

# **An Evaluation of the Communities of Interest Network: Final Report**

*Produced for Forum Central  
by  
Sarah Frost and Simon Rippon  
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## Summary Headline Findings

The Communities of Interest Network (COI Network) has:

- a ***broad membership of both third sector and public sector organisations*** representing a diverse range of communities and issues;
- been a ***place for information, conversations, and ideas*** related to the Covid-19 response to be shared;
- served to ***highlight the needs and challenges faced by different communities of interest*** - especially those at most significant risk;
- helped to ***promote what's available to help address the needs*** of different communities;
- provided a ***strong platform for peer-to-peer dialogue about inequalities*** and space to practically work through related issues;
- been a place where ***members can feed in what's happening and what's known*** around Covid-19;
- been a ***sounding board*** where members came up with practical ideas about local solutions;
- ***acted as a learning/knowledge hub***, where members identify opportunities to develop practice and resources – contributing to the third sector's broader workforce development;
- been a ***mechanism for partnership working and more collaborative delivery models*** - ensuring power and agency are mobilised across partnerships, within the third sector and statutory bodies, and with local people;
- had a core role in ***maintaining the power of the voice of the third sector***;
- had a role in highlighting the value and ***potential for intersectional work*** and influencing thinking, practice, and partnership opportunities around this;
- been a ***helpful conduit for stakeholders*** to place and establish work strands that contribute to strategic objectives on inequalities;
- been a ***platform for meaningful engagement with communities*** for use by commissioners and others tasked with addressing inequalities;
- provides a potential ***vehicle to share lived experiences*** of communities;
- a ***potential role as a convener and facilitator*** to increase the voice and representation from COI and support practical activity by third sector groups;
- the potential to ***support system stakeholders*** in delivering activity related to post covid social recovery.

## 1) Introduction and background

Third sector and community organisations have been crucial in helping co-develop the response to the Covid-19 Pandemic. The Leeds COVID-19 outbreak control plan developed by the Leeds Director for Public Health and partners, in line with national guidance, sets out how local partners will work together to help reduce transmission of COVID-19 and manage outbreaks, especially amongst those communities at greatest risk facing additional challenges.

Leeds City Council's aim is to ensure that its COVID-19 response meets the needs of all communities, communities of interest, and those at greater risk, or more vulnerable, to COVID-19. Vulnerability includes those who are clinically vulnerable, those who are socially vulnerable, and those communities who are marginalised or underserved.

Forum Central was asked to manage the Leeds Covid-19 Outbreak Plan response with the third sector in the form of partnership working, networking, capacity building, and grant allocations. The third sector outbreak plan seeks to increase capacity in working with communities and third sector partners, collaborating with communities and third sector colleagues, utilising their expertise and networks to explore the barriers to engagement and develop approaches to overcome these.

### 1.1) The Communities of Interest Network

There are numerous existing groups, fora, and networks representing diverse communities of interest across Leeds (See Appendix C). The Communities of Interest Network (referred to in this report as COI Network) was established as part of the Third Sector Outbreak Plan in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Developed by Forum Central in partnership with Voluntary Action Leeds, Healthwatch, and Leeds City Council, the COI Network has been built on trusted relationships with local community organisations and the richness and diversity of the Third Sector in Leeds. The COI Network was established as a place for community organisations to share knowledge and insight related to what's happening in communities, the challenges faced, and the successes achieved.

The COI Network aims to ensure the flow of information and support relating to Covid-19 reaches all communities, especially the most marginalised and vulnerable communities. The COI Network also seeks to enable effective local two-way dialogue between communities and providers and supports active involvement from these communities to shape solutions that best meet their needs.

