

Essex Children in Care Council

Partnership, Practice and Impact Report 2025–2026



SERIOUS
ABOUT
SOCIAL WORK



Essex County Council

Foreword: Belonging, Voice and Breaking Cycles

Purpose of this Report

This report is written for corporate parents, partners and practitioners to demonstrate how lived experience drives relational practice, system learning and improved outcomes for children and young people in care. This report sets out our purpose, approach, learning and impact for children, young people and the wider system, aligned with Essex's co parenting ambitions to centre relationships, use learning to drive change and challenge inequity

Statutory Basis

The Children in Care Council (CiCC) is grounded in statutory duties under the Children Act 1989, the Children and Social Work Act 2017, and Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which upholds children's right to be heard in decisions affecting their lives. CiCCs are the nationally recognised mechanism through which these duties are fulfilled and operate as a statutory participation and system influence function, not an optional engagement activity. This approach reflects and operationalises the principles of Family First Partnership Programme and Children and Working Together (2026), placing relationships, belonging and children's lived experience at the heart of safeguarding, participation and system learning.

Essex Context and Ofsted Assurance

Essex Children in Care Council (CiCC) operates within an Ofsted rated 'Outstanding' (2023) Children's Services department, providing a strong and credible platform for young people to influence care and leaving care services. Inspectors recognised the strength of participation and the centrality of children's voices in decision making.

Key Aspects of Essex CiCC

- High quality participation
- Membership by right for every child in care
- Direct influence on practice, including work with IROs
- Strong links to senior leaders and corporate parenting
- Youth led initiatives, including the Its' My Life Festival
- Accessible, inclusive engagement across age groups and experiences

Our Ethos

Our work is rooted in relationships, lived experience and the belief that belonging and trusted connection change lives. Working alongside children and young people across Essex, we build confidence, identity and resilience while influencing the systems that shape their care.



Context

Every child in care in Essex is a member of the Children in Care Council by right. CiCC is not an “extra” or a reward for engagement – it is a standing offer of belonging, voice and relational support that children and young people can draw on at different points in their journey.

Children come into care experiencing a wide range of challenges, including instability, disrupted relationships, separation from family and community, stigma and loss of identity. Many care leavers navigate adulthood without the family networks that others rely on, increasing risks of isolation, poor mental health, exploitation and homelessness.

CiCC works alongside children and young people across these experiences, offering continuity, care and opportunities to shape a better system for themselves and others as well as building meaningful networks that will support them into adulthood.

Our Aim!

We want children and young people in care and leaving care in Essex to:

- Feel loved, cared for and safe
- Experience belonging and stability
- Have power, purpose and influence
- Be supported to build positive futures on their own terms

At the same time, we aim to use learning from lived experience to strengthen co-parenting, improve practice and challenge inequity across the system. Our work contributes to prevention, early intervention and system improvement, complementing the wider work of social care.

How We Are Organised

CiCC is supported by Involvement Leads 1.5FTE and a Senior Insight and Evaluation Analyst 1 FTE within the Involvement Service which sits within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Directorate at Essex County council, alongside the Independent Visitor Service, Missing Chats and Risk in the Community teams. We work closely with colleagues across Quality Assurance, Safeguarding, Reviewing Services and Audit.



Essex Children in Care Council PLUS

Essex Children in Care Council (CiCC) is not an add on or project based offer; it is a relational constant for children and young people in care and leaving care. Membership is by right, not earned, meaning every child is entitled to connection, voice and influence throughout their journey.

What sets Essex CiCC apart is the depth and longevity of relationships. Young people may remain connected during and after care, often over many years, supported by trusted adults who stay alongside them through change and transition. This consistency is a powerful protective factor for those experiencing instability, isolation or loss.

Essex CiCC operates at the intersection of youth work, social care and system change. Lived experience actively shapes workforce development, service design and strategic decision making, with young people influencing practice locally and nationally through co production, leadership, peer mentoring and direct engagement. By combining relational practice with statutory participation and system influence, Essex CiCC creates spaces where young people feel safe, valued and heard, ensuring their experiences lead to meaningful change for future generations.

