

VITAL SIGNS

MK

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Vital Signs MK is an annual report published by Milton Keynes Community Foundation. The report pulls on published data; both local and national, coupled with insights from the local voluntary sector.

The aim of both the quantitative and qualitative data is to illustrate the real lived experience of the citizens of Milton Keynes.

This year's report examines how the social landscape of Milton Keynes has transformed since our report in 2020 – highlighting the pandemic's enduring economic effects, rising cost-of-living pressures, and the ever-growing needs observed from local charities and community organisations.

By comparing 2020 findings with current data, this report highlights how local diverse communities, economies, and support networks have had to adapt to a rapidly shifting environment since the pandemic began.

While each area within the report focuses on distinct themes, the themes are deeply intersectional. We encourage, therefore, viewing the findings as a whole to better understand the full experience of life in Milton Keynes.

We hope that the findings presented in the report will act as a conversation starter for our community to work together to improve the lives of all residents and create a fairer, more inclusive community in Milton Keynes.



United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The themes explored in Vital Signs MK closely align with the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which call for global action to reduce poverty and inequality while addressing climate change.

This alignment is reflected in the following key areas:



Poverty and Disadvantage
SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere



Work
SDG 8: Promote decent work and economic growth



Crime
SDG 16: Promote peace, justice, and strong institutions



Arts and Heritage
SDG 10: Reduce inequalities

Welcome from CEO

The concept of 'Vital Signs' was established 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.

Our Vital Signs MK report serves as a snapshot of how our community is evolving and highlights areas where action is needed to ensure a fairer, more inclusive city.

This year, we report on four areas of Vital Signs: Crime & Safety; Poverty and Disadvantage; Work and Arts and Heritage.

The report helps us to identify our strategic priorities and the areas we need to focus our grant giving and rent subsidy support. We use this report to advise individuals, families, and businesses in their philanthropic aims, helping them to direct their giving to where it's needed most and can make the most impact.

Ian Revell



CRIME & SAFETY



Crime and the fear of crime have physical and psychological effects, for example, whether people feel safe in their communities. This section analyses trends in crime based on data from the Police and ONS (Office for National Statistics).

Crime and safety remain of critical concern in Milton Keynes, which parallels the broader trends found across England and Wales. **Notably in 2024, Milton Keynes continues to have a higher crime rate than the national average.**

The overall crime rate in Milton Keynes has increased by **35.9%**, rising from **96.3 per 1,000 people** in 2019 to **130.9 per 1,000 people** between 2023 and 2024. 'Violent Crime and Sexual Offences' is now the most frequently reported category of crime in MK.

The rate of **Violent Crime and Sexual Offences in Milton Keynes** has risen by **77.2%**, increasing from **29.8 per 1,000 people** (Sep 2018 – Aug 2019) to **52.8 per 1,000 people** (Jun 2023 – May 2024). This highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to enhance public safety and address concerns, particularly regarding the safety and wellbeing of women in Milton Keynes.

Nationally, crime disproportionately affects certain demographics, particularly women, as highlighted by the latest Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW).

The data reveals that **6.3% of women experienced domestic abuse, compared to 2.9% of men.** Women are also more likely to be victims of stalking, sexual offences, and harassment, reflecting broader societal issues and the persistent gender disparity in experiences of violence and abuse.

The impact of the rising cost-of-living on survivors of Sexual Violence and Domestic Abuse and the services that support them has been well documented.

Women's Aid Federation of England's 2023 'No Woman Turned Away' report illustrated the continued impact of the cost-of-living crisis – seeing a **4% annual rise in women without enough money to pay for essentials** for themselves and their children while waiting for a refuge space.¹

With crime rates rising and gender-based violence remaining a serious issue, Milton Keynes must continue to invest in preventative measures and targeted interventions to improve safety for all residents.

However, crime statistics alone do not provide the full picture. Survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence often do not report crimes due to fear or stigma, meaning the true scale of the issue is likely higher.

Violence Against Women and Girls

The United Nations define Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) as:

*"Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women."*²

Local efforts to tackle VAWG in Milton Keynes include the SaferMK Partnership's Priority 3 strategy, which emphasises improving safety and addressing violence in the 'nighttime economy'.

SaferMK's Strategy

The SaferMK Partnership is the statutory Community Safety Partnership for Milton Keynes and ensures that agencies are brought together to tackle and reduce crime and anti-social behaviour.

Its vision of "sustaining safe and resilient communities together"³ aims to make Milton Keynes a safer place by reducing the fear of crime, minimising the likelihood of becoming a victim of crime and by addressing community safety concerns to improve the lives of our residents, businesses and visitors.

To support these efforts, SaferMK has partnered with Milton Keynes Community Foundation to establish a £100,000 fund dedicated to reducing violent crime in the city. This initiative aims to provide targeted grant funding for community-led projects that address safety concerns and promote crime prevention.



¹(Source: Women's Aid, (2023) Nowhere To Turn, 2023: Findings from the seventh year of the No Woman Turned Away project, Bristol: Women's Aid.)

²(Source: <https://www.un.org/en/observances/ending-violence-against-women-day>)

SaferMK's strategy, reviewed annually, serves as a commitment by community safety partners to work together to maximise the impact on safety in the agreed areas of priority. Published in 2022, Priority 3 (VAWG) highlighted 'both women and men feel less safe in Milton Keynes compared to previous years' and that 'VAWG in the night-time economy is a national concern.'⁴

The partnership's next steps are to 'engage with stakeholders, including licensed premises and the public to understand how women and girls feel about their safety in open spaces and the night-time economy.'⁵

While concerns often focus on the risks of women going out alone at night, Rape Crisis for England and Wales highlights that in **86% of rape cases against women, the perpetrator is someone the survivor knows—45% of the time, a partner or ex-partner.**⁶

White Ribbon Day

White Ribbon UK, a leading organisation committed to ending VAWG, highlights that such violence is deeply rooted in harmful masculine traits and calls for cultural change through the engagement of men.

