

All One Collective & Lab

# FINAL REPORT:

LEARNING EXCHANGES

COMMUNITY RESPONSE & RECOVERY



## Key insights & Recommendations

### Partnership:

Working in partnership can facilitate innovative work within communities and support the growth, learning and development of the organisations involved. However, some time and energy needs to be invested in partnerships to make them effective. Clear principles and ground rules for the partnership, open and honest communication and a space for reviewing progress is key. Power dynamics in partnerships are also important to consider, especially between larger more well-resourced organisations and smaller organisations with limited resources. There needs to be some honest analysis and communication in the formation of partnerships around resources available for each partner (including time) and the influence that can be leveraged for all in the partnership, rather than just the organisation with the largest resources

### Public Sector:

There is a lack of understanding in some parts of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) on who and how they should be working with the public sector, particularly the local authority. Some VCS participants highlighted their desire to influence council policy on the issues they work on but were not sure how to instigate this. As a starting point, building stronger relationships between the public sector and VCS is key. There remains an ongoing tension between how council staff would like to be seen and how communities see them. A move towards the 'radical help' approach could address these issues but there is considerable work to be done around this. There is a need to develop different narratives about our communities, which acknowledge the full potential the community has for change, particularly with the support of active citizenship.

### Arts Methodologies:

The arts hold huge potential for bringing about personal and social change. However, this is not always recognised and there is a lack of funding to support this work. There is need for a regular funding stream in Calderdale which would support the use of arts methodologies and creative practice in community development and for health promotion. For example through social prescribing commissioned by the CCG.

### Health Inequalities:

There is a need to promote awareness on the different systems that penalise the poor and the range of intersecting issues that underpin health inequalities. Due to the fact that we live quite polarised lives, assumptions are often made around individuals making 'unhealthy lifestyle choices,' but we need to move from this stance of 'blame and judgement' and towards a holistic understanding of the challenges experienced by people living in poverty and the systemic changes that need to take place to provide real solutions to the health inequalities experienced.

### Active Citizenship:

Active Citizenship has been essential in navigating the Covid crisis; it is also likely to play an important role in recovery both for individuals and communities. For example, some people who have received support also want to contribute and to 'give back'; self-care, boundaries and understanding you can't solve the problems of the world has been essential learning for community groups supporting people during the crisis; it is important to consider who cares for the carers, if we are to ensure longevity and sustainability of social action.

### Response & Recovery:

Research from 'Belong' the National Cohesion and Integration Network highlights that areas where there have been high levels of community activism during Covid also have high levels of social cohesion – stronger and more connected communities. In Calderdale the level of community activism during Covid has been different in different areas of the Valley. There is a need to understand the factors that led to people in certain areas being able to deliver a high level of volunteer support versus areas where this did not happen. Understanding the different factors that led to a well-coordinated response and the individual and community barriers that prevent a coherent response developing, are integral for facilitating the potential scale up of crisis response Calderdale-wide.

### Next steps:

Participants on the Learning Exchanges expressed interest in the provision of a regular 'reflective practitioners' space for the VCS and public sector staff, which would enable them to develop relationships, and learn and reflect upon specific topics related to policy and practice.



# 1.Introduction

## Context of the Learning Exchanges:

Since March 2020 (the early stages of the Covid 19 crisis) the voluntary and community sector in Calderdale, as throughout the country, stepped up to meet the increasing needs of communities. The support provided came from established organisations and community groups as well as mutual aid groups working at a very local level. The support offered was and continues to be diverse and has ranged from practical assistance such as picking up shopping and prescriptions and delivering food parcels, to running activities that alleviate social isolation. Some groups have also worked to facilitate deeper connections between residents living in Calderdale and other countries through the shared experience of the Covid Pandemic.

Within this context, All One Collective & Lab decided to run a series of Learning Exchanges to provide a space for people working at different levels of the voluntary community sector (volunteers as well as paid staff), in addition to public sector staff, to be able to reflect on what they had learned over the last year: A safe space to breathe and think.

Six learning exchange sessions were held covering topics identified through discussions with key stakeholders about what would be useful and relevant to groups. Each session covered a different subject area and included a guest speaker to inform and stimulate the discussions.

