

ESSENCE: Examining the economic case for adult social care interventions

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Background

Comparing costs and outcomes of alternatives – which is what economic evaluations seek to do – can be a helpful part of social and health care decision-making processes when budgets are fixed. Economic evaluations provide evidence about the costs of two or more alternative courses of action relative to their respective outcomes. The outcomes chosen should relate to the objectives of the decision-maker. In social care, for example, key outcomes might include quality of life related to social care, improving independence, satisfaction with support and wellbeing.

The EconomicS-of-Social-carE-CompEndium (ESSENCE; www.essenceproject.uk; 2017-2019) was conducted by a team in the Care Policy and Evaluation Centre (CPEC) at LSE, with funding from the NIHR School for Social Care Research. The team reviewed and summarised economic evidence that could support decision-making in England's adult social care system. The aim was to make it easier for decision-makers to access and understand the economic consequences of different ways to meet care needs. Case summaries highlighted relevant evidence on a number of specific adult social care interventions. A searchable online database of evidence (the ESSENCE Toolkit) was created (<https://essenceproject.uk/toolkit/>).

A new project - ESSENCE-2 ('The ESSENCE continuation study: Examining the economic case for a range of adult social care interventions', 2020-2022) builds on our previous work. We are reviewing, summarising and updating evidence in the ESSENCE Toolkit. We are also summarising *new* economic evidence, drawing on studies of services and interventions relevant to the adult social care system in England. We will therefore be able to update material on the ESSENCE website to ensure that evidence is easily accessible. We will consult with potential users of the material to help us improve Toolkit layout and content. We will also work to raise awareness of the Toolkit and encourage its use. Alongside this activity, we want to improve wider understanding of this economic evidence by providing related training and developing learning materials.

The ESSENCE Toolkit, main activities and lesson learnt so far

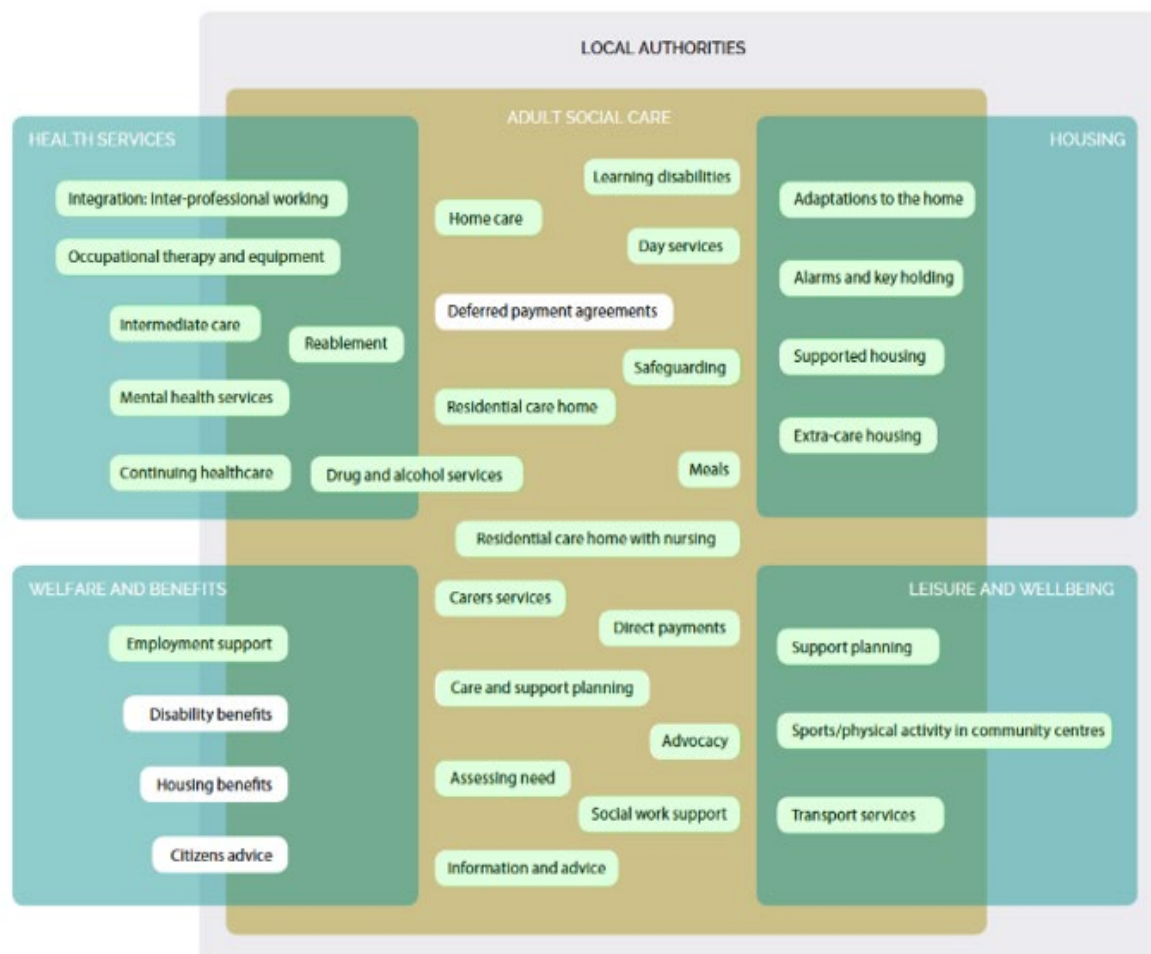
Selecting social care interventions and assembling the economic evidence

