CoLab Evolution Report

Report for

CoLab Exeter

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Simon Pickering
Homeless Link Associate

Contact us
Homeless Link
Minories House
2-5 Minories
London
EC3N 1BJ
020 7840 4441
www.homelesslink.org.uk

Sophie Price
Consultancy Manager
sophie.price@homelesslink.org.uk

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About CoLab

1.1   Background

1.1.1   CoLab (previously known as Exeter CVS) was established in 2016 as an emerging organisation with a sense that far more could be achieved for local communities through the establishment of a hosted multi-agency hub focusing on people with complex lives and multiple disadvantages. The aim was to encourage organisations to work to shared principles, collaborate, learn, and grow collectively to enable and support better outcomes for the City.

The early foundation of CoLab's core partners included Public Health England, Devon County and Exeter City Council, Working Links and The Clock Tower surgery. The establishment of CoLab was funded by these core partners at inception.

1.1.2   The transformational change from Exeter CVS "traditional" to CoLab Exeter "progressive" infrastructure support, is a significant achievement considering other CVS (Community and Voluntary Sector Support) organisations across the country have been struggling over the last decade to maintain their services and pivot towards new ways of working.

Progressive Infrastructure is defined as an approach for infrastructure organisations being enablers, brokers and catalysts for people, places and projects (Navca, Change for Good Report https://barrowcadbury.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Change-for-Good-36-pp-final-aw.pdf)

1.1.3   CoLab was established during a time of significant change for the communities and the public sector. The detrimental effect of austerity, with subsequent significant increase in poverty and homelessness led to a huge impact on Exeter's community. The CoLab model has been developed during a continued drive to save public sector costs and increase efficiencies.

1.1.4   CoLab has a core value of promoting social justice for all individuals and communities in Exeter by building wellbeing, recovery and change capability.

The collaborative community has four distinct themes that define their work, and a central approach.

Recovery

Working toward whole-person recovery from drug, alcohol dependence or mental ill-health.

Belonging

Supporting homeless and vulnerably housed towards sustainable housing solutions and reconnecting people who have become socially isolated.

Rehabilitation

Promoting rehabilitation into the community for those on the justice pathway.

Wellbeing

Promoting health and wellbeing as a tool for informing better lifestyle choices.

Central Approach

CoLab's Approach is about social innovation through partnership. It involves the proactive hosting of collaborative communities and activities and facilitation of stakeholders as they move through cycles of innovation, stabilisation and sustainability. The approach enables stakeholders to share resources, co-design new responses to local challenges, learn from practice and adapt, so people can do their best work and achieve shared outcomes.

1.1.3   It has been suggested that CoLab acts as a "social accident and emergency;" a place where vulnerable members of the community go to have their needs met, whilst meeting a sense of welcome and belonging. In an average year the CoLab Welcome and Triage Team receives in the region of 12,000 individual visits per year, 3,000 of those visits are for probation and homelessness services based there.

1.1.4   The CoLab hub building currently hosts 38 individual organisations or projects. That includes an Access GP surgery, probation services, housing and homelessness and recovery (drug/alcohol and mental health) services, alongside a broad spectrum of social purpose organisations. Beyond managing and developing the building, The CoLab core team engender a 'sense of shared journey' amongst partners, with constant support for the collaborative approach and for shared learning and change.

1.1.5   There are around 150 staff based in the building, and the space is specifically designed to foster visitor hospitality and collaboration between likeminded organisations. CoLab is increasingly part of a whole systems change approach, and seeks to utilise its insight and influence to promote wider collaboration and co-production to improve outcomes for individuals that stakeholders in 'the system' work with.

1.1.6   With the recruitment of a new Chair of Trustees, CoLab are moving in to an exciting period of change and development of their strategic direction. CoLab has a number of challenges to overcome in this respect, most notably the need to develop a more sustainable income generation model, by firstly gaining recognition for the role and value the initiative brings to the system and city.

1.2   CoLab's Vision, Mission and Values

CoLab's vision, mission and values were co-designed by the community. They have been an integral element in guiding the development of CoLab since inception.

1.2.1   **Vision**

To create a place where organisations work together, support one another, and through an innovative model of collaboration, seek to bring out positive change and social justice for individuals and communities.

