

# Early Years Ethnographies

Learning from the experiences of families across Essex

Research by ESRO

Commissioned by Essex County Council,  
in partnership with ThePublicOffice

**ESRO**



Essex County Council

**ThePublicOffice**

# Foreword

In Essex we are rethinking the way that we commission public services so that the things we do make a more positive difference in people's lives.

We need to improve how we work with and for the people of Essex and we want to become much better listeners: we want to properly understand how people live and what they need to improve their lives. It sounds simple, but this is a really difficult thing to do which is why we are working closely with ThePublicOffice. Together we're seeking to place a citizen-focussed ethos and set of behaviours at the heart of commissioning.

Using ethnographic research helps us make a leap towards our ambition to get to know people and understand the reality of their lives. In the past, if we'd wanted to understand what people want and need we'd have run focus groups, done surveys and asked people directly what they think. Ethnographic research allows us to see things we'd never have seen and gives us answers to questions we wouldn't think to ask.

We requested this research from ESRO as part of a specific aim to radically improve Early Years outcomes. We will use it (alongside other evidence and insights) to help shape our thinking about what we should do next. The report looks closely at the lives of a small number of ordinary families in Essex. Whilst small in number, the detail gathered from these 'mainstream' yet diverse group of families tells us a lot about current service provision and how the system works from parents' points of view.

The insights that ethnographies yield are not always easy to hear. This research highlights a number of uncomfortable realities – the difficulties that families are facing and what is currently not working in the Early Years system. But these insights give us much more than a critique; they offer pointers to how things could be better. In our Early Years work and across other areas of commissioning, we expect our use of ethnography to challenge our long-held assumptions. But we will also use it to move our thinking forward towards new and exciting possibilities for really making a difference in the lives of people across the county.

Dave Hill, Executive Director for People Commissioning,  
Essex County Council

Chris Martin, Integrated Commissioning Director (West),  
Essex County Council

Building citizen/patient insight into the way we plan and commission health and care services in West Essex is something I am very passionate about. So I was very excited when Essex County Council commissioned this piece of ethnographic research focused on families with young children. The insights in this report are very challenging: we need to think through the implications, from how our frontline practitioners work and are supported, right through to what should count as success for those of us designing the whole system. Essex County Council and WECCG share a commitment to making citizens - their capabilities and needs - central to all that we do, and I'm really looking forward to the work we are going to do together to make change happen.

Clare Morris, Chief Officer,  
West Essex Clinical Commissioning Group

At Essex County Council we want to do everything we can to support all children, young people and families to reach their potential...

We will take a whole family approach, working with families on a holistic basis, thinking about all the factors that impact on families on a day-to-day basis.

By concentrating on the conditions and influences that affect children's health and development, we will work with families, listen to their needs and support them to make informed decisions.

**With the right support, at the right time, children and families can develop the firm foundations needed for a positive and fulfilling life.**

From Essex County Council (2014)



Happy, healthy  
**CHILDREN**

Confident,  
capable  
**PARENTS**

Effective,  
low-cost  
**EARLY YEARS  
PROVISION**

# About the research

This ethnographic research takes an in-depth look at the lives of eight families living across Essex, combined with observational fieldwork at over 30 services targeted directly at, or providing indirect provision to, families with young children.

By its very nature, ethnographic research focuses on the experiences of a small number of people, amplifying the importance of strategic sample design. This project focussed on the experience 'mainstream' families in Essex – exploring what 'typical' life is like for a family with young children. The families involved included those who considered themselves to be 'happy and striving', as well as those who felt under pressure in some way. We deliberately excluded families who were receiving support from specialist or targeted interventions.

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## The research aims to:

- Understand the lives of families living in Essex holistically, and from their point of view
- Understand the key issues and concerns for parents of young children – revealing uncertainties, challenges, fears and pressures
- Explore parents' needs, preferences and experiences of support
- Understand the current role and experience of different local service provision (public, third and private sector)
- Identify dreams, hopes and aspirations of young families – and the perceived enablers/blockers to being able to achieve these
- Identify insights that open up new lines of discussion about Early Years service provision in Essex

All of the research was conducted by ESRO in Spring 2014, with Essex County Council staff directly observing and participating in parts of the fieldwork process.

# About the families (more detail in appendix)



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## Amy & Greg

- Both unemployed
- Three children aged 4, 6 & 7



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## Charlie

- Single mum, working part-time
- One son aged 1



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## Zara & Mike

- Working dad, stay-at-home mum
- Four children aged 1, 3, 5 & 7



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## Marie

- Single mum, unemployed
- Two children aged 3 & 5



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## Lindsay & Martin

- Both working parents
- One daughter aged 2



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## Matt & Gemma

- One studying and one working
- Two children aged 4 & 18 months



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## Mitch & Suze

- Working dad, stay-at-home mum
- Three children aged 12 weeks, 3 & 6



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## Louise & Rob

- Both working parents
- One daughter aged 2

# Summary of challenges experienced by families

Over the course of this project, we found families who were living in a range of circumstances – none well-off, but all managing on a day-to-day basis. Uniting them was a desire to do the best for their children – to see them grow up to be happy, independent, healthy and successful at whatever they wanted to do with their lives. Parental aspirations included wanting to improve their living situations, describing their desires for larger houses in better areas, with a garden – or highlighting the importance of being able to treat themselves or go on nice holidays every now and again.

