

# THE ESSEX PLAN FOR WORKING FAMILIES

October 2021

**EVERYONE'S  
ESSEX**



Essex County Council



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## FOREWORD

**We want to make Essex one of the most family-friendly counties in England by helping to address some of the most challenging issues faced by working families – financial worries, childcare, housing and employment opportunities.**

As a working parent myself with two children, I understand many of the pressures and competing demands working families are under. For many working parents, these challenges have been made all the harder over the last 18 months. Some of those who were managing before, are now experiencing additional financial pressures leading to precarious housing or employment situations. Here at Essex County Council, we have launched a programme to help such families as we know they are among the most hard-pressed in our communities.

By involving parents and working with employers and services, we aim to make life easier for working parents by identifying new opportunities. This Essex Plan for Working Families sets out a radical agenda to:

- Ensure there is access to affordable and flexible childcare to meet families’ needs
- Assist in early action to avoid situations where housing costs and insecurity affect financial stability and mental wellbeing
- Improve signposting and quality of information, advice and guidance needed for families to make the right decisions
- Support employers to think what they can do to help their staff with family difficulties and challenges

We’ll do this by influencing the childcare, employment and housing markets, influencing council spending and lobbying government for more family-friendly policies.



**Cllr Louise McKinlay**

Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnership and Performance

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## MAKING ESSEX ONE OF THE MOST FAMILY-FRIENDLY COUNTIES IN ENGLAND

Local Government has an important role in improving the lives of all citizens. Essex County Council (ECC) is the second largest county by population size in England, with nearly 1.5m residents. All residents benefit from universal services, such as highways, while statutory services such as social care help the most vulnerable. There are many residents who do not qualify for statutory support but could do with a little bit of help now and then to smooth their way and make life a little bit easier.

Among these are hard-pressed working families who are often described as ‘just about managing’. In 2019 ECC committed to a £1 million programme to support the needs of working families.

Almost a third of the national population are estimated to live in households where the income falls below the ‘Minimum Income Standard’ for a decent quality of living. Before the pandemic it was estimated that 24% of Essex residents were in the ‘just about managing’ cohort, which we define as earning 25% below the Minimum Income Standard. Recent evidence suggests that the size of this cohort grew, and life got tougher for many families during the pandemic.

We started by researching working families’ lived experiences. We wanted to understand what challenges they face, what support they need and where we could help. Our research highlighted that the key challenges faced by working families are around financial worries, childcare, work, and housing. We also found that working families are not a homogenous group, some are in more precarious situations than others. Dealing with family life on a limited income can be challenging and leave little room for thinking beyond the here and

now. Families have limited resilience for dealing with the unexpected and planning for the future is challenging.

We have engaged with parents from the start to help develop and inform our policy initiatives.

### Our early response to some of the challenges working families face were to:

- create an “Essex is Supporting Working Parents” Facebook Page
- fund a pilot of the TellJo portal to provide and signpost families to further information, advice and guidance
- expand the already successful Essex ActivAte holiday food and activity programme to provide more places, including extending hours for some full-day places, during the summer holidays for children and young people whose parents needed to work
- work with Peabody Housing Association to provide early support to families to prevent them reaching a housing crisis and becoming homeless.

This plan sets the council’s ambition to be on the side of working families and to make Essex one of the most family-friendly counties in England.

It outlines our research and the policy response to the challenges working families are facing. It articulates the policy initiatives we will deliver over the coming months, as well as further exploratory work to see where else we can adapt existing services to help make life easier for working families.

Measures here address the priority themes that emerged from our research:



### CHILDCARE

Creating the conditions for working parents to access affordable and flexible childcare to meet their needs



### HOUSING

Supporting working families to avoid situations where housing costs or insecurity impact on their financial and family stability and mental well-being



### INFORMATION, ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

Ensuring working families can easily access the right information, advice and guidance they need to make decisions for themselves and their families when they have limited headspace to seek it out



### SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT

Working with employers so that they embed a truly family-friendly ethos into their employment practices and help working parents develop their skills and prospects



### LIVING COSTS

Helping working families to make their income go further and cope with spikes in spending that we know can be destabilising, without recourse to public assistance.

### Some of our flagship initiatives to support working families will include:

- a household budget campaign that will offer personalised advice, guidance and support to families struggling to make ends meet
- an Essex Employers Family-Friendly Charter, which we will encourage employers to sign up to and to adopt family friendly policies
- an Essex Childcare Early Years Charter encouraging excellence in childcare provision. This aims to add specific support to working families
- opening social supermarkets where parents could buy affordable, nutritious food.