Based at Forum Central, an Outbreak Plan Coordinator acts as the single point of contact for the third sector relating to the COI Network and Outbreak Plan Coordination. They also work to galvanise the third sector and maintain positive engagement in response to emerging health needs in Leeds. Their role involves connecting the various workstreams/learning/levels through good communication and information sharing. The main activities of the COI Network are:

- **Communities of Interest Virtual Sessions.** These take place every two weeks to bring members together to share issues stemming from Covid-19 and discuss how organisations can best support others within their communities. Audio recordings and notes of the session and flashcards are shared following each session (see Appendix D).

- **Communities of Interest Email Updates.** The weekly email to members with the latest news and information about Covid-19 in Leeds with resources for organisations to use and share.

Separate evaluations of the grants scheme and the community hubs set up in response to the Pandemic are being undertaken. This evaluation focuses on the role of the Communities of Interest Network, hosted by Forum Central.

### 1.2) Aim of the evaluation

This qualitative evaluation aims to explore the role of the COI Network, the related benefits and learning from the perspective of COI Network members and wider system stakeholders, and the future role of the COI Network. See Appendix A for a full list of organisations that participated in this evaluation.

The evaluation findings are based on the following data sources:

- Survey responses from 15 COI Network members
- Interviews/focus groups with 13 COI Network members
- Interviews/focus groups with 20 wider stakeholders, including system leaders from across Leeds

### Limitations of the evaluation approach

We were unable to undertake any face-to-face fieldwork with COI Network members or stakeholders due to the social restrictions of Covid 19, which informed our sampling approach and method. We had access to the membership list for the COI Network and the online COI Network meetings through which we circulated an invitation to participate in the interviews, survey, and focus groups.

The evaluation began when the COI Network had been operating for several months, so much of the data collected was retrospective.

There were limitations in terms of the sample who responded to the survey and invitation to interview. The survey was sent to 62 COI Network members via email. Fifteen people (24%) responded to the survey. We undertook interviews and focus groups with 13 COI Network members representing nine different COI (although many identified as representing a wide range of COI). This means we did not hear the views of individuals or organisations representing some of the COI involved in the network.

The participants in the evaluation were self-selected (a convenience sample), which may indicate that some communities, voices and issues were not represented. Organisations who we spoke to or who answered the survey, and the COI they represented are listed in Appendix A. We did not consult community members directly in the evaluation but made the assumption that the voices of community organisations were representative of these. Direct consultation with community members could be a consideration in the review of the COI network.

We also interviewed 21 wider stakeholders and system leaders to seek views and insights of the COI Network and the third sector in the context of a wider system response to the Pandemic. These

interviews also focused on the possible contribution of COI Network in the covid social recovery phase.

These respondents were in roles across the health, care, and community system and included those in senior positions in statutory sectors in the Council and community agencies. We spoke with representatives from Leeds city council (Public Health, Health Partnerships team, Migration Team, Communities), Healthwatch, Community Hubs, VAL, Street Games.

***The evaluation findings and recommendations should be shared with all members of the COI Network, especially those who did not participate, so they can contribute their views.***

## 2) Key Findings

### 2.1) Membership, Involvement and Representation of COI Network

The COI Network seeks to represent all 'Communities of Interest' in Leeds. 'Communities of Interest' are defined as groups of people who share an identity, such as people with a learning disability or those who share an experience, such as the homeless community. An initial list of communities was identified (see Box 1), and relevant organisations and individuals were invited to join the network (see Appendix B).

The COI Network has established a broad membership and representation from a diverse range of communities and issues.

*"There are different group representatives to engage with across all communities of interest – it crosses all different aspects..."*

*"having one group which represents everyone together is unique."*

#### Box 1: Communities of Interest Represented in the COI Network

Homeless people	People from black, Asian and minority communities
LGBT+ communities	People with long term health conditions
People with mental health support needs	Single parents
People with a learning disability, autism or mobility issues	Unpaid carers
People with physical or sensory impairments or are deaf or blind	Young people (including care leavers)
Men and men's mental health	Older people
Refugees, asylum seekers, migrant communities	Sex workers
Gypsy, traveller, and Roma people	People with drug or alcohol issues
People leaving prison	People facing high levels of inequality
	People living in deprived communities
	Women and maternity
	People experiencing domestic abuse

From the survey responses, it is clear that some organisations represent a range of different communities of interest and that there are issues of intersectionality (e.g., autism may affect any of the COI).