Its 2024 campaign, **#ItStartsWithMen**, underscored the responsibility of men to challenge attitudes and behaviours that contribute to a fear of violence.

Positive action in Milton Keynes has already been demonstrated, with MK City Council achieving White Ribbon Accreditation in 2022, signalling its commitment to addressing these challenges.

As part of the effort to raise awareness and promote action, Milton Keynes hosts an annual vigil each November, established in 2020, to mark the city's solidarity with women and girls both locally and globally who deserve to live free from violence.

Milton Keynes Community Foundation supported the 2024 vigil with funding toward the cost of the event space. The vigil underscored the power of community partnerships in driving change. Together, these groups are working towards a future where Milton Keynes continues to grow as a city free from violence towards women and girls.

“

“Women and girls have the right to feel safe in our city. Whilst we are proud to call ourselves a White Ribbon City, we know there is still more work to be done. Lots of people are signing up to be ambassadors and champions and I am asking local organisations of all sizes to join us and lend their support to these issues. Together, we can challenge harmful behaviours and ensure that women and girls in MK can feel safe and supported by men and boys.”

Amber McQuillan, Cabinet Member for Community Safety

”



³ (Source: <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/community-safety-safermk-partnership/safermk-strategy-and-themes>)

⁴ (Source: Page 4, Community Safety Strategy, Safer MK)

⁵ (Source: Page 4, Community Safety Strategy, Safer MK)

⁶ <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/about-sexual-violence/myths-vs-realities/>



Sexual Assault and Abuse Support Service for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes (SAASSBMK)

SAASSBMK has been providing vital support, advice and counselling to individuals affected by sexual violence since 1995. Its mission is to empower survivors and their loved ones to address the trauma and suffering caused by sexual assault and abuse, including non-recent and childhood experiences.

The data behind the alleged perpetrators across Milton Keynes and Buckinghamshire, provided by SAASSBMK, challenges the common misconception that women are primarily attacked by strangers.

In fact, the majority of cases (30.07%) involved **intimate relationships**, highlighting the regularity of harm within close personal connections. **Family members accounted for 22.18% of cases**, and acquaintances represented 15.82%, reinforcing that most incidents occur within familiar or trusted circles.

By contrast, **strangers were involved in only 7.44% of cases**, a reminder that the narrative of 'stranger danger' often overshadows the reality of harm caused within personal relationships. **Overall, 92% of perpetrators of sexual violence were known to the survivor**, emphasising the urgent need to address violence within relationships and community contexts.

These findings underscore the importance of addressing violence within relationships, whilst challenging the myth that strangers pose the greatest threat.

MK ACT

MK Act is a charity that works with over **100 families every day** to help them move on from fear and abuse. **Supporting more than 2,000 people each year** to flee domestic abuse, the charity has been providing safe emergency accommodation in Milton Keynes for nearly 50 years.

In response to growing demand, MK Act has observed a sharp rise in individuals reaching out for help. *"We are seeing a significant increase in the number of individuals contacting our crisis team, as well as a rise in referrals into the service from professionals and agencies in Milton Keynes. Additionally, the complexity of the cases we are supporting continues to grow."*

This reflects not only the increasing prevalence of domestic abuse but also the need for specialised, long-term support. **The charity's refuge accommodation, which operates at full capacity**, plays a crucial role in protecting those at the greatest risk.

"The domestic abuse refuge accommodation in Milton Keynes is available for those at the greatest risk. It operates at full capacity, providing a safe residence and essential support services for families in need,"

Sue Burke, CEO, MK ACT.

With violent crime and sexual offences remaining a key concern in the community, organisations like MK Act provide an essential lifeline, ensuring that survivors have the safety and support they need to rebuild their lives.



Vital Action

The Empower and Challenge Programme, launched in April 2024 by The Safety Centre, is an innovative educational initiative designed to address and reduce the risks of violence against women and girls (VAWG).

“Violence against women and girls is a real issue and real concern to so many of us across the community. We identified there was a real need for some early intervention and preventative work. We were absolutely thrilled when the MK Community Foundation were able to fund us to kick start this project in Milton Keynes.” – Maya Joseph-Hussain, Chief Executive Officer, The Safety Centre.

Supported with strategic funding from MK Community Foundation, the programme is delivering targeted workshops to primary and secondary school students across Milton Keynes. Between April and October 2024, the education team **delivered 106 workshops to 3,180 students in Years 6, 7, and 8 (ages 10-13).**

These workshops provided students with the tools to identify and challenge harmful behaviours, understand consent, and recognise the importance of reporting inappropriate actions. One Student reflected, **“Now I know where to report things that happen without consent.”**

The programme also provided a platform for students to connect their personal experiences with the workshop content. One Year 7 student shared, *“This was very helpful because my sister has experienced this and never spoke up,”* indicating the importance of equipping young people with tools to seek help and identify others.

By creating safe spaces for dialogue and empowering young people with knowledge, the programme promotes understanding of bodily autonomy, consent, and respectful behaviour, contributing to a safer and more inclusive community.

“I liked that now everyone should know how to act with decency.” – Year 7 Student



Vital Question:

How can we challenge the myths about sexual violence and survivors and shift attitudes towards VAWG to create real understanding and change?

