



Essex's approach to data ethics

Essex is making great inroads into data with the creation of the Essex Centre for Data Ethics or ecda as it's known locally.

Ecda is new, created just over two years ago from a partnership between Essex County Council, Essex Police and the University of Essex. David Caplan is the head of ecda and he says that they have been committed to data ethics from the start and made a decision early on to establish a data ethics committee (DEC).

Like Brent, the ethics committee in Essex is independent and advisory. The members are drawn from different fields, some with ethics in NHS and academic settings, others drawn from the civil service and local authorities in the county. More recently lay members have joined the committee.

The Essex Ethical Framework is inspired by the [ethical principles](#) developed by the UK Statistics Authority and the government's [Data Ethics Framework](#). From this, ecda has developed seven questions that all data projects must answer before they present their project to the DEC. These include a consideration of the benefit of using the data and whether it serves the public good; reviewing legislation, limitations and also thinking about whether the use of data is proportionate to user needs.

There are some challenging data projects underway in Essex, including bringing partners together to explore data in the context of mental health and domestic abuse. They have a helpful project timeline in slide six of these [Sprint Notes](#) that shows where they are with each of them. Not all have been to the DEC yet but the expectation is that all ecda projects will be presented to the DEC.

As with all new structures, the DEC is learning from its experience and editing its approaches along the way. One piece of learning is that projects need to be clear about their objectives for using data and identify tweaks early on in the project timeline.

There is a commitment in Essex to thinking about data ethics as a skill for people working in public and third sector organisations across the county. This starts with training data analysts but can also be seen in approaches to developing leaders of the future where consideration of data ethics is ingrained in their work. This will be helped by the ongoing discussion about the Essex Data Declaration, a new approach described by David Caplan in his [September blog post](#).



Measuring the impact of data ethics on project outcomes is hard to do, but ecda is having that difficult conversation. It is working out how to balance hard measures like key performance indicators with softer more nebulous ways to describe change. It is firmly a work in progress.

For more information visit:

<https://www.essexfuture.org.uk/ecda/essex-centre-for-data-analytics/>