The six sessions were as follows:

- Working in partnership
- Working with the Public sector
- Arts and Wellbeing
- Health Inequalities
- Active Citizenship
- Response and Recovery

## Methodology:

The sessions were scheduled for a Tuesday morning 10-11.30am. A regular day and time helped the sessions to build momentum and become a regular part of participants' weeks. After the initial welcome, the sessions started with a relationship building exercise done in pairs or smaller groups. This activity was different in every session but was an integral part of the Learning Exchange design, ensuring participants had the opportunity to learn about each other's work and to build connections. The sessions then introduced speakers to present relevant information as a stimulus and provocation for further small group discussions, with participants asked to share their own experiences and reflect on the learning and relevance to their work.

## Participants:

In total, 36 participants attended the sessions, with some participants attending all and some dropping into individual sessions. The sessions started with small numbers but gradually built up to 10-12 participants at each one. 27 of the participants were from the VCS, with 13 from this sector being volunteers. 8 participants were from the public sector.

### Assumptions and Challenges Around Recruitment:

Due to the high level of volunteers providing support to community groups either through the Council's volunteering scheme or through newly established mutual-aid groups, All1C assumed a significant number of participants would attend from these groups. However, very few official mutual-aid volunteers attended the sessions. Promotional emails had been disseminated to all the relevant groups in addition to social media promotion, but this did not translate into attendance. Although All1C is not entirely clear why this was the case, there are a number of probable explanations for this including: People who are involved in mutual aid are interested in developing practical solutions to the crisis and are not necessarily interested in attending zoom events; people are generally 'Zoomed out' and not interested in online events; people didn't receive the marketing information; people are not aware of All1C as an organisation and there is not a huge buy-in for attending an All1C event; leaders and decision-makers in the mutual-aid groups are too busy to attend events, people involved in mutual aid do not see themselves as part of the VCS sector, people involved in mutual-aid groups have gone back to work and therefore couldn't attend sessions during the day time.



## 2.Key Insights from the Learning Exchanges

As already described, each of the Learning Exchanges focused on a different topic. The key insights below are not a summary of the entire discussion but instead provide reflections on some of the key points identified by both the speakers and participants. It is hoped that these are useful for learning and in contributing to the recovery process going forward.

### A) Working in Partnership:

The first session of the Learning Exchanges explored the topic of working in partnership. Jayne Leech works as the Delivery Manager for Calderdale's Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Alliance. Jayne provided an overview of the work of the Alliance in supporting the voluntary and community sector, and the learning journey they have been on over the last year in terms of supporting the wider sector to be able to deliver a community response to Covid-19. Jayne has worked for many years facilitating partnership work and below is a representation of this expertise in addition to reflections from participants. Insights are as follows:

#### How a partnership is established is key:

Principles and ground rules are key to establishing a healthy and fruitful partnership, creating a safe space for developing trust and ongoing communication. Clear processes for dealing with conflict are also important. This includes being able to sit with some discomfort, acknowledging limitations, recognising the skills in the room and committing to working out, 'where are we stuck?'

#### Ongoing review and reflection:

Developing a partnership where ongoing learning, review and reflection is built in is key, going back to the 'why' - why the partnership was developed in the first place. Creating a learning environment where it is ok to be wrong and make mistakes is also important, alongside maintaining respect for each other, even when not in agreement. Change is often essential both in terms of the delivery of work but also changing something in the partnership. Key to this is developing the emotional resilience for change. Working in partnership can allow innovations to develop, but there needs to be an explicit focus on this as a potential outcome.

#### Going Forward:

Understanding who is doing what in the wider sector is key to being able to develop fruitful partnerships. Due to the geography of Calderdale this is sometimes challenging but wider opportunities to learn about others work would help the sector to innovate; power dynamics in partnerships are important to consider, especially between larger more well-resourced organisations and smaller organisations with limited resources. There needs to be some honest analysis within the partnership around resources available for each partner (including time) and the influence that can be leveraged for all in the partnership, rather than just the organisation with the largest resources.

## B) Working with the Public Sector:

The second session of the Learning Exchange explored the topic of working with the public sector. Sian Rogers works as the Policy and Projects Manager and Lead for the Voluntary and Community Sector at Calderdale Council. Sian talked about her own journey into the public sector and reflected on the belief in 'public service' that is the driver for many people who work for the Council. Whilst Sian recognised from the outset the huge challenge in talking about 'working with the public sector' due to the sheer size, scale and differing scope of different public sector bodies and departments, she shared with us some useful insights, reflected with participants comments below:

### Makeup of the public sector:

A good starting point is understanding that many people that work for the public sector are passionate about public service and have been on their own journeys to bring them to the point of working in their jobs. However, there can be a misunderstanding around public sector employees and their values, particularly those working for the Council, and this is reinforced by the lack of opportunities to hear their stories. Additionally, the public sector can feel like an 'amorphous blob' making it difficult for the VCS to understand why they should be working with Council services, who they should specifically be working with and when.