Vital Statistics

- There were 38,241 total crime offences in Milton Keynes Local Authority (LA) between Jun-2023 to May-2024, with the overall crime rate being 130.9 per 1,000 population (13.09%). This was higher than the average across England of 118.1 per 1,000 population (11.81%).
- The overall crime rate in Milton Keynes LA has increased from **9.63%** (96.3 per 1,000 people) between Sep-2018 to Aug-2019 to **13.09%** (130.9 per 1,000 people) between Jun-2023 to May-2024.
- The most common crime in Milton Keynes, based on the data provided for the 12-month period (June 2023 to May 2024), is **violent crime and sexual offences**, with a rate of **52.8 incidents** per 1,000 people.
- The rate of **Violent Crime and Sexual Offences** has risen by **77.2%**, increasing from **29.8 per 1,000 people** (Sep 2018 – Aug 2019) to **52.8 per 1,000 people** (Jun 2023 – May 2024).
- Between 2023 – 2024, Aylesbury Vale and Milton Keynes Sexual Assault Support Service saw **406** referrals, over three times as many referrals compared with pre-pandemic levels of 125. (2019 –2020) An increase of **224.8%**.
- **64%** of AVSAASS work is responding to needs of Milton Keynes residents.
- According to data from SASSBMK, **92%** of perpetrators of sexual violence against its service users were known to the survivor.

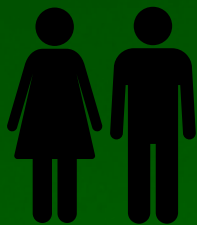


Vital Voice:

Violence against women and girls has been described as a national emergency, and rates of reports to Police and requests for support from women and girls in Milton Keynes is much higher than all other areas in our region. That's why we urgently need to work together in partnership to address the support needs of women and girls, do more to hold men accountable for their violent and abusive behaviour and improve women's sense of safety in Milton Keynes.

Bekki Osborne, CEO, SAASBMK.





406

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An increase of **224.8%**.



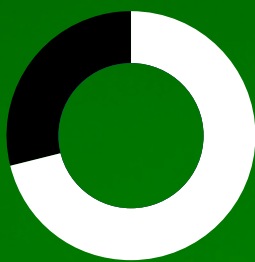
38,241

Total crime offences in Milton Keynes LA between **Jun-2023 to May-2024**



13.09%

The overall crime rate in Milton Keynes LA has increased from **9.63%** (96.3 per 1,000 people) between Sep-2018 to Aug-2019 to **13.09%** (130.9 per 1,000 people) between Jun-2023 to May-2024.



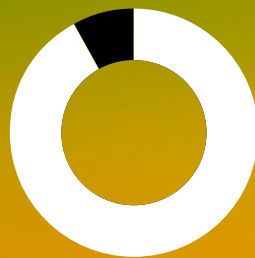
64%

64% of AVSAASS work is responding to needs of Milton Keynes residents.



77.2%

The rate of **Violent Crime and Sexual Offences** has risen by **77.2%**, increasing from **29.8 per 1,000 people** (Sep 2018 – Aug 2019) to **52.8 per 1,000 people** (Jun 2023 – May 2024).



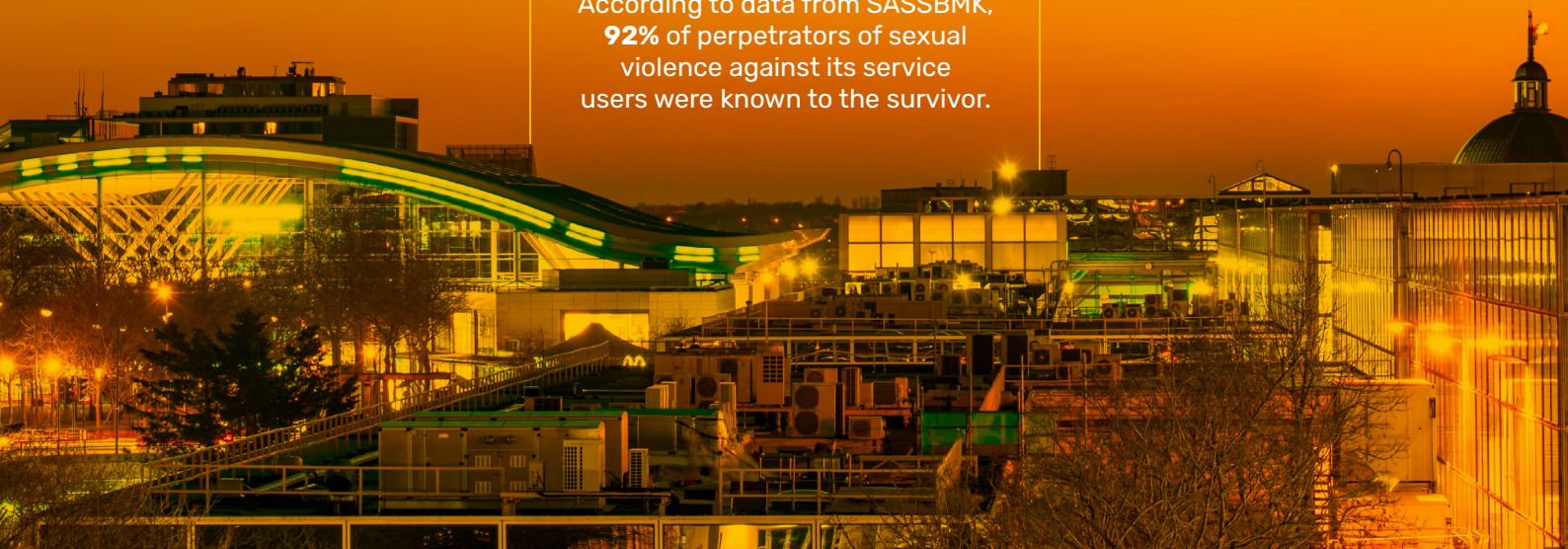
92%

According to data from SASSBMK, **92%** of perpetrators of sexual violence against its service users were known to the survivor.



52.8

The most common crime in Milton Keynes, based on the data provided for the 12-month period (June 2023 to May 2024), **is violent crime and sexual offences**, with a rate of **52.8 incidents** per 1,000 people.



A close-up photograph of a hand holding an open, empty brown leather wallet. The wallet is made of worn, textured leather with visible stitching. The interior is a lighter, suede-like material. The hand is positioned on the left side, with fingers gripping the edges of the wallet. The background is dark and out of focus.