*"We work with wide groups and pass on issues from many marginalised communities we work with."*

Around three-quarters (73%) of survey respondents stated that the participation in the COI Network represents the diversity of communities across Leeds. There was a view from some that some groups were underrepresented on the network, for example, older people with long-term conditions, younger people and mental health issues, and migrant communities.

#### Involvement in the Network

The involvement of most COI Network members was long-term, with very few recent (in the month before the survey) new members. 46% (n=15) of survey respondents have been involved since March 2020, with 33% having engaged for between 7>9 months. A small number of organisations had attended all COI Network meetings. There was an equal split (40%) between those attending

most and (40%) those attending a few COI Network meetings. Busy work diaries and work volume had impacted members involvement and ability to attend meetings.

### Reasons for being involved in the network

There were four main themes related to involvement in the COI Network identified by survey respondents, which were echoed by the data in the interviews and focus groups.

1. To **share information** on my/my partner organisations COVID response work (80%)
2. To **gain understanding and knowledge** about what other agencies and groups are doing in response to COVID and to share learning about approaches taken (80%)
3. To **share the experiences** of the people and communities I /partners work with (80%)
4. To have an **opportunity to influence decision-making** systems across the City re: needs and solutions for our community of interest (80%)

Other themes rated highly were '**opportunities to shape new partnerships**' (73%) and '**to share new information on Covid and the community response**' (60%), and '**to better understand the needs of people in high-risk groups and impact of COVID on them**' (60%).

## 2.2) Key Benefits for Network Members

Key benefits of the COI Network identified by members were:

- Gaining knowledge and information
- Sharing and being together as a practice community
- Learning and practice changes
- Making new connections and partnerships
- Opportunities to challenge and influence peer organisations

### Gaining knowledge and information

A key role of the COI Network was the provision and sharing of information both about Covid rates and responses and the impact on different communities. The survey responses show that three of the most highly rated benefits<sup>1</sup> (by 80% or more) of the COI Network were related to this theme;

*'I have gained increased understanding about the differential and disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Communities of Interest in Leeds.'*

*'I have gained up-to-date information about rates of COVID in Leeds.'*

Some participants saw the primary aim of the COI Network as being a conduit through which information is delivered and knowledge shared. As one respondent commented:

*"Having started my role a week prior to the pandemic starting, **this group has been invaluable for me, to link with other organisations and understand vital information about what is taking place in Leeds to share across the communities we represent.**"*

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<sup>1</sup> The survey asked respondents to rate their experience (on a scale from: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree) on a range of potential benefits of the COI Network.



There was a strong emphasis on the COI Network as a conduit for sharing information from public health and others on a wide range of issues related to the Pandemic.

*"...the guest speakers are a real draw around what's happening around incidence rates... local up to date information is really useful."*

The provision of information had also enabled some organisations to access practical support and resources, such as PPE provision.

*"there was an impact on staff wellbeing where young people were not sticking to the rules and staff did not have adequate PPE ...through the network we got donations of PPE for staff - we wouldn't have known about that without the network."*

Feedback on the information provided via the COI Network was largely positive, with respondents stating it was clear, comprehensive, timely, and helpful:

*"the communication is good – a good level and content and detail... it means that if I needed information on a certain topic... I'd know where to find it. it's very accessible ...I know I could just email Forum Central and ask them for something ."*

*"Lots of effort and energy goes into providing information in different formats (e.g., different languages, easy read formats), but **the meetings really bring the information to life..**"*

*"Really useful and **keeps us all in the loop** - ... **it's a one-stop shop for info around covid**"*

#### Sharing and being together as a practice community

As well as being a place to hear information about Covid-19 in the Leeds context, the COI Network also provided an opportunity for members to **share their own information** and insight about the needs, challenges, and experiences of people in their communities and about their Covid response work.