1.2.2 **Mission**

CoLab aims to work together to resource and mobilise effective and innovative support that builds capacity for positive change in the lives of people, their communities, and the city as a whole.

1.2.3 **Values**

The overarching ethos is about promoting social justice and providing a space for everyone to realise their full potential. Core values that underpin that are:

Compassion - Accept and value people at any stage of their journey

Welcome – Provide a welcoming, non-judgmental, and hospitable environment

Collaboration – Success and social innovation is something achieved together

Ambitious – Be ambitious for people, help stakeholders to develop, test and learn from new ideas, and be courageous.

1.3 Community Values Survey

1.3.1 In the early stages the CoLab team identified a need to map the health of the culture for collaborative working. Stakeholders were invited to complete a Community Cultural Values Survey which gave a profile of the strengths and challenges in the system at that time.

1.3.2 The survey also captured people's thoughts about the systems in place to support vulnerable groups in Exeter. 76 people working within the sector responded and a profile of the health of the Complex Needs System for Exeter emerged.

1.3.3 The survey indicated that though passion and energy for change existed, efforts were being hampered by a "high" level (29%) of cultural entropy, or dysfunction in the system. This was attributed to:

- People feeling hampered by what they saw as a culture of blame, competition, wasted resources, short-term thinking, and uncertainty about the future
- Stakeholders wanting to see more community spirit, development of a more compassion-based system, and a clear shared focus on longer-term thinking and greater care for the disadvantaged in the real work.
- Staff wanted more opportunities to be creative and innovative as this was how they felt they could directly influence positive outcomes
- People wanted to be able to bring themselves to work, to express their passion and purpose and ultimately feel they were making a difference

1.3.4 In January 2019, after four years of experimentation around these goals, the same survey was repeated. This time 120 people responded, including service users. (82 Staff and 38 service users, 87 female and 38 male). The results stated that the cultural entropy score had decreased from 29% in 2015 to 8% in 2019. This indicated

a movement into "cultural health". This change was significant as it demonstrates that the conditions for joint working and positive outcome achievement had changed.

- There is a stronger sense of community spirit amongst stakeholders
- The limiting values from 2015 had gone or had a lesser impact
- People appeared less worried or confused about where their organisation was heading
- People felt they had more tools at their disposal and less red tape hindering opportunities
- People were less concerned about feelings of being alone, less burdened by power struggles and tendencies to place fault on others
- Addiction and dependency issues were being addressed more effectively within the collaborative approach, and there were aspirations to go further and achieve more.

1.4 CoLab Strategy

1.4.1 As the initiation of CoLab was experimental, and underpinned by a "test and learn" approach, the team did not create a long-term business strategy. Part of the rationale for this was that the landscape was constantly changing and they needed to remain flexible enough to respond.

1.5.1 The CoLab Evolution Stakeholder Report will inform development of a three-year strategy to support CoLab to achieve greater sustainability and impact for those with complex needs in Exeter.

1.5.2 The organisation has reached a point where a formalised longer-term strategy is needed to underpin the organisation's direction of travel. The strategy will include financial goals alongside the key work streams that CoLab need to move towards.

1.5 CoLab funding

1.5.1 In 2019 CoLab had an income of £1,035,189 and expenditure of £899,95 (Based on 2018-19's Accounts) The breakdown of income streams is shown below:

Income	Amount	Percentage (%) of income
Grant and trust	£711,290	69%
Office hosting	£180,153	17 %
Government grants	£87,454	8%
Meeting room hire	£20,396	2%
Office support	£13,077	1%
Training course fees	£11,003	1%
Consultancy	£876	1%
Other income	£6,986	0.6 %
Investment	£1,233	0.2%
Donations from individuals	£2,721	0.2%
Total	**£1,035,189**	**100%**

1.5.2   The majority of CoLab's income is generated through grant funding (77%). The grant income is used to deliver projects and within this grant funding 8% comes via a Government grant. CoLab generate their own income through office hosting and space hire (20%). The remainder of their income (3%) comes from a range of other sources.

1.5.3   CoLab do not currently receive core funding, which is both a positive and negative arrangement, it allows CoLab more space to challenge the system and work towards CoLab's commitment toward Social Justice. However, the negative impact is that securing income is a constant challenge for the Leadership Team, and takes away from work to develop the community.

