



Our Impact

2022-2023

Supporting and sustaining community life



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Everybody has a story

*Everybody has a story, and CoLab is a part of mine.
It needs to be told.
It needs to be heard.
Listen to my story.*

*Everybody has a story, and CoLab is a part of mine.
Almost two decades working in this hub,
And I've seen incredible change in that time.
Arriving outside at CoLab you may feel uninspired,
But we invite you, we WELCOME you to step inside,
And discover a rich tapestry of collaboration, compassion and life.
CoLab has a story, and I am part of that.*

*Everybody has a story, and CoLab is a part of mine.
from a tent, a field, a sleeping
bag on the quay alone, isolated.
Crushing pain inside me, humiliation,
worthlessness, no friends apart
from Henry and a bottle.
Is my existence worthwhile.
The wonders of why, what
happened and when.
Then a shiny light a smile
a cuppa and a chat, it's the
outreach team checking on my existence.
I wave someone does care,
someone does like me and I feel warmth.
I feel grateful next stop CoLab.
Anxiety lifted when I open up
To staff, colleagues and clients.
The connection, correlation and
maybe soon celebrations.
CoLab bringing all of the communities,
Housing, Food, Doctors, Nurses, Dentists,
Support workers, Social Events.
I'm part of this community and*

*grateful, happy, valued and most
important supported
CoLab has a story, and I am part of that.*

*Everybody has a story, and CoLab is a part of mine.
Fresh out of rehab, new city, new me,
Then I walked through the doors of opportunity,
Met with a smile, encouragement and belief,
Sat down with a cuppa, big sigh of relief!
Made to feel human, accepted and seen,
Finally found a place to just be,
These are my people, this is my tribe,
Now I feel ready to begin my new life!
CoLab has a story, and I am part of that.*

*Everybody has a story, and CoLab is a part of mine.
Working alongside each other, in search of a smile
Joy and kindness abound, a place to belong for a while
There's no place like CoLab, in body or soul
Particularly when the darkest days start to take their toll
To try something new, because who knows what you'll find
Be brave and courageous and open your mind
CoLab has a story, and I am part of that.*

*As pain is shared – the burden becomes lighter
Laughter invades fear and the future becomes brighter*

*CoLab makes space for stories to be told, to unfold, to be heard and to be shared
Because most humans are longing simply to know that somebody cares.
Perhaps this is all it takes for new stories to be birthed
14,000 smiles saying dignity must continue to be unearthed.
The beautiful building stands as a constant in the midst of stories where it seems
hope has gone
And those sliding doors keep opening declaring this is somewhere you can belong.*

Written by visitors and staff of CoLab with the support of Pete Davies from Co-Create

Who we are

CoLab is a multi-agency wellbeing hub in Exeter that enables people and organisations to work together, to create the conditions for people to lead their best lives and do their best work, and for organisations to achieve their greatest impact and value.

We began seven years ago with a vision of a collaborative community and social laboratory. We host a community of partner organisations in our hub and test out different collaborative approaches to supporting people experiencing multiple disadvantages. We are involved in innovation and system change as well as service delivery. We also work with the wider community to build a fairer, more inclusive, and healthier city.

CoLab is designed to improve social capital and reduce health inequalities. CoLab is a space in which people develop social capital – a measure of social connection which is strongly associated with macroeconomic growth, social mobility, reduced physical and mental health issues, and decreased pressure on public services [1]. We bring people together to address health inequalities and bring about positive, sustainable change for the people and communities we serve.

Our current work is guided by our 'Supporting and Sustaining Community Life Strategy 2022-2025'. This report explores what we have learnt and the progress we have made towards our strategic objectives in the first year of our new strategy. We would like to celebrate what our staff, partners, and the people we support have achieved in the last year despite a broader political discourse which undervalues their lives and work.



Our Vision

Our shared vision is of a compassionate and inclusive city and hub where people actively participate and communities thrive.



Our Mission

Our shared mission is to create the conditions for people to lead their best lives, and do their best work; and for organisations to achieve their greatest impact and value.

Our Values

Our values are the foundation of everything we do.

 *Compassion*

COLLABORATION

 *Ambition*



SOCIAL JUSTICE



Our health & wellbeing hub

CoLab hosts a range of organisations and projects within the hub. The hub also provides a single point of contact for support for people experiencing multiple disadvantages, in the form of our Atrium and Welcome Team. The diagram below details the types of organisations, support and activities present in the hub.



Our city and system

Exeter is a small city, nested within many rural and coastal communities. Over the last few years, there have been several significant challenges for people who live and work in Exeter, and across the county. More than a decade of funding cuts to public services and widening health inequalities left communities vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic. Subsequently,

the cost of living, of existing with your basic human needs met, has become increasingly difficult – one service user at CoLab described surviving in this context as like “treading water”. Our city and region have found strength and resilience amongst these challenges from our culture of innovation and collaboration.



A partnership of public and private organisations within the city, including CoLab, are working towards a vision for Exeter in 2040. Central to this vision is a city which promotes innovation, healthy and active lifestyles, inclusivity, education, sustainability, arts and culture.

Cultural values survey

In October 2022, we conducted a survey to better understand the culture of the system which supports people with complex needs in Northern Devon and Exeter, alongside partners in both areas. There were over 160 participants, including service users, frontline staff and managers across different services including housing, health and criminal justice. The results were stark – the current culture was described as highly

dysfunctional. In particular, relationships were limited by a competitive, bureaucratic, and unequal culture. There was a sense of opportunity in the breakdown of the system – to build and sustain partnerships which better honour our values and build resilience to scarcity and uncertainty. People wanted a system based on compassion and cooperation, not competition. Below summarises the most popular values chosen in the survey [2].

Personal values

- compassion**
- making a difference**
- caring
- enthusiasm/passion
- fairness
- listening
- humour/fun
- equality**
- continuous learning
- honesty