Children in Care Council (CiCC) Offer

Statutory participation mechanism ensuring children in care and care leavers can share views, wishes and feelings in line with statutory duties

Membership by right for all children in care, with flexible levels of engagement

Regular participation forums (e.g. councils, meetings, groups) to gather feedback on care experiences

Opportunities to influence services, including consultation on policies, plans and service changes

Access to decision-makers, such as senior leaders, corporate parenting representatives or elected members

Support to develop confidence and skills, including communication, leadership and advocacy

Inclusive engagement methods to reach younger children, care leavers and those less likely to engage

Feedback loops so children and young people understand what has changed as a result of their input

Links to corporate parenting responsibilities, including informing the local authority strategies

Annual reporting on participation activity, themes, learning and impact

Our enhanced relational and developmental offer

Alongside our statutory participation duties, Essex CiCC provides an enhanced relational offer

Long-Term Relational Support Essex CiCC provides consistent, trusted relationships over many years, offering continuity that supports children and young people experiencing instability.

Youth Work-Led Group Provision Regular group work supports belonging, the development of identity, independence and peer connection beyond traditional participation activity.

Residentials My Time residentials provide purposeful pause and challenge through outdoor education, and life-long memories supporting the development of emotional wellbeing and confidence.

Junior CiCC and Early Participation Junior CiCC events and early-years engagement introduce voice, belonging and participation from a younger age.

Leadership Pathways and Peer Roles Young people progress into peer mentoring and leadership roles, building confidence while supporting others.

Peer-Led Festivals and Belonging Spaces The Its' My Life Festival creates trauma-informed, youth-led spaces of connection and joy for children and families.

Co-Production of Creative Resources Co-produced films and exhibitions ensure services are shaped by lived experience in accessible ways.

Workforce Development and Learning Care-experienced young people contribute to training, recruitment and development activity, strengthening professional practice.

National Policy and Strategic Influence Care leavers engage in national forums, extending influence beyond the local authority.

Targeted Practical and Emotional Support Initiatives such as Winter Hampers provide timely, dignified support that reduces isolation.

System Learning and Insight Function CiCC provides system insight, using lived experience to inform quality assurance and service improvement

Belonging, Safety and Trusted Relationships

We will ensure that every child and young person in care and leaving care in Essex experiences a strong sense of belonging through the Children in Care Council. CiCC will offer a consistent, safe and welcoming space where children and young people are met with care, compassion and acceptance, and where trusted adults walk alongside them through both celebration and challenge. We recognise that feeling safe, known and connected is the foundation for emotional wellbeing, identity and long-term stability, and we will remain available throughout a child's journey, including at times of crisis, transition and change.

Identity, Hope and Strengths-Based Development

We will support children and young people to explore and take pride in who they are, where they come from and who they want to become. Using strengths-based and trauma-informed youth work approaches, we will help young people reframe negative narratives, recognise their resilience, grit and achievements, and build hope for the future. Through shared experiences — including creative work, positive activities and outdoor education residentials — we will encourage young people to push their comfort zones, develop confidence, build lifelong memories and discover new possibilities for themselves.

Value Based Work

Our work is driven by four core commitments rooted in relationships, rights and long-term impact.

Voice, Influence and Shared Power

We will actively support children and young people to have real influence over the decisions, services and systems that affect their lives. Through participation, co-design, research and leadership opportunities, CiCC members will shape practice, challenge stigma and work alongside professionals, senior leaders and partners to improve outcomes for others. We will value lived experience as expertise, create opportunities for young people to develop confidence and agency, and ensure that participation is meaningful, flexible and responsive to where young people are in their lives.

Stability, Connection and Positive Futures

We will work alongside children, young people and co-parenting partners to support positive transitions and future pathways. This includes helping children navigate key changes in their lives, plan for what comes next and build confidence for adulthood. We will support connections with family, siblings, peers and community, and walk alongside care leavers as they prepare for independence, adulthood and, for some, parenthood. CiCC will continue to draw on lived experience to understand what enables successful transitions and hopeful futures, informing practice and improvement across the wider system.

Cross-Cutting Principles

Equity, Identity and Anti-Oppressive Practice

We actively challenge stigma, discrimination and inequity. Our work is anti-racist, anti-oppressive and culturally responsive, shaped by the voices of children and young people from the Global Majority, disabled young people, separated migrant children and those at risk of exploitation

Learning, Reflection and System Change

CiCC is both a relational service and a source of system intelligence. We generate insight through research, participation and feedback, using this learning to influence language, policy, practice and culture across Essex. Children's voices lead to tangible change and greater accountability.