POVERTY & DISADVANTAGE



Whilst there is no universal definition of poverty, it is widely accepted as:

“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 Shelter, Warmth, Food, Clothing, as well as being able to participate in everyday social activities.”

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) report, *A Minimum Income Standard for the United Kingdom in 2024*, offers insights into the financial requirements necessary for individuals and families to attain a socially acceptable standard of living in the UK.

This analysis is particularly relevant for understanding the economic landscape in Milton Keynes.

Key Findings from the JRF Report:

Income Requirements for a Minimum Standard of Living:

- » A single person needs to earn **£28,000** annually to meet the minimum acceptable standard of living in 2024.
- » A couple with two children requires a combined annual income of **£69,400**.

The report highlights that while benefits experienced an inflation-based increase of 6.7% in April 2024, essential costs—such as Council Tax, water, and broadband—have risen above this rate, straining household budgets.

Milton Keynes, while noted for its economic growth, faces significant income disparities and rising living costs. Milton Keynes' housing market has seen marked price increases, making affordability an issue for many residents.

Recent data indicates that the average monthly rent in Milton Keynes has risen, further adding to the financial pressure on households.

The average monthly private rent in Milton Keynes was £1,267 in August 2024. This was an increase from £1,184 in August 2023, a **7.0% rise**.⁸

The findings from the JRF report highlight the urgent need to address local challenges related to income and living standards. Initiatives focused on increasing local wages, providing affordable housing, and supporting families with children are vital in mitigating the effects of rising living costs.⁹

Poverty has become a reality for many families in Milton Keynes. Many support services and local organisations have reported seeing families who once supported their services now seeking support. This is evident in the increased reliance on organisations such as Kings Church Community Centre (KCCC).

KCCC supports the local community through its many outreach programmes, including food support and social initiatives. It operates as part of the Milton Keynes Food Bank network, contributing significantly to tackling food poverty in the region.

Its activities range from food parcel distribution to running a top-up shop and providing hot meals through a lunch drop-in service. The centre also offers a welcoming space for individuals in need of support or companionship, reinforcing community ties and cohesion.

Food Bank Usage

Operating across thirteen centres in Milton Keynes, KCCC's Food Bank accounts for one-quarter of the city's food bank support. In 2018, it distributed 800 food parcels, but since the disruption of the pandemic and the impact of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, the charity has seen an increase in demand. In 2023, the charity **distributed over 8,350 food parcels, an increase of more than 943%, or nearly ten times as many, by September 2023.**

As of September 2024, 5,000 parcels had already been distributed by KCCC, with the busiest winter months still ahead. The centre anticipates the numbers continuing to rise, reflecting the deepening struggles of households across the city.



⁸(Source: Price Index of Private Rents from the Office for National Statistics)

⁹Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2024). *A Minimum Income Standard for the United Kingdom in 2024*. [Online] Available at: www.jrf.org.uk [Accessed 4 Nov. 2024].

Lunch Drop-In Programme

The Lunch Drop-In provides individuals with hot meals, a warm space, and social opportunities. The simplicity and adaptability of offerings, such as baked potatoes, allow the organisation to cater to a wide range of cultures and needs.

The KCCC initiative has seen an increase in need:

- **2016: 30 meals served**
- **2020: 7,001 meals served**
- **2023: 16,395 meals served**
- **By September 2024, 12,401 meals had already been served, with the charity projecting over 18,000 by the end of the year.**



Top-Up Shop

The Top-Up Shop allows individuals to purchase food supplies at a subsidised rates (£2 for 10 items or £4 for 20 items). This initiative has seen an exponential increase in demand, from serving an average of **50 people per month in 2021 to over 1,000 people per month today – an increase of at least 100%.**

The charity has noted individuals and families who were once supporters of its services are now seeking help themselves. This alarming trend highlights how widespread the cost-of-living crisis has become.

The demand for support services in Milton Keynes shows no signs of decreasing, and organisations like KCCC are under increasing pressure to meet these ever-growing needs of the local community.

MK Food Bank

The MK Food Bank data for the year 2024 highlights important trends in food support demand and distribution, with a shift in service usage patterns compared to previous years.

Overall, the demand on MK Food Bank's services remains at its highest ever, **with 750 more people supported in 2024 than in the previous year.**

In 2024, approximately 5,000 households—equating to around **12,000 individuals—relied on MK Food Bank services** in Milton Keynes, with nearly half accessing support for the first time. This sharp rise in demand underscores the growing pressures faced by households across the city.

“

“Longer-term users of our services are being joined by more and more people every week. Many have never had to ask for help before but have found themselves unable to make the most basic ends meet.”

Louisa Hobbs, MK Food Bank

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Demographic data reveals a diverse group of service users: 56% identified as being from white backgrounds, while 22% came from non-white backgrounds. Notably, 18% chose not to declare their ethnicity, and 4% selected 'other'. These insights underscore the broad reach of poverty and disadvantage in Milton Keynes, spreading across communities and demographics.

Families with dependent children represented the largest proportion of food parcel recipients at 46%, followed closely by single adults at 43%, with couples without children making up the remaining 11%.

When asked about the reasons for seeking food support, nearly half (48%) cited the soaring cost of living as the primary reason for needing support. Benefits-related issues emerged as the second most common factor, accounting for 24% of cases.

Other significant reasons included family crises, health challenges, homelessness, and unemployment, which paints a stark picture of the varied struggles faced by those turning to food banks for support.



MK Food Bank - Key Stats

- **Vouchers & Emergency Parcels:**
 - » 13% decrease from 2023 but still **5% higher than 2022**.
 - » Emergency parcels **down 9% from 2023** (adult parcels ↓11%, child parcels ↑6%).
 - » Despite this drop, demand is **15% higher than in 2022**.
- **Rise in Top-Up Shop Visits:**
 - » **33%** increase from 2023.
 - » **270%** surge compared to 2022.
- **Overall Food Support Demand:**
 - » 5,000 households received **35,000 instances of food support** in 2023.
 - » Total demand **aligned with 2023**, but **43% higher than 2022**.