Current culture

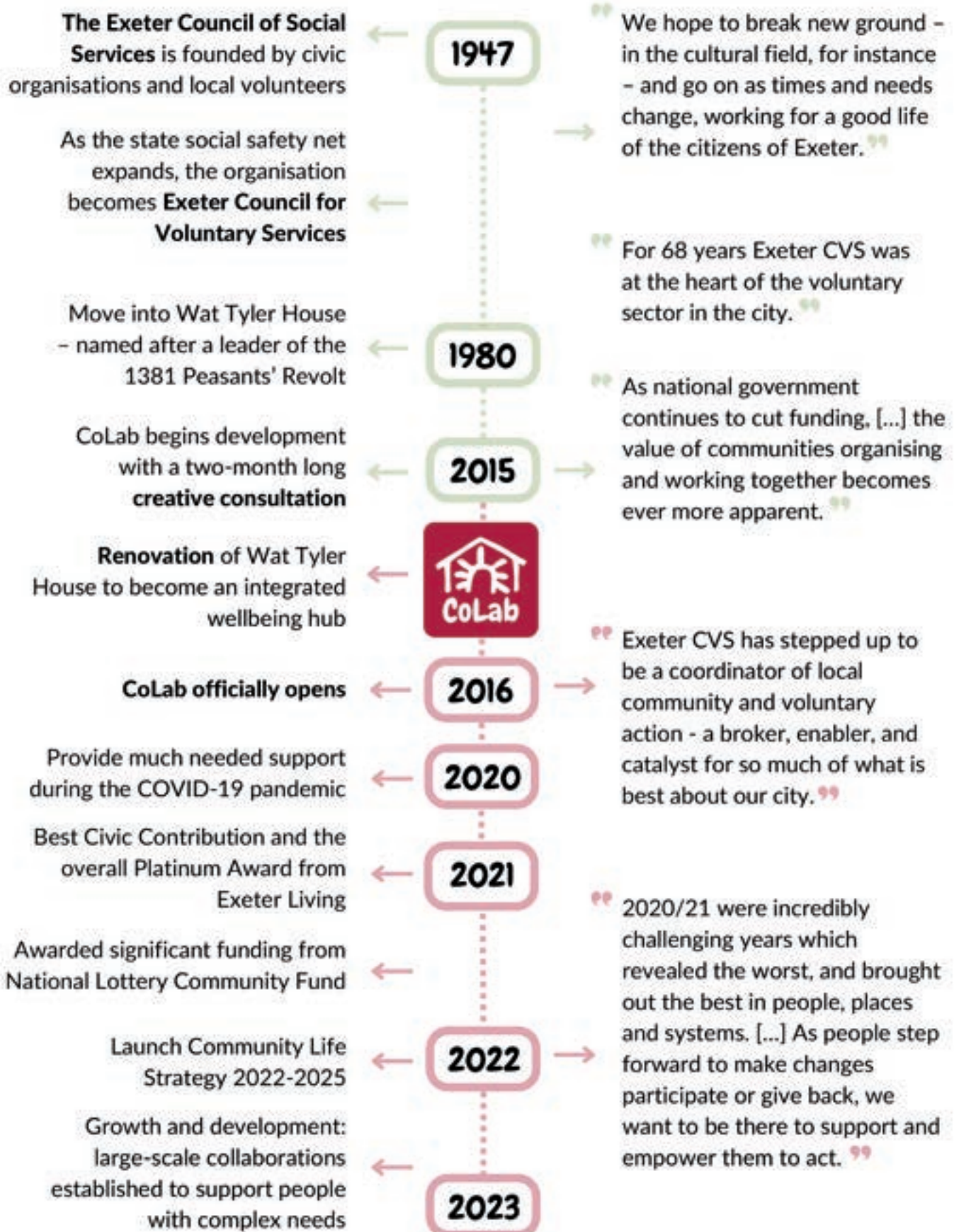
- uncertainty about the future
- bureaucracy
- wasted resources
- blame
- partnerships**
- discrimination
- isolation
- drug/alcohol use
- power
- conflict/ aggression

Desired culture

- compassion**
- access to health services
- affordable housing
- accountability
- caring for the disadvantaged
- inclusiveness
- making a difference**
- long-term perspective
- equality**
- cooperation
- dependable public services

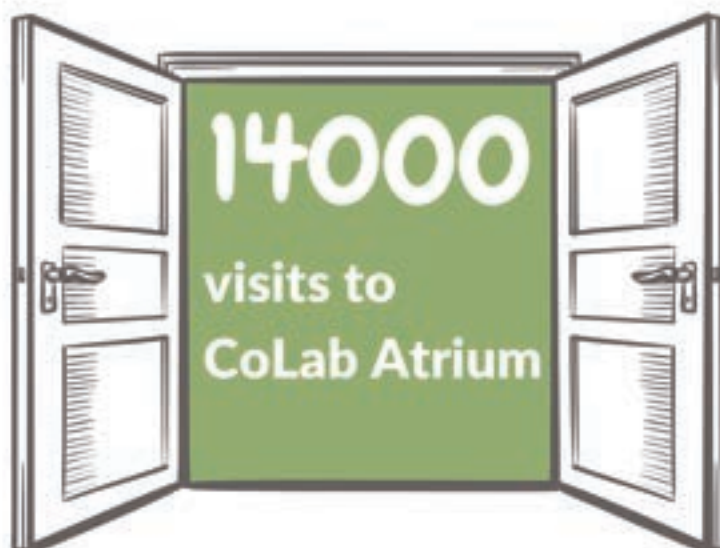
Our history

CoLab embraces change. Below outlines our development from Exeter Council for Voluntary Services, alongside quotes spanning the last 75 years.



Our year at a glance

THE COLAB HUB



of visits were resolved by CoLab Welcome Team

The remaining 43% of visits were supported by our

30 partner organisations and projects in the hub

Support needs

Many of the visits to the CoLab Atrium were from people with complex support needs. The following shows the proportion of visits from people with certain support needs.

homelessness

>60%

mental health

>77%

substance use

>69%

involved in criminal justice system*

>29%

*known to be on license or have probation orders

Data on visits for period June 2022 -July 2023; data for support needs for period Jan-July 23 only.

IN OUR WIDER COMMUNITY

Wellbeing Exeter connected

1821 people to
628 different groups
or services



The Urban Learning Academy has grown to offer

75 courses across
27 providers

in the Spring/Summer 2023 programme



The One Mental Health Team supported
172 homeless and vulnerably-
housed people to access
mental health support



483

women supported
with accommodation,
finances, pregnancy and
parenthood

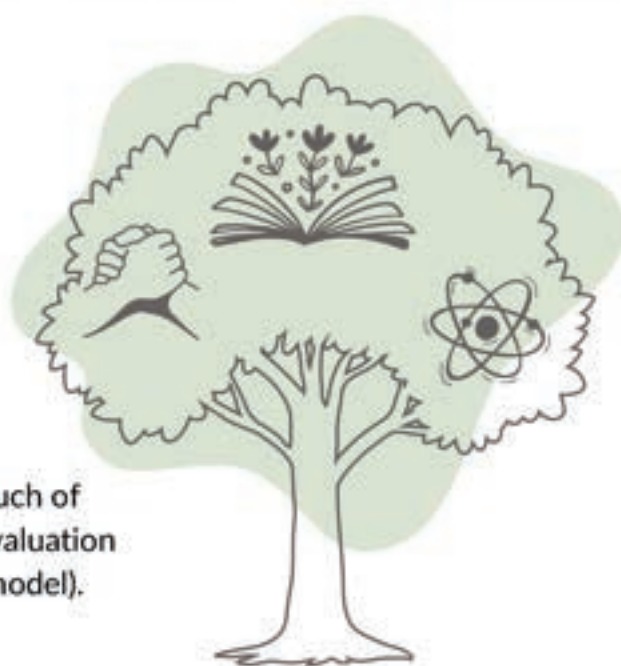
over
1000

engagements
in positive activity
groups

Data for period Apr 2022 -March 2023

How we are building our learning community

CoLab was first conceived as a **Collaborative Community and Social Laboratory**, emphasising the two main pillars of our work: partnerships and experimentation. The following describes our approach to understanding and evaluating our work, one which emphasises learning as a tool for change (rather than monitoring outcomes) and focuses on building a community of practice. This framework is aspirational, it is what we consider to be best practice. However, much of this work to change the culture of public service evaluation within CoLab has begun (see p.23-26 sustainable model).



