

Listening, learning and telling stories

Can insights from citizens really transform
the way we commission public services?



Sharing the work of Essex County
Council and ThePublicOffice

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ThePublicOffice


Essex County Council



Contents

Introduction	4
Customer insight - from consultation and surveys to an ‘Empathy Engine’	6
Listening, learning and telling stories: what has happened so far?	8
A short note on ethnography...	13
“Why are we singing this old shit?” - surfacing critical insights and landing the learning	14
What’s changing as a result?	16
Prepare to be moved, prepare to be scared - why we must keep doing this	17
Helping public service organisations become ‘Empathy Engines’ - barriers and recommendations	18



Foreword

I’m excited to see the scale of our ambition captured so well in this document. We are convinced that to secure great health and wellbeing outcomes in the future we need a radically transformed approach to working with Essex citizens. This paper tells an honest story about what trying to do that really means.

As you will read here, colleagues from across the County have been pushing forwards and making progress but the further we travel the more it becomes clear that there is a long way to go before we could claim to be an ‘Empathy Engine’. We are having to learn new disciplines and methods for meaningful engagement with our citizens, but we are also realising that our broader business capabilities, our strategy, analysis, resource deployment and success measures all need reshaping to support new ways of thinking and doing.

Changing our practice and making it stick is really hard; sometimes it feels like two steps forward and one step back. But I believe our commitment to honesty and reflective learning is a real help in embedding the change. We hope our story so far is helpful to others, and look forward to sharing more conversation on the journey.

Dave Hill
Executive Director for People Commissioning
Essex County Council (ECC)

Introduction

The public sector is being required to listen - really listen - to what its 'customers' have to say. Few now disagree that radical change is needed in order to shift the demand for services and support behaviour change, and to do much more on prevention and collaborative commissioning. Many advocate the creation of a new system with active and collaborative citizens at its heart¹ - the starting point for which has to be a significantly better understanding of the realities of people's lives.

Frontrunners in the sector are setting out to create the conditions that best enable active engagement between professionals and citizens. They are doing deep listening and learning using new methods and approaches in order to create rich understandings of how people interact with and experience the services they use. Leaders are using these new insights to disrupt long-held assumptions, rethink service provision in response to what they learn, and to start working alongside citizens to shape and create change.

In the context of a move to become a Commissioning Council and the integration of health and social care, Essex County Council is in strategic pursuit of innovation to transform outcomes for individuals, families and communities. At the heart of this complex and important work is the need for a clear and unwavering focus on the citizen.

The Council is asking itself: What are the needs and desires of the people who live in Essex? What are their strengths and aspirations? How can we involve citizens in the design, commissioning and delivery of services that really work?

This short paper is written by the Council's innovation and learning partner - ThePublicOffice. It gives a snapshot of how Essex County Council is listening and learning from its citizens. How, by creating and telling stories about real individuals and real families, public servants are starting to think, feel and act differently in their work.

This is an emerging story about a bold and difficult journey that professionals have embarked upon, and through which they are constantly learning. The purpose of the paper is to tell the story so far and capture some of this learning in order that it can be shared within and beyond the council, and to make some recommendations for how to further develop the approach.

ThePublicOffice is helping Essex County Council to build new understanding of what it takes to create powerful and long-lasting change for practitioners and citizens within a complex local system. The purpose of our work over the past 18 months has been to:

- learn about what it would take to put citizens at the heart of People Commissioning, and develop the capacity to innovate internally and with partners
- support specific vertical strands of work, to progress Council priorities (e.g. Early Years, Working Age Adults with Disabilities, Dementia and Mental Health)
- learn about how the organisation works, and how it needs to change, and to bring reflection and learning back to the organisation itself.

¹ www.collaboratei.com/media/11423/The%20Collaborative%20Citizen%20Report%20-%202nd%20Edition.pdf



Customer insight - from consultation and surveys to an ‘Empathy Engine’

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In the past, we would have done a whole range of things, like group sessions and questionnaires, but they wouldn’t have given us any depth or richness. We need to carry on doing those traditional things, but be a bit more imaginative. We need a continual dialogue with everyone in the community.”

Chris Martin, Integrated Commissioning Director, Essex County Council

Business has long understood the value of customer insight. Successful companies find ways to understand what their customers need and desire, and then use these insights to make short-term, focused improvements to products or services, or to secure long-term competitive advantage.