### 21st Century Public Sector – Changing the Relationship:

People in communities and some in the VCS often believe that Council staff are only about 'delivering basic public services,' which then defines their ongoing relationship with the Council. There is a move to transform the relationship between the communities and the Council through a move away from 'basic public service delivery' and towards the Council playing an 'enabling and convening' role. The Council could and should be finding ways to connect multiple forms of resources and supporting the identification of who is the best place to 'do stuff.' So a new kind of public service will help navigate systems, broker relationships and weave together necessary resources. Influenced by Hilary Cottam's notion of 'radical help', this raises the question of how we enable people in our communities to understand this new kind of public service and how to change the relationship and power dynamics from people being 'done unto' to empowered citizens.

"Are we, the public servants of today, simply humanisers of the inevitable (a phrase I borrow from the Brazilian political theorist Roberto Unger), those who must mop up the fall out of rapid techno-economic change. Or can we be the radical architects of a much-needed social revolution?"

*Cottam, Hilary:  
'Public servants: humanisers of the inevitable or radical change architects?'*  
2018

### Challenging Narratives About Communities:

The stories that are told about communities' impact on how people think and feel about where they live and the services or support, they can access. They can also shape how people working for the Council and other public service delivery organisations interact with the community. When the dominant narrative is negative around a community or part of a community this can become a self-replicating scenario. For example, one participant highlighted that in a deprived area community members had been told by the council they couldn't have a bin in the park as the teenagers would burn it, as they had done a few years ago. Thus indicating that anti-social behaviour of local young people is a permanent fixture rather than something dynamic which has the possibility to change and transform. A subconscious message around this issue for the community is that they are 'undeserving' of a resource such as a bin as they cannot manage the behaviour of their young people. Just as negative stories can be told about communities and areas, a key learning point is that this means that it is also possible to tell a different story around the full potential the community has for change, with the support of active citizenship being key.

### Going Forward:

There remains a lack of understanding with some parts of the VCS on who and how they should be working with in the public sector particularly around the development of strategy. Developing an understanding of this is key. Additionally, there remains an ongoing tension between Council staff with regards to how they would like to be seen and how the community and wider groups see them. The potential transformation and transition to a 'radical help' approach which focuses on forging new kinds of relationships between the local authority, VCS and communities could help to address these issues but is considerable work needed to be done around this.





## C) Arts Methodologies and Well-being

Session 3 of the Learning Exchanges explored the use of Arts Methodologies to promote well-being in communities and included a presentation from Jeff Turner, Co-director of local Arts organisation Verd De Gris, which has been working with communities in Calderdale for the last 20 years. Verd de Gris focuses on using different art forms to explore issues such as identity, place, and belonging as well as the social issues that impact on people's daily lives such as mental health, worklessness and inequality. Their work also facilitates community cohesion, bringing people together from different backgrounds and experiences and encouraging creative exploration in a group setting, promoting tolerance, understanding and a sense of common humanity and solidarity.

### A platform for storytelling:

The arts play an important role in providing a platform for marginalised voices with creative expression allowing people to articulate their experiences and realities on their own terms, shining a light on the rich diversity of stories that are all around us in our communities. This work can challenge stereotypes and assumptions about different groups in our society and in doing so can also be a powerful way of facilitating community cohesion. Helping people to move beyond 'lazy demographic analysis' to really understand people and their experiences.

### Arts and Wellbeing during Covid:

Verd de Gris's work shows the therapeutic potential of the arts. The film project 'What Remains' has been instrumental in facilitating conversations about suicide through the film reaching a wide audience. The therapeutic and creative support groups enabled local people affected by suicide to process grief and loss, demonstrating the importance of arts methodologies for processing difficult life experiences. Storytelling also played an important role during the Covid crisis in terms of developing peer support and helping people to process the loss and grief - of loved ones, jobs, education, social lives and normality - which has been such a prevalent part of the crisis.