1 Nurturing collaboration

CoLab is a community of people who work for numerous statutory and charitable organisations, and the people they support. We create spaces for people to actively participate in this community, learn together and collaborate on issues that are important to them. This approach aims to be inclusive and deeply democratic. Strong relationships are foundational to learning and should be valued highly.

We are currently utilising 'A Guide to Collaboration', developed by Collaborate CIC to frame our collaborative practice [3].

2 Embracing complexity

We work within a complex system. Complex systems have "many different parts that are highly interconnected and interdependent" [4]. They cannot be controlled and are often unpredictable. It is important that our approach to learning and evaluation acknowledges and embraces complexity.

This is inspired by complexity theory, and its application to public service through the 'Human Learning Systems' approach [4].



3 Action and learning together

We engage in action research which aims to achieve change through simultaneously taking action and seeking knowledge. Action research often encompasses devised cycles of action, reflection, learning and planning, although in practice much of these activities are overlapping.

Participatory action research has a long history as an alternative or activist approach to research which challenges the power dynamics inherent in scientific design [5].



4 Valuing qualitative, as well as quantitative data

We use both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand complex problems. We value experiential knowledge, narrative or lived experience. Qualitative research helps us to understand the relationships between different elements of complex systems.

5 Thinking long-term

We understand reducing inequalities and achieving social change is a long-term project. We may not be able to understand the full impact of our work if our evaluations are based on short timescales. The following saying brings hope and perspective when considering the impact of our work:

"A society grows great when people plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit."



Our strategy – one year on

Supporting and Sustaining Community Life 2022-2025

Our strategy sets out the roadmap towards a more compassionate and inclusive city and hub where people actively participate and communities thrive.

The CoLab 2022-2025 strategy was developed to rise to the challenges of local and national strategies [6]. It responded particularly to the call to action from leading voices such as Professor Michael Marmot, who have proven that the inequalities people face can and do harm them, and there needs to be a concerted effort to level the playing field, improve outcomes and to create conditions for people to lead lives they have reason to value.

The following sections of the report will cover the progress we have made towards our six objectives in the first year of our *Community Life Strategy*. We will explore what we have learnt and the difference we have made to people, practice and place.

Six strategic objectives

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1. Sustainable Life

The fragmented system and increase in poverty and inequalities has resulted in the most vulnerable people being further marginalised.

Objective: people live lives they have reason to value and sustain

2. Sustainable Team

People working in the complex needs system often struggle because of low pay and short contracts. Individual workers experience bureaucracy, confusion, a lack of agency, contributing to burnout and attrition.

Objective: staff are empowered and enabled to do their best work

3. Sustainable Model

The CoLab Model assumes that colocation, collaboration and joint working improves collective impact and outcome goals. We don't have consistent evidence to understand how the arrangements make a difference

Objective: CoLab is able to understand and evidence the difference the CoLab model is making

4. Sustainable Hub

Long-term financial security and sustainability remains a challenge because of current funding and commissioning arrangements alongside a lack of clarity about the CoLab-community offer. The lack of system wide response to complex needs results in people feeling unsafe.

Objective: CoLab is safe, financially secure and sustainable

5. Sustainable System

It's long been recognised that the complex needs system is broken and at the same time the city, while prospering, is leaving some people behind.

Objective: CoLab contributes to a fairer, more equal and inclusive system and city

6. Sustainable Community

Whilst the CoLab Community has a wealth of expertise, well developed relationships and some resource, there is a lack in consistency of investment, evidence and system recognition.

Objective: the multi-agency community response maximises expertise, resources and relationships, to strengthen and develop the community

P e o p l e 1 Sustainable life

Objective: people live lives they have reason to value and sustain

The fragmented system and increase in poverty and inequalities has resulted in the most vulnerable people being further marginalised. Social capital is also unequally distributed devastating people's life chances, health and wellbeing. People with the most complex needs are the least likely to receive the support they need. CoLab aims to support people with complex needs to benefit from support in crisis and beyond. People visit CoLab to help get their basic needs met but also to learn and develop

social networks. It is vital that public services are inclusive and accessible, and that people feel welcomed, heard, included and respected. Our independence has allowed us to be flexible and responsive to the presenting needs of our community. We do not consider ourselves a service provider in the conventional sense, but over the past few years our projects have allowed us to increase the choice and quality of the support available to the people who need it most.

Support in crisis and beyond

Since the pandemic, the complexity of visitors' support needs has increased significantly. We have experienced challenges in both responding to crisis and nurturing an environment in which people feel calm, safe and welcome. We have responded by changing our atrium space to appointment only in the afternoons. This has allowed us to develop a programme of purposeful activities including our women's and men's groups.

On average, 10 women visited women's group per week for tea, chat and activities

Over the last year, we have expanded the opportunities for learning, support and participation. The establishment of The Urban Learning Academy has greatly increased opportunities for and the accessibility of adult learning in our city.

The Urban Learning Academy has grown from 25 courses across 11 providers to 70 courses across 27 providers

It is crucial that people benefit from support in crisis but also from options to learn, recover, and progress.



Men's group - *the isolated became connected*

Downcast eyes
Closed down senses

Taste of lead
Painful head
Introverted
Isolated
Alone
Lost
At a loss
All time lows
Body blows

I arrived
I settled
Felt a sense of belonging.
The longing
For connection.
I shared
Others cared.
I felt valued.

A glimmer of possibility
A lightening
A softening
A clearing
Upon hearing
The shared experiences
Of other troubled men.

The sharing of pain
That had lain
Hidden,
Submerged

Beneath
The protective shield of "I'm alright"

The isolated became connected.

Nigel

What is it like to be supported at CoLab?

The following summarises key themes in the experience of being supported at CoLab gathered from case studies and qualitative feedback.

Feeling welcomed

People describe feeling scared, nervous and overwhelmed by anxiety when they first arrive at CoLab. They are often suffering from social isolation and the impact of trauma and abuse. Frequently, we first help someone with the basics they need in that moment. This might be clothing, accessing a foodbank or making a housing application. People describe receiving a "kind" and "non-judgemental" response from staff across statutory and charitable organisations at CoLab.

"Everyone is friendlier and more relaxed than I expected."

"I have been time and time again blown away by the amazing, friendly, welcoming, non-judgemental and supportive women I have met every time I come in."

Building trusting relationships

Our staff 'meet people where they are at' - they offer appointments which suit people and are structured around their goals. People value being offered time and space to be listened to, heard and respected. Relationships are built at the pace in which people feel comfortable.