The survey responses show that **four of the most highly rated benefits<sup>2</sup>** (by 80% or more) of the COI Network were related to this theme;

- I have **gained knowledge of what other organisations and groups are doing** in response to COVID and shared learning.
- I have **shared the experiences of the people and communities** I /partners work with COI Network members.
- I have **shared information on the challenges experienced** by my/my partner organisations.
- I have **shared information on my/my partner organisations COVID response work.**

<sup>2</sup> The survey asked respondents to rate their experience (on a scale from: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree) on a range of potential benefits of the COI Network.

The COI Network meetings are a place where members are invited to share their work and experiences, and insight. Members were also asked to suggest topics for discussion and exploration, often with input from external agencies.

There were several examples of where the **COI Network had enabled members to share information** with each other and all respondents highlighted the value of being together and sharing common interests and work focus.

*"it has been a **massive opportunity for me to be involved** - bringing together other organisations to **share challenges and have the opportunity to network and understand where organisations were offering support...**"*

*"it...**brings people together in a way that's very, really valuable** and gives people the opportunity to think about the future... the network has evolved over time to become something that's really beneficial and helpful - it's hugely valuable I would like to see it stay"*

*"it's so useful for everybody to be together .... in a forum - it sparks lots more information...because we are all debating... it's richer because we can all support each other to get that information out and to look at how best to do it... **Leeds has done a really fantastic job in having local messages and getting information out**"*

COI Network members identified lots of crossover on some issues discussed and raised in COI Network meetings, e.g. mental health, health conditions and migrant communities, young people's development.

*"It's good to hear what others in communities...are saying and doing and learn from them – **there's lots of crossover on certain issues e.g. mental health.**"*

In some cases, involvement in the COI Network **prompted organisations to collect their own insight** and data;

*"[involvement in the network] sparked me to do a women's survey on the impact of covid 19...collected local data and had over 1000 replies ...we shared the findings in the Communities Of Interest Network ...[which] enabled us to share that information more readily"*

### Learning and practice changes

Members saw the COI Network as **a good learning environment** between organisations. The COI Network provided an opportunity to work on common issues related to the Pandemic (e.g. vaccines, shielding, track and trace, testing centres, digital inclusion).

Most survey respondents (73%) and a number of those interviewed were able to identify changes to work practices due to their involvement in and learning from the COI Network.

Working together to ensure information about Covid was available in an accessible format for some communities of interest was one example of this.

*"Been involved in identifying and highlighting accessibility needs for those across the community who need alternative formats of information,"*

*"there was also an opportunity to influence and challenge the kind of communication that existed that wasn't accessible to the communities we support – we were able to challenge people to think differently."*

*"We are working alongside [other partners] to develop a more inclusive approach to our community of interest."*

**Examples of resources and activities** developed via networks in the COI Network highlight the value and potential for intersectional work, these included:

- Covid toolkit for people autism
- Partnership working with Basis on support for sex workers who are autistic
- Mental health resource for people who are autistic
- Autism awareness training for Housing Association staff
- Men's health project focused around men and boys against domestic violence
- Development of the culturally appropriate food hub at Hamara

While much of the learning and sharing has been covid specific (e.g. using face masks for autistic adults, shielding advice for different COI), the COI Network is seen as a suitable 'ring holder' for broader issues to be raised and discussed. There was a view that the COI Network had a role in **raising awareness of diversity and inclusion and pre-existing issues** faced by communities and provided an opportunity to focus on these and make changes.

