

# Community Evolution: Insights from the journey of CoLab Exeter

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## Introduction

CoLab Exeter is a thriving Inter-agency hub in Devon. It is home to a community of organisations from across private, VCSE (Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise) and public sectors. Its core aim is to provide a single access point for people seeking a range of support and development opportunities; particularly those with complex lives and needs, who often find accessing the right support challenging and stressful. We have 150 staff in the building and 1500 visits per month on average. The collaborative community works to achieve impact in four areas:

- 1) Better recovery
- 2) Social Justice
- 3) Belonging
- 4) Health and Wellbeing

The hub is home to a specialist GP surgery, it also has representation from probation, mental health, housing, and addiction services. In addition to the statutory agencies, there are a range of VCSE organisations which offer learning, volunteering support and development opportunities to those with complex needs, but also a much broader range of people who are seeking change in their life. These include veterans, prison leavers, older people, people in recovery or rehabilitation journeys, and those simply looking to improve their health and wellbeing.

Over the last four years we have been on a learning journey to improve our core aim. The aim was to develop as a collaborative community and improve outcomes in the four thematic areas. As lead agency in the development we have been at the forefront of building the collaborative community and exploring how to configure the offer and function as collective group and create the conditions for success. To respond to changing need and keep stakeholders motivated and engaged in the process and initiative, we have had to take an honest look at where we are, what we are doing, and how that is influencing our impact. What we have learned fundamentally is that whilst it is relatively easy to generate a strategy, it takes much more than that to influence success in practice.

In this paper my aim is to share insights from this process. I'd like to focus particularly on the evolutionary journey of the people involved, and describe how the Community Evolution Survey has been instrumental in the process

## Overview of the Journey

In 2015 we asked stakeholders from across the local *complex needs* system to assess where they felt things were at, using the Community Values Survey. The results told us that we had a high level (29%) of *entropy* in our system. People felt they were being hampered by what they saw as a culture of *blame, competition, wasted resources, short-term thinking, and uncertainty about the future.*

The results also indicated that stakeholders wanted *a greater experience of community; development of a more compassion-based system; and a focus on long-term thinking and greater care for the disadvantaged.* They wanted more opportunities to be *creative* and to *innovate* as this was how they felt they could directly influence positive outcomes.

What we also learned was that this group needed to feel they were able to *bring themselves to work*, to express their passion and purpose and feel they were *making a difference*.

We were surprised by these results. In truth we didn't really know what to do with them.

The advice was to use the positives to address the negatives, and to allow ample time (three to five years) for investment in the culture change needed. This in turn would offer the group the best chance of succeeding.

## WHAT WE DID

In 2019 we repeated the survey to see how far we had progressed and what we needed to do next. We found that the cultural entropy in the inter-disciplinary group had reduced by 21%; "compassion" was now the top value in all aspects of the culture, and people felt they were part of a community that allowed them to bring their whole self to work. What was more surprising was that though things had improved considerably in personal experience and organisational culture; people rather than being complacent were now more ambitious for greater social impact and justice.

## The Impact and benefit

### The Process

In September ECVS were commissioned by the steering group to conduct a Community Values Survey<sup>4</sup> (BVC) a cultural health mapping tool designed to generate a baseline picture of where system stakeholders felt the system was at. Stakeholders participating were asked what they valued personally, how they viewed the effectiveness of current services and system, and what values they felt needed to be present to empower people to realise their potential, tackle their problems and make a community contribution. Anecdotally people were saying that change was needed, but opinion differed about where and how.

The survey was distributed to 204 people across six categories (Health and Wellbeing; Housing and Homelessness, substance misuse; criminal justice; education and training and other. 76 people responded in the two week window. We therefore had a 35% response rate.

Health and wellbeing 38%	Housing and Homelessness 22%	Education and Training 15%
Substance Misuse 8%	Criminal Justice 13%	Other 4%



What also came to light was that without positive values at Level 2 - Relationship and Level 3 - Self-esteem, there was a need to focus on both interpersonal connections and the provision of more efficient systems and processes, to offset the impact of further change initiatives.