# INTRODUCTION - ON THE SIDE OF WORKING FAMILIES

Local government has a role to play in improving the lives of all its citizens. We are here for the hardest pressed and most vulnerable in our society. That is a key responsibility that we take very seriously but we also have a responsibility to help all our residents live the best lives they can.

Some people are best served by direct service support from ourselves or another arm of the state. Some people need us to make sure that our universal services, such as schools and roads, are the best they can be. Some others just need a little bit of help now and then to smooth their way and make life a little bit easier.

We think that all levels of government need to have an active agenda for these people – the people who are working hard to make ends meet whilst balancing parenting responsibilities - not because they might create future demand pressures on our services but because it's the right thing to do.

Everyone in Essex should be able to expect that their council is looking out for them.

The Essex Plan for Working Families sets out our strategic response to the challenges working families face. This includes priorities for market influencing and adjusting existing services, new proposals, and our lobbying agenda. We will work together with partners and communities across Essex to implement this strategy.

## Our core ambitions for the programme are that working families experience:

- increased financial resilience
- improved wellbeing
- increased resilience for dealing with financial shocks
- increased social mobility.

## A RESPONSE WITH MULTIPLE LEVERS

Working families are not traditionally or historically a 'client group' of the council. Therefore, we need to think creatively about how we can best support them and demonstrate we are on the side of working families and thinking about their needs. But there are limits on what we can do directly. Therefore, we also need to champion the needs of working families with Government and consider how we can influence markets and encourage providers and partners to adopt family-friendly policies and behaviours across the county.

## CORE SPEND AND ADJUSTING SERVICES - AFFECTING AND INFLUENCING MARKETS

Our greatest opportunity to influence the lives of working families at scale is likely to be in the approach we take to influencing core spend and how we can adjust existing services towards their needs. For example, influencing the childcare market so it can better support working families is likely to have a large impact.

## POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

Our policies and strategies will not as a default take account of working families. We will work across our own organisation and with our partners to understand how best to incorporate or think about the needs of working families in new policies and strategies that we create. This is likely to be an ongoing task. We will consider within our corporate impact assessments the impact all our policies, plans, initiatives and strategies have on levelling up and to take into account the effect they will have on families and other cohorts in Essex. This will help complement our wider work to support the delivery of Everyone's Essex.

## LOBBYING GOVERNMENT

Many of the levers to improve the lives of working families may be beyond our direct control. So, we need an active dialogue with government about the types of policy changes they could consider to support working families across the United Kingdom. We will send a strong signal to working families that the council is on their side and thinking about the challenges they face.





# RESEARCH AND INSIGHTS

Working families who are just about managing are a significant proportion of the population in Essex and are not typically eligible for targeted support. Before the pandemic an estimated 24% of residents in Essex were in this cohort. In general, the council typically has little contact with working families unless they tip into crisis and need our services and support. This has meant that we have had limited insight into the experiences of working families.

To better understand the lived experiences of working families, a robust programme of research was developed to ascertain the challenges they face, and to identify opportunities to proactively support these families.