However, many of our families also experienced specific challenges in their lives – often regretting the everyday expenses they incurred paying for food, travel, childcare, and other day-to-day necessities. Many also

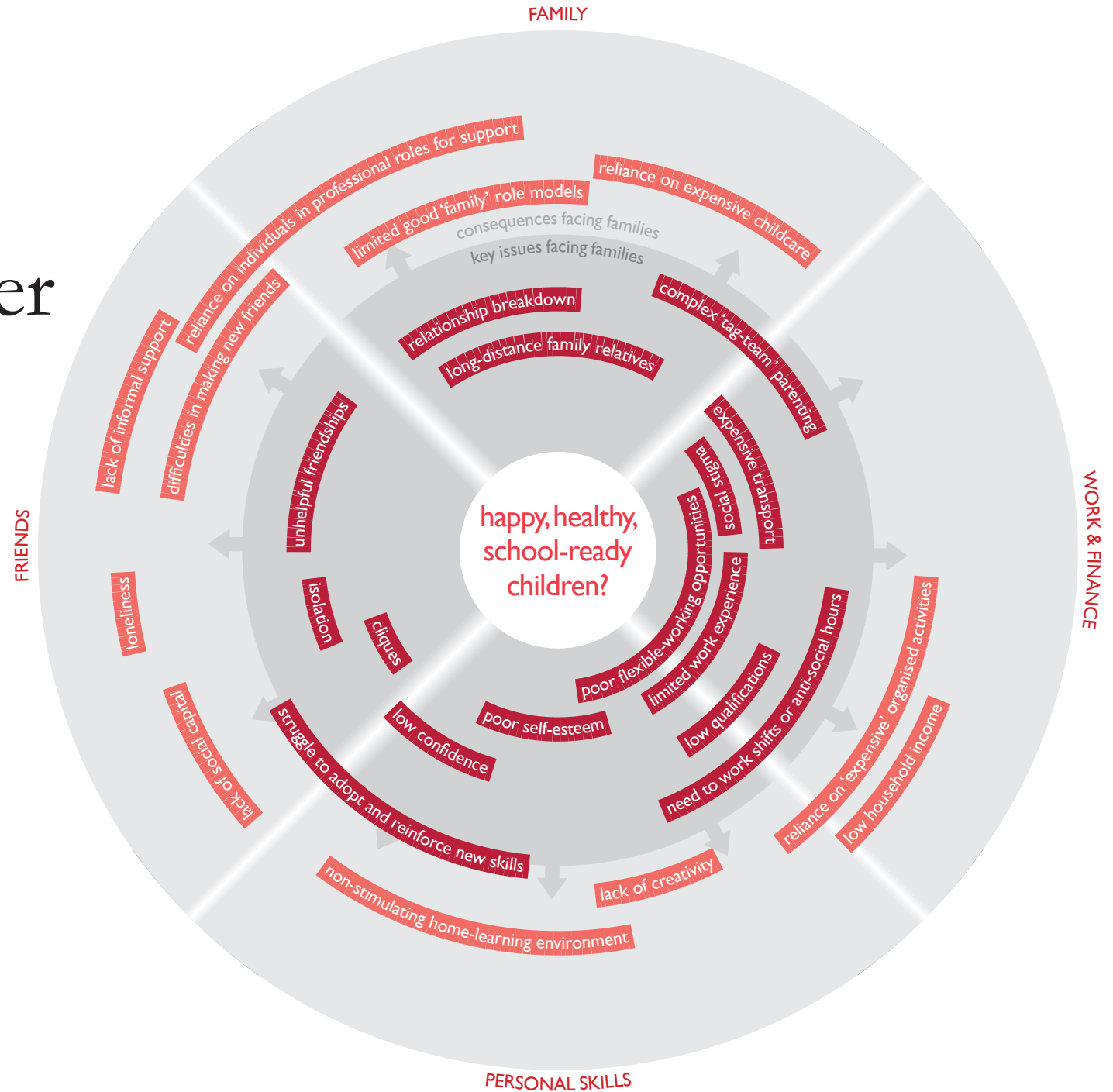
had poor relationships with their family, difficult work arrangements or poor skills – all factors which seemed to prevent them from realising their aspirations.

Many of the parents were currently accessing (or had in the past accessed) Essex County Council-funded service (e.g. children's centres or libraries). Many highlighted positive relationships they had with professionals, recognising the importance of their expertise and support at different parts of their parenting journey.