1.6   CoLab Impact

1.6.1   CoLab's impact is multidirectional and incorporates a number of areas. The whole system approach adopted within social innovation hubs presents some challenges to capturing and communicating impact in a traditional sense.

1.6.2   Measuring and communicating impact for strategic partners poses a greater challenge for CoLab. The strategic partners are working with a constant savings agenda and this means that they require a stronger evidence case and want to understand in detail the social return on investment. This is the most commonly understood measurement tool for impact with organisations of this nature.

1.6.3   CoLab have very strong individual project evaluation methodologies, there is a wider challenge to capture all of the impact that CoLab creates especially in relation to their systems change work. An impact framework tool could support to improve impact reporting – this in turn has resource and capacity implications.

CoLab Evolution Brief & Methodology

1.7   CoLab Evolution Brief

2.1.1   The CoLab Evolution Review presents an independent perspective of CoLab's work, priorities and strategic direction, this report will support the organisation to begin to look strategically into the future.

2.2.2   The CoLab Evolution Review will inform the organisation's longer-term strategic direction with a focus on growth and sustainability. It will draw upon the extensive research and reporting processes completed by CoLab internally, outlining the achievements of the organisation.

2.2.3   The Review consisted of three key outcomes and activities:

1.   Inform the development of a 3-year Growth and Sustainability Plan for CoLab which focuses on leadership, governance, roles, and sustainability.

2. Inform the development of a 3-year CoLab Exeter Hub Strategy in response to stakeholder aspirations
3. Inform the development of a CoLab Impact and Value framework based on a Collective Impact Model

1.8   CoLab Evolution Background

2.2.1   In late 2019 and early 2020 CoLab's Leadership team began to consider the future strategic direction for the organisation. Funding secured from Lloyds Foundation was used to commission an external consultant to work alongside the CoLab Leadership team.

2.2.2   Homeless Link were commissioned to deliver the work in March 2020, Homeless Link's Associate Consultant Simon Pickering visited CoLab in March 2020.

1.9   CoLab Evolution Methodology

2.2.1   Alongside regular meetings with the CoLab Leadership team, the CoLab Evolution methodology has been a combination of the following:

- Initial time on site with CoLab's leadership team and meeting beneficiaries
- Desk based research and reading
- Engagement of partners and stakeholders
- Deeper engagement with key "decision making" partners

1.9.1   Interviews were conducted with beneficiaries, staff, trustees, partners and organisations based in CoLab. Interviews were carried out between August and November 2020 by Homeless Link.

Engagement included in this section of the CoLab Evolution commission were:

- Online survey for organisations based in CoLab
- Interviews with Trustees
- Interviews with partner agencies and organisations
- Interviews with beneficiaries
- Beneficiaries focus groups
- Conversations with key staff at CoLab and beneficiaries

1.9.2   Covid-19 has affected the work with far less being delivered in person and on site, this has an impact on the overall findings. Covid-19 has also had an impact on the responses given by a number of stakeholders due to the rapidly moving landscape during this period, for example, the 'Everyone In' agenda.

Insight and engagement summary

1.10   Online survey for organisations based in CoLab

1.10.1   An online survey was published and shared with the CoLab Managers group, CoLab Trustees and organisations based in the premises. The survey received 16 responses (34% response rate) including one CoLab Trustee.

1.10.2   Respondents commented that strong partnership working existed before CoLab was created, however a high number commented that CoLab had significantly strengthened a sense of deeper collaborative and partnership working.

1.10.3   Respondents all reported that they the felt the role of CoLab in facilitating collaboration was beneficial to support people with complex needs in Exeter. They said furthermore that a "community response" should integrally include involving the whole community in the workspace, including the service users and partners.

1.10.4   There was a strong sense that the four key themes that shape and inform CoLab's vision are very relevant and respondents commented how valuable these are for guiding the principles of organisations working with the space. Respondents felt that social justice was a real driving force for the organisations based in CoLab.

1.10.5   A number of respondents commented that they struggle to see or understand the impact the CoLab has made in terms of partnership working and tangible outcomes for their services users.

1.10.6   Respondents commented that they felt more could be done locally to raise CoLab's profile and share their successes. Some commented that CoLab are achieving real change for people with complex needs and that more should be done to recognise these achievements, the Resilient Women's Project was cited as a prime example of this approach.