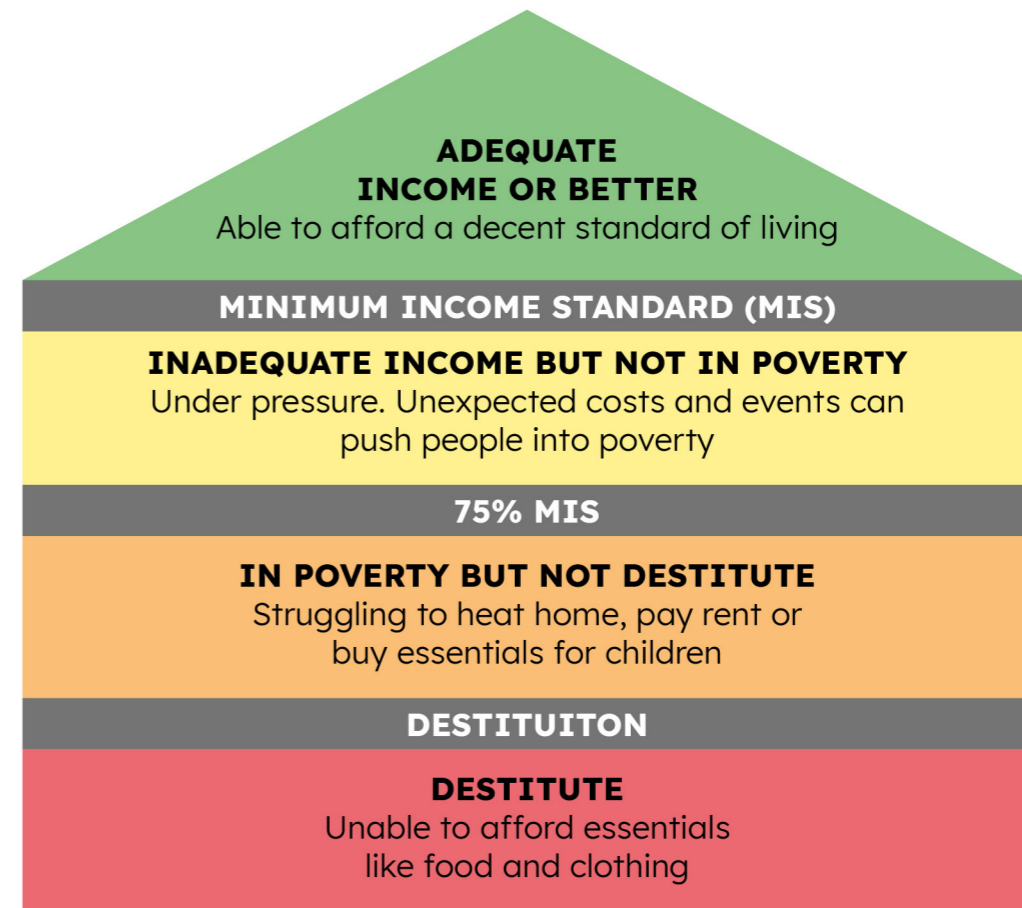
## DEFINING 'WORKING FAMILIES WHO ARE JUST ABOUT MANAGING'

We have used the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) as a starting point for the definition of 'working families who are just about managing', using 'people who earn 25% below the MIS after childcare/ housing costs' (see diagram opposite).

### In addition to using the MIS, we have defined characteristics which are typical of working families who are just about managing:

- just about managing to get by day-to-day to make ends meet and can generally cover essentials such as food and bills, but with insufficient income for anything additional
- finances are a significant source of ongoing stress in their lives
- find it difficult to manage unexpected costs, with minimal savings to fall back on
- vulnerable to even modest changes in circumstances
- likely to have some level of debt
- generally in employment, though some may be working part-time to fit around childcare (Covid-19 may also have impacted levels of employment for many)
- not likely to be eligible for free school meals and not reliant on state benefits for most of their income, though may receive tax credits or partial housing benefit to top up income.

The graphic opposite demonstrates the group we are defining as 'just about managing'. [Adapted from Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University].



### To inform our understanding of these families, key research activities were undertaken. These included:

- an evidence-based review of national literature, and deep-dive into available statistical, administrative, and commercial data to estimate scale and profile of working families across Essex
- qualitative research with families in Essex, including focus groups, online communities, and in-depth interviews (by commissioned partner, Britain Thinks)
  - » phase 1 took place pre-Covid-19, between Dec 2019-March 2020
  - » phase 2 took place during lockdown (spring 2021)
- Essex Resident's Survey 2020 - countywide representative survey of Essex residents, which obtained findings on the views, values, and concerns of working families
- research with ECC employees who are working parents, comprising of a survey, focus groups and in-depth interviews with employees.

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITH WORKING FAMILIES IN ESSEX

We commissioned Britain Thinks, an independent research organisation, to carry out a comprehensive programme of ethnographic research which aimed to develop ECC's understanding of the lived experiences of working families who are just about managing.

### Headline findings

1. Working families are not a homogenous group; some are in more precarious situations than others (renters, those with young children, single parents, those on irregular incomes).
2. Dealing with family life on a limited income is challenging and leaves little room for thinking beyond the here and now. All in this cohort have limited resilience for dealing with the unexpected, and planning for the future is challenging.
3. Finances are not the primary frame through which working families define themselves – their priority is to ensure their children have a fulfilling and enjoyable upbringing.
4. There are several key challenges around childcare, work, and housing in particular:
  - » Formal childcare is prohibitively expensive, and this can demotivate parents from increasing their work hours. Finding the right solution is difficult, particularly for single parents and those with younger children. Parents rely heavily on informal networks for childcare.
  - » Many are in low-paid jobs, with irregular hours and limited opportunities to progress.

