Department for Energy, Security and Net Zero](#)).

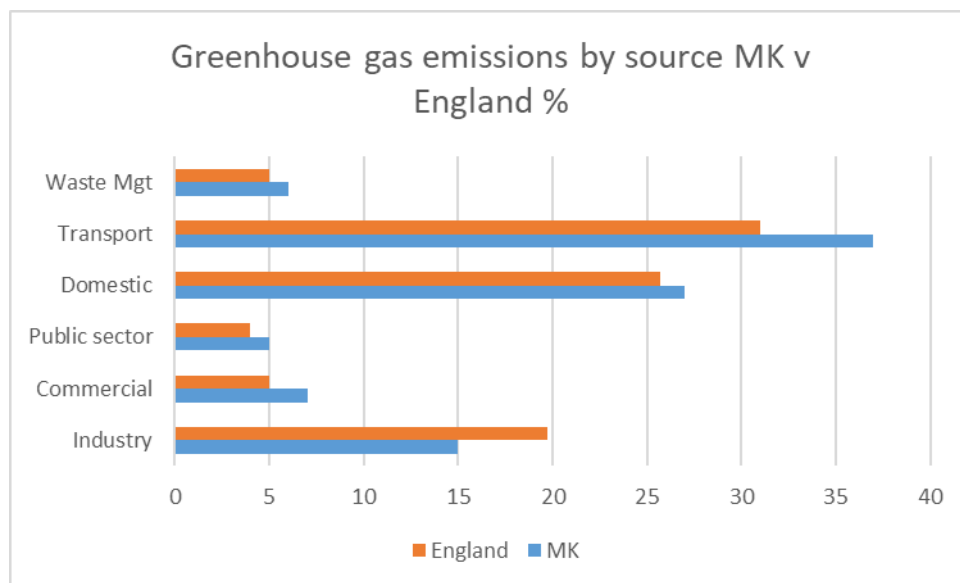


Waste and recycling

There is a need for households to reduce the levels of household waste that they create, as levels are above the national average. In 2021/22, household waste in tonnes per 1000 households in Milton Keynes was 1,074, which is above the average for all English Unitary Authorities of 1,040.

Milton Keynes City Council aims to increase rates of waste recycling to 70% by 2030. In 2021/22 the percentage of household waste sent for recycling in Milton Keynes was 51.9% which is above the average percentage of 42% of all English Unitary Authorities. Waste that is not recycled is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions and carbon-based particulates. (*Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs*).

Table 3: Greenhouse gas emissions by source Milton Keynes v England, percentages (Department for Energy, Security and Net Zero).



Access to green space

Natural England recommends that everyone should have access to at least some greenspace within 300m of where they live for its physical and mental health benefits. For Milton Keynes, the average distance to travel to a public park or garden is 610m whereas the average for England is 926m.

Milton Keynes came top for the amount of green space that residents had access to, with 47.0 square metres (sqm) of public parks and gardens per person, in a study by the *Centre for Cities* which assessed 62 urban areas in terms of accessible green space. ⁱⁱ(*How easy is it for people to stay at home during the coronavirus pandemic? | Centre for Cities*)

Vital Action

Milton Keynes residents are taking positive action to increasing sustainability and community resilience. Two examples are explored below:

Community gardens - increasing local food production.

Planting Up is a Milton Keynes based community group that supports two community gardens in the city. Kirsty Forshaw, of *Planting Up* said: “One of the primary benefits of community gardens is their contribution to local food production and food security by reducing our local dependence on industrial agriculture and long-distance food transportation.

Community gardens are more than just great places to cultivate healthy affordable, local fruit and vegetables for people who don't have their own gardens or allotment. As the *Planting Up* gardens at Westbury Arts Centre and Grapevine wellbeing Hub show, they also serve as refuges for wildlife and provide green urban spaces to cultivate positive health and wellbeing for people.

They connect us with nature, nutritious food, and each other as we care for the environment. It's no wonder doctors are referring them as green prescription alternatives to medication!”

Food Connect and Milton Keynes Community Fridge

Food Connect Milton Keynes is a food redistribution service developed by the environmental charity, *Hubbub*.

Food Connect helps nine community organisations in Milton Keynes access quality surplus food to support community cafes, youth groups, children's centres, and community meals.

It uses sustainable transport including zero emission vehicles, e-cargo bikes, and an e-van to share surplus food from local businesses within the community.

Between November 2022 and October 2023, *MK Community Fridge* and *Food Connect MK* were able to: share 225 tonnes of food, equivalent to over half a million meals; support 52,000 visits; travel 26,000 miles in clean vehicles and saved nearly 6.5 tonnes greenhouse gases relating to transport.

As well as cutting food waste, the community fridge and access to free food, both contribute support for those in difficult circumstances.

Lynette Daniels, a *Food Connect* Courier who collects food from shops across Milton Keynes in an electric van said: “From our team, the shops who share their surplus food, their hard-working staff I interact with when collecting, the network of community fridge teams and fridge visitors, everyone is playing their part to ensure that we are helping to reduce food waste in a very positive and environmentally sustainable way.”

Vital Voice

“We need a hearts and minds change so that people are aware of the emergency that we face, and that climate change is an existential threat to us. Community building initiatives will make one of the biggest differences in the speed of change and helping change hearts and minds.”

Michael Sheppard, Chair of Transition Towns, Milton Keynes.

(Transition Town Milton Keynes is a group of local people concerned about the urgent need to address the climate and ecological crises through practical actions that advocate for a low carbon lifestyle and social and economic justice.)

Vital Signs

- 37% of greenhouse gas emissions are from transport. England average is 31%.
- A measure of the impact of air pollution on public health is the percentage of adult deaths attributable to particulate air pollution. In Milton Keynes this was 5.7% which is above the average for all English unitary Authorities of 5.3%. Certain groups are at highest risk including the young, the elderly, those with cardiovascular or respiratory diseases, pregnant women, and low-income households.
- The number of private Plug-in vehicles per population in Milton Keynes is 1073 compared with 778 for the UK.

Vital Thinking

How can we educate and empower residents to reduce their transport greenhouse gas emissions?

Disadvantage and Poverty

There is no standard definition of poverty, but it is widely accepted that:

Poverty is when you are unable to afford the minimum needs that are deemed reasonable by the standards of the society in which you live.

This includes providing shelter, warmth, food, and clothing as well as being able to participate in everyday social activities.

Definition of Poverty, 2014 Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Levels of poverty continue to rise, and many households have been unable to recover since COVID-19, as fuel, housing and food costs have continued to increase, causing a cost-of-living crisis.

This is disproportionately affecting ethnically diverse households, with more than half likely to experience fuel poverty compared with just under a third of those in white ethnic households.

Households likely to be experiencing the highest levels of poverty are those with serious long-term mental or physical health problems, lone parent households, some ethnically diverse communities, those with problem debts, and those in very low paid and insecure jobs, who often come from ethnically diverse communities.

In Milton Keynes, there are many households grappling with increased vulnerability to poverty.

A report by the *Poverty Strategy Commission* highlights the need for effort across all aspects of society to reduce poverty: “People would have more chance of exiting poverty in future, or avoiding poverty altogether, if they had better skills, stronger family and community relationships and better physical and mental health as well as more income and savings and reduced costs.”ⁱⁱⁱ¹ (*A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR TACKLING POVERTY The interim report of the Poverty Strategy Commission Chaired by Baroness Philippa Stroud SEPTEMBER 2023*)

Overview

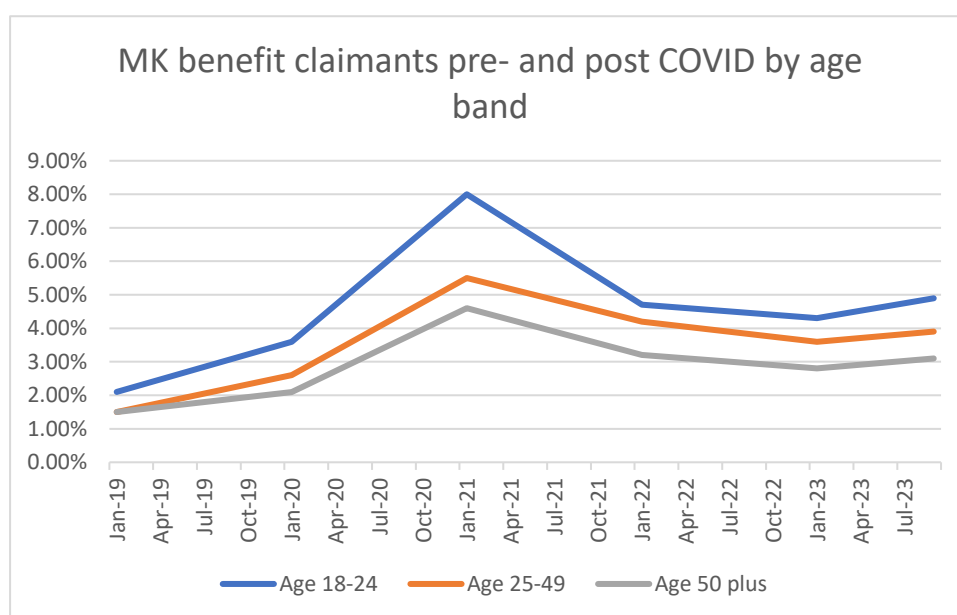
The prevalence of insecure and low-paid work combined with the shortage of affordable housing and rising household costs were identified in the 2013-22 Vital Signs Report as exacerbating financial hardship in Milton Keynes and inequalities in terms of health, wellbeing, educational performance, and life chances.

Data and feedback from local charities suggests that levels of poverty have increased over 2022-23. Those who were struggling before the COVID-19 pandemic are now in a worse situation.

Who is most likely to be in poverty in Milton Keynes?