Our Work in Numbers



5239

(8 - 25 years)

Total Meaningful Contacts With Young People



Check In Or Well Being
Phone Calls or Texts



Group Work Contacts



Families At It's My Life



One To One Contacts



Research Conversations



Pledge Surveys



60 Young People
Have taken part in our My
Time Residential
Programme



150 Young People
Young People in care from
the Global Majority have
actively engaged in the
P2bme programme



90 Young People
Young people in care have
taken part in our Staying
Close Service



Over 200 Care Leavers
Have Come to our Care
Leaver Dinner and Chill
Programme



240 Care Leavers
Have taken part in our Care
Leavers Parents
Programme.



50 Young People in Care
Have been subject matter
experts and trained the
widerwork force



240 Young People
Have attended our weekend
youth group session



50 Young People
Have helped co produced
service level change within
Essex County Council



600 Adults
Have received training via
our young people

These stats are based meaning
contacts throughout the year

Our Group Work

What this supports: belonging / independence / confidence

Youth Group Our monthly Youth Group is often the only space where young people in care come together as equals, without labels or difference. It offers a strong sense of belonging, understanding and connection that many do not find elsewhere. Young people can relax, be themselves and build friendships with peers who share lived experience. Supported by trusted adults, the group provides consistency, safety and connection. Monthly themes that are designed by young people and the freedom to explore issues make this learning environment meaningful and fun.

Care Leavers Dinner and Chill Dinner and Chill offers care leavers a supportive, informal space to develop independence skills for everyday life. Through peer planning meals, cooking, budgeting and eating together, young people build confidence in practical skills they need for adulthood. The group encourages shared learning, routine and mutual support, allowing care leavers to learn at their own pace. Alongside trusted adults, Dinner and Chill supports independence, self-belief and readiness for life beyond care and a network outside of professionals.

P2BMe Proud to Be Me is a space for young people in care from the Global Majority to explore identity, culture and belonging. The group supports cultural learning, shared understanding and pride in heritage, while creating safety to talk about experiences of difference, racism and identity within the care system. A key milestone from this group is the learning tool the young people developed to help foster carers learn about the barriers faced by them. Through discussion, creativity and peer connection, young people build confidence, self-understanding and a stronger sense of who they are and where they come from.

Care Leaver Parents The Care Leaver Parents Group supports young parents with care experience to build confidence in being positive, nurturing parents. The group offers a safe, supportive space to learn about parenting, share experiences and develop practical skills together. With guidance from trusted adults, parents explore healthy relationships, child development and routines, while building peer support networks. The group helps care leaver parents feel supported, capable and confident in giving their children the best possible start.

Young person's Co-Parenting Steering Group The Young Person's Co-Parenting Steering Group regularly meets with directors, elected members, and senior decision-makers to share lived experiences of being in and leaving care. Through these direct conversations, young people help leaders better understand the realities facing children in care and care leavers, and meaningfully influence strategic direction, decision-making, and governance to improve outcomes and experiences for future generations of children in care.



Impact and Achievements 2025–26

Love and Care Conference

At the Love and Care Conference, co-delivered with the Children in Care Council, young people delivered passionate keynote speeches to 300 practitioners on experiences of leaving care and becoming parents.

From Care to Parenthood

From Care to Parenthood is a newly published book written by care leaver parents, for care leaver parents, designed to reduce isolation through shared experiences of parenting after care.

Beyond the Glass Jar: toolkit for working with Care Leaver Parents

Beyond the Glass Jar is a co-developed practice toolkit designed to support professionals working with care leaver parents. Developed alongside care leavers, it provides practical guidance to help build trusting relationships, promote meaningful engagement, and support the co-creation of decisions and plans.

Winter Hampers

Organised, ran and coordinated the production of 900 Care Leaver Winter Hampers, ensuring care leavers felt remembered and supported during the festive period. Funded through a household support fund, the hampers were thoughtfully designed to be memorable, practical and personal, offering warmth and reassurance at a time that can feel isolating.

Social Work reform discussions with SW England

Members of the Children in Care Council contributed to the National Review of Social Work by meeting with and sharing their experiences directly with leads from Social Work England and the Department for Education

A Lens on our Journey

A Lens on Our Journey is a powerful and emotive photography exhibition, co-curated by young people in Essex, exploring meaningful objects that reflect their lived experiences of care.

Care Leavers Month Celebration

For the first ever Care Leaver Celebration Month we managed to do something special. We ran 12 activities locally in Quadrants for Care leavers, that consisted of Graffiti workshops, Poetry, Singing Song Writing and Sport. This all ended in a celebration rave where care leavers could showcase what they had achieved

Step Up 2 Social Work

Young People supported the Step Up to Social Work programme by contributing to interviews and supporting recruitment activities. They shared insight from lived experience and ensured candidates understood the realities of practice. Their involvement strengthened recruitment by keeping children's voices central to the selection process

All-Party Parliamentary Group

Essex Young People have had a national influence by taking part in All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) in Westminster. Young People informed national conversations, strengthening confidence and agency while helping decision-makers better understand the realities of being in care.