- » Many pay over the odds for housing suitable for their families or live in housing that doesn't fit their needs. Keeping up with rent/mortgage payments is difficult for some. Renters want to buy in future, but few see this as feasible.
- » Achieving financial stability is their key aspiration. Most find it difficult to plan for the future and are focused on short term, tangible goals rather than drastic changes to their lives.

### Covid-specific findings

1. Covid-19 has been a hugely stressful and challenging experience for parents. Their priorities have been to shield their children from the emotional impacts of the crisis and keep them safe.
2. Families have been vulnerable to the impacts of Covid-19, and the financial impact has been polarising. The crisis has had an uneven impact on families' finances, with some better off than before and some worse off. Those who are worst affected have been relying on short-term solutions but are very concerned about the long-term outlook. The focus for these families is now on financial stability rather than social mobility.
3. Home schooling was a challenge for parents and children, with parents taking different approaches to this. Parents' priorities were on their children's wellbeing rather than on education during the lockdown period. There are real concerns about what this will mean for long-term prospects of children.

4. Emotional well-being of their children has been by far the greatest health concern of parents. Lack of social interaction is the greatest cause for concern, especially for younger children. Physical activity and healthy eating have been less of a priority.
5. The crisis has exacerbated any pre-existing lack of agency that these families felt towards their futures, and made it even more difficult to plan, even in the short term.

## ESSEX RESIDENT'S SURVEY 2020

The 2020 Essex Resident's Survey included questions which provided insight into the views of working families who are just about managing, compared to other household types.

### Headline findings:

- Health and standard of living are key priorities for working families, mirroring those with sufficient income.
- It is financial anxiety that pulls them apart; they want to save but are often unable to do so, based on financial situation.
  - » Paying bills, employment security and raising children represent the main areas of worry for these working families.
  - » They are anxious about their financial situations and have limited flexibility to adjust spending and may be constrained in their ability to save, although they see the benefits of doing so.






- Their children's futures are a key concern for working families who are as ambitious for their children as other groups but are more sceptical as to whether higher education is always the best pathway to future success.
  - » They lack optimism about opportunities available, particularly around higher education, employment, and home ownership.
- Belief they are 'worse off' financially and in terms of social position, reflects perceived barriers to social mobility, although their views on their standard of living and housing (vs their parents' generation) mirror the views of those with sufficient income.
  - » Views on the fairness of societal paths are similar by household financial situation, although working families living in poverty and just about managing are both more likely to feel that social mobility is harder for people from less advantaged backgrounds.
- They are more likely than average to highlight economic issues – job opportunities, wage levels and the cost of living – as needing improvement in their local area.
- They report stronger social networks (e.g. chatting to neighbours, people to call on) than those living in poverty, although slightly below those with sufficient incomes.





# OUR VISION, OUR PRIORITIES

Five priority areas emerged through the research as the key issues affecting working families and as areas of action to support working families to improve medium and longer-term outcomes:

-  **CHILDCARE**  
Creating the conditions for working families to access both affordable and flexible childcare to meet their needs
-  **HOUSING**  
Supporting working families to avoid situations where their housing costs (affordability) or security of tenure impact on their financial stability and mental well-being
-  **INFORMATION ADVICE & GUIDANCE**  
Ensuring working families can access the right information, advice, guidance and support to make the right decisions for themselves and their families
-  **SKILLS & EMPLOYMENT**  
Working with employers to embed family-friendly thinking into good employment practices and help working parents develop their skills and prospects
-  **LIVING COSTS**  
Helping working families to make their income go further and to cope with spikes in expenditure that can be de-stabilising, without recourse to public assistance



# OUR POLICY RESPONSE – MORE DETAIL IN THE ACTION PLAN

*“We will provide  
earlier information  
on childcare to  
parents”*

## CHILDCARE



### We will:

- Launch an **Early Years Charter** to support the needs of working families
- Further develop the growth of **Multi Childcare Provider Clusters**
- Explore funding the development of **Parent co-operatives**
- Look to partner and add value to a **Babysitting Platform**
- Explore the need for an **Employer provision** of childcare
- Extend the **existing council provision** of childcare where viable