1.10.7   The online responses were mostly positive, with a high number of respondents recognising that CoLab is working within a difficult and underfunded area of need for the local community. The respondents were clearly interested to collaborate further to create further systems change. A number of respondents commented that they felt like equal partners when working alongside the CoLab Core team.

1.11   Interviews with Trustees

1.11.1   A total of two Trustee interviews were conducted. CoLab's Trustees work full time which had an impact on availability, however, the CoLab Evolution report with be presented to Trustees for a facilitated discussion when the wider work on CoLab's Strategy begins.

1.11.2   Trustees commented that CoLab have been 'at risk' financially from their inception and this has created some real challenges This is especially pertinent in their relationship with Exeter City Council who lease the space to CoLab, in addition to this CoLab were loaned the funds from Exeter City Council to complete the building development works.

1.11.3   There was recognition that in the current economic climate moving on from the Covid-19 pandemic is potentially going to be more challenging for the organisation.

1.11.4   Trustees have a desire to gain support from Exeter City Council, however previous attempts have been challenging with a sense that they were not adopting the collaborative principles and shared vision for CoLab. The feeling is that the relationship with Exeter City Council was operating on a 'deficit' model and not a strengths-based approach engendered by CoLab and the organisations working from the shared space.

1.11.5   Trustees commented that they found the language used around CoLab overly complicated and they were concerned that this could act as potential barrier for individuals and organisations wanting to connect with them.

1.11.6   Trustees were clear that the work of CoLab locally had the opportunity to have an impact on national agendas and the model could be replicated. The Trustees were eager that the learning and evidence of success of CoLab should be shared to change the narrative around those with complex needs toward solutions and not problems.

1.11.7   The Trustees spoke about the challenges for measuring impact for the overall work of CoLab, at a granular project level this was more straight forward but evidencing strategic and systematic impact remains very challenging.

1.12   Interviews with partner agencies and organisations

1.12.1   A total of 11 partner interviews were conducted between September and November. The interviews were an average of 40 minutes in length and conducted via video call or telephone.

3.3.2   Partners included in this grouping are those who are co-located within CoLab and those organisations that support individuals with complex needs in Exeter.

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The following individuals and organisations participated:

- Stuart Hooper – Manager, Exeter Homeless Partnership
- Lindsay Anderson – Lecturer, Exeter University
- Richard Jones – Service Development Manager, Julian House
- Rob Smith – Head of Development, Devon Mind
- Simon Sherbersky – Lead Officer, Torbay Community Development Trust
- Stephen Spratling – Community Services Manager, Exeter Community Hospital
- Trevor Gardner – Estates Lead, Probation
- Mel Hartley - Project Manager, St Petrock's
- Anna Suswillo – Partnership Manager, Homeless Link
- Daphne Van Run – Network Lead, Essence, Exeter
- Philippa Smithson – GP, Clocktower Surgery

1.12.3   Partners generally accepted that the Social Innovation Lab approach has been beneficial to provide new approaches and challenge established cultures within organisations based at CoLab. The shared understanding was referenced as the core of the success achieved through the CoLab model. An early headline identified was that a culture of system change approach has begun to emerge so CoLab was established.

1.12.4   Several partners questioned if the system in Exeter is large enough for the Social Innovation Lab's approach to have a meaningful impact. However, other partners challenged the scale notion and considered whether the social innovation lab model holds increased social capital and change potential at a localised, more focused level.

3.3.4   Partners commonly commented that the language used to describe working within CoLab was difficult to engage with. A number of partners commented that it acted as barrier to deeper engagement, learning and collaboration with CoLab.

3.3.5   Interviewees all recognised that supporting people with complex needs to thrive is far more than just providing space and that the collaborative approach is highly valuable, with the concept of 'no wrong door' referred to by partners. A high number of those interviewed considered that CoLab is more than a physical space and that the collaborative environment presented there is improving service user experiences and outcomes

3.3.6   Those interviewed believed that CoLab's strengths-based approach is a key to the organisation's successes and the strong reputation CoLab has established. The interviewees frequently referenced CoLab as 'the glue' between agencies working in Exeter.

3.3.7   There is an acceptance from the organisations interviewed that the value of co-location is naturally difficult to measure and they felt this remains a significant challenge for CoLab's future direction and their ability to capture their value and impact.