Junior Children in Care Council

We have delivered three Junior CiCC events for children aged 8–12, including outdoor centre experiences and a trip to Legoland. To ensure younger children can also be involved, we produce a monthly article for the foster carers' newsletter, creating accessible opportunities for under-8s to engage and feel connected

Impact and Achievements 2025 – 2026 Continued

The Unseen is a co-created short documentary developed with care experienced young people, centring their lived experiences, strengths and aspirations as they move from care into adulthood and the world of work. The film provides a platform for young people to tell their own stories, reflecting on identity, belonging and the barriers they face, including stigma and limited opportunities. Using a strengths based and relational approach, the project supports young people to feel seen, heard and valued, while challenging assumptions about care experience. More than a documentary, *The Unseen* is a call to action. Insight from the film has been shared with employers and partners to inform fairer recruitment practices and strengthen pathways into employment, training and independence for care experienced young people.



Watch The Unseen Documentary Here

The Health Assessment Film is a co-produced project developed with care-experienced children and young people to improve understanding of health assessments for children coming into care. Young people worked alongside partners to shape the message, sharing their thoughts, experiences and advice about the process in a way that feels accessible, honest and reassuring. The project recognises that health assessments can feel unfamiliar or daunting and aims to empower young people by explaining why they matter and what to expect. As part of the co-production, a clear and accessible flyer was created for the *New to Care* pack, featuring a QR code linking directly to the film. Together, the film and flyer support informed participation, reduce anxiety and place young people's voices at the centre of health decision-making.



Watch The Initial Health Assessment Film Here

Designed and Developed by our young people in care, we delivered three **My Time residential**s, offering children and young people dedicated respite away from everyday pressures. Two residentials took place at **Danbury Outdoors**, with a further residential held at **Brathay in the Lake District**. These experiences provided young people with opportunities to build confidence, strengthen peer relationships and experience challenge in a safe and supportive environment. Through outdoor activities and shared experiences, young people were encouraged to step outside their comfort zones, develop resilience and create positive, lasting memories. The residentials prioritised choice, fun and connection, supporting emotional wellbeing and a sense of belonging. For many young people, My Time offered rare space to feel relaxed, supported and recognised beyond their care experiences, contributing meaningfully to their confidence and wellbeing.



Its' My Life Festival

Its' My Life is an established, youth-led festival that brings together children, young people and families from across Essex who are supported by Social Care. Each year, around 1,000 children in care, care leavers, children in need, those subject of child protection, children with disabilities, adopted children, young people in kinship arrangements and Separated Migrant Young People and families come together in a shared space that prioritises connection, expression and belonging. The festival offers a rare opportunity for children and young people to belong. To many this is the only space they access where they are not hiding who they are.

'The Festival gets better every year'

Young Person, aged 16

At its heart, Its' My Life is both a celebration and a listening space. Through creative, physical and reflective activities, children and young people share their lived experiences of care in ways that feel safe, voluntary and meaningful. Research is embedded naturally through conversation, peer-led engagement and choice-based methods, aligning with best-practice youth participation that values voice, influence and authenticity over tokenism.

Learning from the festival directly informs service design, workforce understanding and Local Authority priorities.

Five days, nine events, one shared space.

It's My Life reaches across the breadth of the Essex Children's Social Care system through a flexible, responsive structure that adapts to the needs of different groups. Over the course of five days, the festival creates tailored spaces for nine cohorts, ensuring that activities, conversations and support reflect diverse experiences while maintaining a shared sense of community, belonging and inclusion.

Trauma-Informed, Relationship-Based Space

What makes *Its' My Life* distinctive is its ability to operate as a trauma-informed safe space while retaining the joy, excitement and freedom of a festival. Many children and young people who attend have lived experience of loss, instability, separation or marginalisation. Rather than focusing on deficits, the festival intentionally creates environments of emotional and physical safety, choice, predictability and peer support.

'It's the only place I've ever come where I don't feel judged, I don't feel judged by professionals, more importantly I don't feel judged by my kids, I can just say yes'

Mum of child subject of a Child Protection Plan

Young people consistently describe *Its' My Life* as a place where they feel welcome, seen and accepted. Professionals, carers and volunteers act as relational anchors rather than authority figures, supporting young people to try new activities, take risks and speak openly. This relationship-based approach reflects evidence-informed youth work practice, where trust and connection are central to wellbeing and engagement. This event is only possible because of the support of Volunteers across the partnership.

