

Our Co-Parenting Strategy 2022-27

How we do Corporate Parenting in Essex

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Forewords

Cllr Beverley Egan

As the lead Member for children services in Essex, I know that it is vitally important that we set out how we will ensure children and young people in and leaving care are well looked after. Our last corporate parenting strategy sent a strong message that Essex goes beyond our statutory duties and that as an organisation we take our corporate parenting responsibilities very seriously. Our job is to ensure that children are not just safeguarded, but are happy and well looked after, encouraging them to be confident and independent so they can succeed and thrive in life. In Essex, our approach has always been to put children and families first in our thinking and our corporate parenting strategy embodies this.

We must all remember that each statistic in our care system represents a child, in many cases very vulnerable children. In developing this strategy, we have listened to what children of all ages have told us is important to them and this has shaped our priorities and actions. I was delighted when I visited the It's My Life festival in the Summer, where children spoke very positively about their experiences with our frontline social care officers as well as our foster carers and residential staff. They also had the confidence to give thoughtful feedback around what things they thought could be improved.

This strategy must mean something to children and young people, so we have listened to what they tell us is important to them, in their own words, and played this back to them to ensure we have understood. Following a discussion with care leavers we have adopted from them the term "Co-Parenting" as our brand for the strategy. This recognises that we need to work together with everyone who has a role in caring for them.

Because we cannot do this all by ourselves. Our partners across the public sector can help make things better for children who enter the care system and as they grow up and find their independence. This is Everyone's Essex and we want everyone to be proud of themselves and able to achieve their aspirations, no matter their background. We all play a vitally important role in encouraging and supporting children and young people to be the best that they can be, and I am confident that this strategy will take us even further.

Helen Lincoln, Executive Director for Children and Families

(to follow)

A message from care leavers

Stability is really important and helps us build positive life-long relationships. Many of us leaving care do not have family to guide us into adulthood and we can often feel lonely. Helping us build positive friendships and relationships throughout our care experience is so important.

Most of us in care feel loved and cared for by our carers, are happy where we live and feel safe and protected from harm. Nearly all of us have an adult to talk to about worries and most think our social workers are really good listeners. But being singled out as different feels horrible and can lead to bullying. All our Co-Parents should challenge the negative perceptions of being in care and care leavers... our lives are nothing like Tracy Beaker.

Many of us don't have family members to call on in difficult times - lonely times such as Christmas, birthdays and life's big events. That's why our Personal Advisers are so important. They listen to us, care about us and support us on our road to independence.

If we become parents ourselves, you can play an important role as Co-Grandparents. Some of us haven't had a good experience of parenting so we need help learning those skills. Having a newborn baby is hard, especially with no family around. You can help us become great parents.

Of course we miss our families and many of us want to spend more time with them, particularly our brothers and sisters. We need lots of support to keep those relationships. Not living with family can mean we lose our sense of identity. You can help us explore our backgrounds and celebrate who we are and who we want to be.

As Co-Parents, please take interest in us as individuals. Listen to us, take the time to get to know us. Help us achieve our goals. Don't give up on us. Help us believe in ourselves and be the best we can be.

Co-producing our strategy

We have worked with our Children in Care Council to develop our Corporate Parenting Strategy, which they have re-branded Our Co-Parenting Strategy. We are grateful for the time they have spent reflecting on the themes to bring this strategy to life. It is admirable how our young people want to support others coming up through the care system and help make their experiences better.

You can read more about the Children in Care Council (CiCC) and how the Involvement Service and others work with children and young people to get their voices heard in Chapter 6.

We know that children and young people want to see the results of this work, because it is actions not words that matter. The CiCC will be involved as we create our Delivery Plans and children and young people, along with our Corporate Parenting Panel, will hold us to our commitments.

1. Introduction

“I believe that there’s no limits for children in care. There’s no limits for any child, ever... It’s what they get, what they’re given and the love they’re given and the time they’re given, is what makes them amazing”
[Care Leaver]

All children deserve to be cared for, respected, listened to and supported. To feel safe and loved. All children deserve opportunity and support to grow into happy and successful adults. Our Children in Care and Care Leavers are no different, but without a stable family to support them, and often having experienced trauma, they face more challenges in achieving their aspirations.

As corporate parents, it is our responsibility to step in and be the supportive parent in times when their own parents are unable to fulfil this role. For those young people with their own children, we can also become “corporate grandparents”.

This responsibility is not just with social workers and professionals who work directly with children and young people, but with all county and district, borough and city council staff, elected Members and partners. We want everyone to read this strategy and ask themselves: **“What can I do in my role to help children and young people in and leaving care?”**

Our legal duty

ECC’s social care, education and health services are committed to supporting children to remain within their families where possible, only using care for the right children, at the right time. When children or young people are unable to live with their parents or guardians, it is the duty of local authorities to care for them, as established in the Children Act 1989. Corporate parenting principles are set out in the Children & Social Care Act 2017:

- To act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing, of those children and young people
- To encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings
- To take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people
- To help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners
- To promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people
- For those children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and
- To prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

The Children Act 1989 also places a duty on the council’s partners, including Health, Education and Housing services, to provide help, support and services so that Children’s Services departments can meet Corporate Parenting responsibilities. We need a whole system approach and effective partnerships so that we can succeed in supporting them in all aspects of their lives, no matter where in Essex they live.

“I started adult life early... to the point I now feel I’m 40” [Care Leaver]

2. Our new strategy

We are building on the successes of our Corporate Parenting Strategy 2017-20, responding to changes in the world and reflecting what children, young people and their families tell us is important.

Our new strategy is a framework of Priorities, Outcomes and Actions, which will be developed into Delivery Plans with our partners. It is a call to action for our Elected Members, officers and public sector partners to work together to achieve better outcomes for the children and young people in our care and care leavers.