## HOUSING



### We will:

- Provide advice to families at risk of eviction through **Peabody Outreach**
- Work with partners to increase the availability of **affordable housing**
- Analyse how to ensure families live in **fit for purpose, quality homes**
- Review recommendations for **affordable, stable accommodation**
- Develop a trial **flexible-rent scheme** with a housing association

## INFORMATION, ADVICE & GUIDANCE



### We will:

- Keep the programme relevant via a **Working Families Reference Group**
- Drive strategic change through a **Working Families Stakeholder Forum**
- Provide **earlier information on childcare** to parents
- Explore packaging together a **hyperlocal advice tool** for parents
- Explore how working families can utilise our **country parks and libraries**
- Ensure families are aware and can access existing **family mentoring**

## SKILLS & EMPLOYMENT



### We will:

- Launch a **Family-Friendly Charter** for employers to sign up to
- Explore launching a proactive **job matching platform**
- Target support to parents accessing the **Essex Opportunities Portal**
- Develop a **Parent Ambassadors** learning programme based on local need
- Explore the viability of employers offering a **flexible pay scheme**

## LIVING COSTS



### We will:

- Run a **Household Budget campaign** highlighting savings hints and tips
- Launch **social supermarkets** to drive food costs down
- Encourage employers to offer interest free **loans for childcare**
- Evaluate the **Healthier, Wealthier Children pilot** addressing child poverty
- Encourage schools to use local services and areas for **school trips**



# ‘ON YOUR SIDE’ - LOBBYING AGENDA

As we emerge from the pandemic, it's more important than ever that Government takes notice of the ever-increasing challenges facing the nation's working families. We want to show that we are working tirelessly to make the voices of Essex residents heard and influence decision making at both a national and local level. As part of "Levelling Up Essex" we will demonstrate thought leadership and present an

ambitious, lobbying agenda to raise awareness of the issues facing Essex residents including working families who are just about managing, presenting information to Government to help them understand how they can work with us to implement change.

We will engage in discussions with Government on areas of importance including childcare, housing and employment.

## CHILDCARE

- review potential opportunities and enhancements to the national 30-hour free childcare entitlement
- expand use of childcare vouchers for less formal settings
- support the government's levelling up agenda and identify new ways to support families.



## HOUSING

- additional funding for affordable housing
- planning reforms
- empowering and facilitating local authorities and housing associations to build new homes.



## EMPLOYMENT

- enhancing resilience to labour market disruption through automation
- limiting return-ships (returning to work after an extended break) to 3 months where possible, with the role being available at the end.



## HOW WE PLAN TO DO THIS?

- We will offer support as the Government looks to deliver on action areas set out in the Early Years Healthy Development Review
- We will partner with organisations to review items which would have been included within the previously announced Employment Bill
- We will engage with ministers on the upcoming Planning Bill and respond to any associated White Paper consultation or call for evidence.
- Engage and feed into the "Levelling up" white paper.

## NEXT STEPS

Our desire to have an active agenda for working families in Essex who are just about managing is firmly rooted in our wider work around Levelling Up Essex. The interventions outlined in the Action Plan will be monitored through the the delivery of Everyone's Essex.

To ensure this agenda is moved forward at pace, designated owners will be tasked with exploring and implementing the initiatives set out within the action plan.

We will commit to and consider the needs of working families in Essex across our services. This means that as new strategies, policies, and plans are developed, we'll ensure that a "child

and family" lens is cast over it to ensure that we have mitigated against any adverse impact. As such, we will ensure it complements and links to our economic, skills and financial wellbeing agendas and strategies.

As pointed out at the beginning of this strategy, this is new territory for any local authority. We want to continue to push the boundaries, so we must continue to learn, adapt, and seek the views of working families across the county. As we embark on delivering the strategy, we will use the lessons we learn along the way continuously to improve, sharing what works with partners, locally and nationally.





# ACTION PLAN

## POLICY RESPONSE TO CHILDCARE

### Issues working families are facing:

- Formal childcare provision can be prohibitively expensive for some; finding the right affordable or flexible childcare solution can be difficult for those with younger children.
- As such, parents sometimes rely heavily on informal networks such as family and friends for childcare support (particularly single parents).
- But it can be a struggle to manage work and childcare arrangements, parents have to forge 'finely balanced' solutions, with part-time work/ flexible hours used to avoid paying for childcare, and annual leave eked out to cover school holidays.
- Parents particularly find it difficult to find flexible and affordable childcare in the evenings, weekends and school holidays.