### Plot 3 Desired Cultural Values

In summary the 2015 profile indicated that the Exeter Complex Needs Community wanted to continue to support those in need, with an outward show of empathy. To help with this they wanted to adopt a more holistic approach to looking after others, while continuing to ensure the availability of healthcare. They also felt higher living standards and access to reasonably priced homes was a fundamental part of the solution.

Those who participated wanted to explore how the community might strengthen its own structure and function, whilst also seeking to have a positive impact on the planet. They wanted to see **people taking responsibility** for their actions and show a stronger interest in **working for the good of the whole**. This group were about having a 'can-do' approach, where they were able to provide high calibre services, share ideas and try new approaches as a recipe for success.

### The parallel survey

To corroborate and add detail to the findings in the Community Values Survey, a parallel centre designed, survey was circulated; this invited the same participants to rate organisational effectiveness in ten key areas and comment on the reasons for their choices.

This confirmed that people felt that there was **an urgent need to develop a more person-centred compassionate system that valued all people within it**.

Many respondents used the word "lack" to describe what was hampering efforts to achieve that currently. This lack was of **capacity, hope, access, housing, are money and opportunity** across the board. In housing services it extended to **trust, time** and **options**. In substance misuse services **fear, lack of self-belief (desire, ambition and motivation)**.

### Aspirations

People wanted to move toward **a more long-term perspective in terms of system redesign**; which included taking and demonstrating greater responsibility. There was a common sense that system leaders and staff should be more accountable, and work together to deliver higher standards.

Client journeys should be more meaningful. There should be **a movement towards a one-team approach** to overcome the competition culture. This would operate in a holistic, person-centred way, and utilise skills of staff and service user alike.

Workforce development was seen as integral to change; but this required more than organising training. It was about a system of reflective conversations and supervision of practice that validated and acknowledged good work.

Participants wanted to see movement towards **joined up strategies across sectors**, shared pathways, joint funding, embedded research and evaluation as mechanisms for learning and service improvement.

Overall and foremost people wanted **a different experience of community**, for everyone, as a means to create the conditions for better health wellbeing and quality of life.

## A different experience of community

This call for a different experience of community was rooted in development of a compassion-based system, but it also included a focus on family, recovery and relationship building, not just for service users, but for all. This focus was rooted in the need to facilitate the shift from treatment and enforcement approaches, to early intervention/prevention, leadership and relationship development.

The one-team approach was about being person-centred, focusing on assets, finding ways to be creative, enthusiastic and passionate, to focus on generating resilience through support for wellbeing and quality of life.

There was a sense that people who learn together, who solve problems together, who are supported to make decisions and innovate – to overcome risk-factors, budget constraints, are able to unlock potential in themselves and clients alike.

## Overview of the task

We knew from the information we had that the people involved in the system had the ideas, ambition and potential to realise the change, but that equally there were system challenges that our modest initiative would be unable to change – only influence. We also had insight into where the challenges lay, and what people wanted to experience in their environment in order to have the best chance of realising their ideas about change.

Our goal was to create a micro-system environment where system stakeholders could participate in the CoLab experiment. The name articulated our two objectives “Collaboration” and provision of a “Lab” for experiments in culture change and collective service provision. Our core guiding principles, were to be “compassionate”; to move towards becoming “one-team” and to invest in a “better experience of community.” Our hypothesis was that if we got these things right, great work and transformative experiences would emerge from the natural interactions of people in the space.

We drew from NAVCA’s Change for Good Report on Progressive Infrastructure, and The Collective Impact Model to guide our approach to managing the space and experimenting with shared delivery. The infrastructure approach recommended in the NAVCA report talked about providing empowering leadership; being a leaner enabler, broker and catalyst. Fostering an approach that was both reactive and proactive; focusing on activities that address individual and area based issues. It guided us to be relationship brokers, capable of leveraging resources, and within that remit to find and broker collaborations, within and across boundaries. To interface between communities and decision-makers; help them navigate change and participate in strategic planning and influence. Manage resources so value is maximised, and continuously learn to help demonstrate social value, economic contribution and impact.