*"The COI network has **highlighted a number of issues that some communities have been facing for a long while** and ...has really shone a light on that."*

*"Covid aggravated inequalities...exposing vulnerabilities... these will unfold over the years... COI Network can be a part of this..."*

*"...it served to put **focus on existing issues and inequalities and is an opportunity for real change** - for example flexible working practices is something women have been asking for and Covid has shone a light on that...juggling multiple roles, working from home...seems a real opportunity to change things for the better ..."*

The opportunity and experience of new connections made via the COI Network also exposed issues and agendas facing multiple communities, creating a **focus on intersectionality**<sup>3</sup> and to influence thinking and practice around this:

*"first time I've been involved on work with so many equalities strands... been very exciting... the exposure to the intersectionality's..."*

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<sup>3</sup> i.e. the interconnected nature of social categories such as race, class, gender identity, sexual identity, and disability as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

*"Women are included as a part of all other communities of interest so it's an opportunity to get [others] to consider if a gendered approach or gendered focus is something they could do... to keep banging that drum around influencing so it works both ways - for example culturally diverse groups... I learn from them so **the community of interest also influences my practice re: intersectionality.**"*

The network allows members **to create new or stronger connections with other COI** to push issues forward and for related activity to be planned and actioned.

#### New Connections and Partnerships

Developing new relationships, connections and partnerships were seen as a core benefit of the COI Network. In most cases this was connections with other third sector agencies although there were examples of improved connections with public sector partners (see influencing section). Over 80% of survey respondents said that a key benefit of COI Network had been: *I have **developed new partnerships or connections** with other organisations.*

Several respondents mentioned how it had served to strengthen the link between individual organisations and Forum Central and wider networks and was a *"great vehicle for improved partnership working."*

*"Right now, **the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector in Leeds is thriving when it comes to partnership work...so any platform Like Forum Central...is crucial ...as a vehicle for partnership working...**"*

*"It's **strengthened connections with other organisations,** and we can now reach out to them for partnership working."*

*"**Partnership working has been so powerful...** it's a shame there are so many cuts in the Council which means this may not happen in future..."*

*"One benefit of Covid is that we have all come together, and we need to stay together as a city"*

*"We have achieved so much more working as a whole city and working in partnership...we are able to get the knowledge of other organisations in Leeds to benefit our communities...we are able to tick so many more boxes..."*

This increase in partnership and joint working can help **identify and avoid duplication** of work making better use of resources. There was a view that these partnerships could lead to future funding opportunities for community organisations.

*"covid brought us together but we need to keep connected.....funders are now looking for people to work in partnership so there is a real benefit."*

Several respondents also felt that the COI Network was now a 'place to go' for information and sharing of practice and ideas - that had served to strengthen the sector.

*"We had a pile of people to support, and we didn't know how to do this...but **we had access to people and organisations who could offer support and new referral pathways...**and training for staff – it was really beneficial."*

*"I know now there is a network to go to...we can't lose that...**it has strengthened the sector for the better...**"*

#### Opportunities to Challenge and Influence System Leaders

Some saw these new partnerships and relationships developed through COI Network as providing a key influencing opportunity to give the third sector a stronger collective voice and have a greater impact on local people.

*"the communities of interest network [members] together...- I think that's a really vital part of it actually rather than [if] Forum Central had gone...to individual groups, **having it all together makes it more of a force and more of a focus...**and I think it's been successful in that."*

*"**bringing groups together to influence what's happening** on the ground - I can hear what's happening across all the groups"*

*"I saw lots of organisations communicating and talking together - it created a climate for working on common issues....peers from other community groups offered support to each other on issues and challenges faced in our communities...the benefits to local people... that issues have been raised.. they have a voice, and we are able to influence other future developments."*

*"it's a very consultative process and approach **where we feel involved and have a voice and chance to influence**"*

The feedback from system leaders and wider stakeholders is summarised in section 2 of this report. Here we cite feedback from COI Network members.

It was highlighted by some COI Network members that health and social care leads across the City recognise the COI Network as an **important conduit for information** related to the outbreak plan, but also flowing backwards from communities and sharing the issues of concern.