INITIATIVE	DETAIL	TIMESCALE
<b>Summer Holiday Activities</b>	Following the success of the Holiday Activity clubs in 2020, we funded full day places for hard-pressed working families where accessing this childcare would allow them to continue to work. We will explore the continuation of this offer going forward.	Delivered
<b>Early Years Charter</b>	Our best opportunity to address childcare issues is through influencing the childcare market. As part of the development of our Early Years Strategy, we will introduce into the charter the need to support working families. The charter will encourage providers to offer more flexible childcare provision, including extending hours to cover shift patterns and weekend working.	Jan – Mar 2022
<b>Multi-provider clusters</b>	We will explore how childcare providers could better support working families across the county by encouraging providers to cluster and work together to provide extended hours to enable working families to plan ahead.	Apr – Jun 2022

INITIATIVE	DETAIL	TIMESCALE
<b>Encourage growth of parent co-operatives</b>	We will explore developing and piloting an Ofsted registered parent co-operative, involving parents interested in establishing a community nursery to meet their busy schedules. Parents will be incentivised to volunteer and in turn receive discounted childcare fees.	Apr – Jun 2022
<b>Council provision of childcare</b>	We will explore whether the Council can offer more provision of childcare to build on what is already provided without destabilising the local market. We will do this by exploring expanding existing provision and creating new provision to meet the needs of specific cohorts.	Apr – Jun 2022
<b>Employer Provision of childcare</b>	We will explore how employers can support their employees in identifying or providing cost effective childcare.	Jul – Sep 2022
<b>Babysitting Portal</b>	Babysitting is an important support for families who need to access short term or short notice childcare. We will look to partner with an existing commercial babysitting platform, so we can have an active role in providing information to parents about available babysitters.	Jul – Sep 2022
<b>Lobbying Agenda</b>	We will look to lobby Government on relevant issues relating to the Childcare sector.	Ongoing

### Impact of these initiatives:

These initiatives will help develop more flexible childcare provision in Essex and support the needs of working families who are just about managing. Working families will be more likely to be able to find childcare providers which meet their requirements and so adequately juggle work and caring commitments. The initiatives will also support providing accessible and affordable childcare for residents in Essex.

***Our aspiration is that families can easily access safe, affordable, and flexible childcare all year and outside traditional working hours, enabling them to have increased opportunities to engage in employment resulting in improved financial resilience.***





# ACTION PLAN

## POLICY RESPONSE TO HOUSING

### Issues working families are facing:

- Many working families pay over the odds for housing suitable for growing families or live in housing that doesn't fit their needs.
- Those in social housing were most likely to have outgrown their home, whilst affordability and keeping up with payments were of greater concern for those renting or paying off mortgages.
- Ensuring housing meets their families' needs as children grow is a common mid-to-long-term goal for families. Many hope to avoid having to downsize for financial reasons - particularly those who anticipate that their children will remain at home as they become young adults. Those renting would like to buy in future, but few see this as feasible and are pessimistic about their children's prospects of getting on the property ladder in the future.

INITIATIVE	DETAIL	TIMESCALE
<b>Peabody Outreach extension</b>	To avoid working families reaching the point where they are at risk of being made homeless, we have extended our relationship with Peabody Floating Support to specifically target working families who may be struggling to provide additional help and support.	Delivered
<b>Affordable Housing</b>	We have commissioned research and will explore how we take forward recommendations with housing delivery partners to increase the supply of new affordable housing across Essex.	Jul - Sep 2022
<b>Quality of Homes</b>	We will explore how to work more closely with our district and borough councils' housing and environmental health teams to improve the quality of privately rented accommodation including exploring a register of landlords or accreditation scheme.	Jul - Sep 2022

INITIATIVE	DETAIL	TIMESCALE
<b>Stability of Private Rental</b>	We will review recommendations from research we have commissioned through Savills to look at supporting families to find good quality, stable and affordable rented accommodation.	Jul - Sep 2022
<b>Flexible Rent Scheme</b>	We will look to pilot an Essex flexible rent scheme with a housing association to enable renters to either over or under-pay their rent and at certain times that suit them to avoid potential financial pinch points.	Sep - Dec 2022
<b>Lobbying Agenda</b>	We will lobby Government on relevant issues relating to the housing sector which require reform to support working parents.	Ongoing

### Impact of these initiatives:

We already have a Housing Growth Strategy within ECC which sets out our detailed works with the district local authorities on housing growth and supports work to prevent and manage homelessness. We recognise that we can extend that work to ensure that it specifically supports the needs of working families. These initiatives will provide further support to families who are struggling and look at how we can support them when they are struggling to pay their rent.