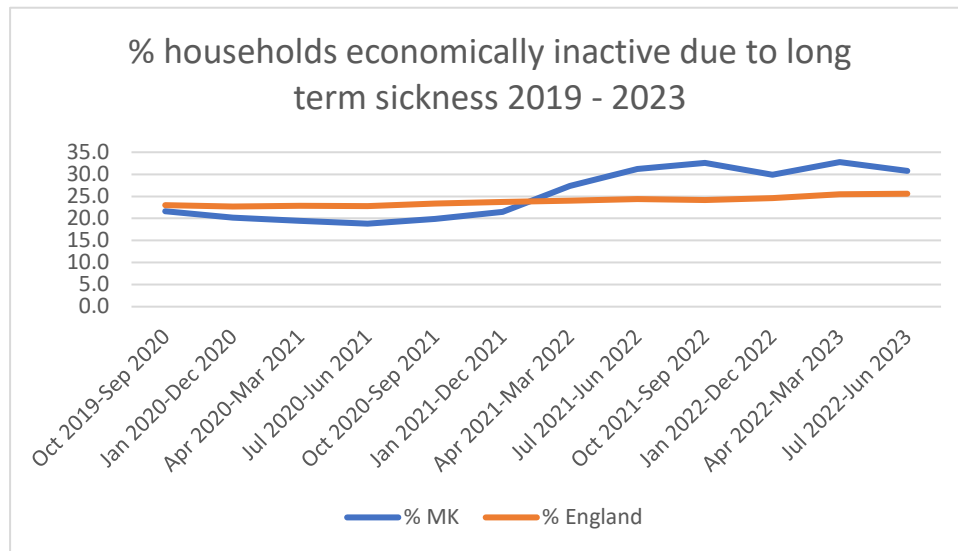
Younger people in Milton Keynes were disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of likelihood of becoming unemployed, and the claimant rate remains higher among younger people than for other age bands. At July 2023 the benefit claimant rate was 4.9% for those aged 18-24 compared with 3.1% of those age 50 plus.

Table 4: MK unemployment Benefit claimants pre- and Post COVID-19 pandemic by age band (Labour Market Profile - Nomis - Official Census and Labour Market Statistics (nomisweb.co.uk)).



In Milton Keynes there is a higher rate of economic inactivity because of ill health than the average for the population of England. (Economic inactivity is defined as people who are of working age, out of work, but are not looking for work). Pre-COVID-19 the rate was 23% of households in Milton Keynes but by June 2023 the rate had risen to 30.7% for Milton Keynes, compared with 25.5% for England.

Table 5: Trends in households being economically inactive due to long term sickness (Official Census and Labour Market Statistics nomisweb.co.uk).



Research by *The Centre for Cities* notes that there is a higher likelihood among those formerly employed in ‘routine and manual jobs’ to be economically inactive due to ill health, as these jobs are more likely to damage health and to be harder to carry out with a long-term illness than desk jobs.

12.6% of the population of Milton Keynes are working in ‘routine’ jobs compared with 10.5% for England on average.

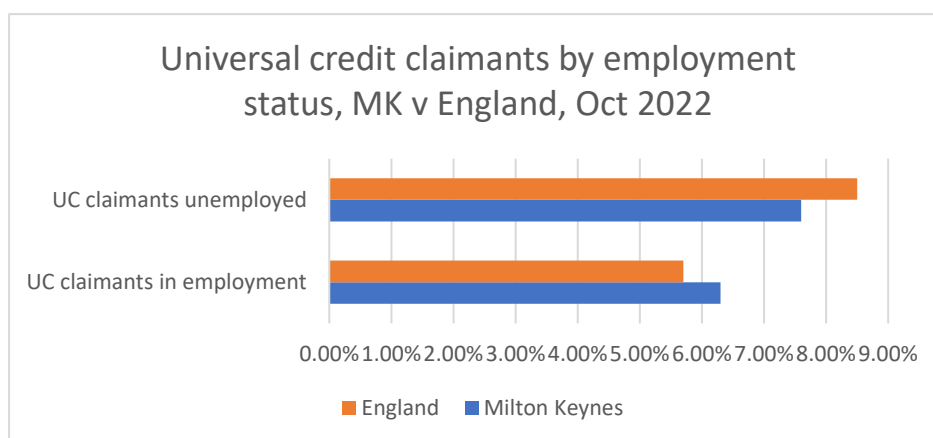
(Note: ‘Routine and manual’ jobs include roles such as plumbers, electricians, labourers, waiting and bar staff, cleaners, HGV and van drivers, packers etc)

[www.centreforcities.org/blog/how-is-sickness-related-economic-inactivity-playing-out-across-the-country/Local Insight OCSI](http://www.centreforcities.org/blog/how-is-sickness-related-economic-inactivity-playing-out-across-the-country/Local%20Insight%20OCSI)

A report by the *Runnymede Trust* identifies that Black and Minority Ethnic households are disproportionately exposed to the current cost-of-living crisis and that more than half of Black and Minority Ethnic people are likely to experience fuel poverty compared with just under a third of those of white ethnicities.^{iv} (*Falling Faster Amidst a Cost-of-living Crisis, Poverty, Inequality and Ethnicity in the UK, Runnymede Trust. October 2022*)

There are higher rates of in-work poverty in Milton Keynes compared with England. 6.3% of Universal Credit claimants are in work in Milton Keynes, compared with 5.7% for England. Conversely, 7.6% in Milton Keynes claiming Universal Credit are not working, compared with 8.5% in England. (Local Insight/OCSI)

Table 6: Universal Credit claimants by employment status Milton Keynes v England ([Local Insight Profile OCSI](#)).



Milton Keynes Citizens Advice director, Ben Thomas reports that over the past year 65% of its advice enquiries were in relation to Benefits, Universal Credit and Debt. The most common benefit claim issue in Milton Keynes was around Personal Independence Payment (PIP) which provides extra living costs for those with a long-term physical or mental health condition or disability. This is consistent with national trends among presenting issues at Citizens Advice centres.

Milton Keynes Citizen Advice also reports that for most of 2021 and 2022 the most common debt was rent or council tax arrears. But from the end of 2022 onwards, the most common debt problem has been energy and fuel debts. In earlier years it was able to help debt clients save money through support with budgeting and finding the best deals, but with the recent turbulence in the energy market and the ongoing squeeze in the cost-of-living, many of these options are no longer available. A high proportion of those who seek advice are from the more economically deprived neighbourhoods of Milton Keynes.

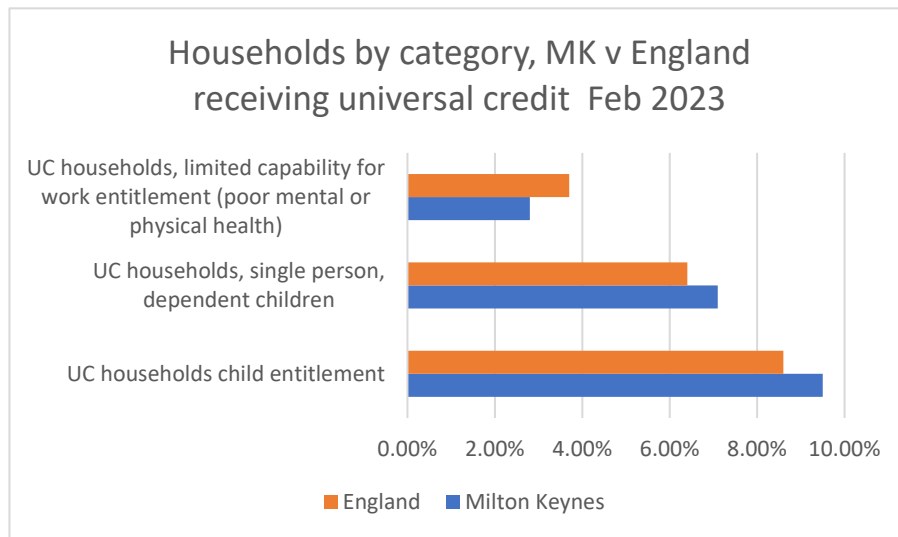
A further indication of the continuing growth of those in poverty is that Milton Keynes Foodbank reports a surge in demand for its services. Comparing January to October 2023 with the same period in 2022, there has been a 49% increase in use of its services. Between January and October 2023, it has distributed the same amount as for the total year 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Child Poverty

In Milton Keynes 30% of children lived in poverty in 2022 compared with and 30.8% in England. The rate rose in Milton Keynes between 2021 and 2022 by 0.2%. (The number of children living in poverty is defined by the *End Child Poverty Coalition and the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University* as the number of children in households with income after housing costs that are below 60% of the median (i.e., midpoint). ^v (*Child Poverty Statistics - End Child Poverty*))

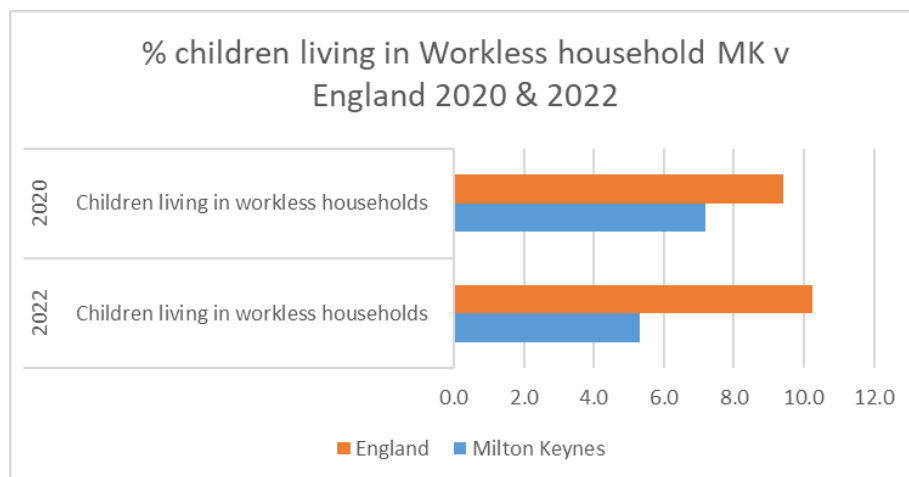
This method of assessing numbers of children living in poverty considers the high cost of housing in Milton Keynes. Nationally poverty rates are highest for children living in lone parent families and that children from ethnically diverse groups are more at risk of living in poverty (EndchildPoverty.org). In Milton Keynes, a particular challenge is children living in households where someone is working but earning low-income levels.