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3.3.8   The majority of the interviewees commented on the skills and talent held within the CoLab leadership team, with many referencing their commitment and understanding of the client group they are working alongside. Interviewed partners identified the shared learning and collaboration being the unseen impactful factor.

3.3.9   One partner suggested that a new area of work could be to work with enterprise and start business to bring a new dynamic to CoLab, alongside a new income stream and an opportunity for cross pollination.

1.13   Interviews with public sector partners

3.4.1   Four in-depth interview were conducted with key public sector partners identified by the CoLab Leadership team. Including:

- Geraldine Benson – Principle Social Worker - Devon County Council & Helena Riggs – Safeguarding Lead – Devon Safeguarding Board
- Kristian Tomblin – Communities & Commissioning Manager - Devon County Council
- Bindu Arjoon – Director - Exeter City Council
- Alan Welch – Senior Accountant - Devon Clinical Commissioning Group
- Simon Arliss, Inspector - Exeter City Council and Devon Police

3.4.3   The strategic partner interviews highlighted a significant breadth of interpretations and viewpoints around CoLab's role, approach, impact and strategic engagement.

3.4.4   The Clinical Commissioning Group interview highlighted the potential for an expanded role that CoLab could play locally by creating systems change and act as a funded critical friend. By using the expertise retained within CoLab team, systems change can be delivered within the CCG's services.

3.4.5   *"There is a role for CoLab in challenging the system and organisational culture – they are more creative; talking to the VCSE sector is vital. CoLab can be an independent provider of checks and balances, acting as a critical friend. CoLab are different because they deliver and are not just strategic," Alan Welch, Senior Accountant, Devon CCG.*

3.5.6   Key themes identified

Partners felt that CoLab's impact was not fully understood and not always communicated out successfully to partners.

"It's very hard to measure the success of the system change programme into social change at an individual and granular level. What is the impact and outcome of the services? We'd like to know more of this information from CoLab," Helena Riggs – Devon Safeguarding Board.

Partners recognised that CoLab was created during a very difficult time for publicly funded organisations.

"Not sure on the strength of the model; we understand the concept is great. Not sure how to measure its success born into austerity. How much worse might it have been if CoLab hadn't been there?" Kristian Tomblin, Communities & Commissioning Manager, DCC.

Devon Police in particular commented that a real barrier to success for systems change was the breadth of thresholds and priorities held by publicly funded organisations.

"The differing thresholds across all of the agencies is difficult for working with street attached individuals. Fiona is brilliant on this in a healthy sense or desire to get it right. Fiona and the team have been a key part in the process," Simon Arliss, Inspector, Devon Police.

Devon County Council expressed that CoLab are working at a micro level (Local agendas), which tends to be lost at a macro level (National agendas).

"I would describe CoLab as a life boat in a very rough sea, especially in reference to national Government agendas coming down the line, while CoLab works counter culturally on a very localised city wide basis," Kristian Tomblin, Communities & Commissioning Manager, DCC.

Partners interviewed all referenced, "The Creative Solutions" work and highlighted how this had really proved the value of CoLab, demonstrating the ability to talk about systems change but also deliver real impact for those with complex needs that come to CoLab for support.

"CoLab bring the advanced knowledge of… voluntary organisations; they have been invaluable in reality checking the group," (Creative Solutions) Helena Riggs, Devon Safeguarding Board.

Partners very clearly identified that CoLab have a role to play within Exeter to improve outcomes for marginalised groups and those with complex needs.

"CoLab have been at the heart of this piece of work (Creative Solutions). CoLab being in there occupies an essential space," Alan Welch, Senior Accountant, Devon CCG.

1.14   Beneficiaries interviews

1.14.1   A total of six beneficiary one to one interviews were conducted, interviews were between 25 and 45 minutes in duration. The beneficiaries were drawn from a cross section of people that visit CoLab. The interviews were constructed around four key questions focused around beneficiaries and their experience of attending services and participating in opportunities offered. The beneficiaries had lived experience of:

- Homelessness
- Domestic violence
- Poor mental health and wellbeing
- Offending
- Those who have had their mental health support funding withdrawn

1.14.2   The beneficiaries were asked what position they were in when first attending and common themes were quickly identified. All beneficiaries stated that they were in crisis or 'unravelling' when they first attended CoLab.