"I have never been able to talk like that, you are all just so kind and understanding"

Expanding community connection

We aim to offer people choice and agency over how they recover and progress. From meeting with a psychiatrist, to courses which creatively harness your inner goddess, people have options for support across clinical and community settings. In addition, people describe greatly benefitting from peer support and connection.

"We do amazing workshops, craft and writing and it means that you can leave your problems at the door and just be yourself for a little while."

"It's just amazing to meet other women who have been through things similar to you - sometimes you can feel like you're the only one that bad stuff happens to. No one judges, and it really has made me feel as if I'm not on my own."

Staff support people to build social connections, work towards their aspirations and participate in their communities.

"Without this support and opportunity to think and plan for my future, I don't know what I would have done."

Leaving the door open

It is important that people know they can always come back if they need more support. Additionally, people who are experiencing a period of stability in which they do not need direct support from CoLab often still pop into the hub to keep staff updated on how they are getting on.

"I can go there and talk and get help it has been good at getting me back on my feet when I need it."

P e o p l e

2 Sustainable team

Objective: staff are empowered and enabled to do their best work

It is difficult to sustain work with people experiencing complex needs. The system is characterised by scarcity, uncertainty, and bureaucratic structures which hinder staff's sense of purpose and agency. We support people and organisations to come together in solidarity, to collaborate and to model more compassionate ways of relating to one another. We hope this will make their work more meaningful and sustainable.

The CoLab Team has experienced significant growth and leadership change over the past year. We have hosted 30 partner organisations, facilitating connections and collaborations among them. This work is generously supported by the National

Lottery Community Fund through our *Doing What Matters Most* project. This dedicated funding to develop the infrastructure needed for collaboration within the hub has been invaluable.

Our staff

Staff employed by CoLab describe a positive culture within their teams, albeit one which balances fulfilment with the emotional challenges of their work. We aim to nurture a culture in which building relationships and learning together are valued. Below is an image of our team embracing the elements at our spring away day, hosted by Organic Arts.

“ It can be stressful and tiring at times, and since the pandemic a lot of staff report burn out and exhaustion, which I also feel. However, the nature of the organisation and those in it mean that this is counterbalanced by strong and supportive relationships and also a feeling of freedom and innovation in our work. ”
(CoLab staff member)



Our leadership

In the last year, there has been significant change in the senior leadership team at CoLab. In March 2023, one of our joint CEOs, Amanda Kilroy, moved on to a new challenge after eleven years at CoLab. She made an outstanding contribution to the development and leadership of CoLab.

Fiona Carden courageously stepped up as our sole CEO. In June, we were also delighted to welcome Jon Cook, as our Deputy CEO. Our new senior leadership model builds capacity for the sole CEO to develop partnership and strategic work and for the newly appointed Deputy CEO to focus on practice and operations. This model will bring capacity alongside sustainability for an organisation that is reflecting on its growth and taking proactive steps to build its future.

Additionally, we have established a leadership team of eleven staff members

across the organisation. This team, guided by their collective principles, have shared good practice, learning, and worked collaboratively to strengthen our offer. At CoLab we feel it is important to share power – to empower all staff to be leaders in their own work.

CoLab Leadership Team's Principles

We will...

- be open to learning and grow together
- be curious and open minded
- 'walk the talk'
- make time for each other
- share power and promote equality of voice
- communicate openly and actively
- nurture leadership in everybody

Our hub

Our hub is unassuming from the outside but as you enter is filled with light, colour, plants and smiling faces. One partner working in the hub described the building as "a transformational space which energises and motivates me upon entering" (Robert Fenwick, Exeter City Council).

Our hub was designed to create both a physical path and the metaphorical 'river' flowing through the building. The working, meeting and social areas are clustered along this river to create a sense of community. Since then, we have learnt that people work most closely with those they are co-located with along the river.

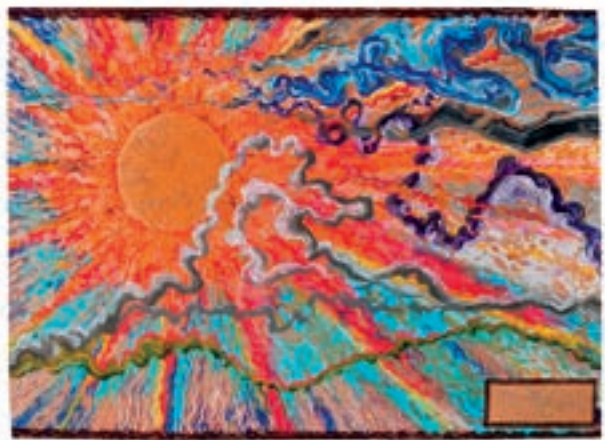
This year, we have refined our thematic approach to CoLab communities within the hub to focus on the following areas: learning and development; social justice; wellbeing; multiple disadvantage; mental health; infrastructure; and women's services. This new working arrangement will facilitate existing collaborations, help to form new ones, and bridge statutory and charitable systems with shared goals.

“The move round has been phenomenal.” (Amy Sparling, Catch 22)

A "chapter closing"

In June, one of our long-term partners, Exeter Community Initiatives, moved out of CoLab. Their Deputy CEO shared some reflections on her time within CoLab. She described the hub as "light and airy". The views were particularly calming, and she had enjoyed watching the changing of the seasons in the trees outside and listening to the birds. She drew attention the painting of a sun which was in view from her desk. She said she would miss the "glorious colours" which remind her of the

creative things that have happened during her time working here and the "beauty" of the space.



Social connection

In the last year, we have created numerous opportunities for staff and partners to build relationships and connect. We have continued to provide monthly hub breakfasts which have become an important occasion for staff to catch up.

In May, we began our Lunch & Learn programme delivered by staff for staff. Lunch & Learn invites staff from across organisations to come together to share their expertise, what inspires them or simply what makes them smile.

Since February, we have been running a monthly CoLab Book Group, which has enabled staff to connect with one another through stories. In May, we were also delighted to be joined by Exeter UNESCO City of Literature to experience bibliotherapy and explore our reading journeys with one another.



“ I look forward to the book group enormously each month. there’s a sense of anticipation when it is getting nearer the time to meet and we catch each other in the kitchen to discuss how we are progressing. It is a real joy to be able to spend time during a workday thinking about and discussing books with others in CoLab. ”
(Gail Mistlin, Wellbeing Exeter)

Collaborative working

We host collaborative projects which bring people from different organisations together. CoLab functions as a relationship facilitator, providing both the physical and psychological space for cooperation, and guides projects towards a common agenda. We aim to foster a collaborative community where people and organisations share not just space but ideas, knowledge, power and resource.

At times it can be challenging to mediate different organisational and personal aims, whilst simultaneously promoting diversity among our collaborations. We see our collaborations as patchwork quilts - each element with a discrete identity but

together creating something greater than the sum of its parts.