Through these initiatives we will work closely with districts to see how we can really target and support working families on some of the areas of key concerns and to develop strong proposals to support this cohort going forward.

***Our aspiration is that working families can live in homes that meet their changing needs, that housing costs are manageable and that renters are able to get onto the property ladder.***





# ACTION PLAN

## POLICY RESPONSE TO INFORMATION, ADVICE & GUIDANCE

### Issues working families are facing:

- Working parents have limited time to find information and advice which could help in their situation. As a result, it is difficult for them to seek out the support they need due to the pressures of dealing with work and family life on a budget.
- Informal support networks are key to coping for families, who do not typically engage with council services
- and may not be aware of the support they can receive.
- Families are generally financially savvy and employ different coping mechanisms to get by each month, however dealing with money management on a limited income takes an emotional and mental toll. It also makes it difficult for them to save and plan for the future.

INITIATIVE	DETAIL	TIMESCALE
<b>Working families Reference Group</b>	We will create a reference group involving working parents who are hard-pressed and just about managing. The role of members of the group will be to advise, challenge and co-design the planned initiatives outlined in this action plan. This will ensure there is co-ownership over the initiatives.	Oct – Dec 2021
<b>Working families Stakeholder Forum</b>	We will establish a stakeholder forum involving professional organisations, in particular those in the childcare and housing sectors, with a specific focus on supporting working families. This will drive strategic change across Essex and bring partners on board who share our ambition.	Oct – Dec 2021
<b>Basildon Working families Advice Package</b>	We will consider how to package together all the advice and support that is on offer for working families ensuring that it's hyperlocal. If a suitable model can be established, we will look to trial this in Basildon.	Jan – Mar 2022

INITIATIVE	DETAIL	TIMESCALE
<b>Early Information on Childcare</b>	We will explore how to better use the key touch points where working families are likely to come into contact with public sector services, with a particular focus on the period prior to a child turning one year old. This will provide families with early information on childcare and help them make better informed decisions and understand more about their options.	Jan – Mar 2022
<b>Family Mentoring services</b>	We will ensure that working families are aware that existing Family Mentoring programmes are available to them.	Ongoing

### Impact of these initiatives:

We will ensure initiatives throughout the programme are developed with parents in mind and can be shaped and influenced by the cohort we are trying to support through the Working Families Reference Group. The Working Families Stakeholder Forum will build on this by providing feedback and challenge from an organisation point of view and will drive forward the initiatives in their relevant sectors.

The initiatives will look to provide working families with greater awareness of the information, advice and guidance available, and where possible ensure more focused targeting on working families who are just about managing.

***Our aspiration is that time poor working families will have increased awareness of what support is available and are able to access the right information, advice and guidance in a timely way.***



# ACTION PLAN

## POLICY RESPONSE TO SKILLS & EMPLOYMENT

### Issues working families are facing:

- A lack of family friendly working practice is a barrier to working families being able to adequately juggle work and caring commitments. Some parents are unable to meet their career aspirations because of caring responsibilities and so work less hours or in less senior roles with a feeling that their careers are on hold.
- Because of this, working parents can be in insecure employment. Sectors which traditionally are less secure have been particularly hard hit by the impact of Covid-19 - meaning many working families have seen their working hours and earnings reduce.
- Some parents would prefer more secure employment, or more progression within their roles. However, working parents do not always have the time to seek out opportunities for further learning and skill developments to meet their career aspirations. Programmes around traditional skills sometimes have low uptake amongst working families.

INITIATIVE	DETAIL	TIMESCALE
<b>Making working in Essex Family Friendly</b>	We will launch a Family Friendly Employers charter for Essex. It will highlight the types of key policies and practices which we'll expect a family friendly employer to have. In return employers will be offered a charter mark to demonstrate their commitment.	Oct - Dec 2021
<b>Parent Ambassadors</b>	We will develop a "Parent Ambassadors" Volunteer Programme, where participants are involved in Family Learning. The programme will be tailored to local need. Parents will be supported to further develop their skills and then to take up voluntary positions within schools and community settings to support and refer other parents onto Family Learning and skills development opportunities.	Oct - Dec 2021
<b>Essex Opportunities Portal Advisor</b>	We will recruit an advisor to provide online and telephony support to working families seeking jobs, careers, skills or training information and advice on the Essex Opportunities Portal.	Oct - Dec 2021