The ESSENCE Toolkit includes a collection of research studies. It summarises much of the evidence through individual case studies, and has a searchable database. By December 2019, when the previous project ended, 17 case summaries and a database with 231 sources of evidence had been included. Evidence was extracted from many sources, including: [NICE guidelines on social care](#) (online searchable database); [the Public Health England Tool on return-on-investment and cost-effectiveness of public health programmes](#) (Public Health England, 2017); a scoping review commissioned by NICE on social care economic evaluation methods (Weatherly et al., 2017); the [Housing Learning and Improvement Network](#); [EMBASE](#) (online searchable database); [NIHR SSCR-funded projects](#); [the Social Care Institute for Excellence online searchable database](#); research at the [Care Policy and Evaluation Centre \(CPEC\) LSE](#) and the [Personal Social Services Research Unit \(Kent, Manchester\)](#); research at [Centre for Health Economics, University of York](#); and the [King's Fund's online searchable database](#).

Evidence stored in the ESSENCE toolkit will continue to be categorised by intervention using a framework borrowed from the National Audit Office's (2019) to describe social care interventions (see figure 1). Findings for each intervention will be extracted and summarised using the formats already tested as part of ESSENCE, in ways that make the information understandable to a wide range of people:

- Individual case summaries. For a selection of interventions – where we consider the evidence to be sufficiently robust – we will produce new or update existing case summaries. Each follows a structure that explains key matters of interest, includes a short summary, and provides a longer non-technical account. Each case summary will include: context and setting for delivery of the intervention; key points of interest and explanation of the intervention; summary information on effectiveness and cost-effectiveness; any evidence on what people think about the intervention; links to additional information such as online material and journal articles; and contact details for key experts in the relevant field (usually the authors of the main studies reported in the case summary). An example is provided in the box 1 below.
- A searchable database of evidence. The ESSENCE database of evidence allows the user to search for information about completed as well as ongoing projects to discover more, for example, about their focus, setting, type of intervention presented, population supported and main findings. Keywords can be entered to find studies of interest. Information can be filtered for comparison using an excel spreadsheet. In ESSENCE-2 we are updating the database to include new evidence.

Figure 1: ESSENCE organisational framework <https://essenceproject.uk/toolkit/> (from National Audit Office 2019)



Annette Bauer, Danielle Guy (2019) Advance care planning: economic evidence. ESSENCE SUMMARY 10 (the resource is accessible [here](#))

KEY POINTS

- Advance care planning is an important end of life care intervention that helps people plan for their future care and support needs, including medical treatment if they are at risk of losing their mental capacity or their ability to communicate.
- It helps people get the treatment they *want* during the final stage of their life and increases their chance to die in their preferred place of death. It benefits the mental health of the person caring for them.
- Advance care planning is likely to be cost-effective. This is due to improvements in carer's quality of life, reductions in the use of aggressive life-sustaining treatment and more people dying at their place of residence rather than in hospital.
- Future research needs to address gaps in implementation knowledge of advance care planning.
- Implementing advance care planning effectively is challenging and requires substantial organisation and system-wide changes.

Working with key partners

As we continue working on ESSENCE-2, we continue to benefit from regular dialogue with a range of experts, including local decision-makers, commissioners, service providers, care practitioners, and third sector organisations. Our advisory group includes stakeholders from these backgrounds, as well as researchers with substantial experience in social care interventions, a carer researcher and a researcher with lived experience of mental health services.

Communicating and discussing findings

The team has been sharing details of the project with a variety of groups, and we will continue to discuss findings with as many people who might be interested! Our aim is to support wider and deeper understanding of the usefulness and uses of the economic evidence in the social care field.

A recent journal paper describes the project in greater detail (Tinelli et al., forthcoming).

Delivering training

In 2019 we delivered a workshop at LSE and ran seminars for different stakeholder groups. Learning from recent experience, we will in future run more events online. Recorded webinars, such as the one we delivered for the NIHR SSCR in May 2020 ([accessible here](#)) offers participants the flexibility of learning, as they can access e-learning materials anywhere at times convenient to them. We will organise online workshops/webinars to explain what economic analysis/evaluation is, why it is useful and how to conduct and interpret economic evaluations in adult social care (for example: we will deliver a dedicated event as part of the NIHR SSCR Capacity Building Webinar).

