

Our Co-Parenting Strategy 2022-27:

How we do Corporate Parenting in Essex

Executive Summary

“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]

Introduction

At Essex County Council, it is our legal duty to act as Corporate Parents and care for children and young people who are unable to live with their parents or guardians. Established in The Children’s Act 1989, this duty is not just with social workers and professionals who work directly with children and young people, but with all county council staff and elected Members. The Act also places a duty on our partners - including Health, Education and Housing services - to support Children’s Services departments to meet Corporate Parenting responsibilities. We need help from our partners across the Essex system to give our children and young people stability, community and the best start in life.

Our Co-Parenting Strategy

Our Corporate Parenting Strategy has been re-named by children and young people as ‘Our Co-Parenting Strategy’. The new name represents how we work together across all the authorities, with carers and families, to be good parents our children in care and leaving care. The voice and perspectives of children and young people are integral to our Co-Parenting Strategy and we are privileged to have worked with members of our Children in Care Council to develop it.

Our approach

Our overall vision for Children and Families is that we bring the right children into care for the right amount of time. We then 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, Essex has one of the lowest rates of children in care in the UK and we are proud of our Ofsted Outstanding rating in this area. We want to build on this success, learn from children and peers and continue to be better.

Since our last strategy was published in 2017, our achievements include: introducing ‘Life Plans’ (designed with young people to replace Care Plans); the new Connecting and Reuniting Families Team; investment to improve our Fostering Service; an Essex-wide council tax exemption for care leavers; and new dedicated employability and youth advisers to support care leavers into good jobs.

Listening to children and young people

Every child in care is a member Children in Care Council (CiCC) by right. Coming into care is a frightening time and the CiCC provides a network of peer support, welcoming and accepting those who may struggle to find a place in their community. The CiCC is supported by the Involvement Service to understand and represent the views of hundreds of other children and care leavers. Together they meet with decision-makers and Corporate Parenting Panel members. They have been actively involved in the development of our Priorities, Mission, Outcomes and suggested Actions.

Children and young people are all individuals. Our strategy considers the different needs of groups such as Separated Migrant Children and Young People, those with special educational needs and

disabilities, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children and young people, and different ages and genders. We will continue to do more to help all children and young people in and leaving care to feel included and proud to be themselves.

Our Priorities

Through the feedback from children and young people gathered through the CiCC, the Involvement Service, surveys, audits and insight from professionals across our services and partners we have developed Priorities based around what really matters to 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

Co-Grandparents

We have worked with care leavers to develop the concept of 'Co-Grandparents' for young people who have children of their own. This means adopting some of the grandparent roles that many new parents benefit from when starting a family. This includes practical and financial advice, support with childcare and emotional support. We can help to build confidence and capability of young parents who may not have had the chance to learn parenting skills from their own family.

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:

1. The right children are in care, the length of time in care is safely reduced, and families feel involved and supported
2. Children and young people in care, care leavers and families feel listened to, involved and understand what is happening to them
3. Children and young people in care are settled and secure in their placements and feel part of a family
4. Children and young people in care and leaving care are happy, healthy and safe
5. Children and young people in care and leaving care are proud to be who they are and feel a sense of belonging
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

7. Care leavers feel cared for, settled, connected to others and supported to find jobs and start adult life

To measure our progress, we will collect feedback on how we are doing from children, young people, families, carers and professionals through surveys and audits, as well as ongoing engagement through the Involvement Service.

Governance and partnerships

Our Corporate Parenting Panel, chaired by Cllr Beverley Egan, Cabinet Member for Children and Families, will hold us to account on achieving our Outcomes.

We will work with our partners through the Children in Care and Leaving Care Partnership Board and the Children's Partnership Boards, county-wide and in the four Quadrants of Essex. Here 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.

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

Everyone's Essex

Our new Organisation Strategy 'Everyone's Essex' includes a commitment to improving outcomes for Vulnerable Children, including Children in Care and Care Leavers. Everyone's Essex offers many opportunities to improve the lives of children in care and care leavers outside the world of children and families' services through tackling the causes of poverty and inequality. We want to help create a fairer society for everyone by "Levelling Up".

Central to our Levelling Up agenda is the belief that a person's potential should not be defined at birth, by who their parents are or where they live. The council and our partners should play a role in helping people define their own destiny. As good Co-Parents, we and our partners should put children in care and care leavers at the heart of this agenda.

"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]