Typically, they set out to establish an ‘empathetic frontline’ - where customer-facing employees are trained and equipped to sense and respond to customers’ problems. But *great* companies go beyond this. They embrace an ethos of institution-wide empathy by establishing an ‘Empathy Engine’². In these companies senior leaders, managers and frontline employees work together to stand collectively in their customers’ shoes in order to better understand and resolve customers’ needs. Establishing and using empathy becomes utterly established in values and practices - it’s integral to the culture of the place.

Of course the use of customer insight is also well-established in the public sector. Local authorities are awash with data: they administer consultations and surveys, gather customer feedback and assemble reports about the take-up of specific services or the performance of providers. Focus groups or ‘expert user’ forums sometimes offer richer, more focused insights to inform service development but, for the most part, current sources of customer insight have little or no impact on service design or commissioning. These traditional methods have as their starting point professionals’ assumptions about what is important, and these assumptions frame the questions that get asked. At best what’s learnt leads to tweaks to existing service provision; at worst the results go nowhere, or are used to justify existing plans within which there was only ever very limited scope for change. Complex decision-making and governance processes also make genuine adaptation in the light of new insights or evidence extremely difficult.

² www.strategyand.pwc.com/media/uploads/The_Empathy_Engine.pdf

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We have got into a professional mindset - that we know best. We really need to understand how and why people experience services the way they do. In the past we have innovated but within very tight constraints linked to this professional mindset of ‘doing to’. We push things to people and we set criteria for their engagement. This [work] is helping us ask ourselves how we create a very different approach - it’s about starting with the citizen and working back towards the professional.”

Vicky Branchett, Director of Organisational Intelligence & Commissioning Delivery, Essex County Council

Few, if any, leaders in the public sector would describe their organisations as Empathy Engines. Real listening and learning is highly challenging to the traditional public service mind-set, precisely because it up-ends the established power relationship. Traditionally the working assumption has been that wisdom and insight comes from expert professionals - those who currently make decisions about what is needed and then deliver that, directly or indirectly, to passive citizens. Unfortunately, insight gathering also tends to be concentrated around single services (police, health, housing) and focuses on siloed issues or individuals’ needs (not the interconnected, family context in which most people live).

In contrast, real listening is based on the explicit assumption that the people who know most about the experience of accessing public services, about how services work (or not) in the messy and complex context of real life, are citizens themselves. Exploring lived experiences in this way often uncovers aspirations, energy and assets in individuals, families and communities - all of which could be supported and further built upon to impact on health and wellbeing. Real listening seeds new ideas for different and better ways of using resources and achieving improved outcomes. But currently the creation of a new system which has active and collaborative citizens at its heart feels a long way off.

Essex County Council, along with others, recognises the headline ‘case for change’: citizens’ needs are growing, outcomes must dramatically improve and there is less money available to make that happen. Indeed, what we do in the future needs to cost markedly less than what our systems cost now. Critically, Essex sees an opportunity to be bold in responding to this case for change, and is seeking to create a new system of outcomes-focused commissioning in which both citizens and professionals have very different roles to play.

The Case for Change in Essex

Financial imperative:

- We have less money to spend than before
- We spend money on some things that are not effective
- We spend too much on firefighting, to the detriment of prevention/early intervention

Outcomes imperative:

- Results are not as good as they need to be
- Public expectations continue to rise
- Some problems are ‘wicked’ and need solving systemically

Opportunities imperative:

- Citizens and communities have insights, capabilities and energies as yet untapped
- There is new collaborative potential to unlock around integration of health and social care
- Proper outcomes-based commissioning opens the door to radically different solutions

Listening, learning and telling stories: what has happened so far?

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It's a really different way of working. You have much more time to explore people's stories. It's much less constrained and you have freedom to get to know that person and understand what their life is like.”