There are many opportunities for collaborative working within the hub; staff support one another and in doing so strengthen our response to complex problems. In addition, our work with The Devon Mental Health Alliance has supported external staff to build stronger teams, for example by leading a peer network of social prescribers. Since the pandemic, we have facilitated several key partnerships to emerge. This has allowed for focused joint working around key themes, but crucially it has also improved the resilience and sustainability of teams.

Our key partnerships

The One Mental Health Team

Aim: To improve mental health support accessible for homeless and vulnerably-housed people with complex needs, including both social and clinical interventions.

Partners: Devon Partnership NHS Trust, Real Life Psychology, Clocktower Surgery, Homeless Mental Health Team, Devon Mind

System Treatment and Recovery (STaR)

Aim: To provide wrap-around support to people rough sleeping or in temporary accommodation, who are experiencing substance misuse challenges but are not yet engaged with relevant services.

Partners: Devon County Council, Exeter City Council, Together Devon, BCHA, Julian House, Clocktower Surgery, BtheChange, Devon & Cornwall Police

Urban Learning Academy

Aim: To enable community-based adult learning, in accessible locations, empowering and transforming the lives of people who find it hardest to connect and engage.

Partners: Devon County Council, Exeter College, Exeter City Community Trust, Exeter City Council, University of Exeter

Brave Spaces

Aim: To improve support for women experiencing multiple disadvantages to access direct support in relation to trauma, sexual and domestic violence and abuse.

Partners: Encompass South West, North Devon Against Domestic Abuse, Mind in Somerset, Devon County Council, NHS One Devon

P r a c t i c e

3 Sustainable model

Objective: CoLab is able to understand and evidence the difference the CoLab model is making

It is important to develop ways to better understand and demonstrate the impact of the CoLab model. As described in the 'how we are building our learning community' section of this report (p.11), our approach to impact evaluation focuses on collective learning.

How we are building our learning community:

- 1 Nurturing collaboration
- 2 Embracing complexity
- 3 Action and learning together
- 4 Valuing qualitative, as well as quantitative data
- 5 Thinking long-term

We are inspired by action learning methodologies, and approaches to research which acknowledge and reduce power dynamics. Both qualitative and quantitative data are necessary to fully understand the difference the CoLab model is making. We value lived

experience, especially the stories of people we support, and believe relationships are integral to deepening understanding of our work.

Over the last year, the ways in which we think about public service evaluation have matured and we have had numerous opportunities to try doing things differently. The Urban Learning Academy was co-produced by a partnership of six civic organisations and guided by research from students at University of Exeter [7; 8], a learners survey conducted across Exeter and weekly engagement at Exeter Library. Academics from the Peninsula Mental Health Research Initiative (PenMHRI) have been integrated into the One Mental Health Team at CoLab. Crucially, two new collaborative projects, System Treatment & Recovery (STaR) and Brave Spaces have embraced action research approaches and seek to build learning communities to guide their work.

Developing the infrastructure for collective impact

Members of the CoLab community share an enthusiasm for research and action learning. However, it is often difficult to find the time and resource to dedicate to this work. Our *Doing What Matters Most* project, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund has enabled CoLab to develop the infrastructure to understand our collective impact. This 'infrastructure' includes spaces for group learning and reflection which enable us to collectively make sense of data. It also includes the time, and expertise of our Collective Impact Officer to develop the ways in which we collect, analyse and present quantitative and qualitative data.



PenARC Mental Health Research Initiative

We have been working with researchers from the PenMHRI, a £30 million Mental Health Research Initiative launched by the National Institute of Health Research and Department of Health and Social Care to help tackle the existing gap between local needs and mental health research activity. As part of this initiative, Lorraine Hansford

from the University of Exeter, has been integrated into One Mental Health Team to understand how, why, for whom and under what circumstances the team's aligned approach to providing mental health services affects outcomes for people with complex needs.

“Working with PenARC, particularly with Lorraine at the helm, has been an invaluable collaboration for us. Throughout our journey together on the whole picture work, Lorraine has been instrumental in the growth of our team, and weaves together nuanced information from various parts of the multiagency team. Perspectives from different agencies have been seen through their own lenses and then through the joint lens of the One Mental Health Team. Lorraine's perceptive and critical thinking has enriched all our understanding of this dynamic and sometimes challenging collaboration.” (Josie Garnsey, Mental Health Matters Lead)



The Relationships Collective

In 2022, our CEO, Fiona Carden was recruited to join The Relationships Collective: a group of 9 individuals from across the UK who together represent just some of the brilliant, enthusiastic, creative and diverse people who are pioneering a relationship-centred future. "Relationship-centred practice is about making

relationships a central operating principle on which we build a favourable and equitable economy, effective government, flourishing businesses, successful services and happy, healthy and thriving communities" [9]. Being part of this movement, helps us to both understand and broaden the impact of our model.



Action learning in practice: STaR & Brave Spaces

The Brave Spaces and System Treatment and Recovery (STaR) projects were both launched in the last year and share a commitment to applying action learning principles to their evaluations. The projects do not have fixed outcomes or goals they are working towards and monitored against. They aim to 'test and learn' the best ways to support people, focusing on system change as well as delivery. They are

building learning communities to guide their projects. In both cases, The System Change Action Alliance, a partnership of staff from charitable and statutory organisations across Devon who come together to challenge the current system for people with multiple disadvantage or complex needs [10], are acting as a 'critical friend' to challenge their assumptions (see p. 32).

System Treatment and Recovery

System Treatment and Recovery (STaR) is a collaborative project which supports people who are experiencing both homelessness and substance use challenges, but not engaged in other relevant services.

The systems thinking perspective employed by STaR enables us to consider the project as part of a larger interconnected ecosystem. We recognize that any change or decision within the project may have ripple effects on other parts of the system. Therefore, we strive to take a holistic approach to problem-solving, understanding that isolated solutions may lead to unintended consequences elsewhere.



Weekly reflection



During the STaR team's weekly reflections, they not only focus on the immediate project progress but also explore potential long-term implications. By identifying underlying patterns and relationships, they can anticipate potential challenges and opportunities in the future. This forward-thinking approach helps them be proactive in adapting to changing circumstances and ensures the project remains resilient and effective over time.

Furthermore, the use of journals for self-reflection provides an avenue for team members to delve deeper into their experiences and thoughts. This introspective practice fosters a deeper understanding of individual contributions and how they fit into the larger system. It also encourages team members to share insights and learn from one another, promoting a culture of continuous improvement and shared knowledge.

Overall, STaR's commitment to systems thinking and the integration of reflective practices fosters a learning-oriented and adaptive environment. It empowers us to be more effective in addressing challenges, leveraging opportunities, and achieving our project goals in a manner that is both sustainable and responsive to the complexities of the dynamic systems in which we operate.



Brave Spaces

Brave Spaces is a collaborative project across North Devon and Exeter which supports women experiencing multiple disadvantages and at risk of sexual or domestic violence and abuse. Brave Spaces in Exeter is led by CoLab Women.

