

Embedding Evaluation

Upskilling to Embed

A key focus of the current evaluation is to embed a culture of evaluation and learning. To change how people perceive evaluation and make it “everybody’s business”, we have been conducting several activities. The intention is to upskill individuals so they are able to embed evaluation into their day-to-day practice.

Workshop Series

We have worked with our academic partner in a collaborative way to build realist evaluation into the ways of working of the Essex LDP. Our evaluation partner has been delivering a series of online workshops with a focus on “Sharing, Learning, and Capacity Building” to upskill the embedded researchers and wider Essex LDP stakeholders in realist evaluation principles. This work aligns with the Sport England’s National Evaluation and Learning Partner (NELP), evaluation and learning communications framework, and these workshops have been designed in a way that is inclusive and co-productive to make sense of how, why and for whom programmes work, building on the experiences of the staff involved in the workshops. The workshops have followed a theme of producing a realist evaluation, with the first sessions being “An introduction to realist evaluation” and subsequent workshops focused on “Developing explanatory accounts”, “capturing realist data”, “testing our explanatory accounts”, and “communicating our findings to relevant audiences”. So far there have been ten sessions delivered, with a further three planned for October and November.

How & Why Hub

Each month, we host a “How and Why Hub” which acts as an informal space to explore different topics of a realist approach. This session allows attendees to bring feedback of their experiences of realist evaluation as well as exploring challenges that they may face in evaluation. So far, 24 members of staff have accessed the live workshops with recordings produced and shared with attendees. This is a key vehicle in facilitating the “everyone’s business” approach that we are promoting through our evaluation.

Research Governance for Embedded Researchers

The Essex LDP has two embedded researchers who are able to work closely with those delivering LDP initiatives. As the evaluation researchers are also embedded within Essex County Council, this has made it easier to liaise with the relevant colleagues in the Research & Citizen Insight team who oversee research governance within the council.

On completing the research & information governance procedures required by ECC it was found that the evaluation of the Essex LDP presented a much larger and ongoing project compared to regular research projects within the council. It was therefore agreed that we could complete the process and then have regular reviews with a member of R&CI to see if any amendments need to be made.

Another consideration for embedded researchers is how we obtain consent from those involved in evaluation activities. It is vital that individuals are properly informed about the evaluation activities they participate in and how the information gathered by these will be used. However, we have found the process by which you inform participants and receive consent for the evaluation activities influences their engagement with the evaluation. We have worked with colleagues to refine our processes so they are more practical, while ensuring we have still properly informed and received consent from those participating in evaluation activities. This has included:

- Producing concise online versions of consent forms
- Implementing verbal consent practices for informal community-based and observation evaluation activities
- Implementing a consent process for partners involved across multiple LDP initiatives and evaluation activities

Sharing Learning in an Accessible Way

It is important that we share any learnings from evaluation of the LDP in an accessible way so that these can be taken forward by the team. The 'evidence to action' session we delivered at the Active Essex awayday showed that, despite initial reservations about the accessibility of the information, after some thought and discussion the team were able to interpret and use evidence from a literature review and relate it to their day-to-day work. Using this approach seems to be a more accessible way for us to share evidence from literature than circulating a literature review.

It has also become apparent the terminology we use to convey our findings is very important for how individuals engage with our evaluation work. For example, when discussing distributed leadership as part of the 'evidence to action' session, we described an approach as "joint effort", rather than "a convergent approach" as it is called in the literature. If we had instead used this more 'academic' terminology, it may have been harder to engage the team in this discussion. In light of this, we have decided not to use the term "programme theory" and instead use "assumptions & beliefs" so the work we are doing is not perceived as something to be solely understood by academics. Similarly, we refer to "how and why conversations" as opposed to "realist interviews". Not overcomplicating language with academic "jargon" has been important for improving accessibility and engagement with the LDP evaluation