Victoria James, Research and Evaluation Manager, Essex County Council

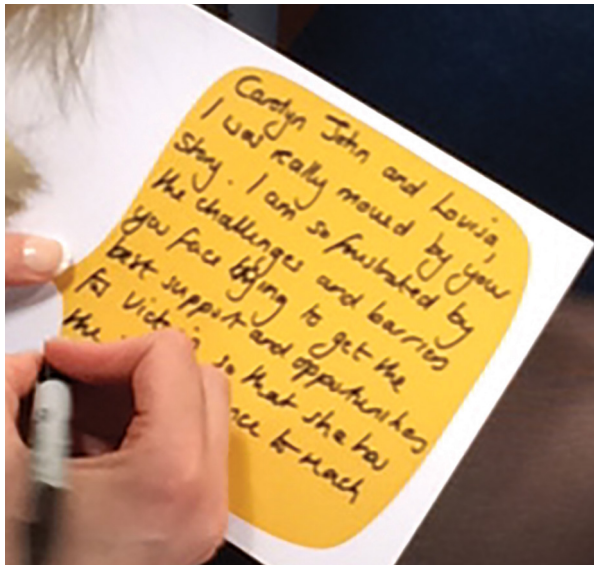
Wow. We had no idea we were making things so complicated for our families.”

Children's Centre Provider, reflecting on learning with parents

Essex County Council is explicitly seeking to generate new insights in order to inform and create commitment to its case for change, support the co-design and testing of innovations in specific priority areas, and develop the Council's overall approach to citizen and outcomes-focused commissioning.

Within a wider design and innovation process being led by ThePublicOffice, professionals from across the current system are being supported to come together and look afresh at data, harness research evidence, and interrogate the best exemplars of alternative approaches through horizon scanning. All of this work demands that professionals take on a more open and creative mindset that is willing to absorb and analyse different insights and consider new ideas.

No single source of insight has been more powerful in this work than the stories of Essex citizens. Using different tools and techniques for capturing, sharing and analysing citizen insights, we have been able to shine a spotlight on how people in Essex live their lives, what it is really like to be on the receiving end of services, and where opportunities lie to do things differently and better.



Listening, learning and telling stories: key approaches used with Essex County Council and partners

Family Stories

ThePublicOffice and Postcode Films

Method or approach	Purpose	Ouput(s)
<p>Creation of a series of short films capturing the lived experience of individuals and families in Essex. Researchers spent two days with participants to capture a picture of their daily lives and undertake conversational interviews.</p> <p>Films used as part of ThePublicOffice collaborative workshops as a way to connect professionals with issues at a personal level, as a tool for stimulating a shared understanding of the 'case for change' in key areas, and to generate a set of common insights about public services as a whole.</p>	<p>Bringing real families' voices into the room is always arresting. Many public servants are shocked to find how articulate, thoughtful, resourceful and tenacious people are. These films helped to create an appetite to hear more directly from citizens.</p>	<p>4 x 5-7 minute films with accompanying photos, quotations and story summary postcards</p> <p>Working age adults with disabilities: Sara, Brenda and family Jessie, Jane and Tom</p> <p>Dementia: Trevor and Margaret</p> <p>Mental health: Barry</p>

Early Years Ethnographies

ESRO and ThePublicOffice

<p>Ethnographic research commissioned to understand the lives of families living in Essex - holistically and from their point of view. The project focused on 'mainstream' families - exploring what typical life is like for families with young children.</p> <p>Involved an in-depth look at the lives of eight families living across Essex, combined with observational fieldwork at over 30 services targeted directly at, or providing indirect provision to, families with young children.</p>	<p>The intention was to see the world through families' eyes, rather than from the perspective of services, in order to open up very different possibilities.</p> <p>Essex County Council directly observed and participated in parts of the fieldwork process in order to develop their own skills and understanding.</p>	<p>'Story slam' workshop with Council colleagues to debrief and review findings</p> <p>Research report: 'Early Years Ethnographies - Learning from the experiences of families across Essex'</p> <p>Photo and quotation posters and boards for use at workshops</p>
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Learning from Family Carers in Essex

ThePublicOffice, Essex Carers' Network and Essex Mencap

<p>Three engagement events involving around 60 people caring for adults with a learning disability. Designed to explore in open and honest conversation a range of issues connected to the Council's Increasing Independence Programme, as well as those raised by carers themselves.</p>	<p>We knew carers were frustrated and had a lot to say about the current system. These events provided a safe space for people to share anger and frustration as well as ideas for change.</p>	<p>Report: 'The system is not working with us' sharing the views of family carers around eight key issues and setting out a 'good system of support' for carers and families.</p>
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Living Well with Dementia in Essex