Its' My Life Festival

Voice, Identity and Belonging

Its' My Life creates strong conditions for identity formation and belonging, particularly for young people who often feel isolated within mainstream systems. Friendships formed at the festival act as protective factors against loneliness and stigma, offering shared understanding and validation. This reflects evidence that peer connection and shared experience strengthen emotional resilience and wellbeing.

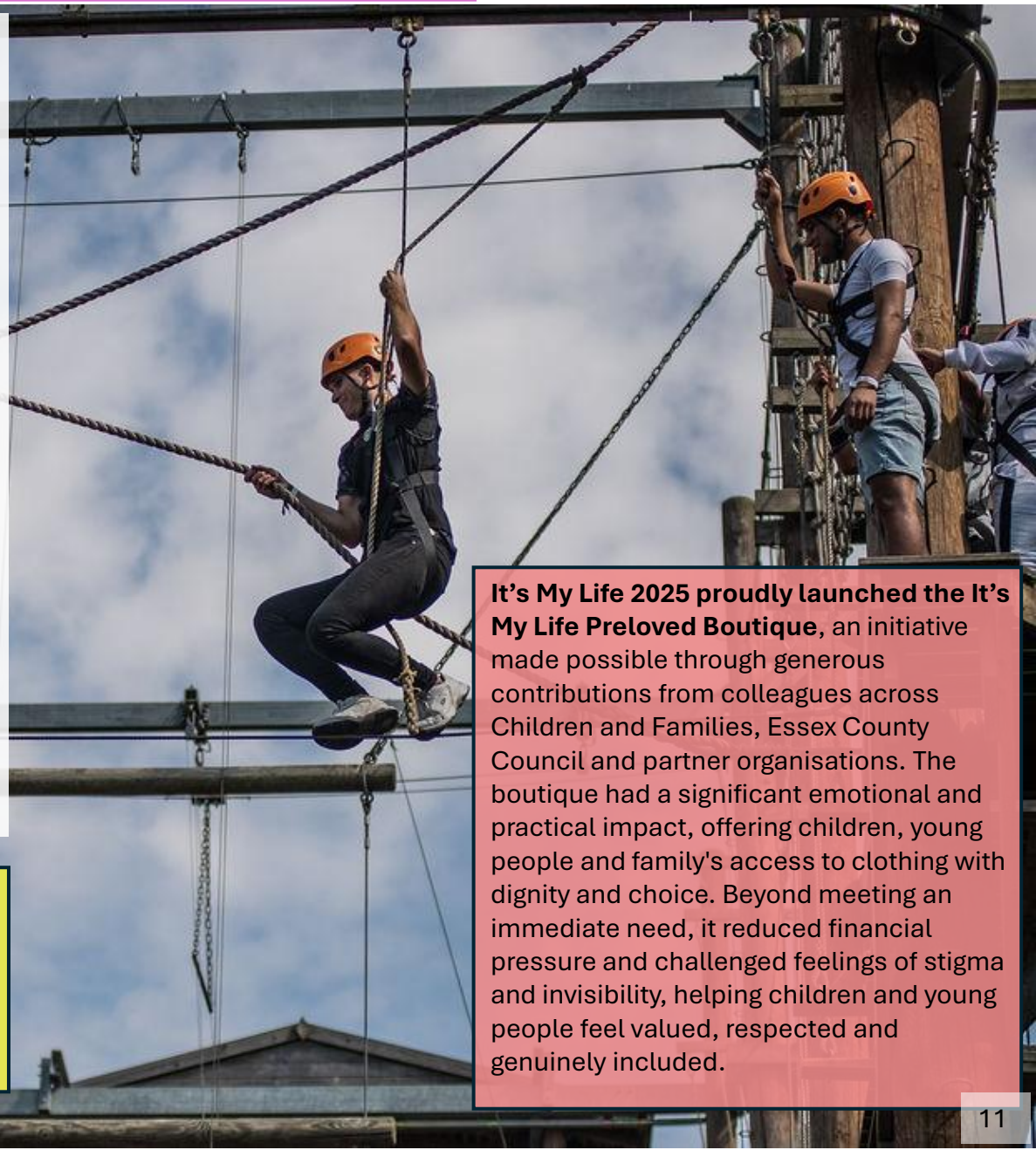
'Volunteering at Its' My Life is my favourite week of the year, I do it with my friends, they feel like family. We get to choose what happens during it'

Young person in care aged 15

The festival also creates space for conversations about culture, religion and belief. For many young people, particularly those from the Global Majority and Separated Migrant Young People, faith and cultural identity are closely linked to wellbeing. *Its' My Life* provides an environment where these aspects of identity are respected and acknowledged, reinforcing inclusive and culturally responsive social work values.