INITIATIVE	DETAIL	TIMESCALE
<b>Staff Coaching &amp; Support Group</b>	We will be building upon the success of a staff pilot to support working families through facilitated sessions drawing on coaching tools and peer support to build resilience in parents who are struggling to manage the pressures they are facing.	Jan - Mar 2022
<b>Job Matching (Uflexi) Scheme</b>	We will explore funding and launching a recruitment platform to automatically match jobseekers looking for part time work with local employers offering those hours. The platform will be low-cost for employers and will enable cash poor and time-poor working people to increase their working hours and incomes.	Jan - Mar 2022
<b>Payroll Flexibility</b>	We will explore the benefit and feasibility of employers offering payroll flexibility to employees who may be struggling financially to prevent them having to access payday loans.	Apr - Jun 2022
<b>Lobbying Agenda</b>	We will look to lobby Government on relevant issues relating to skills and employment.	Ongoing

### Impact of these initiatives:

These initiatives will help support working families with juggling their work and caring commitments and help drive a strategic change with employers in Essex to support family friendly working. Many organisations already do this to varying levels, however our initiatives will ensure this is more transparent and consistent and it's clear what is meant by a family friendly employer. These initiatives will also allow jobseekers to identify opportunities suitable for them more easily, and to develop relevant skills in line with their other commitments. The initiatives will look to provide working families with greater awareness of the information, advice and guidance available, and where possible ensure more focused targeting on working families who are just about managing.

***Our aspiration is that working families can access and engage with opportunities that support their employment aspirations and increase their own earning potential to achieve a successful work-life balance.***





# ACTION PLAN

## POLICY RESPONSE TO LIVING COSTS

### Issues working families are facing:

- Managing expenditure is key for working families. Some find it difficult to save and so resort to loans, leading to additional costs, or miss out on activities and items for their children.
- Families already try to manage budgets using a variety of strategies. However, because of limited time families do not always have time to research how to manage budgets in other ways.
- As well as general household costs, having children at school also has its own costs. Few working families qualify for free school meals and the costs of school uniforms, clubs and trips can cause working families to have to go into their overdraft or take out loans at crunch points in the year to meet these costs, which working parents feel are important for their child's wellbeing.

INITIATIVE	DETAIL	TIMESCALE
<b>The Essex Household Budget Campaign</b>	We will launch an Essex-focused campaign to help working families save money on household costs and withstand the financial shocks that family life can bring. The campaign will follow a small number of families and highlight their personal journey from financial worry to being able to manage their budgets, as well as producing tools, tips, and guidance for others on how to save money and where to find help.	Jan – Mar 2022
<b>Social Supermarkets</b>	We will work with local partners to develop community-led supermarkets to help families save money on food. Customers would have access to a non-judgemental, community-owned service providing reliable access to food and household items at reduced prices for a small fee.	Jan – Mar 2022
<b>School Trips</b>	We will encourage schools to work with Essex-based organisations with a view to lowering the costs of these trips and keep spending in Essex to support our businesses whilst promoting pride in the cultural, historical, and leisure riches our county enjoys.	Jan – Mar 2022

INITIATIVE	DETAIL	TIMESCALE
<b>Healthier Wealthier Children</b>	We will look to evaluate how the Healthier Wealthier Children programme can better target working families. The programme seeks to reduce child poverty by helping families in financial difficulties and is a collaboration between Citizens Advice Service and Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Service (ECFWS) and aims to upskill community child health services to identify families with young children experiencing or at risk of child poverty.	Apr – Jun 2022
<b>Childcare Discounts</b>	Many employers offer staff discounts for facilities such as gyms and season ticket loans to ease transport costs – we would like to explore the potential to extend these types of benefits into the childcare space.	Apr – Jun 2022
<b>Country Parks and Libraries</b>	We will explore how we can use our country parks and libraries to provide even more affordable and engaging activities for working families.	Apr – Jun 2022

### Impact of these initiatives:

These initiatives have been developed to drive down everyday costs for working families. They will help families to prepare for increased costs they may incur and to review how they can most efficiently make savings. Our initiatives will work with employers, schools and organisations across Essex to achieve this.

***Our aspiration is that working families have increased awareness of practical ways in which they can reduce costs and make savings for unexpected events and the future.***

This information is issued by:  
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this document can be translated,  
and/or made available in alternative  
formats, on request.

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