*"they're [Leaders] really keen to use the network to engage more with communities of interest..."*

The Pandemic and community response has also enabled local groups and third sector agencies to take informed risks, or innovate or be more agile in accelerating development opportunities to support communities.

*"The pandemic has shown **how responsive the third sector has been...** there's been an opportunity to take risks... statutory partners have recognised the value of what we're doing - - we've been flexible...and shifted what we've done in response ."*

*"The network has **shown the power of the third sector and the ability of the third sector to respond to crisis** – there has been some positive feedback around the role of the third sector and how central this has been in responding to the crisis."*

### 2.3) Members Views on aspects of the COI Network delivery

We asked COI Network members for their views on different aspects of the COI Network delivery. As mentioned above, most members were very positive about the information provided. Some said how they had shared the email updates with colleagues and team members. A small number felt that the email updates were a little long and too detailed – but most recognised that they would rather have more than less – so they could be selective in which elements were most relevant. There was a suggestion that some key headline message would be helpful. Several members were not aware of the flashcards (see Appendix E) and some of the information on the website. One person suggested the use of a SLACK<sup>4</sup> channel for the COI Network to continue discussions and share resources.

#### Membership of the COI Network

In terms of COI Network membership, it was recognised that it had been based on the current crisis and that a review was suggested by some. It was felt some communities of interest are not included, and there is a need to avoid 'the usual suspects' being around the table. There were also some concerns about how to ensure continued engagement of staff in the COI Network, especially when face to face delivery resumes and restrictions ease.

#### Views on COI Network Meetings: Format and engagement

Most COI Network members found the meetings useful, providing helpful information and opportunities for engagement.

*"It feels **very fluid and open**. Forum Central are very quick to respond to questions and reply – it feels like they want to help - so if I ask to put items on the agenda, I know that they will be put on."*

*"There are **regular opportunities for involvement**, e.g., chairing meetings or presenting an element of our work."*

In terms of meeting frequency, around half (53.5%) felt the frequency was right, and 46.67% stating it was too frequent. Identified challenges with the meetings were that some thought they were too long or sometimes too generic in focus.

*"It can be **tricky to find times for meetings that suit everyone**...I know they've tried different times - but it's hard to get it right especially for part time workers."*

*"It can be hard for some staff to attend all sessions when they're every two weeks ...especially those who are part time."*

A minority of the respondents felt that the meetings were too long and too much time was spent on introductions and updates.

*"the meetings are **sometimes a bit lacklustre and boring**. The 40 minutes intros at the beginning is often a waste of time because nothing has changed..."*

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<sup>4</sup> SLACK is an online platform designed for sharing knowledge, information etc. within groups, teams and organisations.



### *Delivery mechanisms:*

Respondents made suggestions as to how the virtual sessions could be improved:

- Ask people to rename zoom names as their name and organisations – {useful if you want to follow up with anybody and avoids everybody introducing themselves every time}
- Keep it online rather than face to face as it reduces time needed
- Spend less time on updates at meetings
- Offer resources/incentives to keep people engaged - recognising many small organisations have limited resource/ budget and staff time is constrained
- A thematic focus for meetings going forward could be considered.

### 2.4) Members Views on Future Role and Purpose of the COI Network

Respondents were asked their views on the role and purpose of the COI Network in the future. Most respondents wanted the COI Network to continue and made the following suggestions:

- COI Network needs **a clear purpose** going forwards, e.g., addressing health inequalities ongoing for the most marginalised groups
- COI Network can be used to **feed in challenges for different communities and to share their voice**.
- COI Network needs more **buy-in from health and social care leads** and across the City
- COI Network has a core role in **maintaining the power of the voice of the third sector**
- COI Network has a role in **promoting what's available and helping address the needs of different communities** across the City - a place to raise the voice of communities of interest
- COI Network needs to **avoid crossover and duplication** with other groups and fora (some members attend multiple groups, so there's a risk of duplication of effort)
- COI Network has a role as a place where community organisations **can keep feeding in what's happening on what's known**, e.g., messages around shielding.
- COI Network has a role in highlighting the **value and potential for intersectional work** and influencing thinking, practice, and partnership opportunities around this
- COI Network has a role in **developing learning and resources** as part of the third sector's wider workforce development