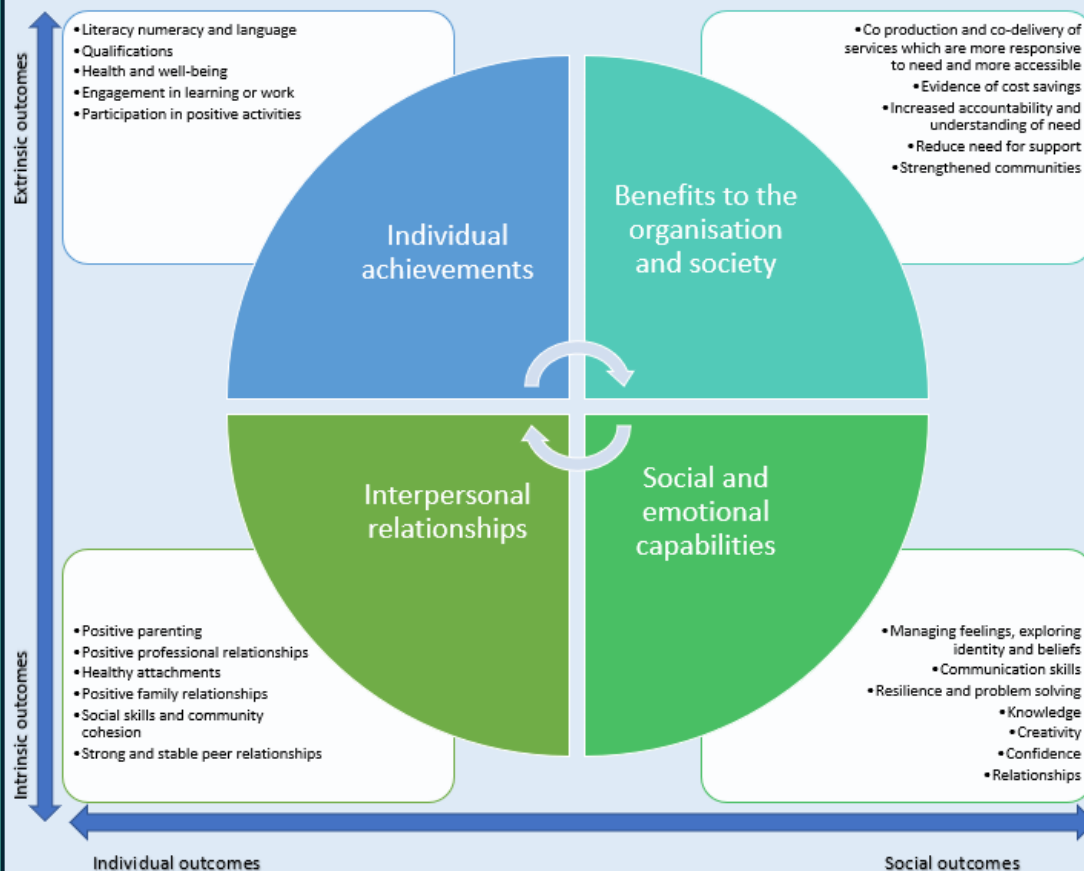
**Watch The Its' My Life
Film Here**



It's My Life 2025 proudly launched the It's My Life Preloved Boutique, an initiative made possible through generous contributions from colleagues across Children and Families, Essex County Council and partner organisations. The boutique had a significant emotional and practical impact, offering children, young people and family's access to clothing with dignity and choice. Beyond meeting an immediate need, it reduced financial pressure and challenged feelings of stigma and invisibility, helping children and young people feel valued, respected and genuinely included.

Outcomes

By intentionally developing young people's personal, social, emotional and relational capabilities, the Children in Care Council supports meaningful and lasting change at both an individual and system level. Our outcomes model recognises that change happens within young people and around them, capturing both intrinsic and extrinsic impact.



Outcomes for Children and Young People

Through long-term, trusted relationships and meaningful participation, children and young people experience:

- Stronger, more secure attachments and positive peer relationships
- Improved emotional wellbeing, confidence and self-belief
- Increased sense of belonging, identity and stability
- Greater hope, aspiration and readiness for future transitions
- Improved independence skills and confidence for adulthood

In practice, this means children and young people feel safer, more confident and more connected, with sustained support during periods of change, challenge and transition.