The project involves creating spaces to reflect, challenge and learn from one another. This collective learning helps the team to build towards their shared vision of better provision for women across Devon. This includes building the evidence base to realise our long-term vision for a women's centre in Exeter that offers colocation, collaboration, and joint working opportunities, improving one-door support for women. Below is an overview of some of the spaces which support the learning and evaluation of the project:

Brave Spaces for learning

Regular team meetings:
Time for shared learning not just action planning

Weekly women's group:
Place for women to come together, connect and share what matters most to them

Action learning community meeting:
Staff involved in Brave Spaces meet to connect and share learning across both areas

Exeter

Focus group:
Women with lived experience of multiple disadvantage narrate their own stories and conduct research within their communities

Our Women:
Multi-agency forum for staff to share and develop best practice

Devon

Quarterly stewardship group:
Team leads and commissioners respond to data and learning, make recommendations and support system change

P r a c t i c e

4 Sustainable hub

Objective: CoLab is safe, financially secure and sustainable

An important factor in the long-term sustainability of the CoLab model is the adaptable, safe and accessible Welcome Team and Atrium single point of contact (SPOC) offer. The viability and stability of the SPOC is challenged by economic constraints, the scarcity of reliable funding and changes to other interdependent city centre services. Despite these unpredictable times we have

demonstrated our resilience and are determined, with support from partners, to develop a sustainable model that continues to provide a vital civic role in Exeter. We have substantially increased our revenue and secured funding that strongly aligns with our mission and priorities. We extend our deepest appreciation to our funding partners for their support.

CoLab Atrium and Welcome Team

The CoLab Atrium and Welcome Team function as a single point of contact for support for people with complex needs in Exeter. The number of visits to CoLab has more than doubled in the last year.

There were approximately 14,000 visits to CoLab atrium in last year.

CoLab Atrium is an open and accessible public space – a place to be – which is

crucial for people who are isolated from much of public life. Over the last year, we have refined our opening times to maximise accessibility, safety, and meaningful use of the space. Changing to appointment only in the afternoons has created a more purposeful and peaceful space for visitors and staff without compromising the number of people accessing support.



57% of visits to CoLab were resolved by the Welcome Team, without additional input from other services.



The Welcome Team are experts in the system, and highly respected within their community. Their strong relationships with both visitors and staff across organisations allow them to get the best support for people who need it most. They offer compassionate, professional support information and guidance. A regular visitor described our Welcome Team Lead as "worth her weight in gold" and compared her role to "juggling hand grenades". He described a hypothetical city in which the Atrium and CoLab Welcome Team didn't exist as "hellish". The Welcome Team has accomplished a significant amount of work

in the past year, both in terms of quantity and complexity. Work is underway to enable wider system stakeholders to better understand the vital role undertaken by the Welcome Team and the necessity for that to be acknowledged in the form of consistent, long-term funding. In the coming year, we are committed to developing a sustainable funding strategy for the Welcome Team. Additionally, we will be incorporating mental health support staff into our Welcome Team operating model and, in collaboration with the CoLab community, evaluating our approaches to addressing complex trauma.

Finances

CoLab operates as a registered charity with a primary mission to fulfil our charitable goals, as evident in this report. Simultaneously it is imperative for CoLab to maintain financial viability to ensure the continuity of our efforts in the years to come. In the last financial year we received a record level £1.38 million of grant funding for initiatives aligned with our strategic priorities. While the financial figures in this report hold significance, our primary focus is on the individuals impacted – the important numbers are the people not the pounds. We endeavour to continue to invest in the support and wellbeing of the incredible people who deliver the vast array of services offered at CoLab.

The fundamental progressive infrastructure, or backbone component of CoLab, on which the success of services are reliant, is not easy to fund. Elements critical to our operation, such as the Welcome Team and the core team, responsible for fostering collaboration among all partners, receive unpredictable financial support. Although these critical elements were self-sustainable in the 2022/23 period, we are continuously working towards securing stable future funding for the core components of CoLab. We are exploring ways to diversify our portfolio of funding partners and establishing relationships with funders who prioritise the long-term sustainability of our organisation, hub, and community.

Our funding partners

We are hugely grateful for the support we have received from our funding partners in the last financial year.



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities



**COMMUNITY
FUND**



Ministry
of Justice



Department
for Culture
Media & Sport



exeter college



Devon



Devon
Community
Foundation
Giving more locally



Office for Health
Improvement
& Disparities

SMALLWOODTRUST

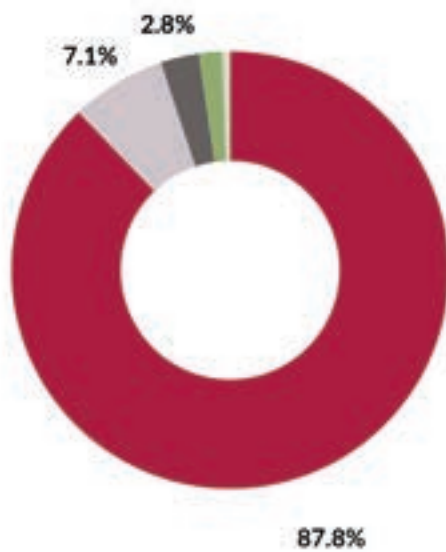


Exeter
City Council



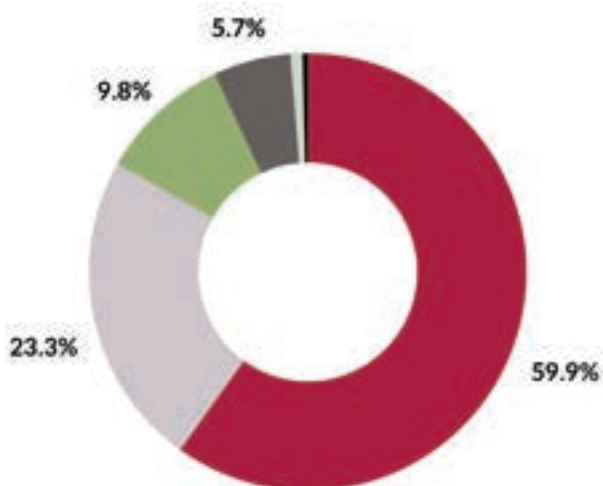
Devon Partnership
NHS Trust

Income



Grants	£1,384,765
Desk rental	£111,461
Room rental	£43,905
Service charge	£27,180
Other	£9,659
Total	£1,576,970

Expenditure



Employment	£956,417
Project	£372,416
Building	£155,977
Office	£91,077
Administration	£14,451
Governance	£5,952
Total	£1,596,290

P I a c e

5 Sustainable system

Objective: CoLab contributes to a fairer, more equal and inclusive system and city

CoLab is an anchor institution – defined as an organisation rooted in place and in which their “long-term sustainability is tied to the wellbeing of the populations they serve” [11]. We recognise that we must work, not just to support people, but to transform the complex-needs system, and our city.