ESRO and ThePublicOffice

Method or approach	Purpose	Ouput(s)
<p>Ethnographic research designed to understand the landscape of dementia care provision across the county and measure the impact these services have on people living with dementia in Essex.</p> <p>An ethnographic approach looked at the experience of the service provider, and the lived experience of people with dementia and their carers. Involved place based fieldwork in a range of dementia services - from Care Homes to Memory Clinics - and people-based ethnographic research. The perspectives of carers were included and encouraged in the research.</p>	<p>Throughout the research ESRO were shadowed and assisted by ECC staff to help them reflect on their current practices and explore new ways of working with local communities.</p>	<p>'Story slam' workshop with Council, NHS and VCS colleagues to debrief and review findings</p> <p>Research report: 'Living well with Dementia in Essex: Ethnographic Research findings'</p>

Co-design with Children's Centre Providers

ThePublicOffice

<p>Intensive support programme for Children's Centre providers encouraging them to work differently with families to understand issues and realities and design new approaches together. Design-led approach, starting with a 'Discovery' phase (creating the conditions to go out and listen well).</p> <p>Provision of bespoke support (engagement, service design) to four projects to trial new way of working and build new capabilities for collaboration and innovation.</p>	<p>Many service providers believe they know their service users very well, but they tend to engage on the service's terms, and often only reach certain people: those who are heavy users of the service and are happy with it. We wanted to help CCs see that conversations focused on listening and discovery could uncover very different and powerful insights.</p>	<p>Completion of four projects that demonstrate new ways of working and raise issues for future commissioning of children's services.</p> <p>'Design Handbook' that describes a process for co-designing with families.</p> <p>Programme report which captures key messages for providers and ECC (in development).</p>
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Demonstrating Co-production in Commissioning

ThePublicOffice, Essex Carers' Network and Essex Mencap

<p>A project to develop and model co-productive practices in commissioning. Working with current and potential users of Stonecroft (a respite facility for working age adults with disabilities in Braintree) to investigate and define the shape and form of future provision.</p>	<p>To consider how engaging with current users and non-users of a service provide both challenge and opportunity when thinking about recommissioning.</p>	<p>Project currently in development, but outputs will aim to capture a process of co-productive commissioning to support staff in their engagement and design work with citizens in the future.</p>
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A short note on ethnography...

It is clear that new and deep insights direct from citizens are one important driver of radically new approaches in the public sector. Such insights are increasingly being referred to by the catch-all descriptor 'ethnography', but we are intentionally avoiding sole use of that term in this paper.

Some of the listening and learning work taking place in Essex constitutes formal ethnographic research (see previous table) and has been undertaken by specialists. But much of it has been about informal research or engagement approaches specifically designed to enable commissioners, service providers and others to listen actively to what citizens have to say. This requires careful attention to creating the conditions in which participants feel safe, and in which honest reflections can be shared.

Additionally, we are aware that in the public sector ethnography is being seen as the 'latest thing', and some traditional research or engagement methods are simply being re-badged without any real change in underlying assumptions, intentions or methods. This is disingenuous and unhelpful. There is a risk too that 'doing ethnography' is perceived as a silver bullet or magic answer: thus we see people embracing deployment of ethnographic research approaches but making no changes to service commissioning or design as a result. This wastes time and resources and squanders trust. We are clear that ethnographic research insights do not take precedence over all others, but must be seen as a crucial part of a wider recipe for insight gathering and analysis that draws on other techniques and sources, and which leads to a collaborative process of analysis, meaning making and challenging assumptions.

Ethnographic approaches of all types must be put to a clear purpose. We love this description of 'stories that capture business insights':

'Where data analytics and surveys provide flattened snapshots, ethnography contributes an empathic understanding of how consumers live, work and play through gritty and detailed descriptions. Ethnographic stories map customer experience in evocative detail, including aspects of experience that elude the behavioral screens provided by sales data or the inevitable, memory-based biases in survey results. In effect, ethnography illuminates the evolving and kaleidoscopic nature of consumer culture.

Ethnography can also stimulate new strategic directions. Through its attention to the minute details of people's lives, ethnography can reveal new market opportunities and serve as a catalyst for organizational innovation. Like all good stories, good ethnographic stories can be transformational and inspirational.'³

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Instead of taking respondents and putting them into research, we take researchers and put them into the real world. For [public sector] professionals, just going out is a massive thing - seeing and listening, really seeing and listening. It's a great first step, but the next step is to rewrite how you see things - challenge your assumptions about what you thought you knew.”