The term “corporate parent” does not speak to children, or in fact to many adults who do not work in social care. Our care leavers wanted “Co-Parenting” as it covers all the various people who might be involved in their care and implies “they all work together for the best outcome”.

So we have adopted Co-Parenting as the brand for our new strategy and will use this when we talk to children and young people.

Attributes of a Good Parent

With every decision about a child or young person, we need to put ourselves in their shoes and ask ourselves “would this be good enough for my child?”. Every child is different and we need to help them to stand on their own two feet and achieve their own aspirations. Our 10 Attributes of a Good Parent reflect what children and young people tell us is important to them:

- ✓ Listening to children and young people, putting ourselves in their shoes and responding with empathy
- ✓ Considering their feelings and individual challenges
- ✓ Taking the time to build relationships
- ✓ Involving them in decisions about their own lives

- ✓ Sticking up for them and challenging negative stereotypes
- ✓ Giving them the confidence and support to achieve at school and work and to grow as people
- ✓ Considering them in our decisions that affect them
- ✓ Not giving up on them - focussing on the present and future, not the past
- ✓ Helping them understand their strengths and achieve their individual aspirations
- ✓ Being open, honest, clear and proactive in our communication

“To listen to you when you have something to say and not just brush you off, because it’s too difficult to deal with or something like that. Even if it’s just talking about how your day went. That’s really important” [Care Leaver]

“Having the right social skills and personality is as important as knowledge/educational based skills in engaging families” [Family Centre Worker]

3. Our achievements since 2017

We believe in moving forward and building on our successes. We look for opportunities to innovate. We have listened to what children, young people and families have told us about their experiences in care in building our services. We are proud of our achievements and progress so far and our new strategy builds on these foundations. Since 2017 we have achieved the following:

Children in care

- Our numbers of children in care are stable and remain low compared to the rest of the country
- Introduced and implemented the Life Plan, an engaging document co-produced with children in care and care leavers which replaces the Care Plan, and brings to life the voice of young people and what matters to them.
- We have developed MAP (My Assessment Plan) for children and young people with disabilities, to help social workers capture their views, wishes and feelings in a more creative way, such as using photographs.
- We have expanded our inhouse Divisional Based Intervention Team (edge of care service) to include the Connecting and Uniting Families Team who focus on using the highly effective solution focused approach to re-unite and return children in care back to their birth families. In 2020/21, the Connecting and Uniting Families Team worked with 82 children and young people, 89% of who were supported to return to live with family.

- We have invested in strengthening and expanding our in-house fostering service by improving our fees structure, providing wraparound therapeutic fostering using a trauma informed model with psychologists and mental health co-ordinators. We have created Oasis Networks, offering informal support, advice and sleepovers between fostering households. At end March 2020, 79% of fostered children were cared for by in house foster carers, a significant increase from 73% in March 2018.
- The Virtual School and Education teams have worked with schools to support children in care to have high aspirations and achieve their goals. We have rolled out innovative emotional and behaviour awareness training, bespoke learning support and a new Personal Education Plan (PEP) process which involves children and young people to create a live record of their experience and progress.
- The success of the innovative Inside Out¹ project, funded by DfE and co-designed with the Children in Care Council. Led by Essex in partnership with Hertfordshire, Norfolk and the Children's Society, the project worked with very complex children in residential care using 'team around the coach' approach to support children to step down to foster homes or back home.
- We have redesigned Missing Return Home Interviews as 'Missing Chats' to be more meaningful and engaging. The child or young person has control over if, how and when support is provided.
- We have improved our Public Law Outline (PLO) support which helping families to avoid court where possible and

¹ Inside Out: Final Evaluation Report, The Tavistock Institute (2021)

have developed a Toolkit for other local authorities which is now recognised nationally as best practice. We are supporting all regions to embed the recommendations from the Public Law Working Group Report 2021.

Care leavers

- We achieved a positive Ofsted Focused Visit of Care Leavers in October 2021 with high praise for our Personal Advisers.
- We have worked with district, borough and city council partners to make care leavers exempt from paying council tax across all of Essex
- Our Targeted Youth Advisers and Employability Workers have helped 63% of care leavers into education, training and employment. We support employers to keep young care leavers in employment with a range of adjustments and wellbeing support.
- At Essex County Council, we guarantee a job interview for care leavers who meet the baseline criteria for that role. Our resourcing team will also provide extra support during the recruitment process including interview techniques, interactive brochure and calls on the day of interview to check in.
- Our [Life Portal](#), designed in partnership with the CiCC, provides practical advice to care leavers on a huge range of things that come with living independently.

4. Our approach in Essex

Our Vision for Children and Families

Our purpose is to provide early help to children and their families, to prevent them from becoming children in need and to protect children and young people from neglect and abuse. We want to support and enable them to grow up healthily and safely, enjoying life, learning and working, so that through their achievements they can make a positive contribution to society as adults. To do this we work with our statutory and other partners to provide a whole system approach.

We do this by intervening early, listening to the lived experience of children and working creatively with families. We have a systemic and strengths-based practice model of work that supports us to work pro-actively and alongside families to identify individual and family strengths and build resilience.

We work on bringing the right children into care for the right amount of time. When children are in our care, we support them to maintain relationships with their families and friends and reunite them with their families as safely and as soon as possible. As a result of our approach, we have one of the lowest rates of children in care in the country and we are proud of our Ofsted Outstanding rating in this area, but we always want to build on this success, learn from children and peers and continue to be better.

This video outlines the social care process, from the perspective of a 10 year old child: <https://vimeo.com/556210644/8640faca0f>

Our whole system approach

We work closely with partners including health, schools, district, borough and city councils and police in a whole system approach to children's needs to provide wrap-around support for children, their carers and their families.