Despite the challenges faced by the families, they all found ways to get by or 'muddle through' – with varying degrees of success. The challenge for Essex is to give families who are struggling the tools and space to overcome the difficulties they face, enabling them to realise their parenting aspirations.



# Pressures on parents make parenting harder



“ I want my children to look back and think that I did absolutely everything for them. I don't even want them to have to pour their own cereal.”

Zara (Mum of four)



# The best start in life?

## Stuck in a rut

One of the common findings across all of our families was a strong desire to succeed as parents. Many – though not all – spent a lot of time thinking about what would be best for their children. Others preferred to ‘find their own way’ and in practical terms often chose not to think too hard about the ‘right’ way to do things – dealing with problems as they arose.

Although many of the parents we spoke to had accessed advice from professionals, this advice met with a mixed reception – and was not always easy to act on in practice. It became clear that sometimes, the decisions parents made – or their outlook for the future – did not necessarily result in what a professional may consider a ‘good outcome’ (e.g. not a rich home-learning environment, or over-protectiveness and ‘clingy’ or ‘molly-coddling’ parental relationships).

The families often reacted badly to being ‘told what to do’ – as in the case of Marie, who felt that she had been ‘made to jump through hoops and attend every parenting class they have’. Marie had not found the advice she had received

useful – and indeed, it did not seem to have impacted upon her approach to parenting at all. In other cases, families recognised that the advice was probably ‘good’, but found it to be incompatible with their situation and a routine that was difficult to break. For example, Lindsay and Martin explained how they had sought advice about their toddler’s sleeping, and were told to be strict and not allow the child into their bed. However, because they both worked very long hours, they were too exhausted to see this through and found that, in practice, it was easier to allow the co-sleeping.

Changing default modes of parenting is hard – especially when parents are under a range of other pressures (and particularly when contrasted with current routines and bad habits). In some situations the main issue appeared to be a reluctance to try something new and break out of an established mode of being. One young mother, Charlie, explained how she had been encouraged to go to an alphabet class with her young son – but she never went because it clashed with her ‘young mums’ group. However, she had been going to this group for over two years, and saw the other mums who attended the group on a regular basis outside the group meetings – calling into question the logic of prioritising this group

## QUESTIONS FOR ECC:

What are the best ways to enable parents to take ‘ownership’ of ‘good enough’ parenting? How do they know what ‘good enough’ looks like? And do they know how to achieve it?

How can advice and encouragement be delivered in a way that has more long lasting impact? How can Essex services be designed to transfer skills and knowledge? Could peer-to-peer support help to embed skills transfer from practitioners?

How are services explicitly seeking to change behaviour? What model of behaviour change are services and interventions designed around?

“*We’re both at work when all the groups are running so it just doesn’t work. I’ve never really been to them [parent groups].”*

Louise (Mum of one)

# Strong & resilient families?

## Fragile family relationships

The difficulties of maintaining and negotiating relationships within a fragile or divided family set-up was a major theme that emerged from all of the households. In many cases, families were no longer close – we came across single mums who had no contact with the father of their child(ren), breakdowns of relationships with (grand) parents and siblings, and tension and arguments within the immediate family.

For example, at the time of fieldwork, one of our mums, Zara was not talking to her partner, and openly used her children as go-betweens to facilitate communication. In another case, parents Amy and Greg had, over the years, fallen out with one family member after another – parents, siblings, cousins – until they had become completely isolated as a nuclear family unit.

In addition to these explicit relationship breakdowns, some families that were, in theory, very much ‘together’, did not spend a lot of quality time together in practice. Dads in particular were more likely to be out of the house working for long hours, often maintaining their own social lives independently of the rest of the family with personal or work friends. In other cases, such as Lindsay

and Martin’s, both parents worked such long hours – often shift work – that they practised ‘tag-team parenting’, juggling work with childcare but never actually spending any time at home together.

These fragile constellations meant that childcare was always finely balanced with other commitments – and if something happened to one parent’s work schedule, this balance could be disrupted. The impact on work was similar, which in turn made it hard for parents to attempt to change their working circumstances, think about changing employer, or be ambitious in terms of promotion and moving up the work ladder.

In all of the above scenarios where family relationships were fragile or in some way lacking – though less so for parents who were working full-time – parents were especially likely to become dependent on individual staff members when they accessed local services, often placing them at the heart of family life. For example, Suze, a stay-at-home mum with three children, said that she didn’t like to go to her own mother for parenting advice but relied on speaking to her health visitor for this kind of help. Now her youngest is no longer getting visits, she misses this support.

## QUESTIONS FOR ECC:

Research is clear that parental conflict and fractured adult relationships impact both upon parenting, and directly on children. Children in these circumstances also miss out on the protective factors of a family environment that models and nurtures relational capability. How should this feature in our family support priorities?

How should we be encouraging good familial relationships?

What support do parents need to build or restore family ties?

What is known about how to deliver relationship support in the most effective way?