Becky Rowe, ESRO

³ <http://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/stories-that-deliver-business-insights/>

“Why are we singing this old shit?” - surfacing critical insights and landing the learning

While surveys and consultations provide large quantities of information and may indicate broad trends, the range of approaches set out in the earlier table (pages 10 and 11) offer richness and depth and nuanced challenge. It has not been surprising to us that the really big, incontestable insights across the strands of work in Essex have come from professionals (commissioners, service providers, or others) listening to the raw, complex and often emotive stories that emerge when families and individuals are given the opportunity to say what they think and how they feel - no forms to fill in and no professional agenda. These kinds of insights come with a shock factor that is entirely positive. The messages families tell are mostly unequivocal. They can't be wrapped up or glossed over, and they are hard to forget.



The use of verbatim quotations and photographs and names allows those stories to enter people's consciousness in a way that I think retains the impact and the value for a lot longer."

Ruth Kennedy, ThePublicOffice

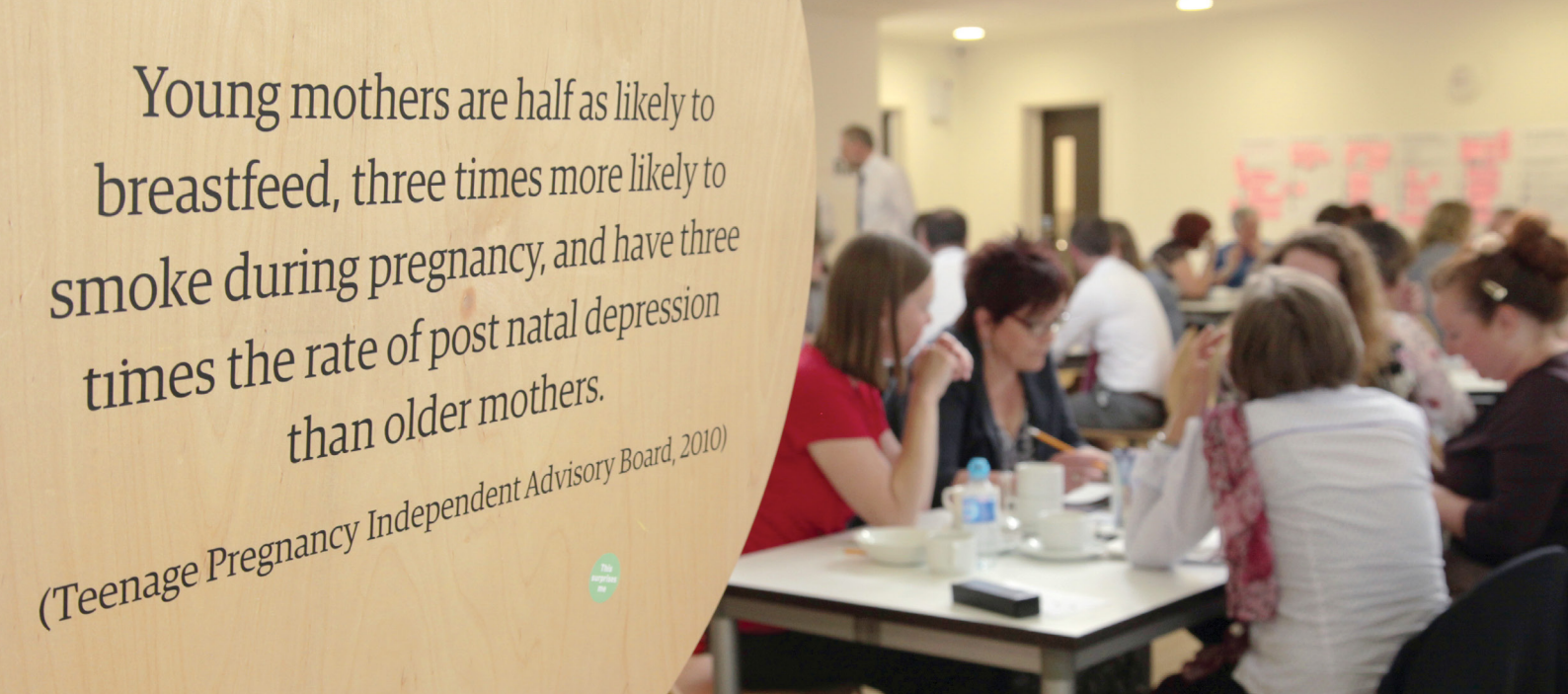
In Essex a wide range of critical insights have emerged within specific areas of commissioning, including:

Early Years

- Parents are isolated, lonely, and struggle to make friends
- Parents don't want or need more provision - they are not getting value from what's already there
- Chances to help parents build relationships are being missed
- Parents recognise good parenting advice, but struggle to make it work at home

Working Age Adults with Disabilities

- "The system is not working with us": family carers play a critical role in supporting working age adults with disabilities, but the system doesn't work well with them - it often causes them as many problems as it tries to solve.
- "They will never be as informed as we are": paid professionals do not always recognise that family carers are experts and this leads to utter frustration or poor decision-making. Professional voices should never be allowed to eclipse the voices of individuals and families.
- "We need support before we fall off the edge of a cliff": The pressure of being a family carer is relentless; it takes its toll on health and well-being and is especially hard as you become older. Many feel constantly at the edge of crisis, making the need to address support - in all its forms - for family carers a clear priority.
- "There is no one to share the load and no one to talk to about what I'm going through": Family carers are lonely and socially isolated. Beyond practical and financial support, they would love more opportunities for social connection and peer support. There is also lots of enthusiasm and capability for this amongst family carers and voluntary agencies.



Young mothers are half as likely to breastfeed, three times more likely to smoke during pregnancy, and have three times the rate of post natal depression than older mothers.

(Teenage Pregnancy Independent Advisory Board, 2010)

Dementia

- "I still want to be normal": Dementia organisations and activities are mostly not appealing to those in the early stages of the condition as they take people away from 'normal' life and into the world of memory loss. Overlooking these needs can lead to isolation and accelerated cognitive decline.
- "Why are we singing this old shit?": Dementia activities can be childish and a far cry from 'real-world' hobbies. They rarely reflect the preferences, experiences or personalities of the individuals attending the groups.
- "Some things you never lose": Friendship and intimacy are forgotten and neglected in dementia care. Past relationships are accepted as dwindling and forgotten in favour of friendships formed at dementia groups. Services do little to accommodate couples, as they either focus on the person with dementia, or the carer, but rarely both together.
- "Get me a biscuit": Current conceptions of 'good care' amongst service providers tend to focus on doing for individuals, rather than enabling them to take responsibility and this reduces independence. Current methods of impact measurement reinforce this conception of 'good care'.

To create long-term impact we need interesting and powerful insights like these to become learning that changes perspectives and drives professionals to make different decisions. In ThePublicOffice we are highly attentive to the need to 'land the learning'. We use our experience in learning design and pedagogy to create thoughtfully designed products and processes as a route to securing this wider impact in the organisations with which we work. These methods, including those illustrated in the table above, ensure that insights become 'sticky'.

We also take time to make the tacit explicit, by creating products and processes that explore and highlight the disruption that is taking place through the use of new approaches, so that the professional learning is owned and understood by participants. A recent film that captures the impact of new approaches to citizen insight in Essex is a good example of this.



What's been so exciting has been turning everything on its head. We've peeled off the layers of our assumptions - you start to see things clearly from a parent's perspective, and it's completely different."

"When I looked at it from the families' perspective, I was baffled by the way that we are currently working."

Children's Centre Providers, participants in co-design workshop

What's changing as a result?



The insights from families have disrupted us. So now what do we do? We can't go back and pretend it hasn't happened."

Children's Centre Provider

The first and most immediate impact of this type of engagement can be to deepen the relationship and trust between services and citizens. In Essex there is a growing understanding growing that citizens are often highly knowledgeable, have assets and capabilities, and plenty of ideas about how better outcomes can be achieved - often for less money. But when people feel listened to, they then expect something different to happen as a result.

Maintaining a dialogue and making clear what will happen next is key: appearing to listen properly and then doing nothing is counterproductive. As a result of work over recent months, Essex County Council is rethinking its strategy and the resources it needs to engage fully with citizens; in some parts of the County this is a shared conversation with other partners, such as Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs).