Where children do have to come into care, we seek to provide high quality substitute care, preferably within family settings but otherwise in suitably matched high-quality residential homes, as near as possible to their home locality to maintain links with their families and communities.

"Looking for and acknowledging the positives in the people we work with is a massive way to build trust" [Social Worker]

Box out: Tom's Story – working together on positive solutions

Tom², his mum and brothers moved to a refuge in Essex when he was 12 to escape violence at home. Tom and his older brother were then targeted by criminal gangs and started to be involved in county lines drug running, leading to Tom going missing many times and being arrested. Tom was moved into foster care in a new area of Essex when he fell out with his gang and police believed his life was in danger.

He did well in foster care to begin with but placements would break down when he kept going missing to travel back to his old community. A violent episode led to some time in a young offender's institute, then into residential care further away for his safety. During this placement, Tom became more settled and wanted to move back home, but his mum was worried about the impact on his younger brother and how she would cope emotionally. Our Connecting and Uniting Families team helped them to explore and rebuild their relationship, with 1-2-1 sessions helping

² Name has been changed

her to explore these feeling without judgement and the team could see her parenting confidence growing.

Tom's older brother moved home and wanted to move on from his criminal past and build a new life, so was a positive role-model for Tom.

Social care and youth offending teams worked closely together with the family, and following more intensive support (including with court appearances), talking and increasingly frequent home visits, extending to overnight, Tom successfully moved back home.

Tom was able to start thinking about his future and his education, taking his GCSEs in maths and English and is now enrolled in college. The Youth Offending Team are considering ending his order early due to his positive attitude and non-involvement in crime. The family is now closed to social care.

5. About the children in our care and care leavers

This page paints a picture of the children we look after:

<to become an infographic>

- No. of children in care: 1088 in December 2021
- Ages 15, 16 and 17 are most common ages of CiC
 - Add age profiles of CiC from latest Panel report
- 1/5 children entering care in last 12 months were <1 year old. 21% were 16 years, 11% were 17 years old
- 17% CiC are from a BAME background
- 82% of children in care were in foster care in December 2021.
- Stability
 - % children in placements for 2+ years = ~2/3 (67.6%)
 - 3+ placements in a year = ~1/10 (9.7%)
- 45 young people in care were recorded as risk of sexual and criminal exploitation in January 2022
- Over last 3 months, 68 children and young people (14 Separated Migrant children and young people) went missing for a total of 197 times
- No. of care leavers aged 18-25: 776 in December 2021
- Currently, 63% of care leavers are in education, employment or training (EET)

[Box out] Separated Migrant Children and Young People

Separated Migrant Children and Young People have different care profiles and needs so their data is considered separately. In 2021, 89 Separated Migrant Children and Young People (also known as Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)) entered care in Essex. We are part of the National Transfer Scheme, working with Government and other local authorities to take our share of Separated Migrant Children and Young People who might arrive in other counties such as Kent. We have two specialist teams to support high quality support to these young people.

Separated Migrant Children and Young People are alone without their parents in a new country, with a new language, many having experienced trauma. In 2021, the youngest Separated Migrant Child to come into care in Essex was 13 years old. Most of these children and young people came originally from the continent of Africa or the Middle East, with the largest number in the last year from Iran (22%). It is important we help connect them with others from similar backgrounds.

It can take a long time to be granted a work permit, so many Separated Migrant care leavers are unable to find paid work.

- No. of Separated migrant children and young people: 127 in December
 - And trend graphs showing change year on year for each (in CP Panel report)

“It’s hard here. Before I lived with my parents, now I don’t, I don’t know where they are or have any contact” [Separated Migrant Child]

“In Eritrea, when you finish school, you go into the military. You have no choice. I left before my final school year when I was 14. I didn’t want to go into the military when I grow up.” [Separated Migrant Child]

6. Listening to children and young people

Children in Care Council (CiCC)

Every child in care in Essex is considered a member of the Children in Care Council (CiCC) by right. Coming into care is a frightening time and all children entering care receive a letter from the CiCC. This reassures them that they are not alone in their experiences and that there is network of peer support available for them

Members of the CiCC regularly engage to seek support, build relationships, celebrate their identity and make a positive difference to the lives of other children in care. When young people struggle to find their place in their community, they are welcomed by the CiCC and accepted by a group that cares and understands. Members of the CiCC often feel a sense of belonging and many describe the CiCC community as an extended family.

The Involvement Service

Building relationships is at the heart of the work of our Involvement Service. The Service uses a range of meaningful participatory methodologies including action research, co-design and peer research to inform service design, governance and evaluation, underpinned by a nurturing approach. They empower children and young people to build resilience and navigate challenging hurdles by walking alongside them throughout their difficult times, as well as life's celebrations.

The Involvement Service supports the Children in Care Council to meet regularly with decision makers and Corporate Parenting Panel members (a minimum of four times a year) as well as enabling young people to attend and present at meetings and take part in discussions with directors, partner agencies, service managers and team managers.

The CiCC is supported to understand and represent the views of hundreds of other children in care and care leavers which are collected through the Involvement Service.

"I see the Involvement Team as like my home. As like my safe place... I feel safe, I feel home when I'm with you guys" [Care Leaver]

Language that speaks to children

We have recently transformed our statutory care plan documents into **Life Plans**, co-designed by the CiCC. Life Plans are live documents that social workers and children and young people complete together. This means that the young person's thoughts and feelings are explored and recorded in a way that means something to them, rather than just being a professional assessment of that child. This is an approach we will take in other areas of our work with children and families, including children with disabilities.

New approaches during and after lockdown

Our Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers have adopted new ways of communication following the first Covid19 lockdown that some children find more comfortable than formal face-to-face meetings. This includes using Zoom and occasional checking in via WhatsApp/text message. This means that children and young people can be involved how suits them, for example dipping in and out of a virtual meeting and being able to turn their cameras off, or knowing that someone is thinking about them when they receive a message, but not having to respond.