“*The person I felt closest to was the health visitor. As the boys grew up I missed that contact . . .*

*I don't have that many people I can talk to.”*

Suze (Mum of three)

# A supportive environment?

## Loneliness is common

Many of our families had limited support networks who could provide advice and practical support around parenting. Several of our parents, such as Amy and Greg, simply stated that they did not have any close friends. Others, such as Marie and Charlie, relied on one or two individuals for support, but did not have broader peer or friendship networks.

Across the sample as a whole, there was a sense of isolation, experienced to varying degrees by each individual family. Amy and Greg's biggest problem appeared to be struggling to 'fit in' in the local community, where they looked and felt 'out of place' because they were unemployed and living on a low income. Marie struggled to make friends because she had suffered from mental health issues and didn't feel that she could trust people to understand her story, and Charlie found it hard to get to know other mums because they were all older than her, and felt that she was looked down upon as a young, single mother. Indeed, prior to joining her 'young mums' group, she had experienced other mother and baby groups as very 'cliquey'.

Other mums, especially those who were working, did not have the time to meet people, and described feeling like there were few opportunities to meet other mums during the maternity leave period – possible because many groups are focused around activities for the children,

rather than the parents. This again raises the possibility of capturing parents at a much earlier stage when it comes to offering support and advice about their own, and their children's wellbeing. Perhaps there is a missed opportunity for integrating mums in particular into social networks, helping them develop new friendships in addition to supportive relationships with professionals. Overall, there was a sense that many new parents – especially mothers, who continue to bear most of the burdens associated with parenthood – are lonely as they attempt to navigate a very new set of circumstances. Some feel shut out of 'cliquey' groups, others form their own cliques – which is essentially what happened when Charlie became involved in the 'young mums' group.

The fragility of people's relationships, and a lack of supportive kinship or family networks of support, make parenting a lonely job, with few places to turn for informal advice and support. On numerous occasions during the place-based fieldwork, researchers observed that opportunities to build relationships were missed. For example, sessions were so focused on the child that whilst everyone knew all the children's names and the words/action to every song, the parents had no opportunity to introduce themselves. In other sessions, opportunities for parents to socialise were additionally hampered by perhaps overzealous health and safety rules preventing hot drinks or the sharing of home-made food.

## QUESTIONS FOR ECC:

Has the way services have been developed encouraged parents to become passive recipients? What could change this?

Have professionals lost the 'soft skills' around helping people to build relationships?

Are services and activities so 'child-focused' that the needs of parents are over looked?

How can the council help parents to stop relying on what is conveniently organised for them and get them to start organising things for themselves?

How can the council help create family-friendly local communities?

“ Apart from the free snack, there’s not much difference when I see my friends at the young mum’s group to when I see them at the pie and mash shop! Apart from the staff answering our questions of course!”

Charlie (Mum of one)

# Creativity & independence?

## Making the most of what we have

Working parents in particular were concerned about spending enough 'quality time' with their children. They had very little time to do this during the week, and felt under pressure to 'cram everything in on the weekend' – when there would also be competing demands on their time, such as getting the housework and shopping done. These parents were more likely to complain that it was difficult to find free or low-cost children's groups and activities on the weekend, as they all tended to take place during the week. These findings were reinforced by our observations that a significant proportion of the adults attending sessions during the week were not the parents, but child-minders or grandparents.

Working parents were especially likely to end up travelling some way to access what they perceived to be 'high quality' activities on the weekend, such as going to a particular swimming pool with flumes, or to the zoo, for example. They often bemoaned the cost of these types of organised activities and described feeling under pressure to do things in the 'best' places at a substantial cost – although they tended to be more able to afford these activities than their non-working counterparts.

A number of the families – both working and non-working – described finding it hard to come up with ideas of 'what to do' and ended up going to the same places – whether a 'young mum's' group during the week, or a soft play area on the weekend – time and again. Some,

however, reported that they did this only because there was 'nothing else to do'. It became clear that many of these families had become reliant on these structured or organised activities, whether private, public or third sector, as a means of spending 'quality time' with their children. There was a strong sense that going to these places where the children would be 'occupied' in some form or other, was 'enough'. For some of the stay-at-home mums we met, groups were simply a venue to access allotted time to spend with children, with the added bonus of facilities such as toys, a snack, or a friendly chat with staff.

This outlook meant that often the group had no longer-term impact – it was simply about doing something for that allocated period of time – even though many of the groups' stated intentions were focused on the longer-term wellbeing of the families. For example, a young mother that we met during the place-based work explained how she had attended a book building class, which was supposed to encourage children to enjoy reading. Over a number of weeks, she crafted a book based on her son's favourite nursery rhyme – but since the classes had finished, the book had remained at home, unread. In addition, as observed above, this young mother had not got to know other parents at any of the classes she attended – seeing them primarily as an opportunity for her son to play with different toys. Finally, it is worth noting that the aims of some of the classes we attended had slipped somewhat – for example, a 'healthy eating' class had taught parents how to prepare biscuits, pizza and ice cream.

