

LGA case study template

Date: 22.03.2021

Local authority: Essex County Council

Submitted by:

Neave Beard, Lead for Strengthening Communities

Fiona Simmons-Jones, Public Health Registrar

Case study title

Evaluating supportive digital communities during COVID-19

Case study synopsis (100 words):

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented challenge to local government. In this rapidly changing situation, Essex County Council had to mobilize quickly to inform residents on guidance, prevent the spread of infection and misinformation and assist vulnerable residents. The Communities team at Essex County Council set up Essex Coronavirus Action Support Group (ECAS) alongside the Essex Public Health team, and in partnership with community Leaders.

The anecdotal success of this project was clear but evaluating such an innovative, complex project in the context of constant change, resourcing difficulties and potential skepticism required rigorous scoping and clear evidence-based underpinnings.

The challenge

As part of the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic the Essex Coronavirus Action Support Group (ECAS) was rapidly established. The Essex Coronavirus Action Support Facebook group, along with the associated Facebook page, is an initiative set up by Essex County Council (ECC), the Essex Public Health team, and community Leaders and is supported by Facebook. The group has three goals; inform residents on guidance, prevent the spread of infection and misinformation and assist vulnerable residents. It is monitored by 14 volunteer and community-based administrators who curate the group feed. Key or recurrent queries are picked up by a separate team of ECC researchers who theme the public input and are put to Public Health colleagues who provide an informed and accessible response. The Essex

Coronavirus Action Support group was established on the 15th March 2020 and is open to all Essex residents. It currently has approximately 37,000 members.

This is the first time a local authority has engaged in this form of collaborative community-building focused engagement, anecdotally it was a huge success. The page received 1,500 to 2,000 new members a day in the first weeks, mobilised approximately 3,400 volunteers, boasted a Facebook reach of 28million as of November 2020 and is raising £20,000 for local community foodbanks.

As the county moves to looking at a COVID recovery plan it was necessary to conduct a formal evaluation around this project to enable the success of future projects in this space, both within Essex and elsewhere. Evaluating such an innovative, complex project in the context of constant change, resourcing difficulties and internal resistance required rigorous scoping and clear theoretical underpinnings.

The solution

A multi-disciplinary team from Essex County Council Public Health and Research was formed to evaluate the project. It was decided to use a Donabedian (1980) analysis framework to underpin the evaluation, this framework measures quality across three components; the structure, the process and the outcomes of a programme or intervention.

To evaluate the structure and process of the project and to create a blueprint for other organizations, local authorities, and functions to recreate a project of this kind the team ran informal case base discussions with members of the project team. These were conducted with the internal sponsor, community manager, content writer, admins, SMEs and Researchers.

As this kind of collaborative, digital community building had not been done previously in a local authority setting, much of the growth, recruitment and management was done intuitively, this work aimed to make those decisions explicit. Using [Lafasto and Larsons model for team effectiveness](#) (2001) we probed the team on the skills they have, the roles that are needed, the type of team leaders needed, how the project team is structured and interacts and how the project works in the organisational environment including inception, delivery, problem solving and risk management. We then applied [Lencioni's five dysfunctions of team \(2005\)](#) to conduct a vulnerability analysis on each of these sections, this was to identify places of vulnerability that any future team might encounter when trying to conduct this kind of project if the minimum requirements laid out aren't met.

We are also conducting a cost benefit analysis to evaluate the monetary impacts and savings of this new way of supporting our residents.

We conducted three phases of engagement with members of the Essex Coronavirus Action Support community to evaluate the project's outcomes, these were structured around the three aims of the group; inform, prevent and assist. The first was a retrospective survey after the initial lockdown from September to November, the second was a real-time survey conducted in response to the second lockdown being announced from November to

December. We are conducting follow up interviews with members to gain a deeper understanding of how Essex Coronavirus Action Support has influenced behaviour change and why the behaviour and compliance of members has changed as the pandemic has progressed.

The impact (including cost savings/income generated if applicable):

A £70,000 public health grant was used to set up the Essex Coronavirus Action Support group and associated Essex Coronavirus Action Support page, Facebook donated £30,000 worth of ad credits and the team raised an additional £20,000 for local food banks through the community.. It took three days to mobilise this project with the funding initially being for 6 months, which has subsequently been extended. An in-depth cost benefits analysis to evaluate the monetary impacts and savings of this new way of supporting our residents intervention is being conducted.

How is the new approach being sustained?:

This work is being used to socialize this method of community building and engagement and support in circles that would have not previously adopted it. This includes internally at Essex County Council, with central government and in future, with other local authorities. The members engagement report will be used to evidence the effectiveness and wide-reaching impact of this way of working, and potential applications to other areas of public sector services. This will then be followed by the project team research which will aid in getting buy-in from stakeholders for appropriate resourcing and the cost benefit analysis will be used to evidence the long-term financial benefits of the model.

Lessons learned:

- Collaboration is key to innovative problem solving, looking outside of traditional service delivery models and organisations allows for diversity of approaches supporting innovation
- Adopting a rapid Plan Do Study Act cycle, or break it live fix it live approach, allows for innovative approaches to be adopted and implemented. For this to be successful risk must be accepted
- Building flexibility into project scopes is imperative when working in crisis and recovery times
- Underpinning evaluation projects with theory aids in selling the outputs widely and organising activities
- Putting concerted time and effort into making learning explicit and socialising the benefits of innovative models is fundamental to progress

Contact: Neave.Bead@essex.gov.uk

Links to relevant documents:

Behavioral Science Public Health Journal publication can be found on page 26 [here](#).

GovLab case study can be found [here](#).

Bibliography

Donabedian A. (1980) Health Administration Press. ISBN: 9780914904489.

Lafasto, F and Larson, C. (2001) When Teams Works Best. Sage. ISBN 0761923667

Lencioni, P. (2005). Overcoming the five dysfunctions of a team: A field guide for leaders, managers, and facilitators. Jossey-Bass.