[Box out] Care Leavers research project

A group of Essex care leavers and care leavers from five other local authorities were supported by Anglia Ruskin University to lead a research project on care leavers' experiences of the pandemic. They found that the pandemic exacerbated challenges they were already facing, such as

emotional wellbeing, practical issues (such as moving accommodation), connection/loneliness and getting support from services. They developed eight recommendations to take forward in our role of corporate parents, during the pandemic and beyond:

1. Clear and up-to-date information on the range of support and proactively share this with all care leavers
2. All care leavers should have the same opportunities and level of practical and emotional support within their local authority, reflecting their individual needs and circumstances
3. Extra support to care leavers with children, including allowing their children to attend nursery or school during lockdowns
4. Provide basic technology (internet, laptop, mobile phone) so that care leavers can stay connected and access education, employment and services
5. Help with connection with others e.g. support bubbles, innovative use of technology and enabling face-to-face interaction, especially for care leavers living alone or newly independent
6. Proactively reach out to care leavers and make sure they have someone independent to their case/care to turn to for support
7. Participatory research with care leavers to better reflect their priorities and understand their experiences to inform action
8. Corporate parent services and central government should make a promise setting out how they will improve the support for care leavers during the pandemic and beyond

They shared their findings at a national conference of social work professionals attended by almost 200 delegates. You can read the full report here: <https://flipbooks.gs-cdn.co.uk/aru-final-report/2/>

“I struggled quite badly with mental health before [the pandemic], then it was like I finally got back on track and then lockdown hit so I went back to how I was before” [Care Leaver]

“All it needs to be is a text. It makes the world of difference to [care leavers] to know that the [local authority] actually care about them” [Care Leaver]

7. Our Priorities

Our Priorities - as told by children and young people in and leaving care

We have taken the feedback from children and young people gathered through the CiCC, the Involvement Service, Have Your Say³ surveys and audits to understand what really matters to children and young people.

We have then consulted the Children in Care and Leaving Care Partnership Board, the Children in Care Council and professionals across Children & Families to develop our five priorities for children, young people and their families:

1. **Home:** Providing good homes, stable placements and ensuring children and young people feel cared for
2. **Health:** Supporting emotional wellbeing, championing healthy lifestyles and keeping children and young people safe
3. **Self:** Celebrating individuality, championing diversity and inclusion and helping children and young people understand where they come from
4. **Learning:** Helping children and young people learn, have high aspirations, grow as people and enjoy school, college, university and training
5. **Independence:** Helping care leavers achieve independence as successful, happy adults who can feel confident in work and if they become parents themselves

In reality these five Priorities are complex and interlinked. If a child or young person is struggling with one of these things, such having as a

difficult time in their placement or suffering with anxiety or depression, it will impact all the other aspects of their life such as their learning or vulnerability to being recruited by gangs. This is why the collaboration with our partners and wrap-around support of the whole system in Essex is so important.

“It’s helped me to focus on school and what I want for my future”
[Child talking about Emotional Wellbeing support]

The Pledge and Care Leavers Charter

As Corporate Parents, Essex County Council is required to make a Pledge to our children in care and leaving care. This is a set of promises written by children and young people being looked after us. The Care Leavers Charter relates specifically to our commitment to support young people after they leave care.

Children and young people helped to write the Pledge and Charter. Each year they get to have a say about what is important to them and whether the promises need to change. The Pledge sets out how we will be good Co-Parents and make things better for children and young people around their Priorities of Home, Health, Self, Learning and Independence. Each year children in care and care leavers have an opportunity to evaluate how well Corporate Parents are meeting their promises they make through the Pledge and Charter Checker surveys.

[Box out: The Essex Pledge – updates to follow]

We will do our best:

³ Annual Have Your Say surveys ask questions around home, school, family, friends and social workers

- To do everything we can to make you feel cared about, valued and respected as an individual
- To make sure you have a social care worker who will spend time with you and get to know you
- To make sure you have opportunities to achieve and succeed
- To help you keep in touch with your family, brothers and sisters and friends when you come into care
- To involve you in decision-making so your views are listened to and to explain when we make a decision you may not like or agree with

The Pledge and Charter are published on the Children in Care Council website: <https://cicc.essex.gov.uk/being-in-care/corporate-parenting-pledge-our-promise-to-you/>

NB Each priority ideally designed to fit onto a page with relevant images – might be able to include images of artwork from It's My Life festivals>

Priority 1: **Home**: Providing good homes, stable placements and ensuring children and young people feel cared for

Stability and consistency in good homes is paramount for children and young people to feel safe, loved and cared for. Entering a new placement is frightening and can lead to changing behaviours and “acting out”. This can put pressure on that new placement and other relationships such as at school. If placements do have to change, then it is important that children know what is happening and why, and that moves are planned where possible with time to get to know their new home and carers.

“Home is about making memories with other people” [Care Leaver]

“I have nice food and they find nice things for me to do to make me happy.” [Child in care]

“I couldn't ask for anyone better. [Our social worker] does a fantastic job. She is in regular contact with us at visits but also emails and calls. She keeps us informed and follows things up promptly. She spends time with the children 1:1 and knows them so well” [Grandmother]

“My foster carers changed my life. I wouldn't be who I am” [Care Leaver]

“Special, special superheroes” [Care Leaver]

You told us: <speech bubble design>

- Coming into a new placement is scary.
- It takes time and effort to get to know one another.
- Being placed far away from your friends and family is very hard and can be a reason for going missing
- It's normal to want to fight or runaway when you're scared, it's not troublemaking. Don't give up on us.

