

Commission East Regional Framework

15th April 2026

Scene Setting

National

- Quality and regulatory pressures
- Placement suitability and safety concerns - 800 children being placed in unregistered children's homes in 2024
- Rising complexity and market pressures impact practice quality
- Competition driving spend to £3.1bn in 2023–24, nearly double over five years

Regional

- Difficulty accessing appropriate placements which impacts quality of care.
- Workforce pressures affecting quality standards in children's homes.
- Strategic planning for children's homes remains inconsistent across the region with different local authorities taking different approaches

Local

- Limited early intervention capacity, resulting in more children entering care with higher levels of complexity
- Financial pressures directly affect children's home commissioning and ability to be relational and innovative
- Soaring high-needs demand and significant deficits make it harder for councils to secure or sustain specialist children's home placements that deliver high-quality, needs-led care

Routes to Commissioning

The public sector faces many challenges meeting the needs of families and Essex is no different. Despite committed and innovative commissioning, procurement, legal and finance teams there are areas of work where demand outweighs local capacity.



ECC has worked with several experts in collaborative commissioning approaches to explore routes to commissioning, relational commissioning and relational contracting:

- E3M and the [Bold Commissioners Club](#)
- Stone King
- Government Outcomes Lab
- Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford
- Public Digital

Resources:

[Formal-relational contracting playbook](#)

[The art of the possible in public procurement](#)

[E3M | Vitalising Purpose Book](#)

[E3M | From Procurement to Partnership: A Practical Toolkit for Commissioners](#)

Deep Thinking

Stewardship instead of commercial systems

The national commissioning environment is **dysfunctional** and has led to provider frustration and mistrust. This is also seen locally.

Relationships are transactional and need to be more relational and built on shared purpose, with a shift to a **collaboration** mindset.

Value for Money is not just about price, but whole value, including **public benefit**.

This is much broader than procurement alone

Collaboration does exist and there is evidence of **good working practices**. This is being done despite our system, and not because of it.

It is the **right thing to do** to develop alternative pathways to the orthodox way of organising things.

We should be led by **purpose** and not by process alone.

New **explicit opportunities** in the objectives of the Procurement Act 2023 mean there is more scope to work collaboratively.

Public benefit appetite instead of risk aversion

We need to better understand risks and mitigate them, evidencing the need for taking risks in **decision making**.

We need to elevate our **appetite for benefit** – for example, balancing risks of challenge against individual and macro benefits, as well as other risks.

Move from “we can’t do that” to “**how can we do that**”

It is hard work, but it can be done!

There are [several examples](#) where collaborative commissioning approaches have been adopted with **positive outcomes** and impact.

We have **committed and excellent quality** legal, procurement, finance, transformation and commissioning teams

There are several areas of work where the status quo is not only ineffective but is actively working against our purpose. **We need to work differently.**

Essex Approach to Relational Commissioning

ECC applied the Routes to Commissioning work to the Children' Residential space. We have approached this as a **system issue**, bringing together leaders from relevant functions to think deeply and to be challenged in how we apply process to commissioning, procurement and contracting – and operational delivery.

Deep thinking: Understanding the reasons behind our processes and ways of working.

Deep learning: Challenging each other to explore how we can work differently, pragmatically.

Deep listening: Understanding perceptions and realities of all parties

Designing together: Building an operational model that works – and testing it.

Producing together: Developing prerequisites for collaboration and exploring procurement pathways

Providers want to work more **collaboratively**, and in some cases are already doing it without LAs support.

Those that have stayed with us on the journey have helped us test changes to our placement finding processes, and we have started to see **reciprocal generosity** of time.

Risk Sharing means different things – we now understand what good risk sharing can look like in a **pragmatic way**.

Our operational processes need to adapt, both in terms of our **placement finding** and in how providers are supported to collaborate to meet a young person's needs.

Providers have told us that they appreciate the **time we are taking** to “do this properly” rather than jumping to conventional approaches to procurement.

We have codesigned a new **operational model**, and a **procurement approach** to identify the providers that will join our **collaborative place finding** approach.

Progress so far

JAN-APR 25

- Internal Routes to Commissioning work

MAY-SEPT 25

- Sufficiency requirements identified
- **Provider Collaboration Event**
- Gap analysis

JULY – SEPT 25

- Operational Model Design
- **Procurement Modelling**
- Financial Modelling
- Sufficiency Board support
- **Provider Collaboration Event**

SEPT-DEC 25

- Legal Testing
- Social Care Model Testing
- Stakeholder socialisation
- Cabinet Members
- Sufficiency Board

SEPT25-JAN26

Procurement Pathway Development

- PSQ and document development
- Mechanism for decision-making development

MAR-MAY2026

- Governance to procure begins
- Documentation development (T&Cs)

MAY2026-JULY2026

- Compact Mobilisation
- Procurement of Emergency Beds
- Procurement of Move-On Beds

Sept 2026

- Contract Award
- Mobilisation

Implementation

- Ongoing Relationship Management
- Joint Monitoring and Evaluation
- Flexibility and Adaptation
- Problem solving and conflict resolution
- Capacity Building and Support
- Learning and Innovation
- Shared Risk and Accountability
- Community and Stakeholder Engagement
- System-wide collaboration

Learning so far

- Relational commissioning requires us to understand commissioning as codesigning **public value** and not simply a **commercial process**.
- It requires the **whole system** (not just commissioners) thinking differently: “I am not buying a bed, we are getting public value outcomes.”
- It requires building the **foundations** for good relationships – and this includes accountability and trust.
- It also needs the structure of **good contracting**
- We need to differentiate between local and regional approaches, and ensure they are **compatible**

There are implications of working in this way – it needs:



Being Intentional

S

Eastern Region needs to be able to access quality placements at a consistent price.

M

Eastern Region needs to be able to access [number] placements over [time].

A

There are quality providers with good and outstanding placements across the region, and LAs with limited resource.

R

It is not realistic for some authorities to adopt an authentic relational approach within timescale pressures.

T

For some authorities this needs to be complete by April 2027, for others, longer.

We want to co-design **Regional Frameworks** with you.

It will have underlying relational commissioning principles woven through it, but it will be realistic in terms of recognising the different starting points of LAs. In this session we will:

Co-design the building blocks of a regional commissioning framework.

Share learning and good practice across the region and beyond

Start to create a culture of innovation and co-design to develop a responsive care system

This is the start of our journey to embedded relational commissioning, but it is starting off as transactional:

The region needs a framework to access quality provision, and you have quality provision you need to be paid fairly for.

Discussion Points

Do you recognise aspects of relational commissioning in work locally or regionally?

Does this feel like a sensible approach?

Is there anything you want to draw attention to?