Though it is early days, learning that has come from listening to citizens is already leading to changes in both commissioning and service design. Examples include:

- Development of new, integrated 'system visions' for Early Years, Dementia, Working Age Adults with Disabilities, and Children's commissioning. Shared across local authorities and NHS. These visions make clear how whole systems need to work differently if citizen strengths, co-production and collaboration are truly to be features of the way things are done;
- Experimentation with micro grants: encouraging library teams to build peer relationships between parents of young children;
- Exploring challenge prizes as a new commissioning tool, to unearth community capacity to reduce loneliness and social isolation;
- Redesigning children's centre communications, for example addressing letters to children not parents, and using brightly coloured envelopes, after hearing that parents do not open letters because they look scary or incomprehensible;
- New work underway to create a 'blueprint' to underpin all future dementia commissioning, making explicit for the market the experience we want those living with dementia and their families to have.

More strategically, ThePublicOffice is supporting collaboration between Commissioners and Organisational Intelligence and Commissioning Support, to look again at commissioning processes and approaches, and re- shape organisational learning (leadership, culture and practice) to put citizens and their insights at the heart of the way everyone works.



Prepare to be moved, prepare to be scared - why we must keep doing this

As a PublicOffice team we have been confronting public servants with powerful citizen insights for around a decade. Our work with Essex County Council over the past 24 months has brought some of our own thinking around this work more sharply into focus. We are convinced that we must ensure more public servants take time to listen and learn from citizens, and to gather and tell real stories about people who use public services.

There is power in these approaches because they:

Bring context to the fore and help public servants understand the dynamic landscape of family and community life in which their policies and services land. Citizens' stories drive systems thinking rather than a focus on single services.

Make even the most complex stories powerfully simple, and surface accessible insights about the complexity of local systems.

Create shared emotional connections with citizens and between people from diverse and disparate parts of an organisation or system, allowing professional and sectoral boundaries to be dismantled. We see people from partner organisations mobilising around an invigorated shared moral purpose.

Shine a light on strengths and assets that are in abundance within individuals, families and communities - resources which can form the foundation for better-designed services.

Challenge longstanding assumptions about why people behave in the way they do, why things aren't working and how things could be different.

Build trust between public services and the communities they serve because engaging in real listening is deeply affirming for citizens: it shows people that someone wants to hear what matters to them.

Mobilise, energise and give confidence to people who want to make things better for the people whose stories they have heard. Having a shared experience of listening to citizens helps build trust between different organisations working in the public sector space - whether public, private or third sector.

Helping public service organisations become ‘Empathy Engines’ - barriers and recommendations

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I want them to think like this in everything they do, and to change the culture of the organisation by doing so. This is pretty challenging. We want people to genuinely, thoughtfully understand, in depth and in an immersive way, what needs to change. It's my hope that there will be a tipping point. That we'll look back in three years time and think, how did we do this in any other way? I don't think we're there yet, but we're on a journey.”

Dave Hill, Executive Director for People Commissioning, Essex County Council

“We've had to unlearn some of our attitudes and approaches. It's been much harder than we thought it'd be.”

Children's Centre Provider

“This is about critical thinking, and it is here where the real value and opportunity for impact on professional practice really lies. Handing over reports with pre-digested material will only take you so far.”

Becky Rowe, ESRO

There is a movement starting within Essex County Council: a movement of people who have been personally and emotionally changed by the process of really listening to and learning from the experiences, wants and needs of citizens in Essex. There is commitment at the executive level and from senior people in different parts of the organisation, but so much more needs to be done.

There is still some way to go before we can be confident that these approaches are integral to the commissioning process, as currently too few people in the Council are being given regular opportunities, or the capacity and skills to make them part of their business-as-usual working practices. And in the context of health and social care integration, ECC needs to share this journey with many other colleagues, not least the Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and other partners.