- Siblings want to stay together, but those relationships can also be difficult
- Care leavers accommodation often doesn't feel like a home – Welcome Packs with lots of information help them settle into a new area, help to meet people. Being able to redecorate helps.
- Semi-independent accommodation options for care leavers are limited and expensive and with no family support they can easily slip into rent arrears, especially when coming of Housing Benefit when starting a job

Priority 2: **Health:** Supporting emotional wellbeing, championing healthy lifestyles and keeping children and young people safe

We know that a child's experiences and environment impact their physical and emotional wellbeing. Children in care are more likely to face health risk factors such as past trauma, loss, poor self-esteem and adverse experience. Care leavers often face inadequate housing, poverty, poor diet and limited access to green spaces. The Covid19 pandemic had a negative impact on emotional wellbeing as well as immunisations and dental checks, though did also have positive benefits for some children and young people, such as having more time to connect with their foster families during lockdown.

Health inequalities are strongly linked to success in school and employment opportunities, which in turn impact life chances. Children and young people in care are particularly vulnerable, especially when unhappy or lonely. This can lead to risky behaviours, such as drug-taking, meeting people online, going missing or getting involved in gangs and violence. We need to stay alert and quick to adapt to new dangers, such as gang recruitment moving to social media during the pandemic.

"We get Costa. And she asks me about school and stuff and she's my favourite social worker I've had" [Child in Care]

"I get support and guidance, if I fall off track they help me to get back on track" [Child in Care]

"Many people in care have severe anxiety, so going to places like work, school, that is a big thing for us" [Care Leaver]

You told us

- The term "mental health" implies something bad, you would rather talk about emotional wellbeing
- It can be hard to know how to access emotional support before issues become crises
- The pandemic negatively impacted a lot of your emotional wellbeing, with too many of you suffering from anxiety, depression, loneliness, missing family and/or bereavement
- Friends and peer support are very important for your emotional wellbeing
- Care leavers need help with registering for doctors, dentists etc. and this has been made harder by the pandemic
- Separated Migrant Children and Young People would be helped by more opportunities to speak with young people from your own background

Priority 3: **Self**: Celebrating individuality, championing diversity and inclusion and helping children and young people understand where they come from

“It’s very easy to forget that every child in care is different, no two are the same” [Care Leaver]

In 2020 the Black Lives Matter movement highlighted how racism and inequality impacts our citizens. In Essex we recognised that we must do better to support Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) children and young people by tackling systemic inequality, championing diversity and practicing empathy in our individual roles. We must also help children and young people in care to meet others with similar backgrounds and stay connected to their culture while they are apart from their family. Our children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) need special consideration as many are non-verbal or have difficulties communicating their thoughts and feelings and can feel excluded.

You told us:

- You need help to understand your background and connect to others like you
- You sometimes feel judged because of your background
- Photos and drawings can help you to share your feelings and make sense of what’s happening to you (young children and those with disabilities)
- At It’s My Life 2020, of 39 Separated Migrant Children and Young people:
 - 81% said they feel part of the family where they live.
 - 64% said they have had opportunities to meet other young people with similar backgrounds to their own

“I am worried about my future and I don't have document from Home Office.” [Separated Migrant Child]

“I worry that people don't understand me” [Separated Migrant Child]

“It’s important to be able to talk to someone in Tigrinya. I can talk to my social worker. I trust my social worker. We start off talking in English but then we slip back into Tigrinya.” [Separated Migrant Child]

[Box Out] A ‘Proud to be Me’ sub-group of the CiCC came together in 2021 to explore culture and identity, including developing their “Please Do, Please Don’t” guidelines.

Please do...

- Make sure I understand my history and why decisions are made
- Embrace every child’s culture and help them know their future
- Make sure I understand the culture of my birth family
- Look after our well-being, our hair, our skin. Think about food and cookbooks. Use these things to ‘welcome’ us.
- Support us to tell our ‘story’ about being in care and why we’re in care
- Look forwards, not backwards
- Create a charter for children and young people who identify as black, Asian or from a minority ethnic group

Please don’t...

- Think we are all the same
- Make assumptions about my religion, ethnicity, skin colour and culture
- Treat me differently to others in my school

- Get my name wrong
- Compare us to foster carers' own children
- Force us to change
- Make me feel like I'm not good enough
- Treat me differently to foster carers' own children]

DRAFT

Priority 4. **Learning:** Helping children and young people learn, have high aspirations, grow as people and enjoy school, college, university and training

Children in care and young people can face many additional challenges that can impact their learning including past trauma, attachment and trust issues, missed school, bullying and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Children in care leave school with fewer qualifications than other pupils (the “attainment gap”), which can impact the rest of their lives.

[Box out: The Virtual School

The Essex Virtual School has statutory responsibilities that extend to every child in care until end of Year 13. Though children in care attend many different schools, they are part of the Virtual School community. The Virtual School monitors progress and supports schools to raise educational outcomes and ambitions of children in care. It advocates for children to receive the right support in a high quality learning environment.

Our Virtual School has high aspirations for children in care and care leavers and encourages them to share those aspirations for themselves. It acts as a champion for care-experienced children, helping and challenging schools to provide the support each child needs to thrive in education and achieve their goals. Each child in care is involved in meetings about their Personal Education Plan, which is a living record of the child’s individual experiences, progress, achievements and ambitions.]