### Future Focus of COI Network sessions

There was a suggestion from several members that the COI Network sessions **could be thematic** and take the form of an **'ideas exchange'** or **good practice session** - linked to specific topics. This would allow organisations to share what they have done so others can learn from this. In terms of other issues that the COI Network could focus on, respondents made the following suggestion:

- Challenges for COI as we move out of furlough, e.g., unemployment, financial problems
- Anxiety and mental health challenges related to the relaxation of lockdown, e.g., young people and mental health and anxiety, older people, and agoraphobia
- Supporting vaccine-hesitant people, and addressing the underlying mistrust of health services amongst some COIs
- Planning to reconnect post lockdown –share ideas progress and practice about how to do this recognising online provision will need to continue for many people - testing out face to face models of working as lockdown eases

- Exploring creative ways of working in partnership – and how best to maintain the relationships created via the network - "we don't want to lose those"
- Joint working on a day of action on cross-cutting issues for members e.g. wider public health issues

## 2.5) Wider Stakeholders Views on Benefits to the System

In summary, the COI Network is seen by wider stakeholders as:

- ***A place for conversations and ideas, especially around inequality issues and an opportunity to work through these practically with members.***
- ***A sounding board that came up with practical ideas about local solutions and provided space for a two-way dialogue.***
- ***A conduit for stakeholders to place and develop work strands that contribute to strategic objectives on inequalities.***

*"[COI Network] provided a really strong support and challenge to the city thinking and locked that in for the communities of interest that we were working with. I thought it was incredibly helpful... the second element was how we might energise and enact activity in the City, and the way that the network got in and behind that, really push that forward. So, we were having meaningful action in a timely manner, I think was really important."*

*"our system plays a leadership role ... supporting colleagues in the communities of interest network to be able to do that to best effect and understand and negotiate the role of that network within the third sector outbreak plan, I thought was key...and colleagues worked very hard on that, and did that very, very well."*

The COI Network established confidence with this stakeholder group through its ability to organise and frame issues and responses directly related to the lived experience of people in communities and the aims of the overall response plan.

Relationship with and role of the third sector – A role in post covid social recovery.

The Pandemic and community response have highlighted the role, value, and connectivity that community groups and community sector agencies hold with local people. It is evident in the representation of members that these connections reflect diverse communities and issues. This is a powerful and often long-term association that can provide a platform for wider system issues to be addressed. COI Network and other Third Sector mechanisms are part of the delivery of post covid social recovery.

*"need to recognise that the relationship of the third sector is important and integral to what we do - local connections relationships and specialisms in the third sector are crucial."*

In recent national commentaries, there has been a focus on balancing power and agency toward communities. Health and Care organisations within the system are tasked with developing more collaborative delivery models with local people and across sectors through the NHS Integrated Care System (ICS) model. Commissioners and funders have a key role in shifting this balance, as do third



sector agencies to ensure power and agency are mobilised across partnerships and with local people. Networks such as COI Network can play an important role in these new mechanisms and structures, acting on learning/knowledge, sharing places where opportunities to shift practice can be voiced, and importantly as a space for representing voices from diverse communities.

*"The third sector is not always seen as an **equal partner**, and **more people are recognising and seeing a role for the third sector and how to work with them**, but there's still a long way to go."*

*"There are power issues at play... **the third sector is often involved too late**, and they need to be involved at the design stage..."*

Ensuring Representation of seldom-heard voices and diverse communities

There was high recognition the COI Network had coordinated strong representation from a range of agencies and groups across the City. In turn, this provided a conduit to and for 'seldom heard' voices in communities to which the response plan could be tailored.