Table 7: Households by category, Milton Keynes v England receiving Universal Credit ([Local Insight Profile for Milton Keynes, OCSI](#)).



The percent of children in poverty living in **workless** households in Milton Keynes in 2022 was 5.3%, just around half that of the national rate (10.2%). ([ONS](#)). Whereas the proportion of households receiving Universal Credit with children is higher in Milton Keynes at 9.5% compared with England (8.6%) ([Local Insight profile/OCSI](#)) Feb 2023 data).

Table 8: Children living in workless households 2020 and 2022, Milton Keynes v England ([Children by the combined economic activity status of household members by local authority: Table C1 LA - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)).



“We are seeing more hungry children arriving in the mornings, more parents at the end of their tether, a lot of stress and distress amongst our low-income families. Parents get to be at the end of their tether and there has been a huge growth in domestic violence and drug abuse,” said Zoe Raven CEO of Acorn Nurseries.

Charity, Dreamsai, which runs projects to support the needy, amongst its goals, currently delivers an average 4,160 free essential food parcels a year to those in need in Milton Keynes. It reports that the biggest increase in demand has been from schools, which increased from 84 per month in 2022 to 180 per month in 2023 (www.dreamsai.org).

“The significant increase in demand is from schools in the deprived areas due to the cost-of-living crisis felt by families with children, resulting in children’s poor ability to concentrate at school.” *Laxman Kastala, Founder & Chair Dreamsai.*

Destitution

Milton Keynes is in Quintile Band 3 in a categorisation of prevalence of destitution by Local Authority by the *Joseph Rowntree Trust* (JRT). Quintile Band 5 equates to highest rates of destitution and Quintile Band 1 the lowest. Destitution is defined by JRT as extremely low income so you cannot afford two of six items needed to meet basic needs to stay warm dry, clean and fed.

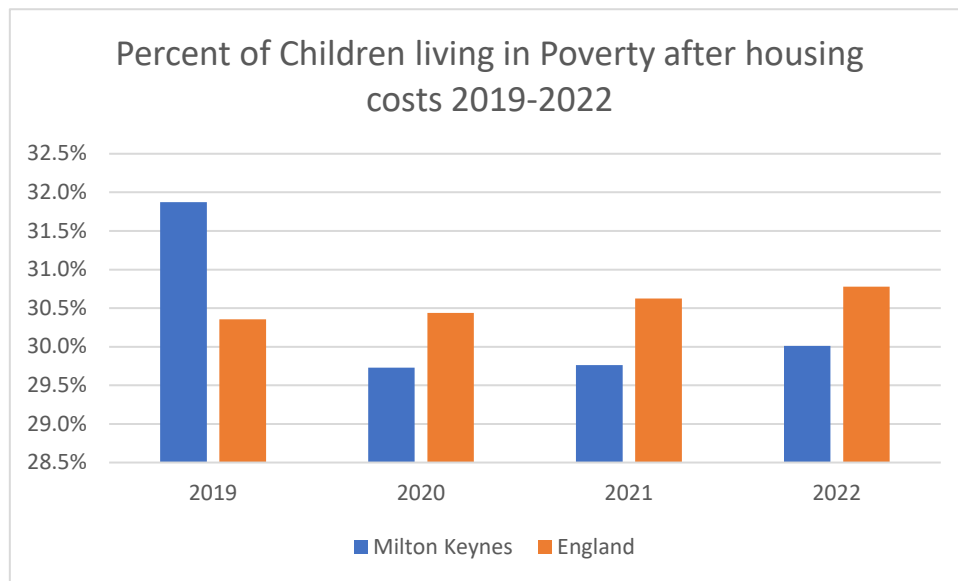
Nationally those experiencing destitution are more likely to be people who are single, of working age, age 35-44, with no children. The research indicated that likelihood of destitution is highest among black-led households and among those with chronic physical or mental health conditions and problematic debt. Some experienced persistent hardship, but more reported sudden deterioration as result of economic shock of COVID-19 compounded by the cost-of-living crisis. ^{vi} (Destitution in the UK 2023 | JRF)

Contributory factors to poverty

Housing costs

The 2013-22 Vital Signs report highlighted housing affordability in Milton Keynes as contributing to poverty. More recently the situation has improved slightly and the ratio of median (midpoint) house price to gross annual earnings has decreased from 9.89 in 2021 to 9.1 in 2022. (www.gov.uk/government/statistics/housing-affordability-in-england-and-wales-2021)

Table 9: Percent of Children Living in Poverty after Housing costs ([EndchildPoverty.org](https://endchildpoverty.org)).



Changing interest rates have significantly increased mortgage repayments for those already purchasing a home. Examples are shown on the government website: ([How are monthly mortgage repayments changing in Great Britain?](https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/banking-and-finance/articles/how-are-monthly-mortgage-repayments-changing-in-great-britain) - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk))

Childcare costs

Milton Keynes is the ninth highest in a survey of cities for the cost of childcare in relation to income, with the average parent in Milton Keynes spending 49% of their income on childcare. The survey compared the average monthly salary after tax for the major towns and cities with the average cost of full-time childcare by place ([Hours vs Childcare | Play Like Mum](https://www.playlikemum.com/blog/hours-vs-childcare)).

Vital Action

Dreamsai was established in 2017. One of the charity's objectives is the prevention or relief of poverty for the public benefit of Milton Keynes. This is achieved by supplying food, hygiene items, and other essentials to the homeless and communities in need.

From their kitchens in Kingston, Dreamsai can supply hot food and food parcels through a network of 400 volunteers. This includes culturally appropriate hot meals to refugees who have no access to cooking facilities. Early in 2023, Milton Keynes Community Foundation provided funding to Dreamsai to increase the amount of food parcels they were distributing.

The charity had seen a 30% increase in demand for the parcels and was also experiencing an increase in the cost of the food they provided.

Most recently, Dreamsai have seen an increase in the demand for food bags from schools in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Milton Keynes, due to the cost-of-living crisis.

Vital Voices

"The issues that clients present with, are becoming more complex and harder to solve. With debt clients there are frankly 'less options' to help them reduce household expenditure and maximise income. Many of the debt clients we see in MK are people who are in a negative budget - where their income does not cover their essential costs."

Milton Keynes Citizens Advice Director, Ben Thomas

The danger of phrases like cost-of-living crisis and the amount of airtime they received in the news is that they become commonplace, and we become blasé. The reality for thousands of children across Milton Keynes though is now even worse than it was when these phrases were first spoken.

Government help has dried up, savings have all gone, inflation continues to rise, and the energy bill cap just increased again. Teachers commonly report having to teach children who have not eaten since their school lunch the previous day, or who are struggling to focus because they are hungry and who worry constantly about where their next meal might be coming from.

Paul Oxley, St Marks Meals

St Mark's meals charity is a project of St Mark's MK. Their aim is to provide food to the most vulnerable children in Milton Keynes whenever they need it. They store emergency meal boxes in schools across the city which staff can invite vulnerable families to take home any day they might need it.

Vital Signs

- In 2022, the most common debt problem in Milton Keynes was because of high energy and fuel costs.
- 30% of children in Milton Keynes in 2022, were living in poverty (after housing costs).
- 49% increase in usage of Milton Keynes foodbank between 2022 and 2023.

Vital Thinking

How can we use the mode of the Child Poverty Partnership to expand support for people living in poverty in Milton Keynes?

Education

Education from pre-school to lifelong learning should enable everyone to maximise their potential, have control over the course of their life and the knowledge and skills needed for stable employment.

Local education experts have noted that multiple lockdowns and disruptions to education during the COVID-19 pandemic have scarred the educational and emotional development of many young people.

Overview

Milton Keynes City Council has a goal to raise the aspirations and attainment of disadvantaged pupils and other groups who do less well than their peers, at every stage of education (mkfutures2050.com). In addition to qualifications improving people's opportunities to gain rewarding employment and meeting local demand for skills, those with higher levels of qualifications report higher levels of life satisfaction (see section Health and Wellbeing).

When comparing diverse groups of young people within Milton Keynes, those that have the lowest attainment rate are likely to be from families eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), from white ethnic backgrounds and to be boys.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic school absence rates have risen nationally and in Milton Keynes and this is likely to be detrimental to school performance and progression into further learning or work.

Early years

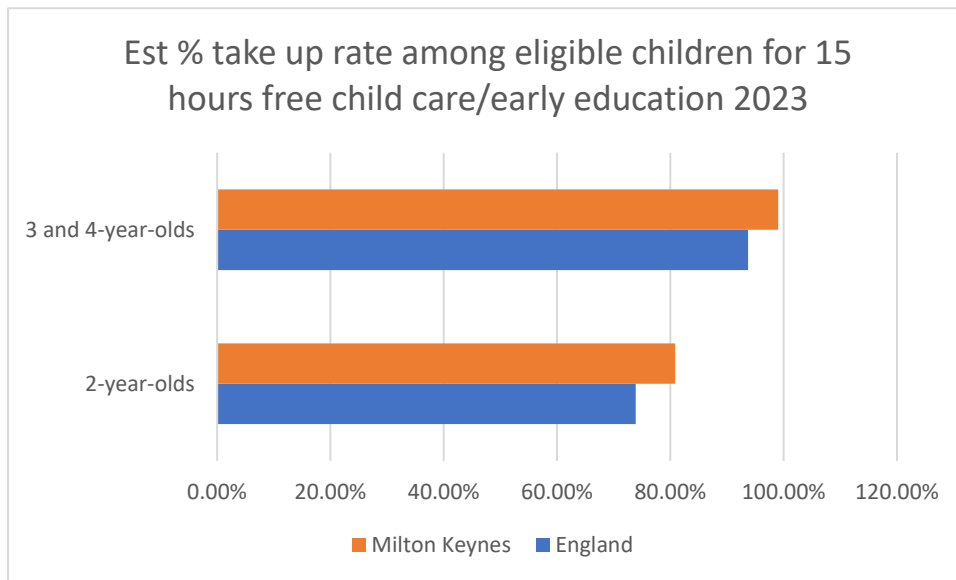
Free childcare is available for two-year olds if the household is in receipt of specific government benefits. The take-up rate in Milton Keynes is 80% compared with English average of 74%.