“I am really excited about going back to school and seeing my friends [after lockdown]. Also, to be taught properly so I can understand better.” [Child in Care]

“I like all things to do with my schooling and I am proud of my drawings.” [Child in Care]

“I had a problem at school with one of my friends asking about me being in care. [My social worker] spoke to my teacher and this was sorted out.” [Child in Care]

You told us:

- Please use positive words, encouragement, don’t focus on negatives. Push us forward.
- It is difficult to open up about being in care in school as it can lead to bullying (physical and emotional) and being treated differently
- Some of you need extra help with schoolwork, especially if you have missed some time at school or if English is not your first language
- It can be embarrassing to be taken out of lessons for social worker meetings and this affects your learning
- We need to educate others to tackle pre-conceptions, stereotypes and labelling as a potential “trouble-maker”

Priority 5: **Independence**: Helping care leavers achieve independence as successful, happy adults who can feel confident in work and if they become parents themselves

When young people leave care at 18, they can feel alone, isolated and financially unprepared for living independently. They have been through more trauma than most children and young people and if they have no connection with their families, they can suddenly find themselves alone in the adult world. Housing is a huge issue – as a two-tier authority it is not possible for the county council to provide guaranteed housing, we need to work with our district, borough and city council partners. Care leavers can struggle with the confidence and qualifications needed to find and keep a good job, and the cost of housing makes it hard to make ends meet. Some have children of their own to look after without any extended family support.

“Budgeting is a big one. If you don’t know how to budget you could mess up your whole chances of being happy” [Care Leaver]

“Mental health is a struggle because you’re on your own” [Care Leaver]

“Transition to a PA is well managed. I’ve had the same PA for the last 4 or 5 years. We’ve built a good relationship” [Care Leaver]

[Box Out] Care Leavers Covenant

In Essex, we are signed up to the Care Leavers Covenant, which commits us to providing additional support to young people around five themes that are important to care leavers:

1. Independent Living

2. Education, Employment & Training
3. Safety & Security
4. Emotional & Physical Health
5. Finance]

In 2020, Coram Voice published the report “What makes life good? Care leavers’ views on their well-being”⁴. With responses from over 1,800 care leavers, the study found that there were 10 indicators most associated with wellbeing which we can take forward in our all our work with care leavers: [re-draw diagram and credit to Coram Voice]



You told us:

- Housing is too expensive. It is harder when you get a job as you

⁴ What makes life good? Care leavers’ views on their well-being – Coram Voice, 2020

lose housing benefit. It is easy to get into rent arrears with no family support to fall back on.

- Being placed in semi-independent housing away from friends is hard, you would like more choice on where to live
- You talk highly of your personal adviser (PA) and value their support with budgeting skills and in helping find employment or education
- You need a chance to “practice” independence while still in care as being suddenly on your own at 18 is abrupt and scary
- You need help finding job opportunities that don’t require qualifications and work experience
- There is a feeling of a “postcode lottery” in terms of support e.g. information about the local area, quality of housing and support such as leisure passes
- Separated Migrant Young People aren’t able to have a paid job while you wait for your “papers”. Many of you are keen to work as soon as you can and would like more help to find unpaid work experience

8. Co-Grandparents

Care leavers and their children “come as a unit”. Young people in care and care leavers with their own children are likely to miss out on the normal support that a grandparent might provide such as: financial support with rent or purchasing baby items; being there when mums and dads need support, advice or a break from childcare; helping provide stability around the family; help with homework and reading; helping to navigate benefits and childcare entitlement.

Growing up in care means missing out on the role-modelling that comes as being part of a stable family. Care leavers that become parents themselves may lack confidence, having not had the opportunity to learn the skills directly from their own parents.

As well as being co-parents, we (Essex and our partners) can adopt some of the grandparent roles that many new parents enjoy when starting a family. This can be practical - building on the Essex Life Portal, our online tool which provides advice on life skills, health skills and financial knowledge. It should also be providing emotional wellbeing support, vital for all new parents, as part of our ongoing duty of care.

The pandemic has highlighted that in times of crisis, we should give special consideration our care leavers with children and think creatively about the support we could give them as Co-Grandparents, such as continued access to school and childcare during lockdown (like key workers). We will continue to work with the CiCC to develop this new approach and our role as Co-Grandparents.

“Some care leavers don’t have their parents around, so they won’t have people to take care of the baby, or help them go out shopping. With a newborn it’s hard to do things like that.” [Care Leaver]

“Some of us don’t have parents, so who do we turn to if we have rent arrears etc.?” [Care Leaver]

9. Our Outcomes: What we will achieve

Our Mission

We will work together across all aspects of children and young people's lives, so that all children in care and leaving care are happy, loved, safe and able to achieve their aspirations.

Our Outcomes

We want all officers, Elected Members and our partners to ask themselves: **"What can I do in my role to help children and young people in and leaving care?"**

Based on what matters to children, young people and their carers and families, we have seven Outcomes to work towards:

- Outcome 1 relates to our wider vision for Children and Families
- Outcome 2 is about listening to and involving children, young people and their families, and must underpin everything we do
- Outcomes 3-7 directly relate to the five Priorities as told to us by children and young people in and leaving care

For each Outcome, we have suggested new actions which will go into our Delivery Plans, alongside the work we already do, and performance measures to keep us on track. Our progress will be reported to our Corporate Parenting Panel and new actions discussed with the CiCC.

[Each of these to be designed up and easy to read with icons etc.]