### QUESTIONS FOR ECC:

How can the council facilitate parents to stop relying on what is convenient and organized *for* them and get them organising things for themselves?

How can services be designed to encourage parents to apply 'what they've learned' in organised setting to their everyday lives?



“ I’ve just applied for a job at the fish and chip shop. I know it’s early, he’s only 12 weeks. But I have to do something for myself. I have to get out of the house. I don’t know how people do it.”

Suze (Mum of three)

# Self-esteem & confidence?

Some of the families we met during both elements of the fieldwork were very aspirational and had clear ideas about the future – moving to a bigger house, moving to a better area, making sure their children got into a good school, and so on. Others, however, struggled to think positively about the future, and appeared to be held back by a number of issues that were ultimately to do with confidence and self-esteem.

## Overcoming health problems

Health problems can greatly impact people's self-esteem and confidence. In Marie's case, her biggest challenge was overcoming mental health issues that were closely linked to having been in an abusive relationship. Her confidence had been severely impacted by being in this relationship, and had been further exacerbated by her negative experiences with the health visitor and social worker. Amy, on the other hand, was clearly struggling with a weight issue that she did not mention at any point during the research process, but which appeared to have contributed to a lot of the issues her family faced.

Whilst they had very different types of health problems, these mums both suffered from a lack of energy and fatigue. They also suffered from perceived or real social isolation and a sense of feeling like they didn't 'fit in'. The embarrassment attached to physical difficulties, or social stigma relating to certain problems, can create huge problems for families and children – suggesting that work to improve overall health could make a real difference.

## Valuing the benefits of work

For other parents the need to feel valued through employment was a big challenge. Zara, for example, explained how she could not see that she had any skills that an employer would think of as being valuable. She was always looking for little things to do, such as mystery shopping – and was even considering egg donation or becoming a surrogate mother, as that was one thing she knew that she was able to do.

Interestingly, the place-based fieldwork demonstrated that many private businesses aimed at parents were also often run by parents, who, as parent entrepreneurs, were attempting to construct their work life around their family and childcare responsibilities. Work often emerged as a rich source of support networks and friends; it enhanced self-esteem and, of course, provided financial independence. These are all things that may suffer when parents give up working to become full-time child carers. Rather than seek alternative support from professionals or organised groups, some choose instead to re-create these structures in self-employment that fits into and around their life as parents. To give just one example: Crafty Mums was a crafting business in Colchester set up by mums, to help other mums become entrepreneurs themselves by renting out shelf space for their craft. It also offered informal advice about parenting and earning money as a stay-at-home mum, ran a post-natal depression support group, and offered a drop-in breastfeeding space.

### QUESTIONS FOR ECC:

Could there be better integration between health and early years services, in order to improve early intervention?

Could exercise and a healthier lifestyle be part of the solution to several of the problems we encountered – e.g. poor physical health, loneliness, low-level depression etc.?

How can we work in partnership with child-focused businesses that are often run by local parents?

How could the council and other services (e.g. Job Centre Plus) better support and promote entrepreneurial attitudes in parents?

Final thoughts

“ *The boys don't have many friends.  
They don't get invited to parties like  
other children.* ”

Amy and Greg (Mum & Dad of three)

# Summary of key challenges

The research identified a range of challenges for Essex County Council and all its partners involved in the Early Years and family support landscape (including primary health, for example). Whilst many parents had accessed some support (e.g. through children's centres) few had made enduring changes to their parenting practice as a result.

In addition, many of the significant challenges families are struggling with (and that impact on their parenting) are simply not sufficiently addressed, for example:

- Social isolation, where often mums especially relied heavily on just one or two close friends with little other support.
- Poor health & fitness, such as Amy and Greg who both suffered physical difficulties which affected their ability to work and some aspects of parenting.
- Clingy or molly-coddling parenting styles, such as Gemma's dependent relationship with daughter Katie, or Lindsay and Martin's difficulty in establishing sleep routines their young daughter.
- Difficulties in managing to sustain work or get jobs that enable a healthy, balanced family life.

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## Early Years Provision focuses on children not parents

It seems clear that despite parents being the first and most enduring educators of children, interventions remain focussed on improving development outcomes of children directly. Early Years Provisions seem too light touch, too focussed on providing activity for children, and too little focused on explicitly seeking to build parental capability in a sustainable way.

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## Opportunities for behaviour change are missed

Whilst many professionals seem to implicitly understand and try to deliver support to parents which promotes resilience, this is often delivered in a way which 'tells how to change' rather than enabling actual behaviour change. Parents seem to become comfortable in this relationship, falling into comfortable routines and bad habits, without being challenged to 'do more'.

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## Risk of poor relationship skills being modelled for children

Children growing up in environments where parents are struggling with their own relationships (romantic, wider family and friends) seem to be at risk of missing out on vital aspects of their social and emotional development. The consequences of social isolation, over-reliance on professionals and fragile family relationships is also perhaps contributing to over-protective and 'molly-coddling' parent-child relationships.