The Collective Impact Model has five strands, namely 1) a shared agenda 2) shared measurement 3) Mutually reinforcing activities 4) continues communication. The fifth articulated where ECVS felt they were working as Progressive Infrastructure, acting as the Backbone Agency for the Hub.

Collective Impact Model (Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2010)

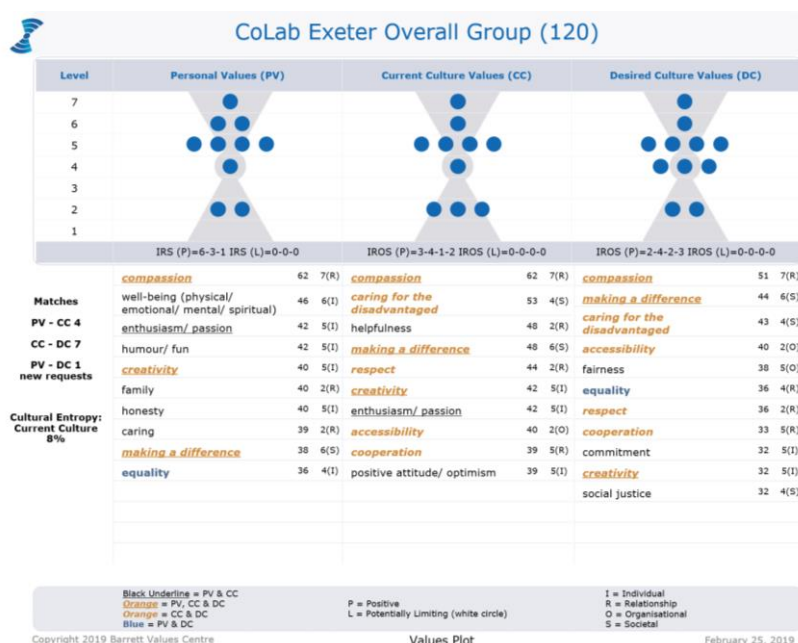
# Cultural Evolution Report 2019

In January of 2019 the Community Values Survey was repeated, with contributions from the current CoLab Community, and significantly the team opened it out to include service users. Over a three week period 120 people completed the survey; 82 staff and 38 Service users. Of that cohort 87 were female and 37 male.

Health and Wellbeing: 38%	Housing and Homelessness: 18%	Mental Health: 16%
Criminal Justice: 15%	Substance Misuse 13%	Service users were 32%

## Headline findings

- The cultural entropy score has decreased by 21% in 3 years, moving from 29% to 8%. An optimistic reduction in entropy for the period would have been 10%, so this is significant.
- There is a strong sense of community spirit amongst community stakeholders
- Nearly all potentially limiting values have a lesser impact now
- People appear to be significantly less worried or confused about where the organisation is headed
- They have more tools at their disposal and experience less red tape hindering their efforts
- They are less concerned about feelings of being alone, less burdened by power struggles and tendencies to place fault on others
- Addiction and dependency issues are being addressed
- 6 of 12 top ten values least time were limiting, now there are none in the top 19
- Only elitism (3%) arose as potentially limiting.



## Overall Indications for the future

The core values all stakeholders who responded have in common are *compassion, making a difference, creativity, fairness and equality*. What is notable is that Compassion is now the top value in all three plots. This suggests that not only has this improved tremendously; it is also the key to the way the community moves forward. Fairness, equality and social justice appear to be the evolving edge of collaborative aspirations

## Ongoing

People want to experience ongoing kindness and support for those in greatest need. They also want continues support for out-of-the-box ideas and solutions. *Caring for the disadvantaged, cooperation, making a difference and compassion* remain core values in 2019 as they were in 2015.

