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Report title: Our Co-Parenting Strategy – How we do corporate parenting in Essex	
Report to: People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee	
Report author: Sukriti Sen, Director of Local Delivery	
Date: Thursday 14 th April	For: Review and input
Enquiries to: Sukriti Sen, Jo Boyd-Wallis, Senior Strategy Advisor and Chris Carpenter, Senior Strategy Advisor	
County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Everyone's Essex

- 1.1 Our vision for children and families is to help achieve the best outcomes for all families, children and young people by building resilience, raising aspirations and protecting the most vulnerable.
- 1.2 'A Good Place for Children and Families to Grow' is one of the four strategic aims for Essex County Council, as set out in Everyone's Essex. Under this aim, there is a commitment to improving outcomes for vulnerable children, including children in care and care leavers.
- 1.3 Our new Co-Parenting Strategy sets out how we will meet our legal duty¹ to children in care and care leavers. It responds to what children, young people, carers and families have told us. It sets new outcomes designed to improve the lives and life chances of the children and young people in our care and care leavers. Cabinet is expected to approve the strategy at their meeting in May.
- 1.4 Everyone's Essex also offers many opportunities to indirectly improve the lives of children in care and care leavers, with action outside of social care and children and families' services. Evidence shows that there is a strong link between poverty and abuse and neglect². Our Levelling Up agenda aims to tackle the cause of inequality and poverty to create a fairer society for everyone.
- 1.5 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 corporate parents, we should put children in care and care leavers at the heart of this agenda.

¹ The Children's Act 1989 and Children & Social Care Act 2017 (Corporate parenting principles)

² 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>

- 1.6 Vulnerable families and care leavers are also affected by the shortage of suitable, affordable social housing in Essex, so should be part of strategic discussions on Housing.
- 1.7 By supporting our most vulnerable children to have good mental and physical health, get the most from their education and grow into independent adults with high aspirations for the future, we will also help meet the strategic aims of:
 - Health wellbeing and independence for all ages
 - Strong, inclusive, sustainable growth
- 1.8 Our Co-Parenting Strategy is our statement of intent. Following its publication, we work with partners to develop Delivery Plans to achieve our stated outcomes, consulting children, young people, carers and families as appropriate.
- 1.9 As a result of our strategy, we want 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?”*

2 Purpose

- 2.1 Committee members are invited to:
 - Review the draft Corporate Parenting Strategy making comments and suggestions for the consideration of the Cabinet Member and noting the Priorities of Home, Health, Self, Learning and Independence
 - Consider how we can collectively raise awareness of corporate parenting responsibilities with all Members, officers and partners
 - Consider potential partnership opportunities to inform delivery of the strategy, such as overcoming housing and employment challenges for care leavers

3 Background

- 3.1 It is Essex County Council’s 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.
- 3.2 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.
- 3.3 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 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.

- 3.4 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.

4 Development of the Strategy

- 4.1 As Corporate Parents, we are required to have a Corporate Parenting Strategy. The previous Strategy ran from 2017-20, with an update in 2021 in response to the Covid19 Pandemic.

- 4.2 In 2021, we achieved a positive Ofsted Focussed Inspection on Care Leavers. During the inspection, it was recommended that our next strategy:

- Reflected the achievements and innovations since the last strategy
- Amplified children and young people's voices
- Included measurable outcomes

- 4.3 We have taken these recommendations forward in the development of our new draft strategy, which is attached at Appendix 1.

- 4.4 When we spoke to care leavers about the strategy, they told us that the formal term "Corporate Parenting" does not appeal to children and young people. They wanted to use "Co-Parenting" instead, as it covers the various people who work together to care for them. We have adopted this as our brand for the strategy and will use this when we talk to children and young people about corporate parenting.

- 4.5 We have drafted the new strategy based on evidence and insight collected from children, young people, carers, families and professionals through the Involvement Service, Independent Review and Audit Services and many other professionals who work with children and young people in and leaving care.

- 4.6 Our Priorities are designed to be meaningful to children and young people in and leaving care and reflect their experiences. We have run key parts of the draft strategy past a group of care leavers who have helped bring the strategy to life with their suggestions, including making sure we use tone and language that speaks to children and young people.

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

4.7 Related to these Priorities, our overall approach of ‘the right children in care for the right amount of time’ and our commitment to listening to children, young people, carers and families, we have seven Outcomes:

	Our Outcomes
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

5 Working in partnership

- 5.1 In publishing our new Co-Parenting Strategy, we need to highlight the importance of working together across the Essex system to help tackle the challenges that Essex County Council cannot tackle alone, such as housing and employment for care leavers.
- 5.2 We presented our emerging Priorities at the Children’s Partnership Board (December 2021) and Children in Care and Leaving Care Partnership Board (January 2022) and invited partners to share their ideas for improving outcomes for children in care and care leavers.
- 5.3 We presented the draft Co-Parenting Strategy to an Extraordinary Corporate Parent Panel meeting on 4th April 2022. At this meeting we received endorsement of the strategy, helpful feedback and ideas for future

communication to help raise awareness and galvanise action across the Essex system post-publication.

- 5.4 The Chair of Corporate Parenting Panel, Cllr Beverley Egan, has written to our District, Borough and City Councils Leaders and Chief Execs to raise awareness of our emerging strategy and invite ideas for working together on delivering it. This shares our priorities for children and young people in and leaving care and is a first step to gaining partners' commitment to helping children in care and care leavers.
- 5.5 Following publication of the strategy May 2022, we will carry out comprehensive engagement to promote and embed the Co-Parenting Strategy across the council and beyond.
- 5.6 This will include consultation and collaboration with partners to develop Delivery Plans for action across the council and with partners from across the Essex system.

6 List of Appendices

Appendix A - Our draft Co-Parenting Strategy

Appendix B - Our draft Co-Parenting Strategy - Executive Summary