1.14.3   Interviewees responded very positively when asked about the CoLab approach and welcome, there was a common theme that beneficiaries felt they had been 'through the system' before attending CoLab. All the beneficiaries stated they experienced completely different treatment at CoLab, a number stating that they felt instantly supported and listened to.

One interviewee said, "It feels like they actually want to help us to move forward. So many other services perceive us an inconvenience when we go to them for support".

Another beneficiary stated that they wish they had been signposted to CoLab sooner as it would have helped her to recover more quickly. She citied that she had been in crisis several times at Exeter City Council's offices and suffering as a result of multiple inappropriate accommodation allocations, after several months she discovered CoLab she said:

"Coming to CoLab I felt instantly welcome, their support and approach accelerated my recovery, the unique part of CoLab was that all the services that I needed at that point were all working side by side, within my first appointment I saw three services and joined the Resilient Women group, this was more progress in one hour than I had made in months"

"The difference in my life has been massive I wouldn't have been here now, I needed full support and that's what I received, I didn't feel like a victim at CoLab and that approach has helped me to become independent and healthier sooner"

1.14.4   Beneficiaries interviewed all stated that CoLab and the organisations based there do not work like other agencies, beneficiaries said that they felt informed, included, respected and that being asked their views and opinions was one of the biggest noticeable differences.

1.14.5   Another beneficiary stated: "I was thrown around by the system before CoLab, I'd like to emphasise the inclusiveness and I was trained as peer mentor, giving me a platform so that I could get involved in stuff. The Resilient Women project has made a massive impact. Longer term opportunities are vital more than just immediate survival. There is more to life than getting by"

1.14.6   All beneficiaries interviewed were explicit that CoLab's work with them had made a real lasting impact in their lives. When asked what they would change about CoLab they were clear that the work needed to continue with the same ethos and understanding.

1.15   Structured conversations with CoLab's Senior Leadership Team

1.15.1   Throughout the CoLab Evolution work Homeless Link's consultant held regular meeting with the CoLab SLT to explore the emerging finds and to provide insight into the organisational background and challenges.

1.15.2   One area of constant challenge for the SLT is raising income to fund the organisation and deliver work that contributes to their overall mission. The team are evidently very good at securing grant funding, alongside coproducing projects with beneficiaries. The SLT are a small but highly skilled group and one suggestion is to increase the size of the SLT to create more capacity for the organisation.

1.15.3   This income generating activity is detrimental to the strategic and systems change agenda that CoLab hold, there is an understanding within the CoLab SLT that core funding could create further capacity to undertake more of the systems change work.

1.15.4   There is a frustration that some strategic partners are willing to receive the benefit and work delivered by CoLab for those with complex needs, the SLT feel that these organisations should be funding CoLab to deliver the systems change approach for Exeter.

3.6.5   The Creative Solution work is an example cited where partners are all communicating how valuable the role played by CoLab is to the success of the Creative Solutions work, but in effect CoLab are the only organisation 'self-funding their position at the table'.

1.15.5   CoLab's SLT are very committed to the work of CoLab, partners frequently referenced this commitment. In addition to this partner fed back that they had learnt a great deal from the CoLab team when working together.

1.16   Beneficiaries focus group

1.16.1   One beneficiary focus group with the Resilient Women's group was conducted, using zoom during Covid-19. The Women attended the group had a wide range of backgrounds including those with lived experience of:

- Homelessness
- Mental wellbeing issues
- Substance misuse
- Domestic Violence
- Offending
- Loneliness and isolation

3.7.2   The Resilient Women's group were very vocal about the impact the CoLab service offer had made on their lives. The Resilient Women's project is an excellent project, the women who took part in the focus group all commented how refreshing and impactful the project had been in changing their lives for the better.

1.16.2   The women all stated how participating in the project had enabled them to move significantly forward, overcoming the problems they experienced with a learnt empowered approach.

1.16.3   The group responded extremely positively to the questions posed that were more broadly about the work and approach of CoLab. The group could not have spoken more highly about their experiences of CoLab's approach, staff and the physical space.

1.16.4   The women that participated in the focus group all stated that they had experienced services offered locally by other public and voluntary organisations. The group were very clear that their experience of CoLab had been entirely different. The women shared that attending CoLab gave them a sense of belonging and welcome from the very beginning.

