



# Vital Signs MK

**11th Edition**





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

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

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### Disadvantage and Poverty

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### Education

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### Health and Wellbeing

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**\*Each looking at the implications for our diverse community within each area.**

**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 action to help reduce global poverty, reduce inequality, and at the same time tackle climate change. There is a close alignment between these goals and the themes reported in Vital Signs, showing how local actions can contribute to global change.

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

We're 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 space 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 the  
Voluntary, Community and  
Cultural Sector organisations.**



**Click here to Discover more about  
MK Community Foundation.**

## **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 where data sets and criteria have changed.

Data shown is the most up-to-date available and can refer to different time periods. The long version of the report is available via the Milton Keynes Community Foundation website and provides data tables and relevant sources and references.





## 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 grassroot 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.

**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.

Jenny, Girl Pack





# Environment

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



## Emissions

There is a strong relationship between the health of the environment and the health of residents.

Measures that reduce greenhouse gas emissions also help improve public health, such as active travel, improving availability of sustainably produced food and improving air quality.

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

The challenge for Milton Keynes continues to be reducing the high 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 strong in Milton Keynes compared with the country as a whole.

**The number of private plug-in vehicles per 100,000 population in Milton Keynes is 1073 compared with 778 for the UK.**

A comprehensive Electric Vehicle (EV) charging point structure is essential to facilitate the uptake in electric vehicles.

Milton Keynes City Council has been allocated £1.6m by the government to expand charging points.

Air pollution is the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK. 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 slightly above the average for all English Unitary Authorities of 5.3%.**



**Milton Keynes City Council has been allocated £1.6m by the government to expand charging points.**

## Home Energy

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

**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.



**9.9%**

higher rates of household recycling compared to the UK average.





“ ”

**Community gardens are more than just great places to cultivate healthy, affordable, local fruit and veg for people who don't have their own garden 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!**

Kirsty Forshaw – Planting Up



**Planting Up's mission is to encourage, educate and empower people to create local sustainably run community gardens that connect them to the natural world and each other in growing food, enhancing wildlife habitats and cultivating their community.**



## **Vital Thinking**

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



Planting Up, Volunteer

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## Vital Action

How we treat our environment, and the impact of climate change can seem overwhelming, but as individuals we can make small local changes that together, make a bigger global impact.

Food Connect Milton Keynes is a food redistribution service, supporting established food projects. By using three e-cargo bikes and an e-van, they share surplus food from local businesses with the community via 14 existing Community Fridges.

**Between November 2022 and October 2023, MK Community Fridge and Food Connect MK were able to share 225 tonnes of food, equalling over half a million meals. In distributing the food, they travelled over 26,000 miles in clean vehicles, saving nearly 6.5 tonnes of greenhouse gases.**



As an environmental charity, cutting food waste is Food Connect's core objective and they do not see the provision of surplus food as a long-term solution to food poverty.

However, they recognise that for many, the community fridge and access to free food is a crucial support in the current economic climate, and that community fridges have become valuable community meeting places.

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**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.**

Lynette Daniels,  
Food Connect Courier 2023

## 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 communities.**
- **The number of private Plug-in vehicles per 100,000 population in Milton Keynes is 1073 compared with of 778 for the UK.**





# 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.**

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 of white 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, those with problem debts, and those in low paid and insecure work, who often come from ethnically diverse communities.

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



### Employment

In Milton Keynes, there is a higher rate of people who are out of work but not looking to get back into work (economically inactive) because of ill health than the average across England.

Pre-COVID-19, the rate was 23% of households in Milton Keynes, by June 2023 the rate had risen to 30.7%, compared with 25.5% for England.

This is particularly prevalent in manual or routine jobs, which research suggests is more likely to have caused ill health. Milton Keynes has 12.6% of the population working in these roles compared to 10.5% for England.

