

Children and Young People Vulnerabilities and Inequalities – Executive Summary

2023/24

Children and young people vulnerabilities and inequalities - executive summary

Vulnerabilities can have a strong relationship to, and be made worse by, the health inequalities experienced by children and young people across Central Bedfordshire. The following summarise the findings across five categories of vulnerability:

Domestic abuse

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 established children living with domestic abuse as victims in their own right due to the long-lasting impact it can have. For many victims/survivors, and their families and children, the impact can be life-long and take mental, emotional, physical, social, and financial form.

Key findings:

- In 2023, 2,142 incidents of domestic abuse were reported to Bedfordshire Police, but crime data only provides a partial picture of the actual levels of domestic abuse experienced by more than 500 children in households across Bedfordshire.

Priority areas for action:

The Domestic Abuse Strategy for 2022 – 2025¹ outlines the Council priorities for responding to domestic abuse as required by the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Current service priorities for children and young people are:

1. Play therapy offer for all children living in Refuge accommodation
2. The appointment of two KIDVA (Children's Independent Domestic Violence Advocates that work with children living with high-risk domestic abuse to understand their experiences, create safety plans and advocate on their behalf.
3. Work with schools across Central Bedfordshire to deliver the RSHE curriculum and training, awareness raising, and signposting offer.

Children and young people in need of help and protection

Children in need are a legally defined (Children Act 1989) group of children assessed as needing help and protection due to risks to their development or health. This group includes children subject to Child In Need (CIN) plans, Child Protection plans, children in care, young carers, and disabled children. Children in need also include young people aged 18 or over who continue to receive care, accommodation or support from Children's Services, and unborn children.

Key findings:

- In the last five years the numbers of children in need in Central Bedfordshire has increased steadily but the rates (per 10,000 children) remain lower than regional and national average rates.
- Local data on primary need at assessment over the last five years in Central Bedfordshire report that cases related to abuse, or neglect continue to predominate and have increased since the pandemic. Cases relating to families in acute distress have also increased in number recently, whilst cases relating to family dysfunction and absent parenting are relatively constant.

Priority areas for action:

4. Ongoing strengthening and promotion of the local SEND offer² via appropriate communication channels to ensure local awareness of the support available. This will be subject to quarterly review.
5. Children Centres to continue to develop and strengthen the 0–19 Intervention and Support Service, providing the first line of response to local families in need, ensuring integrated

¹ Via [Domestic abuse strategy | Central Bedfordshire Council](#) (Accessed on 20 September 2024)

² See [Central Bedfordshire SEND Local Offer](#) (Accessed 20 September 2024)

support for children and families from pre-birth onwards in conjunction with a wide range of partner agencies.

6. Introduction of a practice model to ensure consistency and robustness. A new Principal Social Worker (PSW) role has been recruited and the PSW will be responsible for delivering the new practice model.
7. Continued commitment to community and early help services to provide early intervention to families when they need it; in particular the extension of service delivery through use of 96 outreach venues including libraries, schools, parks, and Traveller sites.
8. Embed and continuously review the impact and effectiveness of 'New Ways of Working' re-model for Children Services and Early Help, which provides a more joined-up service to children and family receiving social care support from the Council.
9. Support the Early Help Plus teams to become part of Family Help - a joined-up service offering support and intervention to children from early help to initiation of care proceedings.

Children in care

These are children under the age of 18 for whom Children's Services in the Local Authority are responsible for providing care and accommodation. Children and young people entering care may have a history of physical, sexual or emotional abuse; some may have suffered the death of a parent or have parents who are unable to look after them properly because of illness or other personal issues. The health needs of children in care are critical because they are at greater risk of not realising their full potential, and having poorer outcomes in terms of physical health, emotional health, and educational attainment.

Key findings:

- In Central Bedfordshire over the past few years there has been a stable trend of children being placed in care (327 in 2021/22). Whilst most children live safely in care, a minority experience harm within the care system.

Priorities areas for action:

10. Introduction of Lead Champion Member roles. A Lead Champion Member, informed by feedback from The Children in Care Council will be responsible for supporting officers to identify and help overcome potential barriers and challenges, using their networks to bring about positive change.
11. Expand the providers within the DPS (dynamic purchasing system) which reduces the number of young people who may experience unplanned changes to placement. If placements do break down, it allows access to a greater pool of alternative placements to enable timely transition for young people.
12. Develop and expand on the offer of training flats, which has provided tenancy practice/ support for young people who require additional support, to provide a stepped approach in navigating some of the complexities of managing their own home before being allocated a permanent tenancy.
13. Recruitment of an Operational Manager for Residential Services who will oversee the existing, in-house residential Children's Homes across Central Bedfordshire, and take the lead on the design, planning, development, and review of new residential in-house Children's Homes, whilst also carrying out the statutory duties of a Responsible Individual.

Young carers

A person is a provider of unpaid care if they give any help or support to family members, friends, neighbours, or others because of long-term physical or mental health or disability, or problems related to old age. Caring can have positive impacts emotionally and psychologically and can be rewarding; however, evidence shows that it can affect their health, social activity, mental health, and education and, later in life, employment. A young carer is someone aged 25 and under who cares for a friend or family member who, due to illness, disability, a mental health problem, or an addiction, cannot cope without their support.

Key findings:

- The latest Census 2021 data reports that 522 (0.9%) of children aged 0-15 years and 1,059 (4.2%) young people aged 16-24 years were providing informal, unpaid care in Central Bedfordshire. These rates were similar to national rates and are likely underestimates for many reasons.
- In June 2024 there were 710 registered young carers in Central Bedfordshire, half due to parental/household illness or disability, 49% because of sibling illness or disability and 1% because both a parent and sibling had needs.
- Young carers are referred into the Access and Referral Hub in Central Bedfordshire which completes a short analysis of need and determines if a full assessment and/or support services are required by the appropriate area within Children's Services.

Priority areas for action:

14. Further strengthen the transitional arrangements for young carers moving into adulthood.
15. Continue to increase the visibility of the Young Carers offer.
16. Develop data maturity and use this to enable analysis of trends within young carers.
17. Promotion of the Family Group Meeting service for young carers. The service is available within Central Bedfordshire however, further promotion of this availability to young carers should be used within schools and the Young Carers Support Group.
18. Continue to raise awareness among the wider population of the young carers support available. Consideration of the most appropriate and effective means of communication i.e., social media.

Unaccompanied asylum seeking/refugee children and young people

Children seeking asylum are particularly vulnerable for reasons including separation from their families, limited or no English language skills and the likelihood of past trauma (e.g. civil war, trafficking, and exploitation). The local authority has a duty to protect and support separated children as soon as the child becomes looked after by the local authority.

Key findings: In 2021-22 (latest available data) there were 30 children seeking asylum and looked after in Central Bedfordshire (excluding children in care in short-term placements), a number lower than in the last five years and below that of nearest comparable local authorities.

Priority areas for action:

19. Commitment to continue the work to ensure engagement with vulnerable children not in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) including refugees and asylum-seeking children.
20. Support refugees and asylum-seeking children and their families to engage in the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme.
21. Central Bedfordshire Council should continue to build long-term working relationships with local support services for separated children including the Red Cross, and the Luton Refugee centre.
22. Continue to improve the use of in-house accommodation options for Children Seeking Sanctuary aged 17-25, who have not yet achieved outcomes in respect of legal status. This will support stability in accommodation and provide a platform for transition during/once legal status is known.