Identifying future research recommendations

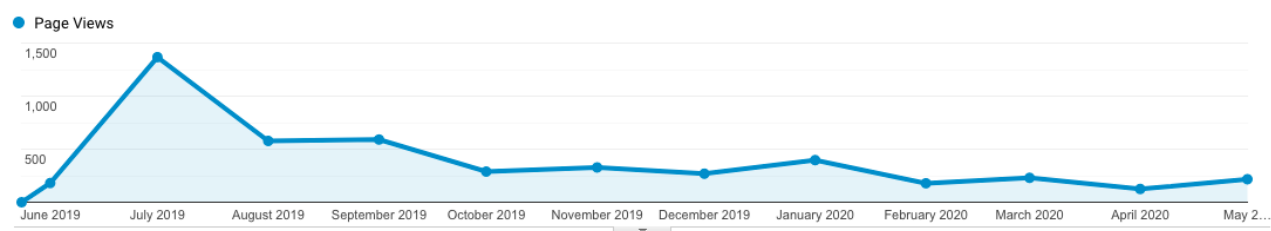
Keeping the ESSENCE Toolkit updated can also be useful for NIHR and other funding bodies to help identify areas that are not well supported with economic evidence, and so can point to research needs and opportunities.

Consulting with ESSENCE Toolkit users and seeking their feedback to optimise the layout and content of the ESSENCE Toolkit

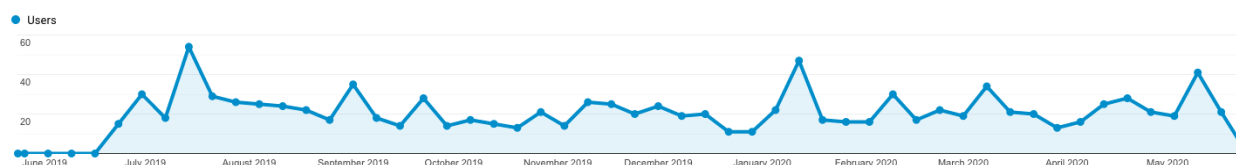
Top-line analytics on site usage data have been collected via Google Analytics (which tracks traffic per device, see figure 2) since the website launched in July 2019. A total of c. 5,000 page views by c. 880 visitors took place over the initial 11-month period with users viewing on average 3.7 pages and each visit lasting around 3 minutes. Of these, 13.6 per cent visited the site more than once (using the same device). The UK accounted for more than half of all traffic and Google search was the top source of traffic – the Google search term that generated most traffic was “Base case analysis”. The site has not been developed or significantly promoted since it began. In ESSENCE-2, we are addressing these points to increase both the usefulness and use of this resource.

Figure 2: ESSENCE Toolkit analytics

(a) Page views peaked at launch then settled to circa 300 per week



(b) Site users relatively consistent at circa 35 per week



Box 2: The most searched case summaries

1.	Carers services NAO Keywords The Essence Project
2.	Home care NAO Keywords The Essence Project
3.	Reablement NAO Keywords The Essence Project
4.	Care and support planning NAO Keywords The Essence Project
5.	Adaptations to the home NAO Keywords The Essence Project
6.	Adult with learning disabilities NAO Keywords The Essence Project
7.	Integration: Inter-professional working NAO Keywords The Essence Project
8.	Extra-care housing NAO Keywords The Essence Project
9.	Mental health services NAO Keywords The Essence Project
10.	Employment support NAO Keywords The Essence Project

The most popular resources on the site were the Case summaries (see box 2) followed by specific phrases in the Glossary. Economic evidence is presented to site visitors grouped by National Audit Office (2019) keywords (see mapping diagram above) and the top ten most viewed groupings are shown in the table to the left. We do not have statistics on individual downloads of PDFs for either Case Studies or evidence papers – this will be addressed as part of ESSENCE-2 via enhanced analytics; a deliverable in this phase.

ESSENCE-2 has already started: please get involved!

ESSENCE-2 will continue to help decision-makers to easily find evidence to help them make better use of the resources they control. If you would like to get involved, there are many ways that you can contribute to the project:

- Sharing relevant research (published or underway)
- Providing feedback to optimise the layout and content of the ESSENCE Toolkit
- Providing expert advice
- Raising awareness of the ESSENCE toolkit and promoting its use and the use of economic evaluation for decision-making
- Organising new training events

To get involved please contact the research team <https://essenceproject.uk/contact/>.

References

Knapp, M., Tinelli, M., Bauer, A., Weatherly, H. & Schlaepfer, B. (2020) Economic case for a range of adult social care interventions *NIHR SSCR Webinar Series: Economics* <https://www.sscr.nihr.ac.uk/event/nihr-sscr-webinar-series-economics/> [Accessed 3 August 2020]

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