# The opportunity

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## What is Essex County Council (and wider partners) aiming for with Early Years services?

The research team encountered a range of Early Years Provision, much good and but also a range of opportunities for improvement.

The research suggests there is a strong need to address the social and emotional wellbeing of parents. In order to ensure that children grow up happy and healthy, ensuring parents are confident and capable, and feel able to do embrace the challenges of parenthood must be a key factor.

Findings also suggest that across the board there is a need to reflect on how provision can be a catalyst for change amongst parents – not just focussing on children and finding new ways to avoid parents becoming ‘passive recipients’ of services. It seems there is a significant opportunity for balanced support which is designed with the clear end goal of parental resilience and independence – pushing parents to make friends, strengthen relationships and family ties and develop new confidence and skills. We do not underestimate the challenge of achieving this goal – especially when families are already under pressure.

In practical terms there also must be a reflection on what success looks like and how impact is measured. Simple metrics such as ‘attendance at a group’ do little to actually engage with the challenge of promoting resilience (and may even run contrary to the ideal outcome, which may indeed be transitioning to ‘not attending the group’ or even better, ‘running and organising your own group outside of public service provision’).

When combined, the pressures on families and the complexity of service delivery can conspire to create an environment where achieving these outcomes is incredibly challenging. In particular, both forces have a tendency to shift interventions towards those that are easier and more comfortable – suggesting that continual vigilance is required to maintain focus on strategic delivery.

Overall, the research evidence suggests that the most important future challenge relates to how services should be designed and delivered in order to make real improvements in outcomes for as many parents and children as possible over the long term. If independence is what we are aiming for, then success has to be the movement of parents away from publically funded support.

# Appendix 1: Methodology

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## 'Place-based' ethnographies

- 4 x place-based ethnographies (3-4 hours)
- Explored the challenges and opportunities that exist within current service provision
- Focus on universal services – mix of public, private and third sector

## Household ethnographies

- 8 x family / household ethnographies (3-4 hours)
- In-depth research looking at the day-to-day experiences of families. The research mainly took place in the family home, but also including accompanied visits to services/local amenities where appropriate
- Focus on 'mainstream' families (i.e. those not receiving any targeted interventions, but not wealthy or high-achieving)

## Finding the families

This project focussed on the experiences of 'mainstream families' in Essex – exploring what 'typical' life is like for a family with young children. The research covered mainstream families who were happy and striving, but also those who were under pressure in some form or 'just coping'.

- Exclusion of those who already require specialist/targeted interventions
- Focus on 'average', 'normal' people – not high performing or wealthy families
- Ensuring coverage of a range of people including some who were 'exposed to stressors' and found it difficult to cope sometimes and families who were 'making it work' and pushing forward.



# Appendix 2: The families

## Amy & Greg



“The boys don't have many friends. They don't get invited to parties like other children.”

“We fell out with the school liaison office because we were thinking about home schooling. She didn't think that was a good idea.”

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### Life story

Amy is 34 and Greg is 31; they have three children. Tim is seven, he is very sensitive and gets upset quite easily but is doing okay at school. Billy is six, his parents describe him as 'gifted' but not emotionally mature; he has severe tantrums and is sometimes taken to the 'rainbow room' at school. Claire is four and is reception at school. The boys both go to Beavers and Cricket Club organised by the school. Amy wanted to take them out of school for home-schooling, and had a disagreement with their school liaison officer regarding this, who strongly discouraged it. Besides this they have quite a good relationship with their school liaison officer – last year she helped secure a fully-funded place at nursery for Claire. Amy and Greg say they cannot afford to do much in their free time, but the family do save up for their English Heritage membership and often visit castles and stately homes at the weekends. Amy and Greg love being parents although do worry about 'getting it right' – they want a better childhood for their kids than they had.

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### Challenges

Neither Greg or Amy are currently in work. Greg has an as yet undiagnosed health problem which caused him to collapse at work some months ago where he worked stacking shelves. Amy worked in admin before having children and would like to get back into work as a carer. Amy has a severe weight problem, which pointedly didn't come up in conversation at all. Her obesity would most likely restrict her from doing the kind of work she imagines, but it seems this is not something she has consciously considered.

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### Social isolation

Over time it seems like the family have isolated themselves more and more from family and friends. They described numerous family disputes and fall-outs over the years, and their reason for not spending Christmas with family is that they prefer not to eat large amounts whereas their family cook a large meal on Christmas day. The kids try to invite other children over but they have always been rejected, and there has been some bullying by other kids at school. Amy and Greg don't feel welcomed by the other parents in the neighbourhood and tend to feel looked down on. There is some awareness of this – 'we don't look right, we don't have money'. They were once invited to the weekly parent 'pub catch-up' but were appalled by the parents drinking alcohol in front on their children, so no longer go.