1.16.5   In addition, the group reflected that the approach undertaken by CoLab's team had provided them with a unique space to work through their issues and rebuild their lives. The women stated that CoLab's team ethos had been very powerful in supporting them to progress with a lasting approach that is focused on recovery and rebuilding healthy lives in the longer term, as opposed to short term crisis resolution.

1.17   Meaningful conversations with key staff and beneficiaries

1.17.1   Homeless Link's consultant spent time on site at CoLab, meeting organisations, staff and beneficiaries. It was particularly clear from conversations with beneficiaries that CoLab is providing highly valuable opportunities for vulnerable individuals and those with complex needs.

3.8.2   It was very apparent how diverse and complex the needs and challenges are for those beneficiaries who come to CoLab.

1.17.2   The beneficiaries informally engaged in conversations spoke about the how important the warmth and welcome that they received is to them. A number stating that they felt significantly more comfortable and engaged in the services offered at CoLab, opposed to those offered elsewhere by other organisations based in less accessible locations.

Summary of findings

1.17.3 Successes

Given the complex system that CoLab works within, the organisation and the Leadership Team have achieved a significant amount of success. Whilst some of the partner feedback was mixed, the wider consensus was that CoLab are an asset to the City and especially for individuals with complex needs.

The project delivery element of CoLab's work is hugely successful. CoLab's role as a 'systems agitator' is seen an asset to achieve systems change, even though it can make partner relationships more challenging. CoLab's involvement in Creative Solutions presents a good opportunity to prove the value and effectiveness of CoLab's system's change approach.

1.17.4 Empowerment and self-agency for beneficiaries

A reoccurring finding in the beneficiary interviews was that beneficiaries felt empowered by CoLab's approach to working alongside them to overcome challenges and problems in their lives. This finding is significant for CoLab and highlights the importance of empowerment to other partners who don't find their beneficiaries reporting a sense of empowerment.

Beneficiaries didn't directly refer to the term increased self-agency, however it was clear that beneficiaries' self-agency had increased through engaging in the opportunities and support offered by CoLab.

1.17.5 Impact

Within all the conversations and interviews with all the different parties a reoccurring theme has been capturing and communicating CoLab's impact. Measuring impact for CoLab is difficult due to the multifaceted nature of their work streams. At a beneficiary level the insight gained as part of this report clearly demonstrate the approach and work delivered by CoLab is impactful.

The wider systems change impact is far more challenging to capture and communicate. Opportunities such as Creative Solutions present CoLab with a potentially powerful work stream that could be used to engage and demonstrate to strategic partners the valuable impact that could be achieved in redesigning services and approaches to better support those with complex needs.

1.17.6 Language

A key finding is that the language used by CoLab with partners can act as a challenge or barrier at times. The overall values for CoLab are very strong but some of the feedback identified that the language and communication can sometimes prevent deeper engagement.

1.17.7 Business model and finances

There are a number of challenges for CoLab, the business model and economic engine that drives the work needs to be reviewed. The constant gap left by the lack of core funding is a significant challenge for CoLab. There is a need for a range of options to be considered for the future direction of the organisation.

1.17.8 Challenging landscape and Strategic relationships

In the interview with strategic partners, it was clear that the landscape around CoLab is going to continue to shift over the lifetime of CoLab's strategic plan, which is in development to the response of this report.

One of the challenging changes is the landscape as a result of Covid-19, and the preceding decade of local spending reduction. The likelihood is that the number of those with complex needs and in crisis is likely to increase which will have an impact for CoLab and their strategic partners.

However, this does present an opportunity for CoLab to be part of the solution to these challenges, strategic partners will be unlikely to respond to the emerging challenges with a continued 'silo approach'.

1.17.9 Trustees

Interviews with trustees and interaction with CoLab's leadership it is evident there is an excitement emerging for the future. A combination of the development of a new strategy and a new Chair of Trustees joining to take CoLab forward into the future.

