

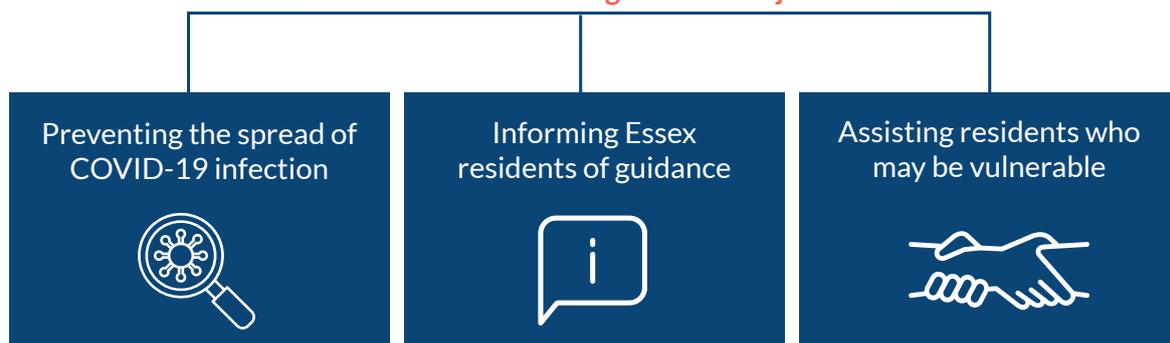
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# Evaluation of the impact of Essex Coronavirus Action Support (ECAS) upon attitudes, behaviour and public health systems during the COVID-19 pandemic

## What was the project about?

The project, the Essex Coronavirus Action Support (ECAS) Facebook digital community development approach, is a collaboration between Essex County Council (ECC), the Essex Public Health Team and local Facebook groups.

## ECAS has been focusing on three objectives:



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## What was the evaluation trying to do?

The Public Health Intervention Responsive Studies Team (PHIRST) South Bank, based at London South Bank University, investigated project outcomes and contributing factors for **improved health literacy, protective health action, community connectedness and mutual aid and the extent to which whole system change was achieved for the public health function.**

## How was the evaluation conducted?

The evaluation team used a range of diverse and novel methodologies, exploring the project from the perspective of group members, group administrators and the wider public health team. This involved undertaking primary analyses of new survey data from ECAS members and a comparator group and a social network analysis. A discourse and sentiment analysis of ECAS Facebook group interactions from salient time periods was conducted as well as interviews with key intervention stakeholders.

## What were our time periods of interest for analyses?

The ECAS Facebook Group was searched for relevant months and interactions for the below periods were manually extracted. These periods were identified as salient within the coproduction workshops and informed by The Institute for Government Timeline (April 2021).

### 26 March-9 April 2020

Lockdown was legally enforced at the start of this period.

### 15-29 June 2020

First two weeks following the lifting of the first lockdown, non-essential shops were reopened in England at the start of this period. Retrospective period for survey.

### 5-19 November 2020

Covered second lockdown.

### 2-16 December 2020

Covered interim period between the second and third lockdowns. The second lockdown terminated after four weeks, and a strict three-tier system of restrictions was imposed.

### 6-20 January 2021

Covered the third lockdown.