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### Denial and defensiveness

In order to make sense of the negative aspects to their lives, it seems that Amy and Greg created a narrative as to why things happened and were in denial about some of their problems. They believed the other local families were jealous of their 'nuclear set up', as opposed to their broken families. They also felt that their children's behaviour problems were a result of being 'gifted' but 'misunderstood'. Amy's avoidance in talking about her obesity seemed to be a form of denial of the ways in which it might be causing problems for them. Amy and Greg expressed that they would like to foster other children in the future – the reality seemed that they may be struggling to cope with their family as it is.

# Charlie



“ Apart from the free snack, there’s not much difference when I see my friends at the young mums group to when I see them at the pie and mash shop! Apart from the staff being there and answering questions of course!”

“ People kind of come and go [to our ‘young mums’ group], but it’s mainly just the three of us.”

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## Life story

Charlie is 23 and lives alone with her 18 month son Tom. They moved into the privately rented flat about a year ago with her then boyfriend and Tom’s dad. However around December last year the relationship broke down and Tom’s dad moved out – he now only sees his son on Sundays. Charlie currently works as a carer for an individual with severe learning difficulties, and has part-time hours that allow for Tom to be looked after by her parents or a friend. She is now planning on moving out of the flat and back in with her parents in order to save some money and learn to drive – she gets on reasonably well with her parents but some aspects to the relationship are definitely strained.

Charlie has two really close friends, Sarah and Ellie, who are also young mums, who she sees most days. They spend a lot of time at the local pie and mash shop – there is space for all their buggies and ‘no one bothers us’ (despite the shop owner not being particularly pleased).

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## Narrative

Charlie feels like children benefit from having a strong ‘narrative’ of what their parents do – she would like to get a job where her son understands what her career is - ‘It would be easier for him as he grows up, to give him a sense of identity. Like, saying ‘my mum’s a teacher’ is much better than ‘my mum works as a carer for this person and sometimes she does these things.’ Because of this, Charlie would like to go back to college and get into teaching, despite struggling and not really enjoying school. Charlie is also very aware that all her peers have moved away and got jobs - ‘They’re all doing what people my age are supposed to be doing’.

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## Cliques

At first, Charlie struggled as a young mum to make friends, and felt like the older mums were in ‘cliques’ - ‘I couldn’t fall into a friendship group when there’s a 10 year age gap’. She ended up requesting a ‘young mums’ group be set up at the Children’s Centre, which is where she met Sarah and Ellie. The three of them still go every week, despite seeing each other most other days anyway. After being rejected by the ‘older mum cliques’, Charlie and her friends seem to have formed their own, as no one else has come along to the ‘young mums’ groups and stayed for more than a couple of sessions.

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## Loyalty

Charlie still makes a lot of effort to get to the young mums group each week, and structures her other weekly activities around attending.

Charlie wanted to take Tom to a ‘learning letters’ class, but didn’t because the timing clashed with her young mums group. She also struggles to make it to others groups and classes because of her shift patterns, although she does take most of a day to travel to and from a baby swimming class with Tom each week.

# Matt & Gemma



“The biggest thing we argue about is Katie’s attachment to her mum. I think she needs to be firmer with her to leave her in peace for five minutes.”

“We’re all a family now...”

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## Life story

Gemma, 29, lives with her partner Matt and two children, four-year-old Katie and Harry who is 18 months. Katie is Gemma’s daughter from a previous relationship, while Harry is Matt and Gemma’s first child together. Gemma is currently a student, studying support work in order to work in schools, while Matt works in IT and does relatively long hours driving to various sites.

Matt and Gemma have been together for three years but only moved in together into a council flat six months ago. They are still adjusting and learning to live as a family. At first, Katie found it difficult to adjust to Matt being around and not having her mum all to herself, but now they are living together they have got along much better. Before Matt was around, Gemma and Katie were on their own – ‘it was always just me and her’. They are very close and Katie can be overly clingy, which annoys Matt – she won’t leave Gemma ‘even when she’s just having a shower’

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## Parenting

Matt thinks “it’s important for her to learn discipline alongside reading and writing” and considers his parenting ‘old fashioned’. He works long hours and his time with the kids is ‘bath and bed’ each evening when he gets back. Gemma worries about spending enough quality time with both children; she is used to spending so much time with Katie that she is very aware of now having to balance this with Harry.

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## Confidence

Gemma describes herself as ‘not a very confident person’ and says she would like Katie and Harry to have more confidence than she does as they grow up. Gemma’s two sisters are much less confident than she is and are too anxious to attend Sure Start sessions on their own – so despite Gemma not feeling like a confident person herself, she tends to take the lead with them - ‘If I hadn’t have gone with my older sister to the Sure Start near her, she would never have gone to anything. She still doesn’t really go to things. She’s so anxious about having to talk to strangers’.