### Access to Communities and Audiences:

The increasing use of digital platforms to host arts events during the Covid Crisis enabled more people to access Verd de Gris events, meaning activities that usually attracted around 20 people in a town hall, instead attracted 100 people on Zoom. This experience of having to adapt during the crisis presents opportunities for the wider reach of socially engaged arts projects going forward and means that more people can be part of the diverse conversations that creative events and storytelling approaches facilitate.

### The Arts and Recovery:

It was recognised that the arts and creative practice has the potential to support community recovery, for example helping to bring high streets back to life, helping people to envision different ways of living and managing change, making the connection between nature and the arts. It was also recognised that supporting communities to re-tell old stories from a different perspective can also support learning and connections between communities, for example acknowledging the stories of African soldiers that fought in WW2.

### Going Forward:

Despite the acknowledged power and potential of the arts to bring about personal and social change in our communities there continues to be no real recognition of its importance around community transformation. This is illustrated by the lack of long-term and sustainable strategic support and funding for the sector. It is essential that artists and creative practitioners are recognised as essential players in Calderdale's recovery and that both the vision, strategy and resourcing directly reflects this status.



## D) Health Inequalities

The fourth Learning Exchange session focused on health inequalities and the specific issues that Covid-19 had highlighted. Jo Bibby, Director of Health at the Health Foundation talked about health inequalities in the UK and how Covid-19 has clearly exemplified the relationship between poverty, inequality and health inequalities with the poorest communities experiencing the worst health and economic outcomes of the pandemic. Below are the insights from Jo and participant discussions.

### What Health Inequalities Mean in Reality:

There is a 10-year difference in life expectancy between the richest and poorest people and communities in the UK due to a range of intersecting issues which includes social class, race, ethnicity, gender and age amongst others. At the same time and perhaps more significantly, there is an 18-year difference in the years of good health that a person can expect to live between the richest and poorest. This means that a person living in a deprived community can expect to experience 18 years more of poor health versus someone from a privileged background.

### Awareness of Health Inequalities Remains Low:

As a result of Covid there is increasing awareness of health inequalities but the level of awareness in the general population remains low. This is partly due to the fact that people's social networks tend to be people from similar backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. As a result, people tend to see their experiences and that of their peers as the norm. For example, people living in areas that are labelled as 'deprived' do not see themselves in these terms but are often living with and around others who are faced with multiple physical and mental health challenges. In these settings, ill health can be seen as the norm and may not be questioned.

### Going Forward:

There is a real need to promote awareness on the different systems that penalise the poor and the range of intersecting issues that result in health inequalities. Due to the fact that we live quite polarised lives, assumptions are often made around individuals making 'unhealthy lifestyle choices,' but we need to move from this stance of 'blame and judgement' and towards a holistic understanding of the challenges experienced by people living in poverty and the systemic changes that are required to challenge health inequalities.



## E) Active Citizenship

The fifth Learning Exchange session explored 'Active Citizenship' and focused on two local examples: 'Calder Community Cares' (CCC) and 'Light-up Black and African Heritage Calderdale' (Light up BAHC). Both are organisations that delivered support during Covid-19. Jan Lymer from Calder Community Cares and Adelle A'asante from Light Up BAHC (both participants from All1C's Active Citizenship programme) presented their experiences of active citizenship during Covid, highlighting the varied ways in which they supported community members. CCC came into existence during the pandemic and Light Up BAHC substantially increased and adapted their activities during this time. Both organisations responded directly to community need. Insights from both organisations and from participants are as follows:

### Delivered During Lockdown:

Active Citizenship (AC) has been essential for navigating through the crisis. Many different forms of AC highlighted the range of need in communities, from the practical delivery of shopping, to helping with social isolation to promoting connections across the globe. The lockdown situation was new for everyone and meant that specific needs arose within the wider community. CCC delivered a range of support from delivering shopping and prescriptions to hot meals and social activities and supporting people to increase their digital literacy to facilitate digital access to services, activities and socialising online with friends and families.

Light Up BAHC delivered online groups and activities that aimed to support families with young children. One activity 'The Good News Club' was particularly popular, providing online sessions on a Sunday for children with black and African heritage. Children from all over the world joined these sessions, learning about different cultural contexts and issues and having fun with each other, which helped to facilitate a sense of connection and belonging to a community. The sessions also provided positive black role models for the children with professionals such as immunologists coming to speak directly to families and children on the calls. Providing positive black role-models for children of black and African heritage was recognised as a unique opportunity for children from Halifax and something integral to their personal development, and that was facilitated by the new situation of the Covid-lockdown.