All three-to four-year-olds in England are eligible for 15 hours a week of early education and childcare. The local take-up rate is 99% compared with English average of 93.7%.

While the take up rates of early years education is now high, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns have negatively impacted the youngest children at a crucial stage of their development as observed by Zoe Raven, CEO of Acorn Nurseries: **"We noticed a regression in the social skills, confidence and emotional resilience in the children that did not attend the nurseries during the pandemic and who didn't have access to the normal range of social situations.** Language development has especially been affected, and the increased dependence on screens is having an ongoing detrimental effect on children's

development. Vulnerable children and those with keyworker parents were able to continue to attend, and they thrived on the increased attention they received in nurseries with much lower numbers.”

Table 10: Estimated take up rate among under 5s of free childcare/early education (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk).



Secondary Education

Attainment

Gaps remain in school performance between different communities, with those from families eligible for Free School Meals, of a white ethnic background, and boys, having lower levels of school attainment compared with their peers.

(The measure of attainment reviewed is the Grade 8 score and is the average attainment score per pupil across examinations typically taken at age 16.)

Table 11: Attainment at Grade 8 by ethnicity, Milton Keynes schools compared with England ([LG Inform local.gov.uk](https://lg-inform.local.gov.uk)).

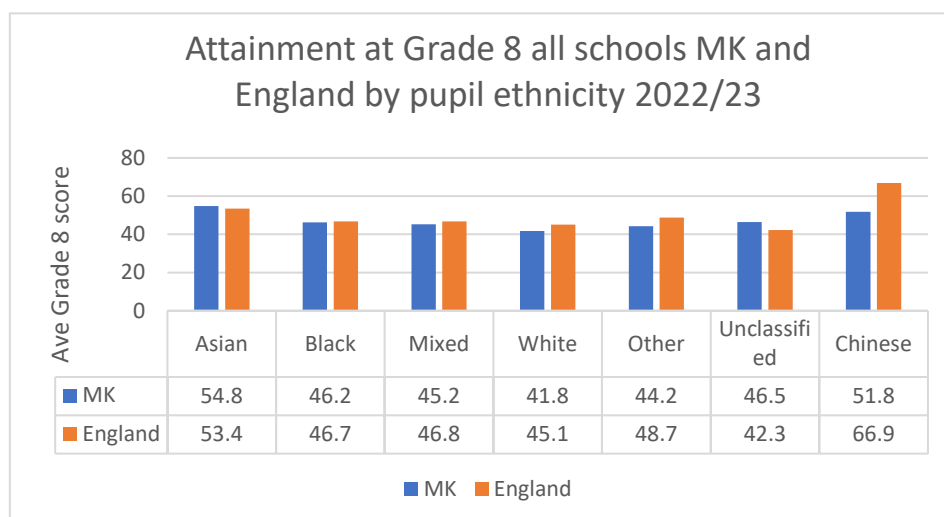
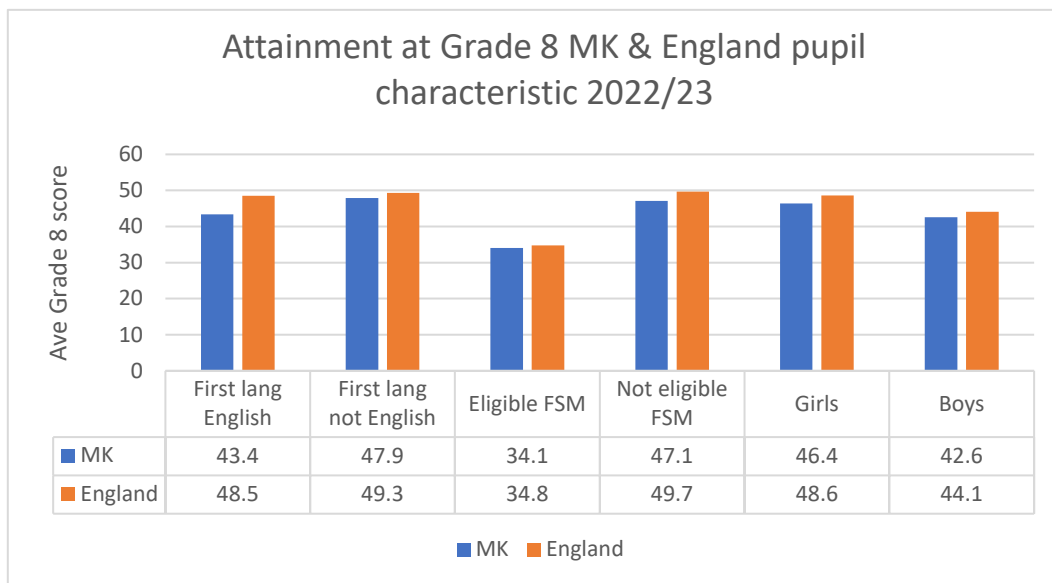


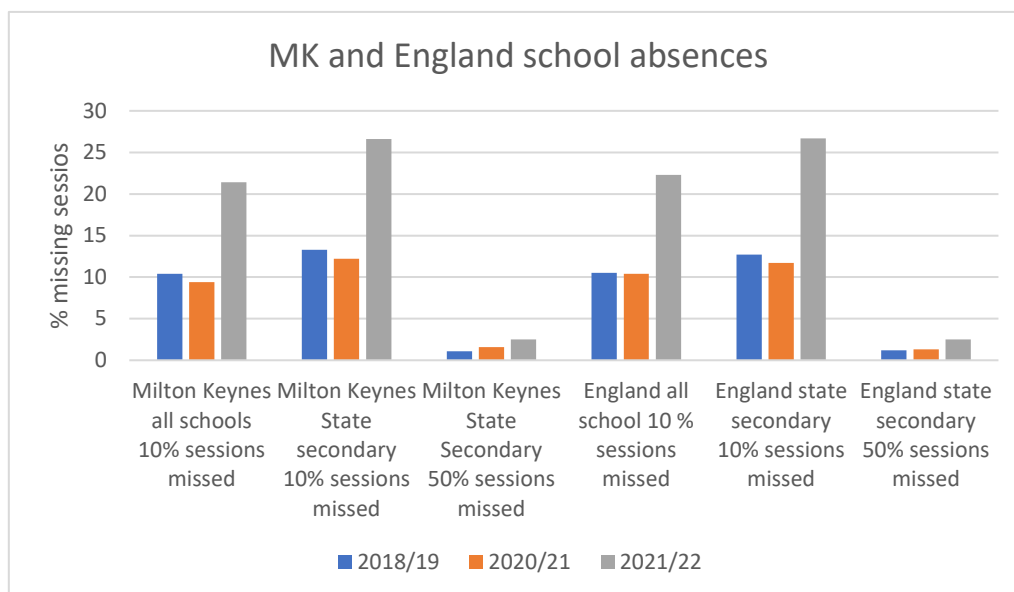
Table 12: Attainment at Grade 8 Milton Keynes schools compared with England by pupil characteristics (LG Inform local.gov.uk).



Attendance

There is a severe problem with school attendance which has declined dramatically from pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels across the country and in Milton Keynes. **26% of secondary school pupils in Milton Keynes missed 10% of school sessions in 2023 (a similar percentage as the average for England). This is double the rate pre-COVID-19 pandemic in 2018/19, when 13.3% missed 10% of school sessions.**

Table 13: School Absence Rates (GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk))



Data on the characteristics of those who are absent from school is not available at Local Authority level but national research by the *Centre for Social Justice*^{vii} indicates that those who have the highest rate of absence tend to be from families eligible for FSM, from the most deprived communities, with multiple learning difficulties, physical disabilities, and social and mental health needs. (*LOST AND NOT FOUND How severe absence became endemic in England's schools March 2022, Centre for Social Justice*)

This research found that anxiety was the biggest driver behind increases in absence and some of those who previously attended school regularly had, since the COVID-19 pandemic, become extremely anxious. In some cases, parental mental health was also a barrier to attendance. Other reasons identified for school absence were disengagement with the curriculum especially around traditional academic subjects. A survey of young people aged 11-16 in Milton Keynes identified that only 36% of students enjoy their school (*Oxwell Survey, 2023*).

The lead for *MK Mental Health Leads Network*, Liz Nightingale, who is also Head Teacher at Green Park School, said that locally school absence is being driven by anxiety in the main, and changing attitudes of parents are also contributing to the problem. She felt that some parents find it easier to keep the child at home if they are working from home and the child has a minor illness. They may also take a child out of school for their birthday and do not take school attendance so seriously as in the past. She added that in neighbourhoods where extreme poverty is behind school absence, schools in Milton Keynes are active in providing breakfast clubs and afterschool clubs to facilitate school attendance.

Milton Keynes City Council recognises the issue of 'Emotionally based school avoidance' and published in 2022 a guidance for schools in Milton Keynes.

Supplementary schools

The number of supplementary schools continues to rise, there are currently around 104 supplementary schools in Milton Keynes, attended by an estimated 6,000 students. They provide academic, language, culture and faith teaching classes and are mostly run by volunteers and depend on support from the community. These schools often work in collaboration with statutory secondary schools and support core curriculum subjects such as English and Mathematics

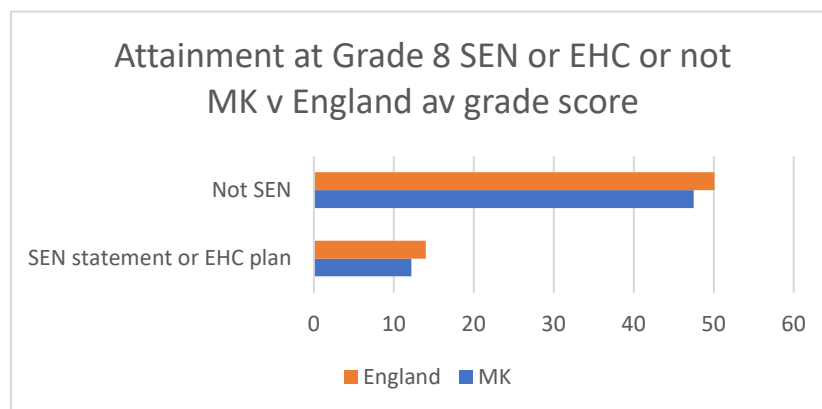
Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

The usual timing for identifying those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) is at nursery school stage, and nurseries start getting support in place. However, Zoe Raven, CEO of Acorn Nurseries explained that this was obviously not possible during lockdown, so some children started primary school without proper assessment and support plans in place. She said: "These children will probably need greater attention in their early years at school to regain their expected level of social and emotional development, language development and confidence. "

A report by *Public First* identified that those waiting for Special Educational Needs diagnosis may struggle to attend school. ^{viii} (*Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis September 2023 Dr Sally Burtonshaw & Ed Dorrel, Public First*)

Anxiety is especially high amongst those diagnosed with autism and Special Needs according to Liz Nightingale, the lead for the Milton Keynes Health Leads Network. The average score at Grade 8 for those with Special Educational Needs or EHC plan in Milton Keynes is 12.2 compared with 47.2 for non-SEN/EHC pupils.