Recommendations

1.	Review the financial operating model of CoLab to increase self-generated income. This could mean reducing turn over but increasing traded income to make CoLab more sustainable whilst retaining independence.
2.	Consider ways that CoLab's team could offer consultancy to other organisations to embed and replicate the strength's-based approach created by CoLab. This could include replicating the CoLab model and selling it to other Local Authorities or organisations, providing a potential income stream.
3.	Consider the role of enterprise and start-up businesses working with the space to achieve: - An increase in desk and building rental income at a higher rate - Provide potential employment opportunities for beneficiaries - Cross pollination of ideas and approaches that could benefit the other organisations based in CoLab
4.	Consider ways in which to reframe the relationship with Exeter City Council, especially considering the impact of Covid-19.
5.	Review current SLT Leadership capacity, to potentially increase the SLT to be more focussed on longer term positioning, providing additional capacity to work on longer-term sustainability.
6.	Develop a robust and clear impact measurement framework to support the three-year strategy that will support communicating the social impact delivered by CoLab.
7.	Adopt a communications strategy to underpin the wider three-year CoLab strategy to increase the organisation's profile sharing impact and achievements. Addressing the need for a more successful route for communicating CoLab highly valuable work and do and how it supports those with complex needs to progress.
8.	Consider ways in which to change the language used to describe CoLab and its work.
9.	Further explore the relationship with the CCG to potentially develop a service level agreement with them as a strategic partner.
10.	Organisations based with CoLab are interested to explore further collaboration with CoLab. Consider ways in which collaboration could be deepened.
11.	Explore ways to further develop the voice and impact of beneficiaries with lived experience including representation on the board.

Conclusion

In conducting the CoLab Evolution insight work it's been implicitly clear that the work delivered by CoLab is of significant value, especially to those with complex needs.

The engagement of service user stakeholders in the research for this report brought the real value of the approach to life. It was evidently clear the values and approach taken by CoLab in their day to day work was significantly different to that which service users experienced within other services in Exeter.

The challenge, however, remains in proving impact achieved from the CoLab approach to strategic partners at a time when resources are stretched. The onus is present for those strategic partners to look at new ways of working, grappling with the struggle of finding new approaches that often require front loaded investment to achieve the desired financial outcome.

In their current form CoLab have the ability to challenge the cultural notion that social change is all about saving costs for the publicly funded strategic partners. As opposed to improving the wellbeing for individuals that are vulnerable with complex needs.

If the value of collaborative working between organisations based in CoLab or within the system could be captured and communicated better that would bolster the position of CoLab as a model for achieving social innovation.

CoLab has a challenge to achieve a more sustainable footing moving forward, perhaps with a greater focus on making the building providing a higher return to sustain other areas of the organisation's work. A more commercially driven approach for the use of the space would ease the pressure of grant funded income over a period of time.

CoLab's working relationships with strategic partners will remain challenging. In a challenge to 'the system' that says CoLab is too small and local to achieve any real change is limited with national government agendas overriding. However, CoLab's local focus is what the Government want to see as part of the Localism agenda.

The overall capacity of CoLab's SLT would benefit from further thought in order to increase capacity to achieve the ambitions of the organisation, working towards a more varied portfolio of income.

About Homeless Link

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for services working directly with people experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness with housing, health, care and support needs.

Representing over 700 organisations across England, we work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and to promote policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

We aim to bring about positive policy change as well as providing practical support to individual organisations. Our Innovation and Good Practice (IGP) Team runs a range of special projects including focuses on welfare reform; the future of supported housing rents; the Homelessness Reduction Act; Housing First; Ending Women's Homelessness and Youth Homelessness.

We are a leading training provider delivering both public and in-house courses around the country to local authorities, registered housing providers, third sector and charitable organisations and service user groups across housing, homelessness, support, health & social care and criminal justice services.

We have a strong consultancy service; our staff and bank of associates nationwide support members across the spectrum of their activities from the strategic - strategy development, business planning, service evaluation, commissioning and workforce development - through to the operational, such as policies and procedures and rent setting. Our team brings many years' operational and consultancy experience as well as a strong understanding of the sectors in which we work, and an empathy with the daily challenges that staff face. We have experience of working with large and small providers from local authorities to the smallest charities, and with commissioners and service providers.

What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for services working directly with people experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness with housing, health, care and support needs. We work to improve services and campaign for policy change that will help end homelessness.

Let's end homelessness together

Homeless Link
Minories House, 2-5 Minories
London EC3N 1BJ

020 7840 4430

www.homeless.org.uk

Twitter: @Homelesslink
Facebook: www.facebook.com/homelesslink