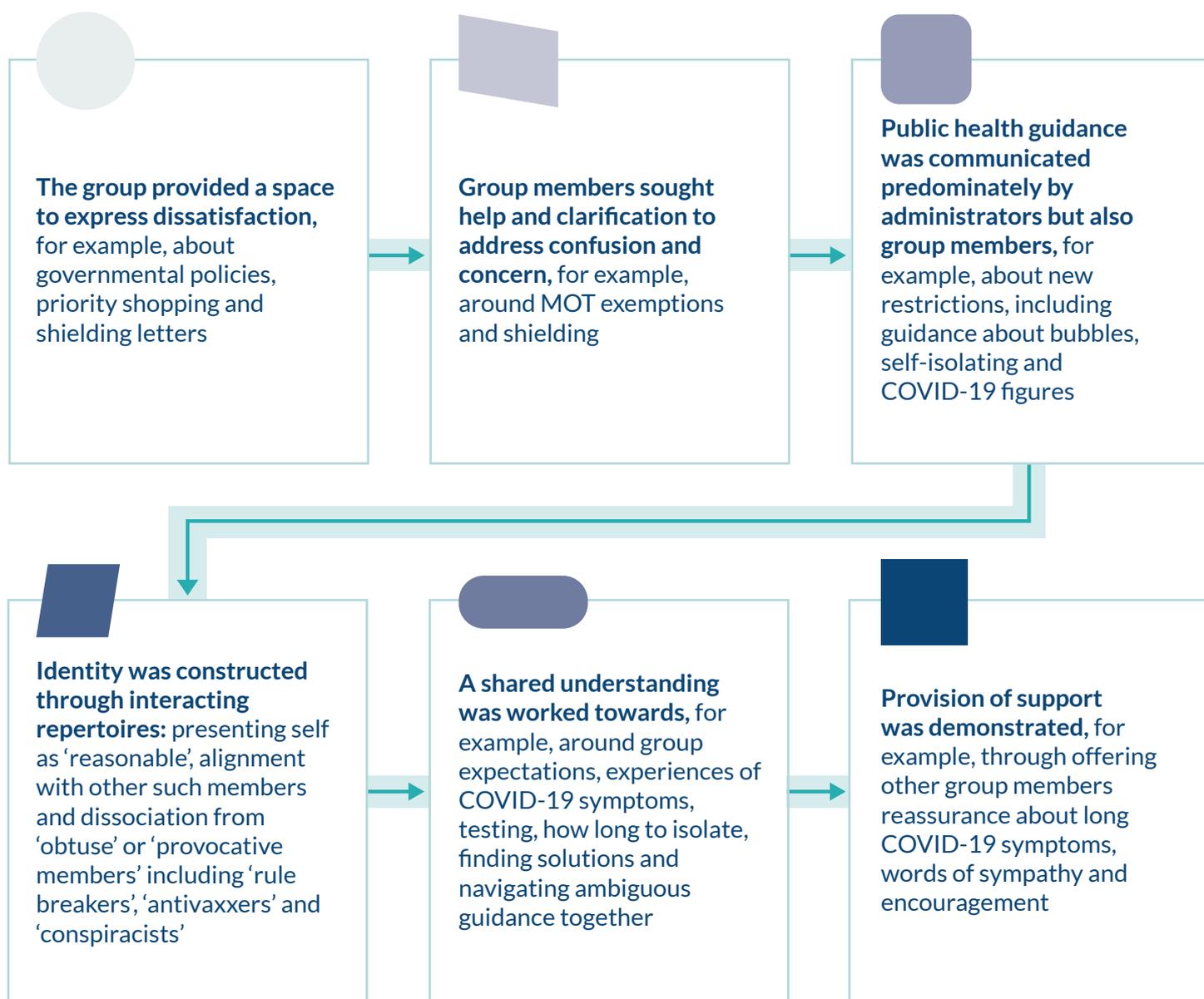
## What were some key findings from the evaluation?



- The ECAS group was seen as informative, something to refer people to and something people relied upon.
- Significant statistical differences between those using the group and not in terms of outcomes were not detected. However, the limitations of retrospective recall data should be acknowledged.
- Authenticating the self, role and sources of information helped admins to present discourse as credible with helpful intentions. Admins promoted shared understanding within the group and desirable group characteristics.

- Group members increasingly used language indicative of thoughts and emotions and authentic narratives, suggestive of development in thinking style and social awareness within the group.
- The approach was identified by stakeholders as a powerful way of combining different forms of social capital to promote engagement with communities.
- A potential limitation acknowledged was that group members may be a self-selected sample and the group is unlikely to attract people who are unconcerned with health risks and difficult to engage.
- Collaboration between the local authority and grassroots social media admins rooted in the local community was seen as central to this approach and strong and risk tolerant support was required.

## Social Action: What was achieved within Facebook Group interactions?



## What can we conclude from the evaluation?



- ▶ Social network interventions can be seen as being of shared ownership, can act as dependable information sources, which may have an impact beyond users and may be particularly helpful for those feeling socially isolated.
- ▶ The nature and character of social network interventions and the interactions therein will change over time, perhaps in ways difficult to predict. Admins play a vital role which matures and becomes more central over time.
- ▶ The intervention provided a space for people to maintain social contact whilst addressing confusion and concern.
- ▶ Disseminating public health guidance via this new means allowed a two-way interaction, differing from traditional forms of media. This can act as an adjunct to, or amplifier for, other approaches.
- ▶ Participants in the evaluation hoped that the intervention would lead to empowerment within communities and may play a part in system change.
- ▶ Whilst challenges should be considered, dynamic approaches show promise for expanding the reach of public health messages for societal benefit.

## How can learning from the evaluation be applied?



- ▶ The evaluation supports that group admins should be selected based on ability to produce high quality content, creativity, possession of local knowledge, conflict management skills, response consistency and timeliness.
- ▶ A continued focus on shared ownership and developing a culture of self-moderation is likely important.
- ▶ Strategies for the dissemination of public health messages and support provision might include use of factual formulations, polite instructions and language promoting credibility and reputational defence.
- ▶ Group members might draw on insight or mental state language and authenticity to support each other within an online community during challenging circumstances or times of crisis.
- ▶ There is a use for the skills, knowledge and relationships developed from the intervention going forward. Findings could inform the ongoing delivery of the digital community development approach, could be applied to a local or regional issue and expanded to other areas of public health (beyond COVID-19). This type of intervention might be suited to addressing global, social topics.

## Acknowledgements

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