**There are higher rates of in-work poverty in Milton Keynes compared**

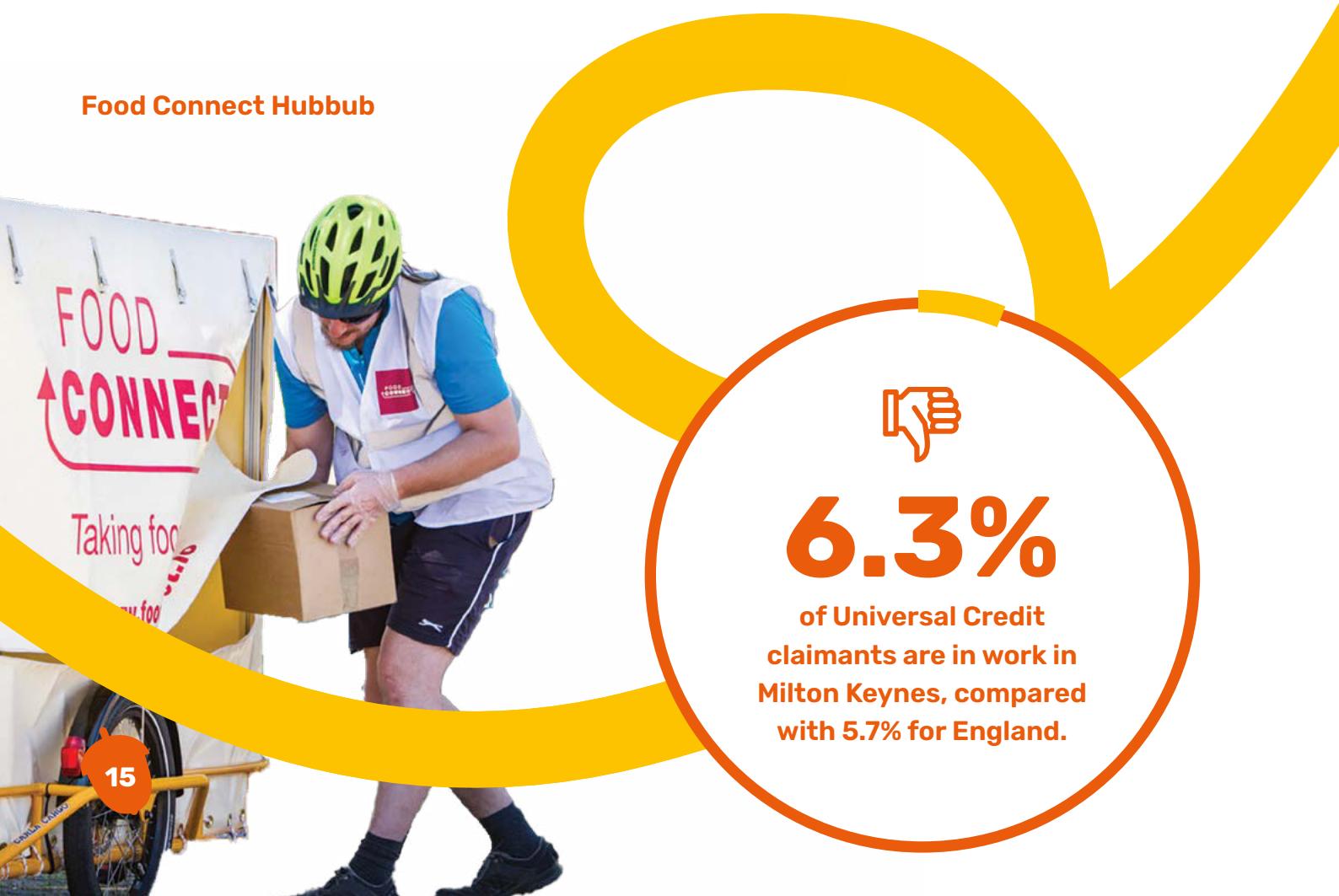
**with England. 6.3% of Universal Credit claimants are in work in Milton Keynes, compared with 5.7% for England.**

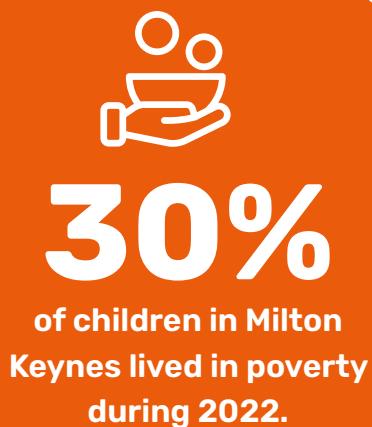
**Milton Keynes Citizens Advice reports that from the end of 2022 onwards, the most common debt problem has been energy and fuel debts.**

**A further indication of the growth in number of those in poverty comes from the Milton Keynes Foodbank report, which states that between January to October 2023, it distributed the same amount as for 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

**Milton Keynes Foodbank saw a 49% increase in usage between 2022 and 2023.**

### Food Connect Hubbub





## Child Poverty

In Milton Keynes, 30% of children were living in poverty in 2022, compared with 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 how many children are in households with income, after the deduction of housing costs, below 60% of the median (i.e., midpoint). This allows for the high cost of housing in Milton Keynes.