Looking ahead, MK Food Bank aims to further encourage top-up shop usage while reserving emergency parcels for acute crises. This shift reflects a stark reality: what was once seen as a short-term crisis response has now become a long-term way of life for many families across Milton Keynes. The increasing reliance on top-up shops highlights how poverty is no longer a temporary hardship but an ongoing cycle, requiring sustained support rather than one-off interventions.

By adapting its approach, MK Food Bank seeks to balance service dignity with efficient resource allocation, ensuring families can access food in a way that promotes stability rather than survival.

Observations from organisations such as Water Eaton Community Hub, further highlight the range of people seeking support with basic necessities, further illustrating the growing pressures faced by local families.

"More and more people are coming to us who are low-income working, but recently we've started see teachers, nurses, care workers, all needing our help."

"Recently a young couple came to us with their two young children. They work all the hours they possibly can but were in tears when they said they couldn't afford to feed their families. They'd made the decision to starve themselves for two days in order to feed their children. This is not a one-off example." – Debbie Fletcher, Water Eaton Community Hub



Vital Voice:

"Breaking the cycle of poverty in MK requires an approach that addresses various underlying causes and, as well as expanding our Top-up Shop model, our Beyond Food collaboration with MK Money Lifeline and MK Community Foundation aims to transition priority service users into financial stability and self-sufficiency. By addressing the root causes and providing support to those affected, we aim to break and subsequently prevent the cycle of poverty, creating a more inclusive and prosperous MK."

Louisa Hobbs, MK Food Bank

Vital Action:

Water Eaton Community Hub is a welcoming and inclusive space dedicated to supporting the local community through a variety of initiatives.

The Hub Larder offers a membership scheme that provides surplus supermarket food at affordable prices, making healthy food accessible to everyone, regardless of their financial situation.

By listening to the needs of its members, Water Eaton Community Hub creates a supportive environment that empowers individuals with the resources and connections they need.

"With help from our Cost-of-Living grant from MK Community Foundation, we've given out 217,800 food items, supported 29,280 families and poured 96,000 cups of tea for people in need in our community."
– Water Eaton Community Hub

The £9,840 Cost-of-Living grant made a significant difference in the growth of Water Eaton Community Hub, allowing it to expand its services and reach more people in need. With additional funds, the Hub was able to purchase more food, ensuring a consistent and diverse supply of healthy options for the community.



Vital Question:

How can we work as a community to address these underlying issues and create a Milton Keynes where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, not just survive?



Vital Statistics:

- **32%** of children in Milton Keynes, nearly one in every three, are living in poverty.¹⁰
- The average monthly private rent in Milton Keynes was **£1,267** in August 2024. This was an increase from £1,184 in August 2023, a 7.0% rise.¹¹
- MK Foodbank provided **23,228** food parcels in 2024 compared with 11,400 in 2019.
- In 2022/23, there were **10,891** Children in Low Income Families.



32%

Number of children in Milton Keynes, nearly **one in every three**, are living in poverty.¹⁰



£1,267

The average monthly private rent in Milton Keynes in August 2024. This was an increase from **£1,184** in August 2023, a 7.0% rise.¹¹



10,891

Number of Children In Low Income Families



23,228

Number of food parcels in 2024 compared with **11,400** in 2019.

¹⁰ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025) UK Poverty 2025

¹¹ [Source: Price Index of Private Rents from the Office for National Statistics]



WORK



Work and employment are central to the prosperity and resilience of any community. In Milton Keynes, employment patterns, income levels, and business activity reflect the area's economic environment.

The employment rate in Milton Keynes has risen to 77.7% in 2024, up from 76.0% in 2023, remaining competitive with England's average of 76.8%. Similarly, the economic activity rate now stands at 79.5%, indicating a highly engaged workforce. In 2023, Milton Keynes had a workforce of 187,000 employees, with the majority (71.7%) working full-time and 53,000 employees (28.3%) working part-time.

However, economic inactivity remains a concern, with 20.5% of residents aged 16–64 classified as economically inactive. While this marks a modest improvement from 21.6% in 2023, it highlights ongoing challenges of re-engaging these individuals in the workforce.

Notably, 87.3% of inactive individuals are not currently seeking employment. This trend may reflect barriers such as long-term illness or caregiving responsibilities, as evidenced by the 19.4% of inactive individuals citing long-term sickness.

Looking back, employment in Milton Keynes declined by 4.3 percentage points between 2020 and 2023, while economic inactivity rose by 4.9 percentage points over the same period, peaking at 21.6% in 2023, slightly above the national average of 21.0%. These trends reflect the economic challenges of recent years and the need for continued efforts to support workforce participation.

Unemployment in Milton Keynes remains notably low, with a rate of 2.3% among those aged 16–64 and 2.4% across all age groups, lower than England's average of 3.8%, pointing to the stability of the local labour market. However, disparities emerge when examining specific demographics.

Males aged 16–64 show slightly higher economic activity (83.5%) and employment rates (81.1%) compared with females in the same demographic (75.6% and 74.4%, respectively). Yet, the unemployment rate for females is remarkably low at just 1.6%, suggesting higher job retention or a preference for stable roles.

Earnings data for 2024 highlight a persistent gender pay gap in Milton Keynes. Full-time workers earn a median weekly wage of £773.00, which is higher than the national average (£729.80) but slightly below the South East average (£779.20). However, men working full-time earn £844.90 per week, while women earn £708.50—a **pay gap of 19.2%**. This gap is narrower than the regional average (22.1%) but wider than the national gap (**15.5%**), underscoring ongoing disparities despite strong female employment levels.

Occupational data highlights the diversity of employment sectors across Milton Keynes. Professional occupations account for 25.7% of all jobs, followed by associate professional roles (12.6%) and managerial positions (11.7%). This distribution underscores the area's emphasis on skilled and knowledge-based industries. Conversely, elementary occupations and process, plant, and machine operatives collectively make up 15.2% of employment, indicating a smaller yet essential industrial and operational workforce.