Outcome 1: The right children are in care, the length of time in care is safely reduced, and families feel involved and supported throughout	
Taking action	Measures
➤ Continue to involve children and families in shaping and improving care services	Numbers entering care year on year

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Supporting siblings to stay in touch and build strong relationships if they can't be housed in the same placement ➤ Refreshing our Sufficiency Strategy, including looking at how we can address the market shortage of suitable residential care in care in Essex and ensure placements are as close to family as possible ➤ Continue our Public Law Outline work to avoid court proceedings where possible 	Length of time in care
	How well have you been supported by Children's Social Care? (audit question)

Outcome 2: Children and young people in care, care leavers and families feel listened to, involved and understand what is happening to them	
Taking action	Measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Using creative communication tools in our work with younger children and those who find it harder to communicate (e.g. children and young people with disabilities and Separated Migrant Children and Young People) ➤ Develop a video around the Priorities and Attribute of a Good Parent to get message across to a wider audience ➤ Invite CiCC to input into themed Corporate Parenting Panel meetings around the Priorities – in person or by video 	Have Your Say results to: - "Do you understand the plan to see your family?" - "Thinking about your care, do you feel listened to?" - Question on understanding care plan
	Number of meetings in a year

	with decision-makers e.g. DLDs, the Panel and CiCLCPB
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Outcome 3: Children and young people in care are settled and secure in their placements and feel part of a family	
Taking action	Measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Working with young people and our strategic partners Barnardo's on providing residential accommodation in Essex that will better meet the needs of Essex Children in Care than offered by the market currently ➤ Continuing trauma-awareness training, access to therapeutic support and promoting the Oasis Network - building an ecosystem of support for foster carers in difficult times, such as when a young person goes missing ➤ Mental health and other support to children in care and their carers to support placement stability ➤ Promoting the CiCC and events such as It's My Life to help those coming into care meet others who've been through the experience 	Have Your Say responses to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Do you feel cared about by the people you live with?"
	Long-term placement stability (2+ years)
	Short-term placement stability (3+ placements in year)
	% children in care fostered and % of those in foster care are in-house

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Work on joint protocol for prioritising care leavers for accommodation across all districts ➤ Working with district, borough and city councils and accommodation providers to support care leavers by sharing good information about their local area and community 	Distance placed from home and % placed within Essex
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Outcome 4: Children and young people in care and leaving care are happy, healthy and safe	
Taking action	Measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Working with partners to improve access to mental health and emotional wellbeing support including strengths and solution-focussed therapies ➤ Working with district, borough and city council partners to roll out free leisure passes for all care leavers ➤ Being open to new, light-touch forms of communication to help children and young people know someone is there for them, learning from pandemic ➤ Work with new Integrated Care Systems to highlight needs of CiC and care leavers to be considered in developing new integrated services particularly improving emotional health support 	Annual health checks
	Immunisations
	SDQ ⁵ scores
	No. of care leavers with health passports
	Young people in care recorded as risk of sexual and criminal exploitation

⁵ Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

Outcome 5: Children and young people in care are proud to be who they are and feel a sense of belonging	
Taking action	Measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Invite Panel Member to be part of the Virtual School governing body to strengthen links between Corporate Parenting and education ➤ Develop a 'Welcome Pack' for young people in care from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds, providing information on things ranging from local hairdressers/barbers and religious communities to career advice ➤ Celebrate the achievements of BAME and SEND children and young people and showcase diverse role-models ➤ Work with the Virtual School to tackle racist attitudes in school ➤ Adapt surveys and make events such as It's My Life accessible for children and young people with disabilities and empower social workers to encourage participation ➤ Use POET⁶ to hear voices of children and young people with SEND and apply their experiences to help children in care and care leavers with disabilities: http://www.essexlocaloffer.org.uk/yp-poet/ 	A new measure for % BAME children in care placed in foster families of same ethnic background/religion
	% Life Stories completed and measure of how they feel about them
	A new question on identity/feeling included/pride in being yourself in Have your Say

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Work with children to keep their Life Stories up to date, helping them to explore their feelings around placements and their aspirations for the future ➤ Create Later Life Letters (as are done for children who are adopted) for children likely to be in long-term care 	
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Outcome 6: Children and young people in care and leaving care feel happy, confident and secure in school, college, university or training, have improved educational outcomes and high aspirations for the future	
Taking action	Measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Children in Care are involved in the Year of Reading, with extra support given to foster carers and residential carers ➤ Streamlining education and social work data collection and reporting to improve PEP process ➤ Continue to implement CPD for schools on trauma and attachment awareness, and improve understanding of other children to reduce bullying ➤ Find work experience opportunities for those who want to go into public sector jobs e.g. police, health, education, social care, fire service 	Have Your Say results to "I enjoy school"
	NEET/EET status of care leavers aged 16 and 17
	GCSE and key stage attainment of Virtual School compared to Essex-wide

⁶ Personal Outcome Evaluation Tool – a survey for children with special educational needs to help improve services

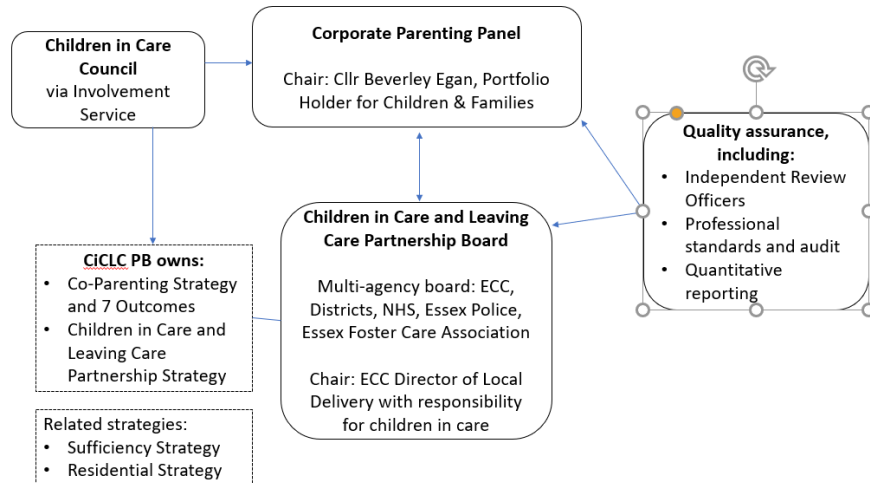
➤ Continue the work of the Virtual School to come up with solutions for schools to reduce exclusions, such as part-time timetables and use of alternative training outside of a school setting	
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Outcome 7: Care leavers feel cared for, settled, connected to others and supported to find jobs and start adult life	
Taking action	Measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ We will offer care leavers apprenticeships and employment opportunities in the ECC and beyond, supporting other public sector employers to prioritise and support care leavers into work ➤ Reduce feeling of “postcode lottery” across district, borough and city boundaries - helping with housing, leisure passes, transport information and discounts, starting with mapping the support for care leavers under each council ➤ Recruit a Care Leavers Champion in each district, borough or city council ➤ Create a video by care leavers to explain the challenges they face with housing when they reach 18 and how this impacts them ➤ Explore a new financial support package for care leavers starting employment to avoid falling into debt with housing. Learn from the care leaver financial 	18-25 year olds actively seeking employment
	No. of care leavers employed at ECC
	No. of care leavers in suitable accommodation
	SDQ for care leavers