Over the last year, CoLab has strengthened its capacity to support innovation of the system. We have built capacity in our senior leadership team for our CEO to develop partnership and strategic work. Our CEO plays a strategic role on numerous civic initiatives including the Exeter Civic Agreement, Liveable Exeter Board and Exeter City Housing Advisory Group. Her strategic work nationally includes participating in the Homeless Link National Advisory Council and Relationships Collective. We are founding members of the System Change Action Alliance, a partnership that aims to create a system which puts relationships

and people's lived experiences first. We are innovators of collaborative and relational practice, and support local and national systems to work in this way.

In recent years we have received recognition for our innovative approach. Our work has been praised in the recent 'Pathway Needs Assessment for People Experiencing Homelessness' for improving accessibility to services. In 2021, our work was recognised at the Exeter Living Awards – we were so proud to win both the Civic and Platinum Awards. As our city grows and prospers it is critical that the most vulnerable members of the population are not left behind. We support system change towards a more compassionate, equal city and system, which prioritises health, wellbeing and social capital.

“CoLab demonstrates phenomenal invention to bring together charities, businesses, health organisations, educators, hospitality and retail; to collaborate with all sectors of Exeter to fight and survive the pandemic, together. A civic inspiration in a time of great need.”
(Exeter Living Awards Judge)





System Change Action Alliance

The System Change Action Alliance (SCAA) is a partnership of staff from charitable and statutory organisations across Devon, including commissioners, who come together to challenge the current system for people with multiple disadvantage or complex needs [10]. The SCAA values the voice of lived experience, time together, relationships, sharing emotion and modelling the change you want to see.

The SCAA was formed in December 2020, and has facilitated the development of the Brave Spaces and STaR partnership projects. These projects are built from local evidence which suggests people want services to be less competitive and more collaborative. They have alliance contract models, in which the commissioners fund not a single service provider but an alliance of organisations with shared goals. As described previously, they are also designed as 'test-and-learn' projects which value service delivery alongside system change. The SCAA has acted as both the incubator and critical friend for these innovative pieces of work.



System Treatment and Recovery (STaR)

CoLab hosts, supports and facilitates the System Treatment and Recovery (STaR) project. STaR is a partnership by design. Led by Public Health Devon, stakeholders working with social exclusion came together, acknowledging that configuration of the existing system was too atomised to meet the needs of individuals exhibiting complex presentations, and designed an alliance style project that could address the intersecting needs of our most excluded community members.

STaR brings together substance misuse recovery interventions, housing and homelessness expertise, psychology, specialist health interventions, robust data analysis and meaningful activity to give individuals the best opportunity of establishing and sustaining recovery. This team is structured in a way that allows intensive and enduring therapeutic relationships between clients and workers.

It is well evidenced that sustainable recovery outcomes are predicated on an effective, diverse and above all well integrated system. The STaR team works very closely with a variety of partners across the city. The multiagency character of CoLab closely mirrors the model and ethos of the STaR team and there is valuable synergy between STaR and CoLab. Given this alignment between STaR and CoLab, being embedded in the hub adds value, it adds value to the daily experience of the staff and to the recovery outcomes of the clients.

Improving mental health systems

Over last year, we have focused on improving responses to mental health. Within the hub, we have improved our mental health offer by establishing the One Mental Health Team. Outside of the hub, through our work with The Devon Mental Health Alliance, we have focused on improving access to services and identifying new opportunities to support people across all of Devon's communities.

The One Mental Health Team at CoLab, is a partnership of professionals across primary care, psychology, psychiatry and community services. The team discuss clients at



multi-agency meetings and creates support plans which include both clinical and social interventions. Alongside the One Mental Health Team is the long-running First Step project which focuses on linking people with mental health concerns to opportunities to connect with their communities. Over the last year, the team have shown a substantial impact on health system outcomes.

In April 2022, when the One Mental Health Team was established, there were 54 people experiencing homelessness on the waiting list for mental health support at Clocktower GP Surgery (based at CoLab).

By January 2023, the waiting list had decreased by 56%. In addition, A&E and out-of-hours attendances for the 54 people had decreased by 55% and 85% respectively.



Devon Mental Health Alliance

Working together for better mental health across Devon

The significant scope and breadth of work carried out by the Devon Mental Health Alliance (DMHA) in its first year has included strengthening existing mental health systems through training, grants, supporting staff wellbeing, promoting integration as well as establishing new initiatives. In order to improve the way people with complex mental health needs are supported, it is important to cultivate and be present in spaces that enable change at a system level. An example of that space is The Eastern Locality Mental Health Partnership Group where the DMHA co-leads a collaboration of statutory and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) partners from across Eastern Devon in exploring and implementing solutions to areas of need highlighted by the community. This group is able to look at solutions that may impact an entire locality rather than a traditional model that may focus on a specific town or Primary Care Network.

joy

CoLab's work with the Devon Mental health Alliance has been a pivotal part of the development and implementation of a new case management and online directory tool for social prescription to non-medical interventions in the community called the Joy App.

Joy creates a space within a GP's data system to refer directly to community services and record a patient's movement through those services, including the impact of what they engaged with. It also creates an online directory of services managed by clever algorithms and systems to stay up to date and relevant with minimal intervention. Our relationship with services across the county has enabled us to maximise the impact of Joy.

The number of organisations 'signed up' to Joy has grown from 100 to almost 500 in a few months.

Our understanding of the system and how community services operate has enabled us to contribute vital wisdom to the development of Joy and how it interacts with those involved.

Safe Place for Everyone Charter

A co-produced citywide agreement enabling providers of services to develop aligned responses to anti-social behaviour. This work includes creating better ways in which partners across Exeter can better support the police, mindful of the challenges for the policing community in working with colleagues in the courts and wider criminal justice system.

Our Women

Established in May 2023 by CoLab Women, 'Our Women' is a multi-agency forum which aims to improve support for women with complex needs through creative solutions, peer-to-peer support and system change. In its first year the group has explored city-wide solutions to cuckooing - when a vulnerable person's accommodation is taken over to facilitate criminal activity. They have also developed a research project - 'The Circle Line' - which will map the accommodation journeys of women with complex needs and explore reasons for frequent loss of accommodation.



P I a c e

6 Sustainable community

Objective: the multi-agency community response maximises expertise, resources and relationships, to strengthen and develop the community

We recognise prevention is better than cure, and the primary way to have a long-term impact on reducing health inequalities in our communities. We aim to build on the strengths of our community – working with what's strong, not what's wrong.

Over the last year, we have broadened our offer to the wider community. Our Community Mental Health Development Leads, working with the Devon Mental Health Alliance, have supported communities to understand their mental health needs, and test out new ways to support one another. We have established the Urban Learning Academy (ULA) - a group of connected organisations enabling community-based adult learning, in accessible locations. The ULA has built significant momentum towards Exeter becoming a 'learning city', those which 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' [12]. Wellbeing Exeter cemented its reputation for building and connecting communities. They continued to demonstrate that a healthy community is one which is connected, active and empowered to grow their own ideas.