Milton Keynes' Workforce

The workforce in Milton Keynes reflects a diverse range of occupations.

- Leadership roles, including managers, directors, and senior officials, account for **14.1% (19,700 people)** of employment locally.
- Professional occupations make up **24.5% (34,100 people)** of the workforce in Milton Keynes.
- Administrative and secretarial roles are also prominent, representing **10.5% (14,600 people)** of employment locally. Similarly, **9.5% (13,200 people)** of jobs in Milton Keynes are in caring, leisure, and other service occupations.
- Elementary occupations, including manual and entry-level jobs, make up **10.0% (13,900 people)** of the workforce locally.
- Skilled trade occupations represent **9.2% (12,800 people)** of employment in the city.



Overall, Milton Keynes demonstrates a balanced employment market, offering roles across multiple sectors and skill levels. From managerial positions to community services, the city supports a broad range of employment opportunities.

Looking closer at the data reveals that ethnically diverse individuals in Milton Keynes experience a lower employment rate of 68.2% compared to the overall population, alongside an economic inactivity rate of 30.2%. These figures suggest possible barriers to labour market access and highlight the importance of inclusive employment initiatives.

Employment among ethnically diverse communities is concentrated in a few key sectors, with the largest proportion (26.2%) working in public administration, education, and health, followed closely by distribution, hotels, and restaurants (25.6%). Professional occupations (22.2%) and roles in banking, finance, and insurance (15.5%) also account for a significant share. Meanwhile, 13.1% are employed in elementary occupations, and 13.0% in transport and communications.

While many hold professional and public sector roles, a significant proportion are also employed in service-based and elementary occupations. This distribution may reflect broader trends in sector-specific opportunities, skills development, and career progression, reinforcing the need for inclusive employment strategies.¹²

In conclusion, Milton Keynes has a dynamic and resilient workforce with low unemployment rates and a strong focus on skilled occupations. However, addressing economic inactivity and promoting equity across demographic groups remain key priorities to sustain inclusive growth for the city.

OU Barometer Findings

The latest edition of an annual report published by The Open University, in partnership with the British Chambers of Commerce, has found that longstanding skill challenges remain, which hinder organisations in a number of ways.

A UK-wide employer survey of more than 1,300 employers found that 62% of organisations are currently facing skills shortages. The report shares a number of recommendations to tackle these challenges proactively and sustainably.

Skills Shortages

- **Prevalence of Skills Shortages:**
 - » In the South of England, **31% strongly agree** and **34% somewhat agree** that their organisations are currently experiencing skills shortages.
 - » This totals **65%** of respondents in the South of England acknowledging a skills shortage, slightly higher than the total of **62%** across all regions.
- **Disagreement with Skills Shortages:**
 - » Only **8% strongly disagree** and **20% somewhat disagree** in the South of England, indicating lower resistance to the idea of a shortage.
- **Uncertainty:**
 - » A small percentage (**6%**) of respondents indicated they **don't know**, which is consistent with the average across other regions.

Skills shortages are a recognised issue in the South of England, with approximately two-thirds of organisations experiencing this issue.



Vital Voice:

"Whilst some businesses in MK do engage with schools, colleges, and universities, to support the growth of a diverse and skilled workforce, many more do not. Inevitably, this results in our community missing chances to maximise the development of all our talent, due to a lack of universal opportunity. As a business community, we have our part to play. We cannot, and should not, take a backwards step and then be surprised if the alumni of our educational system do not match our precise requirements."

**Nicholas Mann, Chair of
Milton Keynes Business Leaders Partnership**

¹²Nomis (2024) Labour Market Statistics: Milton Keynes. Available at: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk>
Notes: Numbers and % are for those of 16+ % is a proportion of all persons in employment.

¹³(South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership (SEMLEP). (2023). SEMLEP Business Survey 2023 Report: December 2023. Public Perspectives Ltd. Section 4: Employment, Skills and Training. p. 50.)

¹⁴(<https://www.centreforcities.org/data/data-tool/>)





Vital Voice:

"One of the biggest challenges young people face in getting a job is the faceless nature of online recruitment. It can be demoralising when a computer simply says 'no' and frustrating when you're not seen as a person. At **Worktree**, we encourage real conversations about work—giving young people the chance to ask questions and learn about different jobs from those who do them.

You can't be what you can't see. The more conversations we create, the more we help young people build confidence in speaking with unfamiliar people—an essential skill for employment. It's a simple commitment for employee volunteers but a vital opportunity for young people preparing for work."

Tom Bulman, Worktree

Rebecca M is a 16-year-old student who once finishing the E4S programme, decided to complete her GCSES. Struggling with anxiety and school attendance, Rebecca found comfort and support through the E4S programme.

With increased confidence, she not only finished her exams, but also secured a job, standing out among 50 applicants. Her journey from apprehension to employment highlights the long-term impact of the programme.

"I was a bit anxious, but with support from my mentor, I was more confident in applying for the jobs I wanted and got help with attending interviews - this meant I was able to get the job I wanted. Out of 50 people who applied, I was the only one that got it. My confidence has increased since I joined E4S Programme. Thank you very much".



Vital Question:

What barriers prevent the remaining 67.9% of economically inactive residents from seeking work, and how can they be addressed?

Vital Action:

In November 2022, MK Community Foundation awarded **Empower 4 Success** with a £9,990 grant to engage young people in Milton Keynes who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) in a Youth Employability Support & Family Engagement programme.

The initiative successfully supported and equipped participants with the key skills necessary to navigate the challenging aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. But the impact it had went far further than this.

By involving participant's parents in the process, it functioned as a catalyst for further community cohesion between participants. Parents expressed relief and appreciation for a project that addressed productivity and helped to curb anti-social activities.