Outcomes for the System

By placing lived experience at the centre of learning, CiCC contributes to:

- Greater accountability and reflective practice across services
- Improved professional understanding of lived experience
- Changes in language, practice and service design informed by insight
- Stronger co-parenting relationships and shared responsibility
- System learning that supports prevention, stability and long-term outcomes

Professionals are better equipped to understand the real impact of policy and practice, adapt their approach and deliver more relational, responsive and equitable support.

In practice, this means:

Our outcomes framework demonstrates that CiCC is not only a participation mechanism, but a relational and system learning model. It delivers measurable personal growth for young people while driving sustained service improvement, ensuring that children's voices lead to real change.

Our Pledge

As Corporate Parents, Essex has a set of **promises** to children in care and care leavers, called the Pledge. The learning and outcomes of the Children in Care Council are intrinsically linked with the Pledge Promises and help senior leaders and the CiCC build an understanding of how well Co-Parents are delivering the Pledge.

1	To do everything we can to make you feel cared about, valued and respected as an individual
2	To do our very best to keep you safe, healthy and well
3	To make sure you have a social worker or personal adviser who will spend time with you and get to know you
4	To do our best to help you keep in touch with your family, brothers and sisters, and friends when you come into care
5	To make sure you have opportunities to achieve and succeed
6	To fully involve you in decision making so your views are listened to and to explain if we make a decision that you may not like or agree with
7	To help you become independent

How do we evaluate our Pledge?

Essex has an established and ongoing approach to evaluating our Pledge, drawing on a range of qualitative and quantitative evidence from across the Children in Care Council's work. This includes surveys, structured and informal conversations with children and young people, discussions at our annual *It's My Life* Festival, insight gathered through group work and relational activity, and direct dialogue with senior leaders and Corporate Parents. Learning is used to inform action planning, monitor progress, and evidence what has changed as a result of children and young people's views, with clear feedback provided through a 'what's changed' communication.

We put effort and creativity into ensuring we reach the voices of those who may be less likely to engage through traditional methods. This includes our children and young people with disabilities, separated migrant young people, care leavers, parents, and those who go missing or are at risk of exploitation, using flexible, trauma-informed and relational approaches to ensure their experiences meaningfully shape understanding and improvement.



Case study

Young Persons Voice

“I started coming to CiCC when I was around 12. I remember my foster carer at the time telling me I should try Youth Group. It was great — I made friends that I still see now. We’ve done things together that I never would have done if it wasn’t for the Involvement team. The staff are like family to me. They’ve been there for everything. Some of my best memories are from Danbury Outdoors, It’s My Life and My Time. Those trips pushed me out of my comfort zone, helped me build confidence and gave me space to just be young, instead of always feeling like the ‘kid in care’.

Being involved for so long has helped me grow in ways I didn’t expect. I’ve gone from just attending to speaking up, supporting others and feeling proud of where I’ve come from. CiCC has been a constant through everything, and it’s shaped the person I am today.”

Professional Reflection and Impact

This case study reflects the journey of a young person who has been actively involved with the Children in Care Council for over eight years, demonstrating the long term impact of consistent, trusted relationships and meaningful participation.

The young person first became involved at the age of 12 as a child in care, during a period marked by challenges at school and difficulty forming peer relationships. CiCC provided a stable, relational space that remained constant through multiple changes in placement, education and circumstance. Over time, sustained engagement supported the development of confidence, communication and self belief. As his involvement grew, he progressed into volunteering and peer mentoring roles, using his lived experience to support other children and young people in care. He went on to peer lead elements of the It’s My Life Festival, helping younger peers feel welcome, safe and able to find their voice. Through CiCC, he formed strong and lasting friendships, including meeting one of his closest friends — relationships that continue today.

