

Evaluation of 'societal impact' ecda project

Executive summary

The Essex centre for data analytics (ecda) team responded at pace to produce analysis about the effect of Covid-19 on vulnerable people and to help partners to best support victims and those at risk of victimisation. The work was undertaken during extraordinary circumstances, with stakeholders under pressure from Covid-19. Nevertheless, the outputs from this work have been used by ecda partners to inform planning and financial forecasting. It has also contributed to senior leaders understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on child abuse and demonstrated agility in using aggregated, de-personalised data to deliver insight without the need to broker data sharing agreements. The project aimed to provide intelligence to help people plan and prepare for the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on their service. The project did not have a single high-level sponsor which may have reduced its impact, as there was no senior person to advocate for the use of the insight and there was sometimes a lack of clarity in the way the results were disseminated.

Because of its nature it is hard to make a direct link between the project and actions taken by services. Overall, this project was insightful and informative and provided useful background information to support decision making and planning.

Background

The Essex centre for data analytics (ecda) identified child abuse as an area of concern during the Covid-19 lockdown and post lockdown period. There was a need to quickly understand what latent service demand looked like and the wider societal impact as we moved towards greater social normality. The ecda analytical team worked to create a strong evidence base to understand the impact of Covid-19 on the level of incidences of child abuse and its effect on service demand. The analytical team consisted of Essex County Council, Essex Police and the University of Essex. The team used police, social services, third sector and open source data to produce predictive and scenario analysis and produced several slide packs presenting the data. This was presented to members¹ of the Children's Partnership Board and members of Essex

Safeguarding Children's Board. The work was developed by Essex Police and ECC as a response to organisation demand for insight to support recovery from Covid-19. The insight aimed to support strategic decision making and the development of early interventions to tackle the effects of latent demand. The project took place in the summer of 2020 and ecda are taking forward the theme of 'societal impact' into a different area.

Essex County Council's Research and Citizen Insight team were asked to carry out an evaluation of the project by gathering feedback from key stakeholders. This involved a mixture of interviews with delivery and operational partners and surveys sent to strategic partners, with questions about the impact of the project towards achieving predicted outcomes, how the insight has been used (where relevant), experiences of stakeholders and reflections on how the project was implemented. The findings documented in this report summarise key themes which have been identified by participants, and interpretations of the data gathered through interviews and surveys.

¹ Membership: ECC, Districts and Boroughs, Health, Police, Schools, Colleges and Training Providers, Voluntary Sector, OPFCC, Youth Offending Service

Evaluation overview

The evaluation took place after project completion. Therefore, the findings are drawn from stakeholders' recollection of events, the ability to gather data from all relevant stakeholders and perspectives of project implementation and impact. This report can be used to enhance our understanding of the project and how it is perceived by stakeholders. It is intended to help ecda colleagues and partners to learn, strengthen and improve similar projects undertaken in the future.

Key challenges for this project

- The need for **quick delivery** due to the pandemic was remarked upon several times by participants. It was also seen as one of the positives of this project since it did deliver results at pace. However, the drive towards and focus on speedy delivery also contributed towards missing key steps in planning and managing the project effectively, such as stakeholder engagement and ownership of the data product by 'users' in other organisations.
- There were **several people who declined interview** who stated they lacked knowledge of this project or were unable to detail how they had used the data analytics in their own organisation. This may be due to the language used as the email invite request was titled 'ecda societal impact (child abuse) project' which may have been unclear if partners saw this as a piece of analysis, rather than a project. In addition, there was no immediate follow up with partners about how they had used the insight or initial feedback about the information that had been produced.
- Undertaking this project during the pandemic and with **pressures from Covid-19**, may have been a factor in why there was limited uptake of using the data product as services were, and still are, under immense pressure due to the pandemic. In addition, this was about latent demand rather than immediate demand and so services may not have had resource to act immediately on this information due to other priorities.

Key benefits

- The evidence and insight produced by ecda has helped to **inform planning**. Practitioners at Essex Police highlighted the benefits of using this evidence, alongside other analysis, as part of tactical and strategic planning.
- To enhance **financial forecasting** used within the ECC Children in Care Placements budgeting for the next four years. The data analysis produced by ecda enhanced the robustness and accuracy of the data the ECC Children's and families finance team normally use to forecast demand.
- To **inform** various stakeholders - the evidence was compiled into a 'summary pack' which outlined the medium and long-term impact of Covid-19 and the surrounding environment on county council services. This was presented to various teams and boards such as Corporate Leadership Team and extended leadership team for partners to be better informed about the potential impact to their service areas.

- Demonstrating the **value of aggregated, de-personalised data** in being able to deliver and share data products quickly as there was no requirement for formal data sharing agreements.