**Charity, Dreamsai, which deliver projects to support the growing needs of the community, reports that the biggest increase in demand for its food parcels has been from schools, increasing from 84 per month in 2022 to 180 per month in 2023.**

School support workers and teachers are well placed to identify children and families in need, who may not qualify for foodbank support or are reluctant to ask for help.



**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 blaise. 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.**

Dreamsai Volunteer



## Vital Thinking

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

## 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, MK 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 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.



# 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.

## Early years

Positive early childhood development forms the foundation for optimum health and social outcomes in later life. Free childcare is available for two-year olds if the household is in receipt of specific government benefits.

**The local take-up rate is 99% compared with England's average of 93.7%.**

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 the England average of 93.7%.



**99%**

**Local take up rate of 15 hr free childcare for children aged between 3-4 years in MK.**



While the take up rates of early years education is now high, Zoe Raven, CEO of Acorn Nurseries commented:

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**We noticed a regression in the social skills, confidence and emotional resilience in the children who did not attend the nurseries during the pandemic and who didn't have access to the normal range of social situations.**

Zoe Raven, CEO of Acorn Nurseries.

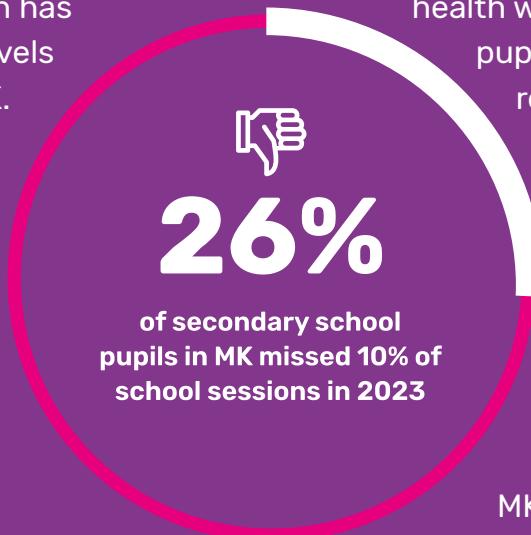
## Schools

There is an increasing problem with school attendance, which has declined from 2018/19 levels both nationally and in MK.

**26% of secondary school pupils in MK missed 10% of school sessions in 2023, which is double the rate of 2018/19.**

Those who have the highest rate of absence tend to be from the most deprived backgrounds, with multiple learning difficulties, physical disabilities, and social and mental health needs.

Research from the Centre for Social Justice 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 pupils' attendance. Other reasons identified for school absence were disengagement with the curriculum especially around traditional academic subjects.

School children from families eligible for Free School Meals in MK score on average 34.1 at Grade 8 (grade A/A\*), the lowest score of any group, and lower than the average for England (34.8).

 **The number of Supplementary Schools continue to rise in Milton Keynes, offering “catchup” programmes for students from ethnically diverse or religious backgrounds.**

## Progressing to university

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to progress into higher education, while 49.3% of the cohort from families who are not eligible for Free School Meals go on to university, a similar rate to the average for England.

**The proportion of students in Milton Keynes going to university from families eligible for Free School Meals is lower at 28.4%, compared with 29.2% on average for England.**



“ ”

**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, including 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 improve employability and educational outcomes of young people, particularly those from ethnically diverse communities.**



## **Vital Thinking**

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

## 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.

These schools often work in collaboration with Statutory Secondary Schools and support core curriculum subjects such as English and Mathematics. One such group, which has been funded by MK Community Foundation, is Friends of the Caribbean. 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 students to better their statutory education, giving them encouragement to get involved in further education, as well as building aspirations and achieving their full potential.

“ ”

**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 Signs



26% of secondary school pupils in Milton Keynes missed 10% of school. This is double the rate from 2018/19, which was 13.3%.