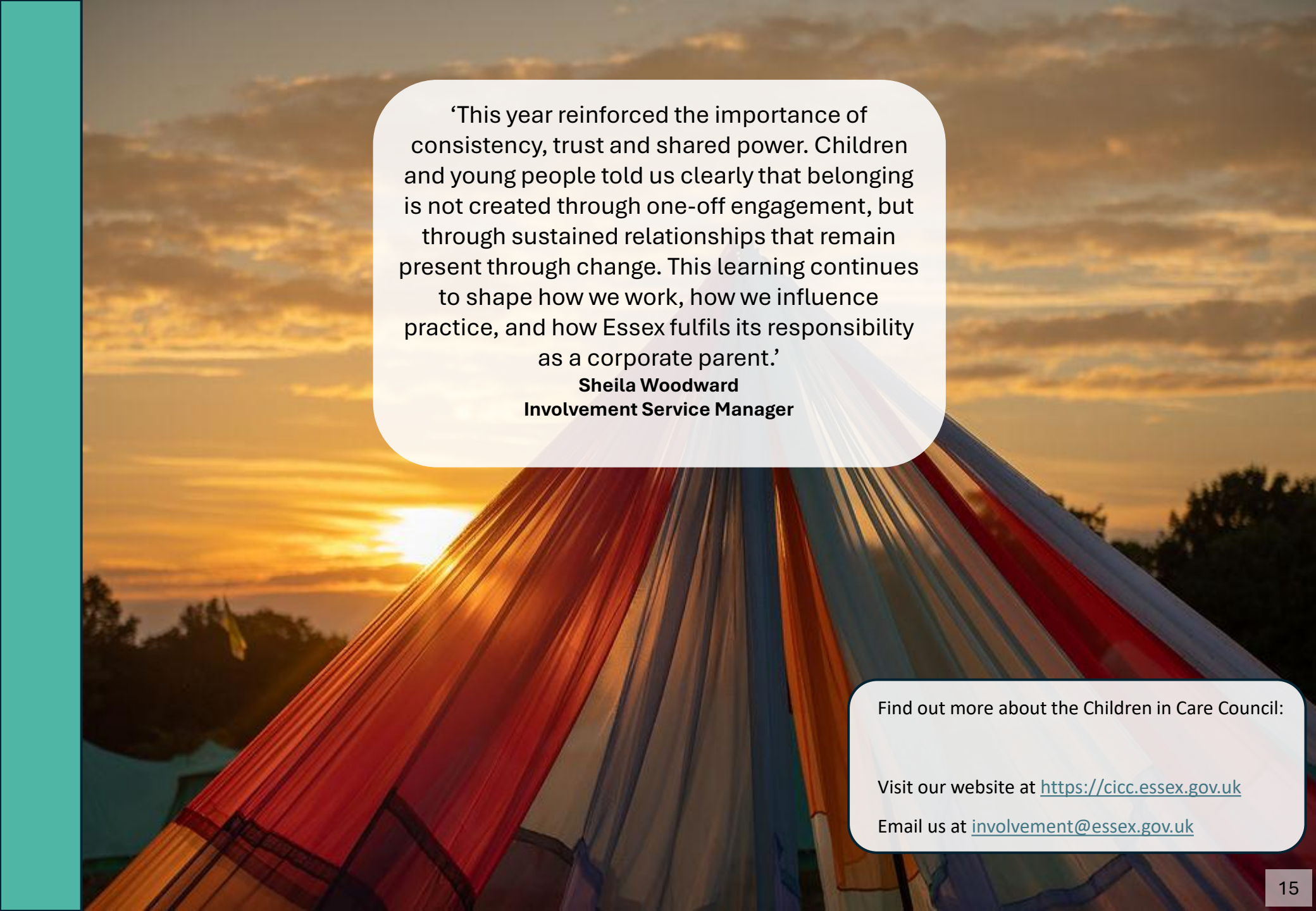
While education remained challenging, the relational and developmental skills built through CiCC supported a positive transition into adulthood. He secured an apprenticeship, progressed into full time employment and passed his driving test, strengthening his independence and confidence.

Now aged 20, he remains actively involved with CiCC, volunteering regularly and contributing to training, conferences and development days. His contribution has been recognised through a national award for his impact on social care.

Impact:

This case study demonstrates how sustained involvement with the CiCC provides stability, fosters meaningful relationships, builds confidence and leadership skills, and supports positive transitions into adulthood. It highlights the value of placing lived experience at the heart of participation, workforce learning and service improvement.

“I see the children in care council as like my home. As like my safe place... I feel safe, I feel home when I’m with you guys”.
(CiCC Care Leaver)



‘This year reinforced the importance of consistency, trust and shared power. Children and young people told us clearly that belonging is not created through one-off engagement, but through sustained relationships that remain present through change. This learning continues to shape how we work, how we influence practice, and how Essex fulfils its responsibility as a corporate parent.’

Sheila Woodward
Involvement Service Manager

Find out more about the Children in Care Council:

Visit our website at <https://cicc.essex.gov.uk>

Email us at involvement@essex.gov.uk