Key learnings

- **Stakeholder engagement:** Feedback indicated stakeholders were not effectively engaged with at the outset of this project and were largely engaged with or communicated to after the evidence and insight had been produced. Earlier stakeholder engagement is needed to agree how the evidence and insight will be used and what actions need to be taken by which organisation or individual, with monitoring or follow up on how the data product has been utilised.
- **Clearly articulating and sharing the expected 'impact' at the beginning of the project:** This data project, like many ecda deliver, aimed to influence change or action through new or better insight about a key issue, rather than providing a direct link to action. However, this ambition was not fully articulated at the outset or throughout the project, especially in collaboration with stakeholders who would be receiving the data and using it to inform key decisions.

Evaluation methodology

The Research and Citizen Insight team designed an interview guide (appendix A) and survey (appendix B) which was sent to stakeholders who were identified by the core project team as having been involved in the project, or as the intended recipients of the evidence and insight to use and inform decision-making in their own organisation.

Interviews took place during February (2021), alongside survey data collection. In total:

- 18 interview requests were made, of which 10 responded that they did not have any knowledge of the project or had no time to participate (one of which was followed up and answered by email).
- 8 interviews took place, which included individuals from the ecda project and analytical team.
- 8 survey requests were sent and followed up; only 1 person completed the survey.

Interview feedback in detail

This section outlines the common thematic areas uncovered during interviews and captured in survey data, detailing insights which emerged following production of the data product.

Faced-paced delivery

Many participants stated that this project worked well in producing evidence and insight quickly and efficiently. This was largely enabled by using aggregated, de-personalised data which was readily accessible to the analytical team. Ordinarily, most ecda projects need to allow time for sourcing the data or setting up data sharing agreements for more sensitive, personalised data.

'The team worked at pace - there wasn't a huge gap between commissioning the project and delivery of findings'

The urgency of the pandemic may also have contributed to how quickly the results were delivered, to ensure key agencies could utilise the information for future planning. In addition, as child abuse is an area of much concern, the nature of the topic may have also factored into the pace of the work.

'Obviously with something like child abuse you want to prepare for it as soon as possible, especially when lockdown restrictions were lifted. I was impressed that it went along swiftly.'

The lack of governance processes in place arguably helped the project team's ability to deliver at pace and, as there was no precedent for this type of project and the approach taken, the team could work flexibly. As much as speed and flexibility were required for this project, this may have been to the detriment of spending more time on project planning, stakeholder engagement and defining the action that stakeholders could take through utilising the information about latent demand. The question of 'impact' and this insight being used to influence immediate action was questioned by some during interviews, especially as the insight was focused on mid to long-term planning. This suggests that some of the project and analytical team had differing understanding of desired 'impact' for this project.

'Outputs were only ever meant to inform planning, but there is this obsession with 'impact'

Project scoping and governance processes

A scoping document for this project was produced which used the 'NESTA 4 step approach'. Feedback from interviewees indicated that there was a lack of planning for impact. It was clear at the outset that a key output was producing the data product and creating a strong evidence base to understand the impact of Covid-19 on the level of incidences of child abuse and its effect on service demand. However, there was less agreement or understanding on how that evidence base was intended to be used or how it has been used to inform key actions or decisions. Generally, interviewees described the outcomes of this project in different ways; mostly describing what tasks they had completed, rather than what the project aimed to achieve in its entirety.

'In light of the process we have now and how we would commission and initiate projects, it wouldn't go with the model that we have now. It wouldn't tick all the process and governance boxes we have now.'

A high-level logic model was produced (appendix C) by the evaluator using information from the scope and final reports. A logic model or 'theory of change' helps to scope the evaluation, map outcomes and helps to identify what features of the programme contributed to which outcomes. This logic model was not used during the project, but it shows there are gaps in our understanding, particular around stakeholder and practitioner engagement and whether that has led to the intended short to mid-term outcomes. It should also be considered that this logic model has been put together by the evaluator retrospectively, but nonetheless the project team agreed it demonstrated the intended outputs and outcomes of the project.

There are already steps being taken by ecda to strengthen their processes around project design and delivery of projects.

Stakeholder engagement

Closely linked to project planning was stakeholder engagement, which most participants agreed could have been planned earlier in the project process. There were workshops held, with quite large and diverse audiences, in which the findings were discussed, but it is unclear how many of those stakeholders used the evidence and insight in their own organisations. This may be due to the lack of immediate follow up with stakeholders. One of the other reasons for this, which was clear in the feedback, is that there was no clear commissioner or stakeholder mapping and engagement plan formed from the outset due to the urgency of delivery of the project and, as a consequence, roles and responsibilities for managing key stakeholders were not allocated across the project team. Stakeholders were largely engaged with after the evidence and insight had been developed and hadn't been engaged early enough to consult on and agree actions. Stakeholder engagement should be a continual process, so along with the planning stage, ecda partners need to be consulted and engaged with throughout the project.