## Newly emerging

People want more focus on being easy to work with, and having a positive impact. They want to see greater equity, appreciation, and support between different social groups. Also just principles informing our treatment of others and the decisions they make. The *Enthusiasm/passion, creativity* desired in 2015 is satisfied in 2019. *Innovation, respect, commitment and helpfulness* come in strongly for 2019 along with some interesting new values to explore; *community pride (which is about belonging and togetherness), equality, social justice, respect and adaptability*.

## Additional Insights

It's a remarkable turnaround. In 2015 nearly one third of all values selected were potentially limiting. With a healthy entropy score of 8%, there is much more focus on expression of level 5 values, suggesting the group has developed a strong sense of community spirit within the workplace, and can bring themselves to work fundamentally. This in turn has shifted the focus on community issues as problems, to a clear sense of where to focus to make a difference, not only to the issues, but to the experience of community itself.

## Moving forward

It is interesting to see how the values profile has changed in three years:

<b>2015</b>	Uncertainty about future	58%	Caring for the disadvantaged	53%	Wasted Resources	35%	Bureaucracy	33%	Cooperation	31%	Blame	25%
<b>2019</b>	Compassion	57%	Caring for the disadvantaged	46%	Enthusiasm Passion	45%	Making a Difference	41%	Creativity	38%	Innovation	35%

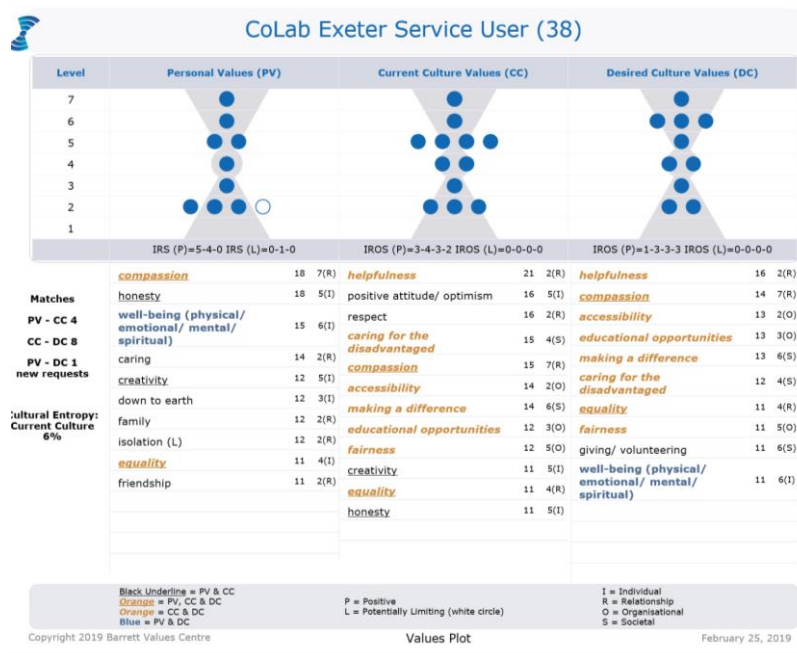
Some of the same issues are still present in the 2019 profile, just not at the same levels. Drug and Alcohol use is at 20% Uncertainty and Conflict 11% and apathy 9%.

The areas where values have increased are also useful to acknowledge when understanding the profile:

Fairness	20% increase	High standards	13 % increase
Safety	15% increase	trust	12% increase
Sustainability	15% increase	Transparency	11% increase
Employment Opportunities	13% increase	Freedom of speech	10% increase



The 2019 survey included a service user perspective.



This profile revealed a good entropy score of 6%, which suggests what they are experiencing is in alignment with their values. Indeed their values are not dissimilar to those of the rest of the participants. This reinforces the notion that all system members need to be included in system redesign, as they can perhaps be seen as being at different points on the same spectrum

Service users not unlike the staff have a Level 6 (making a difference) vision; what they want are more opportunities to participate, to learn, work and give back so the wellbeing they experiences helps them to progress.

- Isolation main barrier
- Relationship focused (friendship, family and caring)
- Equality the transformation value at the personal level and care/equality at current and desired
- They want to see more helpfulness, compassion and accessibility
- They want opportunities to learn, volunteer and make a difference

## What happens next?