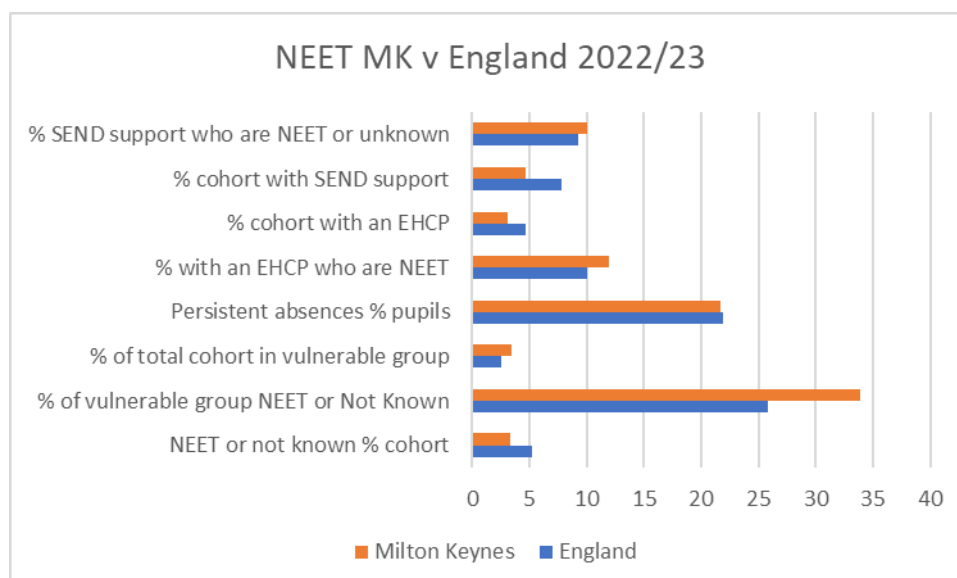
Table 14: Attainment at Grade 8, Milton Keynes compared with England for those with SEN or EHC plans ([LG Inform local.gov.uk](https://www.local.gov.uk)).



Participation in education, employment, or training 16-17

In Milton Keynes 3.3% percent of the cohort are **not** participating in education, employment with training aged 16-18 (NEET) which is better than the average for England (5.2%). Those who are NEET are much more likely to be in a vulnerable group, to be persistently absent from school, to have Special Education Needs or Education Health Care Plan support (EHCP).

Table 15: Percentage of cohort not in work, education or training by characteristic, Milton Keynes compared with England ([Statistics: NEET and participation - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)).



Progression to university

There is a gap in the proportion of young people from different communities who progress onto higher education. Half (49.3%) of the cohort who are not eligible for FSM progress to university, a similar rate to the average for England. However, the proportion going to university of those eligible for FSM is lower, and less than the average for England (28.4% in Milton Keynes, compared with 29.2% on average for England).

The proportion of the cohort going to any university from Milton Keynes is lowest among students from white ethnic groups (38%) and less than the average across England for white ethnic students. (41.8%.)

The progression rate to top (high tariff) universities by Milton Keynes students is highest from those with an Asian ethnicity at 17.6% and lowest among those from Black ethnicities at 7.7%.

(Note. High tariff universities are the top third of English higher education providers in terms of the average number of UCAS points achieved by their students).

Table 16: Progression rate to university by ethnicity Milton Keynes compared with England (www.gov.uk/government/statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education).

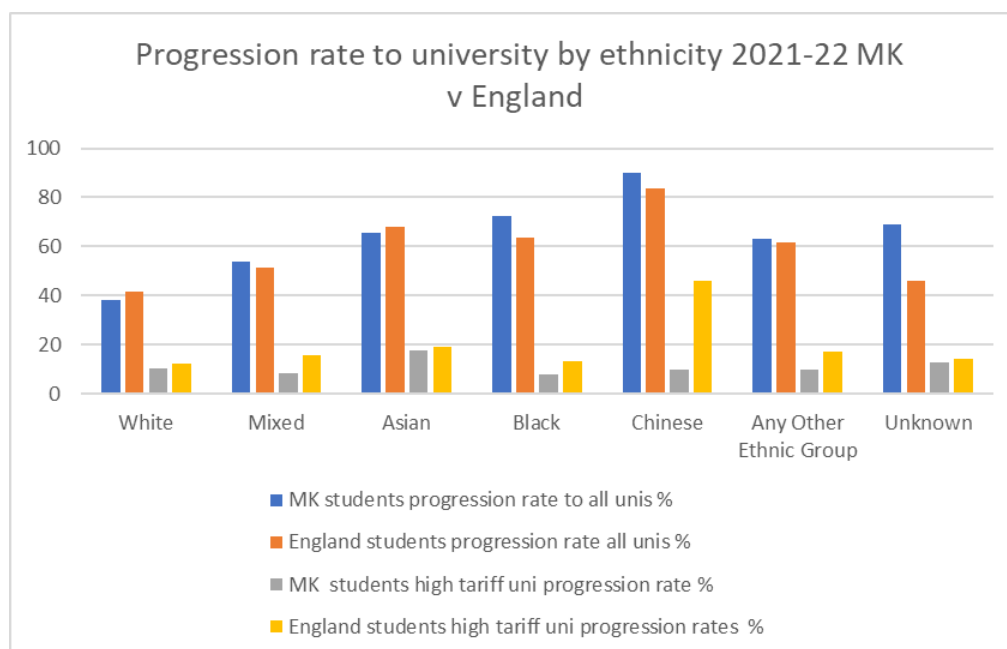
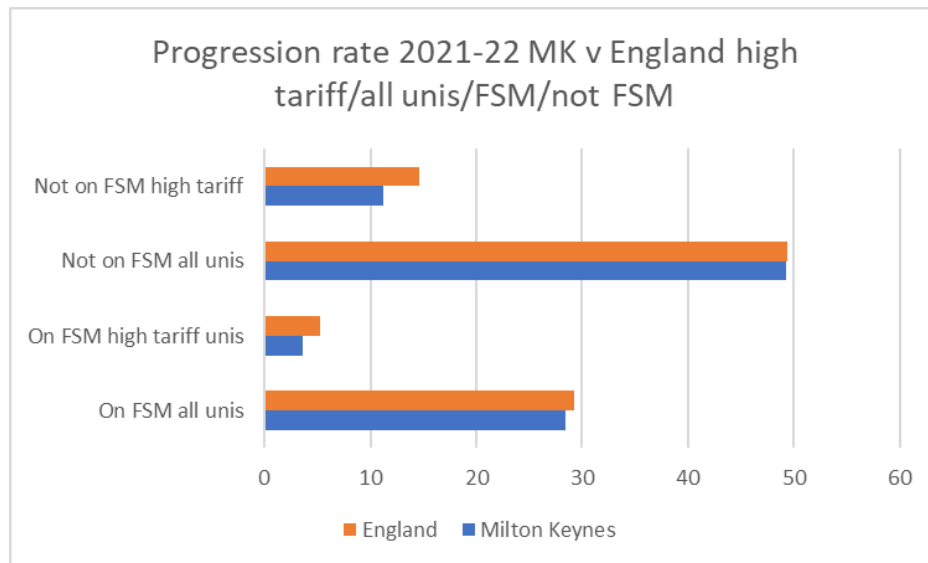


Table 17: Progression rate to university by whether or not student is on Free school Meals, Milton Keynes compared with England (www.gov.uk/government/statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education).



Adult education

Take up of adult education classes funded by Milton Keynes Local Authority are rebounding since lockdown and the numbers enrolling on community learning and adult skills classes in 2022/23 is only 2 % below the 2018-19 level. Government data indicates that participants are more likely to be age 45 plus and of white ethnicity.

Vital Action

Milton Keynes has 104 supplementary schools, mostly run by ethnically diverse community groups. Many provide young people with an opportunity to understand more about their culture, faith, and history.

One such group which has been funded by Milton Keynes Community Foundation, is *EMS Tutoring*, based at Stantonbury School campus, which is the educational arm of Friends of the Caribbean. It aims to improve academic performances, among ethnic minorities and low-performing and disadvantaged students. As part of their many services they befriend and mentor 20 young people a year and provide additional tuition for English, Maths and Science to around 50 young people.

Additional tutoring enables the students to improve their statutory education giving them encouragement to get involved in further education as well as building aspiration and achieving their full potential.

Anthony Russell, a Board Member at EMS, said: “The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the learning and socio-emotional development of young people in our community who were disproportionately affected by lockdowns and school closures. We were delighted that our tutoring programme was able to make a significant impact on recovering lost learning and personal development. The catch-up programmes helped 70% of participating students to return to their expected academic progress trajectories. We found that regular assessment and individual feedback to the students made a significant difference, as well as our building communications with families”.

As a result of the Pandemic EMS transitioned from a physical centre to fully online, which now remains and has the advantage of enabling EMS to extend its reach. In 2023 it engaged with over 100 students, providing over 5,500 hours of one-to-one tutoring in English, Maths, Science, and 11 plus, GCSE, and A-level exams preparation. This resulted in a 30% increase in the number of students achieving their target grades in national examinations compared to the previous year (2021). Moreover. There was a sizeable number of students from low-income and ethnic minority backgrounds receiving scholarships and placements to prestigious UK universities. (<https://emstutoring.co.uk/>)

The lessons are very understandable. My son took English and Science lessons with Julia for a year. He got top grades in GCSE. My younger daughter is taking maths lessons with Ella now she has improved her test scores a lot.