We have also engaged with the wider community through events. For example, we invited the community to share personal stories at BLOOM festival, a free community festival for mental health awareness week [13]. We also organised a large event for International Women's Day and included a variety of activities for all ages and education about support services available to women in Exeter.

We recognise that investing in communities involves improving the environments in which they live. CoLab staff and volunteers worked with the artist Scottie Gillespie to paint the alleyway leading to the CoLab hub. This has contributed to a wider community effort to make the area in which CoLab is located (Sidwell St) a place which people respect, own and celebrate.

“CoLab are the bearers of hope in the city.”
(Right Revd Robert Atwell,
Bishop of Exeter)



Creating solutions with communities

Over the last twelve months, with the Devon Mental Health Alliance, we have organised and led 'Creative Solutions' events in Tiverton, Exeter, Crediton, Okehampton, and Exmouth. The purpose of these events is to gather organisations involved in supporting individuals with complex mental health needs, both statutory and VCSE, to explore what is working well and what gaps in provision there are locally.

Over 130 people representing over 60 different organisations have engaged in creative solutions events.

In each two-hour event we work towards developing a plan to take action in improving local mental health provision by building on the current strengths of the community. We then facilitate the co-design and action-learning experiments

that are sparked into life from these conversations with multiple agencies within the community. For example, in Tiverton we are helping over ten organisations co-design a pilot project providing safe spaces for those experiencing a mental health crisis. In Okehampton we will be supporting the organising of a wellbeing festival for staff and volunteers working with those with complex mental health needs. And in Exmouth we will be helping to lay the foundation for future multi-agency dual diagnosis work by organising a "human library" event raising awareness.

The success of these creative solutions events and the action experiments that follow them depends on relational trust built between ourselves and those involved in mental health work, as well as trust between organisations, that has been cultivated through hours of conversations and listening before, during, and after.



Our Community Mental Health Development Leads:

“Matt’s name has become a buzzword across the VCSE sector in East Devon. Barely a meeting goes by without mention of his name which is testament to the incredible impact and reach of Matt and his team over the last year: they have well and truly put mental health on the agenda right across the sector.”
(Matt Smith, Director of Waffle Away and Axminster Voluntary Sector Rep)

Community-based adult learning

The Urban Learning Academy (ULA) are a group of connected organisations enabling community-based adult learning, in accessible locations, empowering and transforming the lives of people who find it hardest to connect and engage [14].



The ULA connects existing learning providers who create new opportunities based on the needs of the community. They collaborate to provide different ways for adults to access learning – at a time and in a place that works to their needs and agenda – not ours. Together we work towards the vision of building a sustainable and inclusive ULA that offers a hybrid and accessible approach to learning that supports the Exeter Community.

Alliance and partners

Over the past 2 years The ULA Alliance has grown from the emerging four founding partners, CoLab Exeter, Exeter College, Exeter City council and Devon County Council to welcome Exeter University and Exeter City Community Trust to form an Alliance of 6 partners. Our Exeter learning provider partnerships have also grown to over 27 active partners, who offer incredible inclusive and accessible learning opportunities.



Engaging with the community

Over the last year, the ULA has built its recognition within the community. They run engagement events throughout the city and have a weekly presence in Exeter Library to promote the ULA to learners and the community. ULA Community Ambassadors have been familiar, friendly faces encouraging and supporting people to engage in learning.

“ Learning with others has given me the confidence to connect with my community. ”
(ULA learner)

Learning as a tool for change

As a city, we need to enable people to lead lives they have reason to value by providing spaces where they can meet, mix and develop social capital. Through the ULA, we are connecting institutions enabling equity of access to everyone and growing as a learning city. Social infrastructure builds social capital and together as a ULA, we can support this to make Exeter a thriving city to learn, reduce isolation and use learning as a tool for change.



Strengthening community

Wellbeing Exeter respond to community and resident needs, making the most of the assets that already exist in the city or residents, to strengthen relationships, take action and create better communities to live in [15]. Wellbeing Exeter have three main strands of their work: connecting the community; building the community; and organising physical activity.



Connecting the community

Community Connectors have knowledge of a wide range of local opportunities and are able to connect people to those that are right for them.



Building the community

Community Builders support local residents and communities to grow their own ideas, try new things that bring people together, improve their wellbeing and make their community a better place to live.

>75

new ideas have launched in Exeter this last year with the support of our Community Builders.

Case study: A community connector and builder from Wellbeing Exeter identified a need to build bridges between native-English speakers and people learning English. A local resident suggested a 'multicultural English café' and set up a WhatsApp group to organise with thirty women originally from the Middle East. A weekly café was born hosted at the local Mosque and led by two English volunteers.



Organising physical activity

Community Physical Activity Organisers focus on being more active as one of the 5 Ways to Wellbeing, working alongside individuals and communities to make physical activity part of their daily lives.



Message from our CEO and Chair

Our guiding principles of collaboration, welcome, compassion, ambition and social justice inform our daily practice and are the result of seven years of learning, experimenting, failing and being courageous. We continue to work together to achieve the vision of an inclusive city in which everyone's voice is heard and valued.

In the last year, we have been called a 'social A&E', an 'anchor institution', 'a trusted pair of hands' and the 'bearers of hope' in our city. We believe CoLab lives up to each of those statements. We have nurtured and enabled ground-breaking alliances collaborating around common goals to tackle long standing inequalities – these alliances leave aside competing agendas to build trust and relationships. We believe that our approach of collaboration, and alliance-working is the foundation of a sustainable future for services working together to address multiple disadvantage.

Our work in building a sustainable future for the CoLab community is informed by a growing body of evidence telling us that personal and community social capital is positively associated with improved health outcomes. We know that low levels of social connection result in higher rates of mental health issues and we know that a deficit of social capital compounds the challenges of entrenched disadvantage and inequalities. This report outlines the numerous ways in which the CoLab community supports people to build social capital through learning and connection. We create the conditions for people to lead lives they have reason to value.

We are grateful for the dedication of our incredible board of trustees who support and empower the teams in their determination to continue to make a difference despite our uncertain times. We recognise and thank the people that go that extra mile every day because of their shared belief in what we do. We will strive to continue providing a trusted place where visitors are welcomed, valued and respected.

The pioneering spirit that launched CoLab seven years ago prevails today. We hope to broaden our reach and impact and are always excited to make new relationships and forge new partnerships.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. If our work inspires or interests you in any way then we would be delighted to hear from you!

Fiona Carden, Chief Executive Officer

Julie Dent, Chair of Trustees



Thank you to all our hub partners!



Devon
Community
Foundation
Giving more locally



Interventions
Alliance
Part of the Seetec Group



Exeter
City Council



Dentaid
The Dental
Charity

VISION
CARE
FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE



Read Easy
Helping adults learn to read



catch
22



Rees
HELPING CARE EXPERIENCED PEOPLE THRIVE



Julian House
The home of opportunity



HM Prison &
Probation Service

Real Life
Psychology



THE
EDDYSTONE
TRUST
HIV and Sexual Health Services



THE
OLIVE PROJECT



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