The Catalyst Project, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and monitored by the Office for Students (OfS) is a partnership between the University of Essex, Essex County Council and Suffolk County Council.

Using cross-disciplinary expertise in data analytics, big data and evaluation, the University of Essex is supporting both County Councils to assess risks for vulnerable members of the community and provide evaluation techniques to fully understand the impact of Council initiatives.

Catalyst Evaluation Case Study

Essex Data (ED) Programme

The Essex Data programme (funded by a grant awarded to Essex Partners) is working with the University of Essex to support system wide transformation, enabling Essex Partners to harness the predictive capability of data through creating a safe data sharing, modelling and investigative tool.

The Essex Date programme (ED) utilises third-party technology which safely pseudonymises and matches multiple sets of data from a range of public service organisations. The technology affords deeper understanding, and delivers predictive risk 'profiles' which, used in conjunction with qualitative community insight gathered as part of the process, can enable both targeted and earlier interventions.

During an initial pilot phase (August 2016 – December 2018), the ED programme ran a series of four prototypes that combined data from partners including: Essex Police; Essex County Council; Basildon Borough Council, Integrated Care 24, Mid Essex hospitals, Youth Offending Services and other service providers. This was the first instance that partners from across the public sector in Essex shared and matched data to predict what challenges the future holds across four initiatives:

- School Readiness;
- Escalating domestic abuse;
- Violence and vulnerability; and
- Unnecessary attendance at A&E.

Essex Partners have used the findings to recommission domestic abuse services for 2019; to inform strategic decision making; Police Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) strategic assessments; substantiate more than £3 million of funding bids for domestic abuse and 'gang' partnership work. Additionally, the findings have also enabled public sector organisations and community groups to co-design and co-deliver early intervention services that help improve people's lives.

The Catalyst Evaluation Team at the University of Essex worked with Essex Partners to identify key ED programme aims and developed evidence based methods to evaluate the impact of the programme.

Aims identified were:

1) To create a platform that facilitates decision making;

2) To create and foster a culture of data sharing;

3) To create a platform that is user friendly, fit-for-purpose and scalable; and

4) To create a platform that is good value for money.

Methodology

The Catalyst Evaluation Team undertook stakeholder analysis, developed an online survey to administer to stakeholders, and conducted evaluations to measure programme outcomes to test whether the programme aims were achieved.

The stakeholder analysis identified four main types of stakeholders: decision makers, data owners, data handlers and data analysts. Drawing on the first ED prototype, School Readiness, the Catalyst Evaluation Team generated an online survey consisting of a series of questions covering data sharing, accessibility, usefulness, and decision making. 50 stakeholders participated in the survey. Key findings:

- Levels of trust around data sharing among partners is high.

- The ED programme is regarded as a useful tool with a number of helpful capabilities. Greater efficiencies could be achieved in data preparation processes, operating speed and navigation of the third party technology.

- Stakeholders were eager to use the ED programme and believe it will provide effective and targeted resource allocation, service planning and delivery supporting evidence-based decision making.

- Impact on service delivery and commissioning needs to be closely monitored and communicated among stakeholders.

Recommendations

Using these results, the Catalyst Evaluation Team generated recommendations that have helped and will further help to improve the operation and impact of the ED programme by:

- Establishing a collaborative network among partners, aiding the collection and sharing of information on platform utility and stimulating shared learning. This involved establishing a repository of policies, protocols, procedures and documentation to help share good practice and lessons learnt.

- Engaging and informing the community and citizens of the initiative demonstrating the transparency of related decision making processes.

- Continuing communication to citizens on measures describing data protection, data security and confidentiality measures will be key to the success of the ED Programme.

- Continuing to measure outputs and changes over time to compare future results and differentiate perceptions of initial users from new partners that join later.

Essex County Council's view of the Catalyst Project contribution:

Richard Puleston, Director of Strategy, Insight and Engagement, Essex County Council, said: "The Catalyst Evaluation Team have supported us to harness the power of system data to positively impact policy and decision making, placing us at the forefront of collaborative public service partnerships seeking innovative solutions to the challenges we face. The team provided an evaluation vision and approach that enabled the Essex Data programme to meaningfully evaluate community services for vulnerable people within the county and the findings have been helpful in informing Essex Partners' work.

"More widely, the collaboration with the Catalyst Evaluation Team has raised awareness within our organisation of the importance of evaluation by design – reflecting all steps of the project lifecycle – and we will continue to collaborate with the team on future work."

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