Ernestine Brixton (parent)

The additional support has made a noticeable difference in my academic performance, turning what was once a challenging subject into one where I now feel more capable and engaged.

Ashlee (student)

Vital Voice

“This Year 11 are the first set of students that are in school for full preparation for their GCSEs, yet they are still not fully prepared because the foundation years were missed. COVID-19 caused a major setback for a lot of students, it deprived them of education, not only academically, but also robbed them of social interaction and maturity.

This created several challenges for young people, anxiety, lack of confidence in relating to others, and lack of exposure to age-appropriate development opportunities. In addition, they are very much behind in social development and aspirations.”

Kayode Komolafe , Director of Programmes, Fresh Youth MK

Fresh Youth is a charity that aims to significantly improve employability and educational outcomes of young people aged under 25 years, particularly those from ethnically diverse communities.

Vital Signs

- 26% of state secondary school pupils in Milton Keynes missed 10% of school, double the rate pre- COVID-19 pandemic but in line with the national average.
- 70.8% of 2-2/12-year-olds in MK are at the expected levels of the 5 areas of development versus 80% for England. The shortfall being around motor skills and personal to social skills.
- The number of supplementary schools in MK have risen from 90-104 in the last year showing the increased need and demand for the additional support.

Vital Thinking

How can we support Supplementary Schools and alternative provisions to help young people catch-up on their schooling past COVID-19?

Health and Wellbeing

Physical, mental health and wellbeing are impacted by factors which include genetics, lifestyles, social and community networks and living and working conditions.

Mental health and wellbeing have worsened over the past year, particularly among the most disadvantaged communities in Milton Keynes due to the COVID-19 pandemic and are now exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis.

Overview

Mental health, physical health and a healthy lifestyle all contribute to an individual's overall health and wellbeing according to *Department of Health* research ^{ix}. Mental health and feelings of wellbeing have worsened particularly among the poorest communities in Milton Keynes, because of the wider impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and now the cost-of-living crisis. (*The Department of Health, The Relationship between Wellbeing and Health, A compendium of Factsheets: Wellbeing across the Lifecourse 2014*)

The wellbeing of young people in Milton Keynes is of particular concern with high numbers reporting mental health challenges, particularly anxiety. There are long waiting lists for treatments, impacting on quality of life and school performance.

People from ethnically diverse communities are more likely to experience a mental health problem, are less likely to receive support and have poorer outcomes from services.

Physical activity has a positive contribution to both mental and physical health and healthy aging. Young people from the poorest neighbourhoods are less active than those from the least deprived neighbourhoods.

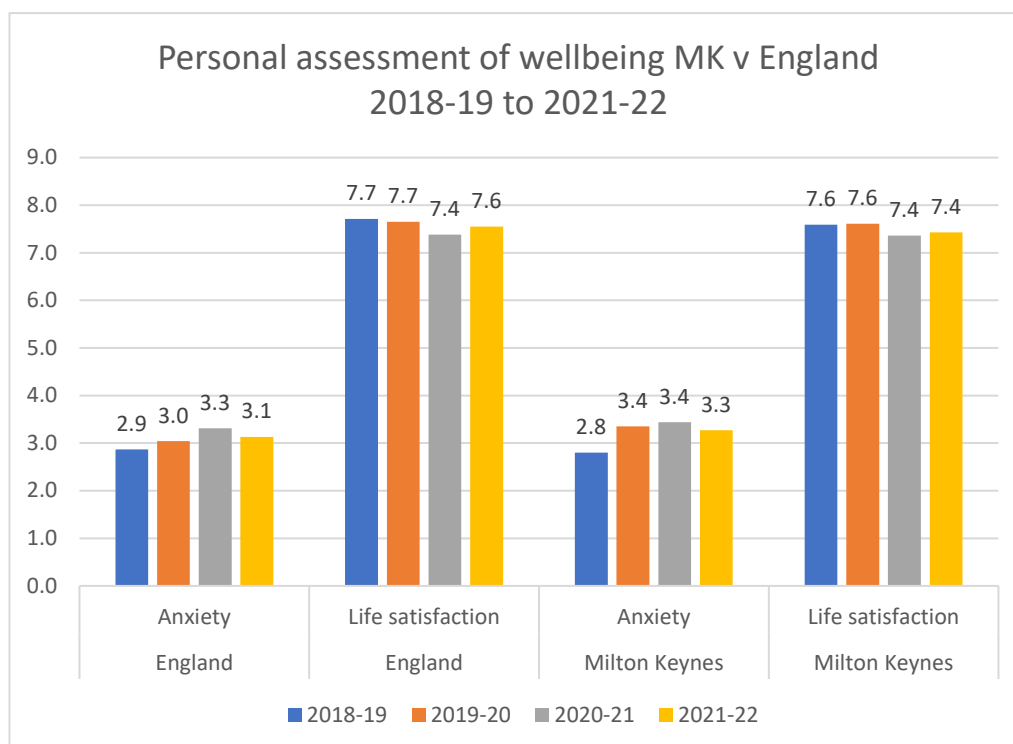
Indicators of the prevalence of health conditions that are likely to impact on a person developing health problems in older age have a lower incidence in Milton Keynes compared with the average for England, although those living in poorer communities often live with poorer health.

Wellbeing

Milton Keynes residents had increased levels of anxiety and decreased levels of life satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with the rest of the country. This is based on a self-assessment of wellbeing collected in government surveys. Research by the *Department of Health* indicates that subjective wellbeing influences health and life expectancy. ^x (*The Department of Health, The Relationship between Wellbeing and Health, A compendium of Factsheets: Wellbeing across the Lifecourse 2014*)

Table 18: Personal assessment of wellbeing, adults Milton Keynes v England pre and post the COVID-19 pandemic ([Ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing](https://ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing)).

Self-ranking on a scale of 0 - 10



Although there have been some improvements since 2020, anxiety levels in Milton Keynes measured at 2021/22 are slightly higher than the national average and above the pre-pandemic levels.

Analysis of the data at national level found:

- The proportion of women (26.6%) reporting elevated levels of anxiety was significantly higher than for men (20.0%).
- The greatest proportion reporting elevated levels of anxiety (25.1%) were aged 50 to 54 years.
- A greater proportion of disabled adults reported poor personal well-being.
- Those of mixed ethnic groups and Black, African, Caribbean, or Black British reported lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of anxiety compared with White, Asian, or Asian British groups.
- Those with no qualifications reported higher levels of anxiety.

(Personal well-being in the UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk))

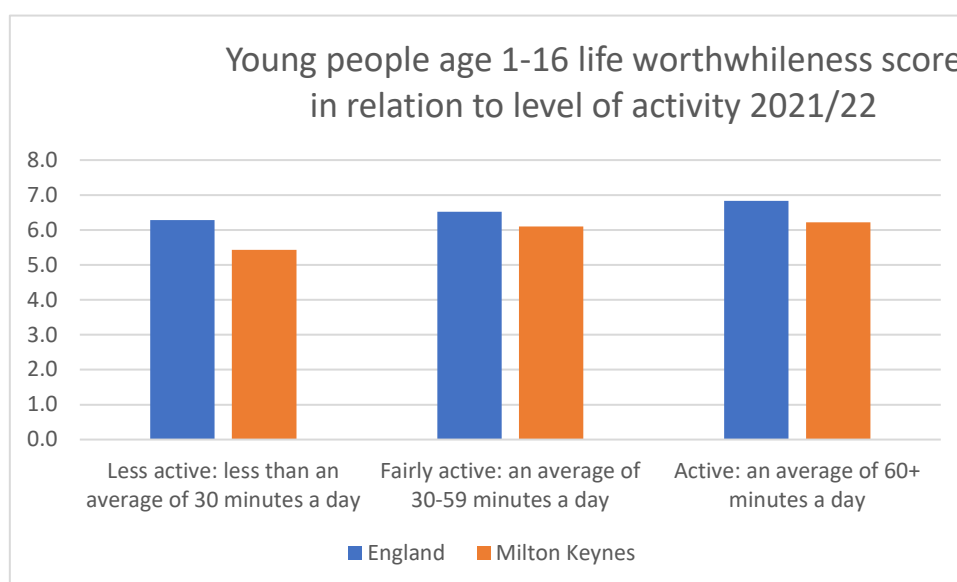
Physical activity

Physical activity is important not only for physical health, but it has also been identified as beneficial for mental health. ^{xi} (*Anxiety and depression in young people | What we do | Wellcome*)

64% of adults in Milton Keynes report being active for at least 150 minutes a week, the level recommended by health professionals, compared with the average for England of 63%. (*Sports England Active Lives Survey*) Latest data 2020/21)

Over half those age 11-16 are not active for the recommended 60 minutes plus a day, and the rate is lowest, at 43%, among children living in the most deprived neighbourhoods of Milton Keynes. Those age 11-16 who were less physically active in Milton Keynes report lower levels of feeling that their life is worthwhile, compared with those who are more active. Whatever their level of activity young people in Milton Keynes gave lower scores for feeling that their life was worthwhile.

Table 19: Young people's reported feelings that life is worthwhile in relation to level of activity. (*Sports England Active Lives Survey*).