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ support scheme being introduced in Wales ➤ Formalise Corporate Grandparent (Co-Grandparent) role and explore new initiatives such as help with managing finances, navigating benefits, childcare and role-modelling to improve confidence and capability of new parents ➤ Continue to improve transition between teams at end of care – start preparing for independence earlier, e.g. forward planning for those with SEND coming back into Essex at 18 ➤ Prioritise care leavers and highlight our legal duty to them in wider discussions with district, borough and city councils on housing and planning ➤ Look at how we can increase the rates of Staying Put, e.g. making it financially easier for carers ➤ Promote care leavers as a priority group for any new employment support schemes e.g. with Essex Anchor Networks ➤ Work with adult social care to help bridge the gap between children’s and adult mental health services for care leavers 	
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10. Working together across Essex

Governance



In Essex we have a Corporate Parenting Panel to hold us to account. The Panel includes Elected Members and key partners such as the Essex Foster Care Association and NHS representatives with responsibility for children in care. The Panel is chaired by Cllr Beverley Egan, Cabinet Member for Children and Families. The CiCC are invited to meetings to present their views. Our new Priorities will become new topics for discussion at Panel meetings.

Some of our Panel Members also hold elected positions within Essex's district, borough and city councils, so they can help our partnership work on issues outside of the county council's responsibility such as housing and public transport.

We work with our partners to deliver Our Co-Parenting Strategy through the Children in Care and Leaving Care Partnership Board. We also work

with partners through the Children's Partnership Boards – county-wide and in the four Quadrants of Essex. Through these Boards we can share best practice, raise issues which need a multi-agency approach and help make system-wide changes to support children in care and care leavers, such as sharing effective recruitment and procurement policies.

Feedback from children and young people

This is a live strategy and we need continual feedback on how we are doing. We ask children and young people to hold us to the commitments made in this strategy and will continue to involve them via the Involvement Service, It's My Life festivals, Have your Say surveys, audits and reviews.

We will invite children and young people to contribute to Corporate Parenting Panel meetings and to join discussions with Directors of Local Delivery and other decision-makers to share their insight and ideas. We will also discuss new programmes with young people via the Involvement Service and CiCC, consulting them during the planning stages.



In launching this strategy, we will raise the profile of corporate parenting beyond those who work directly with children. We will promote children in care and care leavers a priority group for any new programmes or schemes across Essex County Council and The Essex Partners Anchor Network⁷

⁷ Anchor institutions are large, stable employers such as NHS, councils, universities and large businesses that have a significant impact on a place, including employing locally and procuring goods and services.

Everyone's Essex

Essex County Council's strategic priorities are set out in our new organisation strategy, 'Everyone's Essex'. Everyone's Essex focuses on four areas where outcomes really matter for the quality of life for all people in Essex:

- Children and families
- The economy
- The environment
- Promoting health, care and wellbeing for all ages.

There are five commitments for children and families to improve:

- Education Outcomes
- Family Resilience and Stability
- Safety
- Levelling up for Families
- Outcomes for Vulnerable Children, including Children in Care, Care Leavers, Children with SEND and children from BAME communities

Everyone's Essex offers many opportunities to improve the lives of children in care and care leavers outside the world of social care and children and families' services, by tackling the causes of poverty and inequality to create a fairer society for everyone by "levelling up".

Levelling Up and tackling poverty

The Bywaters Report⁸ shows a strong link between poverty and child abuse and neglect. The report identifies and discusses evidence about

⁸ Bywaters et al (2016) The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect: an evidence review <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect-evidence-review>

the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect in the UK, concluding that managing poverty reduces pressure on children's social care. We know that there are more than 123,000 people in Essex, 40,000 of whom are children, that live in areas that are in the 20% most deprived of the whole UK. This is a figure that has doubled since 2007.

Making a significant impact on this figure is a priority for our Levelling Up programme, which will target the places and people most affected by disadvantage to improve their life outcomes. The need to level up services by identifying and replicating the practice in the areas where young people do well is a key recommendation from the 2020 report from Coram Voice⁹

Our Levelling Up Essex White Paper sets out our belief that a person's potential should not be defined at birth, by who their parents are or where they live. Individuals should define their own destiny, and the council and its partners should play a role in helping people do that – putting children in care and care leavers at the heart of this is the Co-Parenting responsibility of all Members, officers and partners.

Our wider work supporting the levelling up programme – including economic development, covid recovery and bringing families up and out of poverty – will be crucial to reducing the number of vulnerable children who need the support of the care system.

This is Everyone's Essex. It is our responsibility as corporate parents to work together across the system in supporting and pushing forward the children and young people in our care and care leavers to get the most out of life. We want them to achieve their aspirations, feel they belong

and be proud to be themselves, just as any parent wants for their children.

"You should be pushing me to achieve. You should be pushing me at every step.... That's the point of being a parent. It's to give everything. As much as you can." [Care Leaver]

⁹ What makes life good? Care leavers' views on their well-being – Coram Voice, 2020