Vital Statistics:

- A third (33%) of businesses reported that they had taken action to increase the skills of their workforce. This is lower than in 2021 when the figure was 45%.¹³
- The employment rate in Milton Keynes was 76.0% in 2023, closely aligned with the Great Britain average of 76.8%. However, the rate has declined by 4.3 percentage points since 2020, suggesting a slight decrease in employment levels over recent years.
- Milton Keynes ranks 8th in the Top 10 cities of highest wages.¹⁴



33%

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8

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76%

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ARTS & HERITAGE



Opportunities to engage with Arts and Heritage are important for the positive effects on personal wellbeing, community cohesion, place-making and developing creativity. The Milton Keynes arts and heritage sector is navigating a period of transformation, marked by both inspiring successes and significant challenges.

The Arts & Heritage Alliance Milton Keynes (AHA-MK) is a forum of organisations that work together to position the cultural sector as a strategic contributor to the community and economy of Milton Keynes. AHA-MK was invited to share its insights on the current state of the arts and cultural sector—exploring its challenges, successes, and vision for the future. These insights, including contributions from Milton Keynes’ cultural leaders, have played a vital role in shaping this section of Vital Signs MK.

Post-pandemic, Milton Keynes’ arts and heritage sector has demonstrated remarkable resilience. Inclusive initiatives like MK Gallery’s programmes and festivals, such as African Diaspora Day and The International Festival (IF), continue to strengthen community connections.

Volunteerism within the sector remains strong, with organisations like AHA-MK encouraging collaboration among creatives and communities. However, the sector faces significant hurdles.

There is a consensus that capacity constraints underscore the need for sustainable funding and staffing. Events often overlap, diluting audiences and fragmenting efforts. These issues point to the necessity of a joint place-making plan and centralised marketing strategies to support the sector’s reach and impact.

The rise in the cost of living has compounded these issues, with rising transport costs and higher venue fees limiting access to culture for many. Yet, there is a clear appetite for affordable cultural spaces, as demonstrated by the success of initiatives like Alina Orchestra’s “Band in a Van,” which brings music to underserved schools across Milton Keynes.

Community cohesion thrives through projects that engage local voices. Partnerships, like those with Milton Keynes Museum and the AHA-MK, are working to amplify underrepresented perspectives. As the Museum explains, *“We are partnering with the Arts & Heritage Alliance to engage groups currently underrepresented at the Museum, including the LGBTQ+, African Diaspora, and Pakistani communities. We want to hear people’s thoughts and perspectives to ensure our displays reflect the shared identity and pride of Milton Keynes.”* However, co-creation remains a vital consideration, as *“culture done to communities”* risks alienation.

Collaborative efforts with trusted local organisations can ensure inclusivity. Milton Keynes Arts Centre provides a variety of events and workshops, including drawing courses and art clubs for different age groups, encouraging community engagement and artistic expression. These initiatives, among others, highlight the vibrant and evolving arts and heritage landscape in Milton Keynes, demonstrating a strong commitment to integrating creativity into community well-being and cultural enrichment. Complementing the cultural offerings in MK, Arts for Health Milton Keynes, established in 2004, continues its mission to enhance health and well-being through the arts. Based at Milton Keynes University Hospital, the organisation oversees the largest public art collection in MK, featuring over 400 works by local, national, and international artists.

In addition to managing this extensive collection, it delivers creative programmes like Arts on Prescription—structured, professionally led workshops designed to support individuals experiencing stress, anxiety, or depression. The organisation also provides online resources for all age groups, making the benefits of the arts more accessible to the wider community.



By collaborating with healthcare providers, community organisations, and local artists, Arts for Health Milton Keynes ensures their programmes are accessible, inclusive, and tailored to diverse needs. It is important to note that these sessions are not art therapy; rather, they focus on the benefits of creative engagement to enhance overall well-being.

In conclusion, while the sector grapples with challenges, its dedication to innovation and inclusivity lays the foundation for a thriving future. To sustain this momentum, cross-sector solutions, long-term funding, and community-driven initiatives are needed to ensure the future of Milton Keynes’ Arts and Heritage.

MK's Creative and Cultural Strategy

Milton Keynes City Council acts as the strategic lead for MK's Creative and Cultural Strategy 2018 – 2027. The strategy, created with citywide partners, sets out the ambitious cultural vision the strategy aims to achieve. It states:

"Milton Keynes will be an internationally recognised creative and cultured city; known for the excellence and diversity of its borough-wide, year-round cultural offer. [It] will provide residents and visitors with an inclusive cultural offer, where creative experiences and opportunities transform lives."¹⁵

State of the Arts in the UK

In 2024, the Campaign for the Arts and the University of Warwick published a report which examined the 'State of the Arts' in the UK.

It reported that Local government revenue funding of culture and related services decreased by **48%** in England, alongside rising cost, and demand pressures on statutory services.

Milton Keynes' arts funding per person is much lower than the England average, with only £4.18 allocated for cultural and heritage services in 2022/23, compared to the national figure of £8.79.¹⁷

This gap has persisted over time, with Milton Keynes' funding consistently falling short in areas such as museums, galleries, and public entertainment.

MK Gallery

Looking at data supplied by MK Gallery, which represents visitor demographics, we can see a strong predominance of White British visitors, who make up 80% of the total respondents (651 individuals). This suggests that the gallery's audience is primarily White British, with limited ethnic diversity.

Other White backgrounds, including White Irish (2%) and other White ethnicities (4%), contribute to a small but notable portion of the visitors.

Visitors from 'any other Asian background' account for just 20 individuals, highlighting a relatively low engagement from this demographic. Additionally, 10 respondents identified as White Gypsy, Roma, or Irish Traveller, making up a minor proportion of visitors.

These insights indicate that the gallery's current audience is predominantly White British, with limited engagement from more diverse ethnic backgrounds. This raises potential considerations for outreach and inclusivity efforts, as well as a need for a centralised placemaking and marketing strategy for Milton Keynes' Arts and Heritage sector.