The latest NHS survey of young people (published November 2023) also indicates a link between physical activity and mental health. The survey showed that those with a probable mental health disorder were less likely to have taken part in exercise or visited green spaces. ^{xii} (*Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey - NHS Digital*)

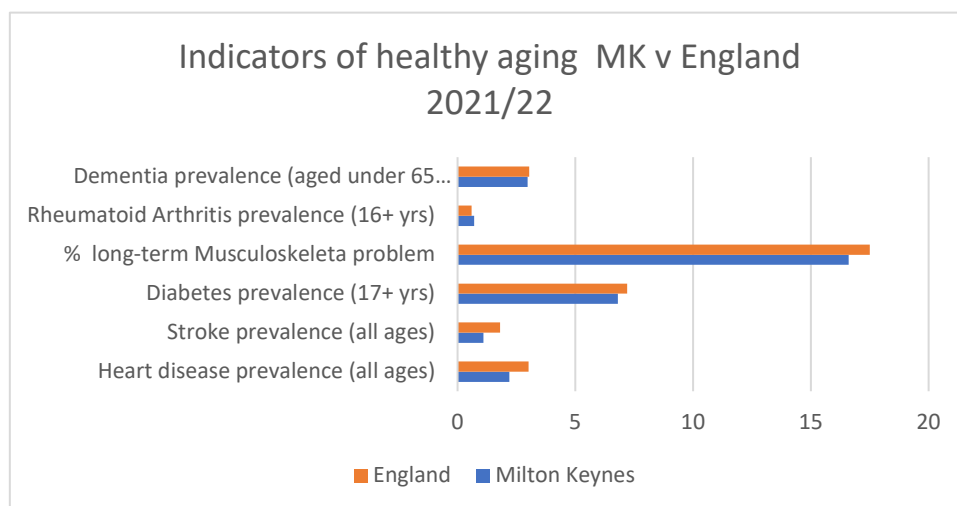
Physical activity levels are lower among children from ethnically diverse groups compared with white groups. ^{xiii} (*kingsfund.org.uk/publications/health-people-ethnic-minority-groups-england*)

(Note: A 'probable mental health disorder' is identified by analysing the results of a specific questionnaire known as the 'Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire' [sdqinfo.org](https://www.sdqinfo.org)).

Healthy aging

30% of those age 50 and above in Milton Keynes have a long-term health problem or disability and this is the same percentage as for England (*LGIInform/ONS*).

Table 20: Indicators of healthy aging Milton Keynes v England (<https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/healthy-ageing/>).



Health conditions that are likely to impact on a person developing health problems in older age have a lower incidence in Milton Keynes overall compared with the average for England. There is a lower prevalence for dementia under 65, heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and musculoskeletal problems.

However, there is a higher prevalence in some of the more deprived communities of obesity, smoking and long-term health conditions. Milton Keynes City Council is co-ordinating pilot projects in particular neighbourhoods to help address these health inequalities.

A programme to help residents reduce excess weight, identified as a major cause of health conditions and early death, was launched by the Director of Public Health in 2022. It includes weight management programmes alongside systems working to build a healthier food and physical activity environment in Milton Keynes. ^{xiv} (*PowerPoint Presentation*) (modern.gov.co.uk)

Mental health and wellbeing among young people

National overview

Depression, anxiety, and psychosis start when people are young according to an article in Nature online ^{xv}. (*Youth mental health crisis management | Nature Mental Health*) They can have a significant impact on all aspects of a person's life.

The main findings of a national longitudinal study by the NHS, published November 2023 into the mental health of young people, indicates that poverty and associated worries about money and affordability are significant drivers in likelihood of young people experiencing mental health conditions.^{xvi} (*Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey - NHS Digital*)

The study identified that in 2023, about 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years had a probable mental disorder. For 17- to 25-year-olds, rates were twice as high among women than men. Among those age 11- 16 there was a strong link between being bullied and having a probable mental disorder.

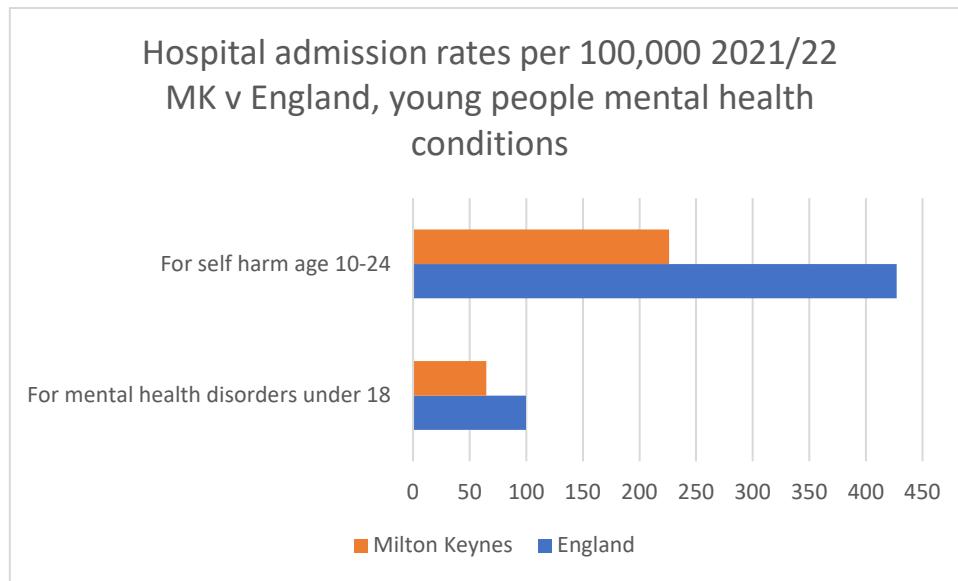
Milton Keynes children and young people mental health issues

A report into public health in Milton Keynes states that during the COVID-19 pandemic there were both increasing numbers and increasing acuity of children and young people suffering crisis. This included a surge in the numbers presenting with eating disorders. Following the first lockdown there was a surge in mental health referrals when children and young people went back to school. ^{xvii} (*Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey - NHS Digital*)

The lead for the *MK Mental Health Leads Network*, Liz Nightingale, shared her insights on the current causes of mental health issues among young people in Milton Keynes. (The network was set up five years ago by Milton Keynes City Council to help with co-ordination of issues and solutions across schools in relation to mental health.) She identified that sources of anxiety may include parental stress around cost-of-living, which are picked up by children, even though parents try to keep it from them. Some children have also been affected by trauma, domestic violence and bereavement which fuels anxiety. Social media usage may create anxiety among some young people in relation to body image for example and can allow abusive relationships to develop between children.

The most recent *Public Health England* data on the rate of hospital admissions among young people for mental health conditions is for the year 2021/22. It indicates that in Milton Keynes Hospital admission rates for those who self-harm or have a mental health condition is lower than the average for England. However, these results can be affected by factors, including how the local mental health system works, rather than providing evidence of the scale of need.

Table 20: Hospital admission rates per 100,000 MK v England among young people for mental health conditions (phe.org.uk/profile/child-health-profiles/data).



A Senior Sister on the Children’s Emergency Ward, of Milton Keynes University Hospital, said: “We get a lot of children who are currently on the waiting list for *Children and Young People’s Mental Health Services (CAMHS)* coming into the Emergency Department as they are advised if they come to the Emergency Department they may be seen quicker. We explain to parents that presenting to the Emergency Department will not affect their place on the waiting list, however we will assess and support their child based on their current presentation.”

Preliminary findings from recent surveys (Oxwell and Beewell) ^{xviii} aimed at increasing understanding the wellbeing of young people in Milton Keynes (aged 11 – 18) surfaced behaviours, experiences and beliefs that are likely to negatively impact on their wellbeing and mental health. (*Understanding the Mental Health & Wellbeing of Children & Young People in Milton Keynes – The BeeWell & OxWell Survey(s) October 23*)

The OxWell Survey (2023) – Focused on secondary school age pupils in Milton Keynes

- **25% are skipping meals due to weight concerns.**
- 25% pupils (aged 11-16) said they had had a mental health problem in the last 12 months.
- 38% spend more than four hours a day on social media networking sites.
- One in three children think their school deals well with racism.
- More than one in four children often or always feel sad or empty.

The BeeWell Survey (2023) – Focused on pupils in special schools and alternative provision in Milton Keynes:

- Life satisfaction and feelings towards self was lower in pupils whose gender identity was not the same as registered at birth.
- Female pupils experienced lower ability to exert control over their own emotions and lower wellbeing, particularly those in Year 12 (i.e., age 16-17).
- Importance of building friend and family relationships for pupils who are eligible for pupil premium (across all surveys).

Support for children and young people with mental health disorders in Milton Keynes

Services in Milton Keynes work towards the National iTHRIVE Programme to improve services for children and young people’s mental health using the iTHRIVE Framework for system change. This contains four areas of mental health services:

- Getting Advice.
- Getting Help (targeted, outcomes-focused help to address the specific mental health issue, delivered by a professional, not necessarily a trained mental health provider).
- Getting More Help (this includes Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)).
- Getting Risk Support (for crisis intervention).

Public Health Principal – Children, Young People & Families, Milton Keynes, James Dove, said: “The data and feedback from stakeholders suggest that there are service gaps, particularly in the “Getting Help” group of services, which are often provided by the voluntary and community sector. The services are currently not well-resourced and have no long-term stable funding stream. This can result in children and young people having limited access to early help and referrals being made to CAMHS that often do not meet their criteria and would not be appropriate to receive their support. The ‘knock on impact’ can also result in CAMHS experiencing significant pressures and demand on their resources. Children and young people can therefore wait longer for support and consequently end up needing much more intensive services that may have never needed in the first place.”

Partners can make referrals to the Milton Keynes Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services but the average wait for assessment is 20 weeks and the average wait for a routine follow up is also lengthy but has improved from 37.5 weeks in October 2023 to 27 weeks in June 2023. Causes for the delay are cited as insufficient staffing to meet an increased demand for the services. Update for Local offer from Central & Northwest London Foundation Trust – CAMH team (June 23).

Schools have a key role in identifying those with mental health disorders. Resources they can use are counsellors employed by the school, referring the young person to support services provided by charities and in some areas, local GPs can signpost parents towards support.

The Milton Keynes City Council Mental Health Support Team is an early intervention service that works in partnership with certain local schools and within some localities in Milton Keynes to offer a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing. The teams are currently embedded within three networks of schools.