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## Making friends

Gemma uses the Sure Start centre a lot – she’s been on a 12 week childhood development course which she got a lot out of. However she didn’t particularly get on with any of the other parents there and hasn’t made any long term friends from the centre. ‘All the parents are so cliquy, they all have their own little groups of people. As I person I always feel judged anyway. But the staff are nice, so I talk to them a lot.’ She tends to use Facebook for parenting advice as well – posting questions on forums – accessing an online ‘mums’ grapevine’.



# Lindsay & Martin



“We are very family oriented. Friends come and go.”

“Even when I'm with Ella, it's always like 'I'm just doing this, I'm just, I'm just...' - always doing some housework.”

“There are lots of things you can do without money.”

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## Life story

Lindsay, 35, and Martin, 38, live together with their two-year-old daughter Ella. Lindsay doesn't have any family except an aunt and uncle who she is close to and who live nearby (she never knew her father and her mother passed away). Martin had a rough childhood but is close with mother and siblings who have children a similar age to Ella.

Both Lindsay and Martin work full time. Lindsay is a support worker for older people, although she initially trained as a nursery nurse. Martin is a bus driver and works two shifts per day, six days a week. He says he is 'not very clever' and is working his maximum capacity to earn what he can with the skills he has. He says that Lindsay is 'the clever one' and encourages her to aspire for a better job.

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## Living for Sundays

With both parents working a full week, Lindsay and Martin are very conscious of spending enough quality time with Ella. They manage to juggle their routines so that Ella only spends two hours each afternoon with a childminder – she is at nursery in the mornings – but still they 'live for Sundays' which is the only time when the three of them can spend time together. They try to cram everything in then, but are never short of ideas for what to do.

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## Life as working parents

However this leaves them little time for anything else – including 'me-time'; Lindsay wishes her and Martin could have a little more quality time for themselves, although Martin is determined to spend any and all of his free time with Ella; both parents are completely devoted to her. Lindsay says that she would like more opportunities to meet other parents, but that all the groups and sessions are during the week. Martin feels like working parents are discriminated against from all sides; nursery and school hours aren't set up to help them and taking holidays in school breaks is too expensive.

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## Parenting

Both Lindsay and Martin are very conscious of being good parents and think through all the decisions they make regarding Ella. They like to get out of the house on weekends in order to enable Ella to 'see different things, different children, different experiences, smells, everything. Opening her mind.' Lindsay is more actively aware of things like potty training and sleep routines, possibly because she used to be a trained nursery nurse before her current job. They try their best not to spoil Ella and think through what toys they buy her for their educational or health value (e.g. looking after a pet rabbit).

# Marie



“ I don't trust people to understand what I've been through.”

“ Eliza says to me, 'I want to be a bus driver', and I say to her, 'you can be more than a bus driver'.”

“ Everyone was against me.”

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## Life story

Marie is a stay-at-home mum with two children – Eliza who is five and in Reception, and George who is three and goes to a Children's Centre three mornings a week. Marie separated from the kids' dad fairly recently – there was a history of domestic violence going back to when George was born and Marie started trying to escape from the relationship when things escalated a couple of years ago. Marie has struggled with mental health problems and has been diagnosed with depression – although she has recently come off her medication.

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## Trusting friends

Marie has one very close friend, Sarah, who knows 'all the ins and outs' and has been to domestic violence support meetings with Marie. She also is getting to another woman, Melanie, who has been in a similar domestic violence situation to Marie; although they have a lot in common, Marie is not sure she trusts her 100% yet. She finds it difficult to meet new people and establish trusting relationships because of what she's been through – she doesn't think people would understand her story and is worried about being judged as a single mum who's had involvement from Social Care.

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## Social services

Marie has had her children taken off her twice by social services. She feels that her ex 'stirred' thing up and that his mother may also have interfered. She now has regular visits from the social workers and health visitors – she feels like this has made her life harder and that 'everyone was against me', 'some days they made my life hell' and 'they listened to outsiders, not me as a parent'. Marie feels that once they are out of her life she will have a better chance of making things better. Stanley has some behavioural problems but Marie feels like he 'acts out' whenever they visit and so don't see his everyday behaviour. 'Because of Social Care, I feel like I haven't been able to give it my full potential. I haven't been able to shine as a single mum.'

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## Parenting skills

As part of her involvement with social services, Marie had to attend a compulsory parenting course. She took very little away from the course because she felt that it was just 'jumping through hoops' and felt like it was a waste of time – the one thing she says she remembers being taught was that 'you should never say please when you ask children to do something'.



# Appendix 3

## Places, services and activities included in the research

### Tendring

- Sea front
- Sydney House Children's Centre
- The Windmill Children's Centre
- The Ark Family Centre
- Clacton pier
- Jaywick town



### Harlow & Uttlesford

- Pets' Corner
- Wild 'n' Wacky
- Mark Hall Library
- Jo Jingles



### Basildon

- Partyman World
- Northlands Park
- Pitsea Library & Centre
- High Street
- Lake Meadows Park
- Church Toddler Group





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