Inclusive Practice of the Arts: MK Gallery

MK Gallery's Inclusive Practice of the Arts programme, funded by Milton Keynes Community Foundation, aims to make arts-based activities more accessible for families with children who have additional and complex needs. It has successfully broadened participation, reduced barriers, and strengthened community connections through creative engagement.

"To find somewhere that everyone can join in is unheard of. This is totally unique and amazing" – Parent of workshop participant

This was achieved through the introduction of tailored initiatives to engage and support diverse communities:

- **Sensory Boxes:** enabled children who found public spaces overwhelming to engage with art at home.
- **School partnerships:** with MK Snap and Pace School provided creative opportunities for disabled and neurodivergent students.
- **Our Studio:** supported young people aged 14-25 in developing their artistic skills, with some progressing to exhibitions.

The programme has provided accessible arts opportunities for 2,800 participants, including 450 individuals from non-white backgrounds and 750 with disabilities. By removing barriers to participation, it has created a more inclusive cultural space in Milton Keynes.

"Relationships are at the heart of IPA and guide everything we do. It's a privilege to go on such special journeys with people. The contributions we have made, both locally and nationally, to conversations about real inclusivity in the arts remind me that we are also part of something bigger, and there is still lots to do. I feel immensely lucky." – Sophie, Producer of Inclusion, MK Gallery



¹⁵<https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/culture/mk-creative-and-cultural-strategy-2018-2027>

¹⁶<https://www.campaignforthearts.org/reports/the-state-of-the-arts/>

¹⁷<https://local.campaignforthearts.org/arts-funding-in-your-area/?area=E06000042>

Vital Action:

Westbury Fabric & Fibre Guild (WFFG) needed support to plan and deliver joint textile art workshops in collaboration with the Middle Eastern Cultural Group.

This initiative aimed to host an exhibition showcasing the work created during these workshops, encouraging cross-cultural sharing of stories and stitch techniques. By facilitating these workshops and the subsequent exhibition, WFFG hoped to enhance cultural understanding and creative exchange within the community.

The £2,960 grant from MK Community Foundation made a significant difference by enabling members of both the Westbury Fabric and Fibre Guild (WFFG) and the Middle Eastern Cultural Group (MECG) to come together and learn new skills in textile design and surface decoration.

This collaboration allowed members to visit each other's meeting places, with many visiting the Westbury Arts Centre for the first time and expressing interest in future visits. WFFG members embraced Islamic design principles and even learned to write a few words in Arabic script. The participants were thrilled to see their work professionally presented in gallery spaces at Westbury Arts Centre and Milton Keynes Central Library. One workshop participant shared:

"I'd never done Batik before and loved it; it was exciting to see the group display of batiks at the library and to point out which one was mine to friends who have never seen that side of me. And then the evening of readings in English and Arabic was such an uplifting experience. It is hard to describe, but it felt like a very gentle but positive shift in consciousness."

This experience has built a solid foundation for future collaboration, creating a sense of mutual respect between the groups.



Vital Question:

How can we support the Arts and Heritage Sector to establish a joint place-making plan and marketing strategy to amplify the sector's reach and impact in the local community?



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Workshop Participant



Vital Statistics

- Milton Keynes received **£2,275,905** of Arts Council England funding in 2023/24. This is an increase from the **£1,837,438** received in 2018/19.¹⁸
- In Milton Keynes, there are 1,990 businesses in the creative and cultural sectors (**13.75%**). This is higher than the proportion of creative and cultural businesses in the South East (**6.87%**) and higher than the proportion in England (**9.3%**). Additionally, this is higher than the percentage of creative and cultural businesses across the whole of the UK economy (12.65%).¹⁹
- The number of creative and cultural businesses in Milton Keynes has decreased from **15.8%** in 2019 to **13.75%** in 2023.
- The proportion of people who engaged with the arts in person in the previous 12 months to being surveyed in Milton Keynes is **89.39%**.²⁰
- In contrast, the proportion of people that engaged with the Arts digitally in the previous 12 months to being surveyed in Milton Keynes is **36.41%**.²¹

¹⁸<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/research-and-data/our-data/national-investment-dashboard>

¹⁹<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/dcms-and-digital-economic-estimates-business-demographics-2023/dcms-economic-estimates-business-demographics-2023-main-report>

²⁰<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-survey-2023-24-annual-publication>

²¹<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-survey-2023-24-annual-publication>





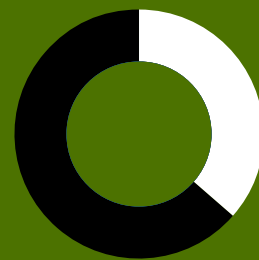
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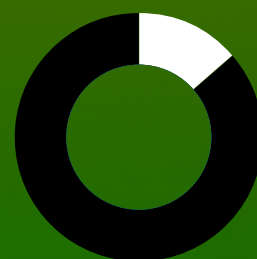
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This snapshot of Milton Keynes provides initial data on some of the issues facing our community. This has already provided Milton Keynes Community Foundation with insights into where funding is needed and can be most effective.

We are always looking for ways to improve and develop our Vital Signs report, so please do not hesitate to contact us if you would like to participate in future Vital Signs research.

Thank you to all who have helped to produce this report:

MK Gallery

MK Act

SAASSBMK

MK Food Bank

Kings Church Community Centre

AHA-MK

Arts for Health

Worktree

The Safety Centre

Water Eaton Community Hub

Amber McQuillan, Cabinet Member for
Community Safety

Westbury Fabric & Fibre Guild

Middle Eastern Cultural Group

The Open University

Milton Keynes Business Leaders
Partnership

Bletchley Park

Milton Keynes Museum

Join the conversation

- Share your #VitalSignsMK thoughts on social media
- Send an email to info@mkcommunityfoundation.co.uk