Research by the *Wellcome Foundation* also identified that prevention is essential as well as treatments to reduce the burden of these problems on young people.^{xix} (*Anxiety and depression in young people | What we do | Wellcome*)

Adult mental health

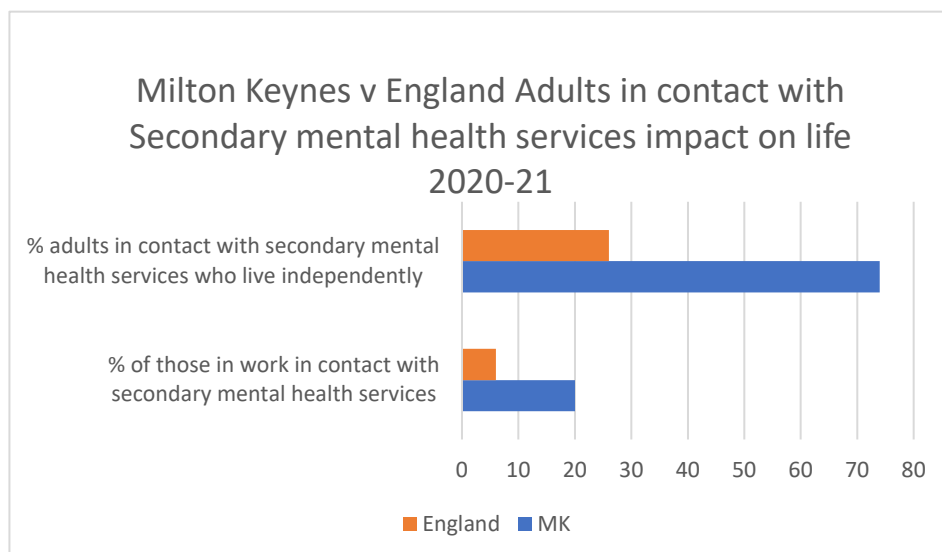
Recent research by the Wellcome Foundation indicates that flexible working can benefit mental health by decreasing the amount of conflict people experience between their work and home lives and that more job autonomy is associated with lower rates of anxiety and depression.^{xx} (*Understanding workplace mental health: Putting science to work | Reports | Wellcome*)

Milton Keynes City Council has compiled advice, support, and training to improve mental health in the workplace and is promoting healthy workplace standards. It also offers free health and wellbeing course at community venues in Milton Keynes.

Milton Keynes residents with mental health conditions reported to Healthwatch, Milton Keynes that they felt that a lot of the care or treatment they receive is done to them, not with them, and that they were not involved in discussions about the benefits or side effects of available treatments according to local research.^{xxi} (*Healthwatch Milton Keynes Denny Review*)

20% of adults who are in contact with secondary mental health services in Milton Keynes are in paid employment compared with 6% as the average of unitary authorities in England, and 74% live independently compared with 26% for England. (*Oct 2022 data, LGINform*).

Table 21: Adults in contact with Secondary mental health services, MK v England 2020/21 (*LGINform*).



1.6% of working age adults in Milton Keynes are in receipt of mental health related benefits compared with 1.9% nationally. (*Department for Work and Pensions, OCSI*)

Racial inequities and mental health

A government publication which summarised a wide number of studies into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health by ethnicity found Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, and White British men reported statistically significant declines in mental health compared with other groups. However, the study did point out that it was difficult to draw clear conclusions because of the interplay of a wide range of factors including income, employment, family circumstances. ^{xxii} ([5. Ethnicity Spotlight - GOV.UK www.gov.uk](#))

Research by *MIND* found that people from Ethnically Diverse communities are more likely to experience a mental health problem, less likely to receive support, and have poorer outcomes from services because of the interaction of a wide range of issues around stigma and discrimination, lack of trust, Eurocentric framing of mental health and lack of appropriate support among others. ^{xxiii} ([www.mind.org.uk/media/12427/final_anti-racism-scoping-research-report.pdf](#))

While there is no evidence that talking therapies are unsuitable or ineffective for ethnic minority groups, people from Black and ethnic minority groups experience worse access to, and outcomes from, NHS talking therapies compared to White British groups (*NHS Race and Health Observatory*).

A report covering Milton Keynes, Bedfordshire and Luton Integrated Care System into recovery rates from those who had participated in Improving Access to Psychological Therapies services (IAPTS) for treatment of depression and anxiety disorders showed that in the quarter to June 2022, the recovery rate overall for Milton Keynes, Bedfordshire and Luton was on the target threshold of 50%, however the rate for Black, Asian and minority ethnic patients was below, at 48%. ^{xxiv} (*milton-keynes-bedfordshire-and-luton (rcpsych.ac.uk)*)

Community support

Voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations are supporting people to stay well in their communities (*Director of Public Health Report 2020 /2021, Milton Keynes City Council*). An example is the *Grapevine Wellbeing Hub* in Christ the Vine Community Church, Coffee Hall. The wild-life friendly community garden is supported by volunteers from the community group, *Planting Up*. It aims to be accessible to all and to help lonely and isolated people get outdoors, to connect with other people, nature and to learn new things. The hub also offers free crafting workshops and has financial support from the Co-op Local Community Fund.

Milton Keynes-based charity, *Arts for Health*, uses arts and creativity to improve health and wellbeing, delivering innovative and inclusive arts activities in community and healthcare settings.

Over 2023-24 it is delivering a programme called “*Creatively Minded, Ethnically Diverse*” for adults and older teenagers. The programme will be created and delivered by professional artists from diverse communities who represent culturally centred practice in their art form. An example is the dance-based workshops run November 2023 by *Pagrag Dance* for younger adults from South Asian communities, who are struggling with low mood, loneliness, anxiousness, and other mental health concerns. The sessions aim to help build a sense of community through sharing experiences of participants common South Asian heritage and providing social and physical activity to improve wellbeing.

Suicide

The suicide rate in 2021 in Milton Keynes equated to 12.9 deaths per 100,000 population, which is higher than the England average of 10.4 deaths per 100,000 population data based on Milton Keynes Coroners’ Inquest files.

Between 2019 and 2021 there was a 45% decrease in those dying by suicide in Milton Keynes, but it has not been possible to draw conclusions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns in relation to suicides.

A report by Milton Keynes City Council provides a detailed analysis of the local picture which is summarised below.^{xxv 1} (*Suicide Audit, Milton Keynes 2019-21, Milton Keynes City Council*)

78% of those who died by suicide between 2019 and 2021 were male and the majority were age 30-49. Among women, the age band with the highest numbers was 20 to 29. The age profile of those who die by suicide is slightly younger than the national picture where the age band with the highest rate is 45–59-year-olds of both sexes.

A range of factors at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels can increase the risk of suicide rather than one single event. The analysis of suicides in Milton Keynes over three years identified commonalities in lifestyles and risk factors.

The highest rates of suicide tend to be in those neighbourhoods which are more deprived. These residents are likely to be experiencing higher levels of health inequality and less of the protective factors including good employment, social contacts and community support and access to professional support.

Other risk factors include a previous history of self-harm or attempted suicide. Personal or social circumstances that increase the risk of dying by suicide include:

- Mental health issues particularly depression and anxiety that may or may not be diagnosed by health professionals and often accompanied by other risk factors.
- Multiple life stresses including relationship breakdown, financial issues (including debt, job loss, gambling) and addiction to illicit drugs or alcohol dependence.
- Long-term physical health issues.
- Recent relationship breakdown or estrangement from family.
- Work pressures including relationships at work, and performance or misconduct proceedings.

It has also been identified that a risk factor is the absence of protective factors for good mental health such as personal coping and problem-solving skills, supportive relationships, meaningful employment, community connectedness and good health.

“We want to reduce the stigma of talking about suicide, so people with suicidal thoughts come forward and ask for help and those who have contact with someone who might be at risk of suicide do not feel afraid to reach out to them. Some people fear that talking to someone about their suicidal thoughts may exacerbate the situation, but this is really not the case. We are strongly committed to reducing the numbers of deaths by suicides in Milton Keynes. Each one can have a devastating impact on family, friends, and the community.”

Emma Bates, Public Health Principal– Public Mental Health and Wellbeing, Milton Keynes City Council

Vital Action

Local social enterprise, Arthur Ellis, provides one-to-one mental health support to all ages at a low fee for private individuals. During COVID-19, referrals increased significantly, and Milton Keynes Community Foundation provided a grant that enabled Arthur Ellis to develop a bespoke referral management system that allowed them to accept service users quickly and efficiently. The new system allowed them to respond to referrals within minutes and set up appointments, usually within a week.

The social enterprise notes that before the COVID-19 pandemic, the most common presenting issue among young people was anxiety and depression. More recently, a higher proportion have come forward for issues around relationships, bullying, conflict management and self-esteem.

Jon Manning, founder, and CEO of Arthur Ellis, attributes this to the fact that during the various lockdowns young people became unused to dealing with relationships in person and how to navigate them.

“People are now building relationships but finding it difficult to maintain them, getting into conflict or struggling to manage the nuances within these relationships” Jon Manning.

Jon also noted that cost of living pressure can be behind some of the mental health issues brought to Arthur Ellis. He advocates that taking responsibility for our own mental health is important at the preventative stage.

Vital Voice

“I am worried about the future in relation to the mental health of children and young people. Parents and professionals can find it harder to understand the pressures that children are under. For example: how their constant use of social media can exacerbate problems especially as things change so quickly with modern technology and the content they are being exposed to. Underfunding is also a cause for concern, especially if schools cannot afford to fund support services for their pupils.”

Liz Nightingale, The lead for the Milton Keynes Health School Leads Network

Vital Signs

- 20% of adults who are in contact with state mental health services in Milton Keynes are in paid employment, compared to **the 6% national average.**
- The proportion of women 26.6% reporting high levels of anxiety was significantly higher than men 20%
- 25% of pupils in Milton Keynes (aged 11-16) said they had a mental health problem in the last 12 months.

Vital Thinking

How we help school children to access mental health support in MK?

Thank you to the following organisations that contributed to this report.

Acorn Nurseries Arthur Ellis Citizens Advice Milton Keynes Dreamsai Fresh Youth MK Friends of the Caribbean HubHub. Old Bath House Wolverton	Milton Keynes City Council MK Foodbank Milton Keynes University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust Milton Keynes Health Leads Network Planting Up Transition Towns Milton Keynes
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Special thank you to Katherine Bull for all her hard work in collating the information and data.

Contact details to be added and QR code for previous reports

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