70.8% of 2 – 2.5-year-olds in MK are at the expected levels of the 5 areas of development versus 80% for England (Q4 2023) – this shortfall is mainly around the areas of motor skills and personal to social skills’.



Supplementary Schools in Milton Keynes have risen from 90 to 104 in the last year.



# Health and Wellbeing

**Physical, mental health and wellbeing are impacted by factors which include genetics, lifestyle, 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.



## Young people and mental health

High numbers of young people are reporting that they are experiencing mental health challenges, particularly anxiety. There are gaps in the provision of services which are often filled by the community and voluntary sector and long waiting lists for treatments provided by the NHS.

The lead for MK Mental Health Leads Network, Liz Nightingale identified that sources of anxiety may include parental stress around cost-of-living, trauma, domestic violence, and bereavement. Social media, which targets young people around body image, can increase anxiety, reduce confidence, and lower self-esteem, making young people more vulnerable to abusive relationships, trolling, and bullying.

25% of pupils said they had a mental health problem in the last 12 months and 38% spend more than four hours a day on social media networking sites.

Physical activity is known to support good mental health, over half those aged 11-16 are not active for the recommended 60 minutes plus a day. The rate is lowest, at 43%, among children living in the most disadvantaged communities of Milton Keynes.

**A survey by OxWell in 2023 focused on state secondary school age pupils (ages 11 – 16) in Milton Keynes and found that 25% are skipping meals due to weight concerns.**



**25%**

of pupils said they suffered a mental health problem in the last 12 months.



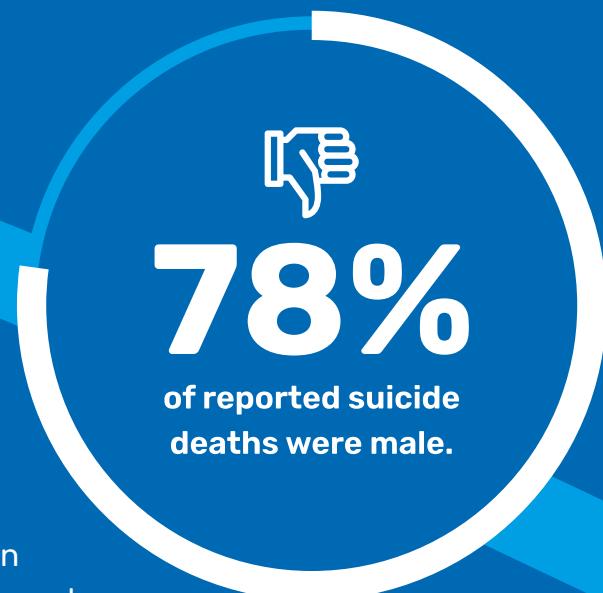
## Healthy aging

Historically, as a new town, MK has had a lower number of older people per head of population, however as the city is now over 50 years old the number of older residents is increasing.

**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.**

In MK 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.



## Suicide

There are a range of factors at the individual, relationship, community, and societal level that can increase the risk of suicide rather than one single event.

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

**Suicide reduced by 45% during lockdown but there is limited data about the reasons for this fall.**

According to data from 2019 to 2021, 78% of reported suicide deaths were male, with the majority being between the ages of 30 to 49. For females, the highest number of reported suicides were in the 20 to 29 age group.





**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. Underfunding is also a cause for concern, especially if schools cannot afford to fund support services for their pupils.**

Liz Nightingale, Lead for the Milton Keynes Health School Leads Network



## Vital Thinking

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

## 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 the MK 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 noted 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.

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**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, Aurther Ellis

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

## Vital Signs



20% of adults who are in contact with state mental health services in Milton Keynes are in paid employment, compared with the **6% national average**.



The proportion of women (26.6%) reporting high levels of anxiety was significantly higher than for men (20.0%).



25% of pupils in Milton Keynes (aged 11-16) said they had a mental health problem in the last 12 months.

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

- Acorn Early Years Foundation
- Arthur Ellis
- Citizens Advice Milton Keynes
- Dreamsai
- Fresh Youth MK
- Friends of the Caribbean
- Food Connect Hubbub
- Milton Keynes City Council
- MK Foodbank
- Milton Keynes University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust
- Milton Keynes Health Leads Network
- Planting Up
- Transition Town, Milton Keynes



Click here to view  
the 2013 - 2022  
vital signs report.



## Join the conversation

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