### Key to Active Citizenship During Covid-19:

Promoting good mental health was essential for all communities. Organisations delivered this in different ways. For example, Light Up BAHC delivered mindfulness sessions and CCC amongst other things delivered Zoom socialising sessions to bring people together. The digital divide was a challenge for lots of different people within the community and this included a lack of access to equipment and data, in addition to having low levels of digital literacy. Through the digital support activities delivered by both organisations, it became apparent that the digital divide was commonly experienced by people experiencing poverty around Calderdale. In Light-Up BAHC's international work they identified that in some countries in the global South, the digital divide was exacerbated by not having access to basic infrastructure such as electricity. Through the delivery of both organisations it became apparent that many people who received support also wanted to contribute as volunteers during the crisis. The need to provide help seemed to people's personal recovery whilst also directly contributing to community recovery.

### Development of Self-care and Boundaries:

Developing an understanding around the importance of self-care and personal boundaries was key to active citizenship during the pandemic. With increasing numbers of people within communities needing support, the leaders and facilitators of activities recognised that they also needed to consider their own self-care. Having an understanding around the potential boundaries of the support being delivered and that it was not possible to, 'solve the problems of the world' was also essential.

### Going Forward:

An ongoing challenge remains for those people leading active citizenship activities which is, 'who cares for the carers?' Whilst there are often well-established support mechanisms developed for volunteers, there is a lack of structured support available for those who are leading the delivery of support to communities. This raises potential issues around the sustainability and longevity of organisations and the potential burn-out of individuals involved.



## F) Response & Recovery

The sixth and final session of the Learning Exchanges focused on the lessons learned from community responses during Covid-19 and their relevance to plans for community recovery going forward. Dr Kaya Davies Hayon from 'Belong', the National Cohesion and Integration Network talked about Belong's work to promote best practice in social cohesion and developing and promoting a 'shared ground' between different communities. She then presented learning around the relationship between social cohesion and the community support response during Covid-19.

### Key Pillars of Social Cohesion:

#### *Place:*

Is it a good place to live, work and raise a family? Are there elements of the area that make it unique and positive? Are there cohesive cross-sectoral partnerships in the area that lead to better services and activities for local people? Is there an arts, cultural and sports offer for local people that enables them to explore learning, well-being and activities in their local area?

#### *People are the biggest asset:*

Is there a healthy voluntary and community sector? Are diverse voices available to inform discussions? Are their natural contact points for people to meet and mix and is their strong local leadership and high levels of trust in local leaders?

#### *Knowledge:*

Is their widely held knowledge about the different parts of the community including their needs and wants? Is there an understanding of how different people and groups are or have been impacted by issues? Is their specialist knowledge available around specific issues relevant to the community?

#### *Systemic Barriers:*

Is there an understanding of the systemic barriers facing certain parts of the community and are actions being taken to address these?

### Lessons for Recovery:

The relevance of social cohesion during Covid-19 was demonstrated through a national survey carried out by Belong which demonstrated that in areas of higher social cohesion, there were higher levels of volunteering, leading to better outcomes for communities. In certain parts of Calderdale there were high levels of volunteering, managed by newly established mutual aid groups. In these areas a significant amount of support was delivered meeting a range of different needs. It was acknowledged by participants that the level of volunteer and VCS support was not replicated across the whole of Calderdale.

### Going Forward:

There is a need to understand the factors that led to people in certain areas being able to deliver a high level of volunteer support versus areas where this did not happen. Understanding the different factors that led to a well-coordinated response and the individual and community barriers that prevent a coherent response developing, are integral for facilitating the potential scale up of support Calderdale-wide and important to understand for Recovery.

### 3. Next steps:

The Learning Exchanges were successful in bringing workers and volunteers together and providing a space for reflection, learning and discussion. Participants fed back that they appreciated the opportunity to have in-depth conversations with colleagues and peers and that this enabled them to make new connections and build their networks.

A further Survey Monkey questionnaire is being distributed to Learning Exchange participants to ask for further feedback on their experience and suggestions, but in a presentation on the Learning Exchange insights to the Voluntary and Community Peer Support session, participants articulated that they would like to find ways to a) reflect and connect on specific themes or subject matters with speakers as experts or stimuli going forward;  
b) find a way to learn and connect more with Council workers to try and bridge the current divide.

All One Collective & Lab will forward this report to relevant funders, VCS organisations and Council teams to explore if there is any potential support to take forward the proposed next steps.