One of the objectives of this project was to support the development of early interventions to tackle the effects of latent demand. However, there were no specific examples of this given by stakeholders who were intended to utilise the insight. This may be due to the amount who declined interview, in part because they were unsure what this project was about, possibly due to the title of the project in the email when most may have recognised having attended a workshop or the analysis they had received. Or, more likely, there was not a clear ask of stakeholders and work between the analytical team and service areas to identify where action could be taken, and which possible interventions could be developed.

'Ordinarily an ecda project would have a commissioner, this one didn't. The ask was we need to know more, and we need to know it quickly.'

Some participants stated that this was not a 'usual' ecda project and didn't follow the normal project process, so certain key elements such as stakeholder engagement were not carried out in the usual way. It is unclear whether this is due to the need to deliver results quickly or lack of planning.

A key improvement identified was that there should have been:

'Much earlier consultation and detailed scoping and commissioning phase that brings all partners on board. Needed more accountability of who was taking this insight to which stakeholder.'

Transparency of the methodology and analytics

Some of the feedback from the interviews discussed the degree of openness in how the methodology was chosen and access to the data and analysis. As the data was aggregated and de-personalised, no formal data sharing agreements were in place. This may have led to a lack of transparency or agreement over how the data was to be shared and analysed within the analytical team and if there were disagreements, how they would be escalated or resolved.

'Should have had more transparency about the methodology and why this particular methodology was chosen.'

Impact and decision-making

Most were unclear or could not answer how they thought the evidence and insight had been used. This may have been because many of the stakeholders who declined the interview did so because of a lack of knowledge about this project, but were the

intended users of the data, and those who were interviewed largely took part in the planning and developing of the analytics.

'I'm not sure how the insight has been used or how it has influenced practice.'

'We had ideas where we could use this, where it would be best used, but I don't think that was followed up with, so I don't actually know if the insights were used for anything.'

However, there are some examples of how the evidence and insight was used from Essex Police and ECC children's finance team.

Essex Police:

- The data product has been included in the annual Force Management statement, strategic planning (presented to the Senior Leadership Team) and has formed part of business planning.
- Key actions will be taken at the front line with a mixture of this data (societal impact) and other intelligence so it had enhanced the insight and information Essex Police use – *'this is an evidence base we haven't had before'*.

ECC Children's finance team:²

- Medium and long-term forecasts from the Societal Impact phase 1 work have informed ECC's Children in Care Placements Budgeting for the next four years.
- Citing "confidence in the robust forecasts" provided, the team acknowledged that this had saved them days' worth of work. Ideally, they would like D&A/ecda to continue to provide this service annually.
- ecda forecasts were based on ECC and Police data. Normally, Finance are only able to use ECC data, meaning they wouldn't have had anything in addition to their normal data sources to account for additional demand from Covid-19 or latent demand that had built during lockdown; without this their forecast would have been less accurate. Although this wouldn't have represented huge numbers of children, it would have impacted the budget.
- In addition, the forecasting video recorded to explain the methodology used has been shared with the Children and Families Finance Forum, which brings together finance representatives from every Local Authority in Essex, to inform their budgeting and enable benchmarking of financial performance.

These are the main examples provided to demonstrate how this project has influenced decision-making and has had an 'impact'. There were no other clear-cut examples from the feedback on how the evidence and insight had led to the development of early interventions, recovery plans or how the recommendations from the report had been put into action. Overall, it is unclear whether lack of agreement on 'impact' from the start or limited planning for use contributed most towards this project being insightful vs. impactful.

Final product and dissemination of findings

There were several slide packs developed to present the data. Some commented that the final report or 'product' could have been clearer and more succinct. One example a participant gave is using the 'bottom line up front' (BLUF), whereby clarity and

² *This is copied from an email provided by the team*

precision in writing are achieved by beginning a report with the 'bottom line', so your conclusions or recommendations up front. This could also be tailored to the specific organisation.

'The product itself could have been punchier. Having those key findings on that first page, loud and clear, would have been more impactful'

Conclusion and core learning

The societal impact (child abuse) project was undertaken during a turbulent time (Covid-19) and there was a perceived need for information about current and latent demand due to Covid-19 so that services were informed and could act quickly on the best evidence and insight. The data product was produced quickly by the analytical team and largely more time has been spent tailoring the reports and disseminating the findings than on analysis, project planning and monitoring of performance and impact.