Trying to make this change requires significant tenacity, and can feel like swimming through treacle. We have a number of observations about why this is the case:

- It is a big challenge for a Council (or CCG, or police force, or Job Centre etc) to come face to face with the actual stories of people using their services. We would argue that this disruption is extremely helpful, because it opens up a space in which new ideas can emerge. But trying to establish new culture and behaviour is tough; something that makes people feel uncomfortable will always find resistance.
- It's not enough only to listen - people need to be clear what needs to happen before and after the listening process; what they are learning needs to lead to something new and better happening.
- Professionals don't feel they have the permission to take this kind of approach, which goes against the grain of formal structure and controlling governance, and requires personal engagement with people. Real listening and learning doesn't come naturally to most people in Local Authorities or other public bodies.
- Synthesis, analysis and meaning-making are a real struggle. Hearing new insights is one thing, but taking time to look at them collectively, with colleagues, and to grapple together with what they mean and what should change as a result, is really hard and not at all what professionals are used to.

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For me these approaches sit across the whole of the life cycle of commissioning. Informing what we do before we do it, assessing performance during and understanding impact. We also need to find ways to capture unsolicited insights and feedback from citizens, and not overuse the same techniques.”

Vicky Branchett, Director of Organisational Intelligence & Commissioning Delivery, Essex County Council

“Engaging very up front and personal with the public is scary sometimes. People might say things to you that are very difficult, ask you questions that you don't know the answer to, and just clearing diaries to be able to sit and think and work like that is a challenge in itself.”

Ruth Kennedy, Founding Partner, ThePublicOffice

“I just want to do this; I don't want to do my other job any more. I feel like I want to write a manifesto.”

Senior Commissioner, Essex County Council

In order to move this work on, we recommend that Essex County Council and other organisations wanting to work in this way invest carefully in expectations, opportunities, and capabilities:

- 1** **Expectations:** Make listening, learning and storytelling a critical and constantly deployed discipline, and a non-negotiable part of the commissioning process. Set it out as a strategic priority and ensure leaders model it and create the conditions and authorising environment in which everyone can make it happen. This will likely mean de-risking things and explicitly giving permission: liberating staff to truly put individuals, families and communities at the heart of what they do.
- 2** **Opportunities:** Create protected time, space and opportunities for everyone in the organisation to 'get out there' and do informal listening and learning, and then empower them to share the stories they hear and collectively think about what they mean.
- 3** **Capabilities:** Define clearly and make available a range of tools, approaches and methods that can be used to listen to and learn from citizens' experiences, and especially how to synthesise, analyse and interpret findings. Help colleagues assess what is right to use and when, and what expertise is needed. Share examples of where this is working and the impact it is having on commissioning and service design processes.

Working in this way can seem incredibly simple - essentially it's about embarking on new and different conversations. But, in reality, it is challenging, counter-cultural and sometimes feels counter-intuitive. It can appear to slow things down when organisational processes are already complex and time consuming. Doing it well requires new and different skills for professionals at all levels, explicit design and pedagogy, and a commitment to reflection and learning collaboratively.

There is a need for bold and courageous leaders who remain resolute and 'hold the ring of uncertainty' for colleagues who find the disruption to long-held assumptions and ways of working unnerving. But as a shared experience it is exhilarating, energising, and reconnects public servants with the moral purpose which brought them into this work in the first place.

We should all prepare to be moved; prepare to be wrong; and prepare to do something radically different in response.



Essex County Council is seeking to create a new system of outcomes-focused commissioning in which both citizens and professionals have very different roles to play.

“Real listening is based on the explicit assumption that the people who know most about the experience of accessing public services, about how services work (or not) in the messy and complex context of real life, are citizens themselves. Exploring lived experiences in this way often uncovers aspirations, energy and assets in individuals, families and communities - all of which could be supported and further built upon to impact on health and wellbeing.

Working in this way can seem incredibly simple - essentially it's about embarking on new and different conversations. But, in reality, it is challenging, counter-cultural and sometimes feels counter-intuitive. It can appear to slow things down when organisational processes are already complex and time consuming. Doing it well requires new and different skills for professionals at all levels, explicit design and pedagogy, and a commitment to reflection and learning collaboratively.

There is a need for bold and courageous leaders who remain resolute and 'hold the ring of uncertainty' for colleagues who find the disruption to long-held assumptions and ways of working unnerving. But as a shared experience it is exhilarating, energising, and reconnects public servants with the moral purpose which brought them into this work in the first place.”

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Huge thanks to all the families, colleagues and partners who have contributed to the ongoing work with Essex County Council and ThePublicOffice. We can't wait to see what happens next.