The aim of this project was to create a strong evidence base to understand the impact of Covid-19 on one key area of service demand – child abuse, and the insight was intended to support strategic decision making and the development of early interventions to tackle the effects of latent demand. It is not clear that the project has had a discernible impact on strategic decision-making or on the design of early interventions, given the small sample size for this evaluation and lack of supporting evidence. This project was therefore more informative and insightful than impactful.

Much of the learning relates to the resources allocated across the wider ecda team to project commissioning, scoping, planning and stakeholder management and the need for further clarification of roles and responsibilities. On a positive note, most of the feedback suggested that people had positive relationships with other partners in ecda and recognised there were elements of this project that could have been done better. Ecda are currently undertaking work to strengthen their existing processes to ensure projects achieve impact and capture learning effectively.

The core learnings for future projects are:

- **The need for setting up key processes and frameworks in a project lifecycle** - most of the feedback spoke of the need for key processes and frameworks which were missing in this project and would have helped define project aims and provide a structure for what actions were meant to be carried out, by whom and at which stage in the project. This would also give reassurance to the core team and wider ecda partners that key steps were completed.
- **Engaging with and managing stakeholders is crucial for data projects where there is an end 'user' in sight** - The 'three pillars' of ecda³ 'Data + People + Action' need to be incorporated into every project if the insight aims to drive decision making. This project demonstrates how missing those last two components of 'people and action' is seriously detrimental to the overall impact of a project.

² <https://www.essexfuture.org.uk/ecda/essex-centre-for-data-analytics/a-year-of-data-plus-people-action/>

Appendix A – interview guide

Opener (2-5 mins)

1. What was your role in the ecda 'societal impact' project?

Insight into action (10-15 mins)

2. What were the key outputs from this project for your organisation?
3. How have you used the insight from this project?
4. Do you have examples of any key actions or decisions taken as a result of the insight from this project?

Outcomes (10-15 mins)

5. What outcomes did you expect this project to achieve?
6. Do you think the intended outcomes (refer to logic model) were achieved?

Stakeholder experience (10-15 mins)

7. How would you describe your experience working on the project and/or as part of ecda?
8. What do you think worked well during the project?
9. Were there any parts of the project you think didn't work well?

Close (2-5 mins)

10. Do you have any other comments?

Appendix B – survey questions

Opener

1. What was your role in the ecda 'societal impact' project?

Outcomes

2. What outcomes did you expect this project to achieve?
3. Do you think the intended outcomes (refer to logic model) were achieved?

Stakeholder experience

4. How would you describe your experience working on the project and/or as part of ecda?
5. What do you think worked well during the project?
6. Were there any parts of the project you think didn't work well?

Close

7. Do you have any other comments?

Appendix C – logic model

Inputs	Key activities	Outputs	Short to mid-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
<p>Essex Centre for Data Analytics (ecda) staff resource:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysts - Data Scientist - Data Developer - Delivery Managers - Project Manager - Communications - Ethics 	<p>Data Science forecasting</p> <p>Literature & evidence review</p>	<p>Detailed forecast outputs for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Domestic abuse investigations - Sexual offences - Physical offences - Neglect - CSC referrals (from education, health, police and LA) 	<p>Strengthened evidence base to understand the impact of Covid-19 on key services involved in the identification and tackling of child abuse.</p> <p>Continued monitoring for services</p>	<p>Preventing exacerbation of harm by minimising delay in the identification of abuse</p>
Context and Rationale				
<p>The societal impact project aimed to forecast the impact of Covid-19 on child abuse. Child abuse includes high levels of harm and vulnerability and includes other areas (Domestic Abuse and Mental Health) that have been identified as areas of concern during the COVID lockdown and post lockdown period.</p> <p>This theme was chosen based on three key criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child abuse has been identified as an area of concern during the COVID lockdown and post lockdown period. • Child abuse includes high levels of harm and vulnerability. • Child abuse also includes other areas (Domestic Abuse and Mental Health) that have been identified as areas of concern during the COVID lockdown and post lockdown period <p>Stakeholders/partners involved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essex Police • Essex University • Essex County Council (Education & Social Care) • Core ecda 	<p>Stakeholder & Practitioner engagement</p>	<p>Sharing intelligence between stakeholders/practitioners</p> <p>Reporting key findings and set of recommendations and proposed actions</p>	<p>Improved data sharing practices and increased sharing of data amongst partners</p> <p>Helping to inform recovery plans and medium-term resource tools for numerous stakeholders</p> <p>Recommendations are put into action and proposed actions are carried out by stakeholders</p>	