*"COI Network is **hearing voices of those seldom heard by services**...this helped us with the detail of what was needed... We could, for instance look to refine messages beyond "Keep Safe" to give newer messages and information.... on vaccines, for example..."*

It was acknowledged that there are other representative bodies, fora and networks in the system that engage with diverse communities. Part of the challenge going forward for commissioners and similar stakeholders is how best to coordinate these bodies to have a strategic impact to optimise engagement and representation.

*"There's a risk that the statutory sector engages with some people and organisations in the **third sector and not others** .... the regular faces... it's important to be inclusive."*

We heard often in the interviews that the covid Pandemic had surfaced and amplified health and social inequalities across the City and within communities. COI Network has been and can continue to be a space for the voices of those with lived experience of these inequalities many of whom experience multiple and complex health needs, to be heard. Stakeholders commented that COI Network is useful for commissioners and others tasked with addressing inequalities as it gives a platform for meaningful engagement with communities. The interviewees gave a strong view that voices of diverse and seldom heard communities need to be brought to the fore more so in the next iteration of system planning for responses to social recovery and inequalities.

*"The COI Network gives a continuous snapshot of how inequalities are impacting across the city but importantly how the VCS sector can support people. "*

This is a complex agenda and requires thoughtful planning. There was a strong consensus in the interviews that the COI Network has provided a strong platform for peer to peer dialogue about inequalities and one that, with refinement, can be useful in future work with communities. Part of this refinement and rethinking will be to bring clarity and alignment with other communities of interest mechanisms across the City.

*"there is a risk that the communities of interest network becomes another 'over there' place to go (to) and not part of the system... there's a risk of the statutory sector just saying 'we'll let you*

*know when we need you' - there could be an **opportunity for a more co-produced collaborative system**, but it has to be a two-way system."*

*"What this network is about for me is it's about the communities of interest that we want to serve. I think it needs to think about how it remains so. So, **the danger is that it becomes about the individual organisations that are sitting around that network, rather than the people that this work is seeking to serve and worry about professionalising it too much.** .... I just think be mindful of the dead hand of accountability and governance...be rapid, be representative with a smaller number of the issues and challenges of the communities of interest, not about the network. And that will be my plea, really, because the minute that switches... we will lose strategic device."*

## 2.5) The future role of COI Network and opportunities for system stakeholders

### A short term view

The opportunity is to review and consolidate the work to date through the COI Network and explore future possible developments shaped by the insights from the members and wider stakeholders. Some initial themes on this from respondents included:

- ✓ **Maintaining a Covid response focus.**

*"Ongoing information as to the nature of the infection rates and the Leeds response"*

*"Continued support and partnership working, sharing of information and peer support during the next phases of the pandemic."*

- ✓ **Developing collaborations**

*"Developing more partnerships and collaborations with agencies and on issues..."*

- ✓ **Post Covid Social Recovery**

*"Look at supporting communities in the future after the devastation of COVID has passed, learning from the issues raised about inequality and the disproportionate impact on some minority groups".*

- ✓ **System Reform: health, care and place**

*"It's such an opportunity to realise pre covid 19 ambitions on inequalities and social development...[COI Network] can be at the centre of plans going forward...the CCG plans for example for ICS's.."*

There was a strong feeling from respondents that there was a role for the COI Network going forward and all respondents wanted it to continue in some form.

*"COI Network is really exciting... **a really tangible mechanism for health inequalities** ... really keen to progress this agenda and mechanism.... COI Network can play a really positive role in the future strategic plan... Leeds is very rich in third sector activity...COI Network is a forum for us to go to ...."*

The COI Network and Forum Central generally are seen as being well placed to contribute to and represent issues on inequalities within communities of identity, experience, and place.

*"[We need] to create an opportunity to have this conversation together...it can be one of the brilliant things to come out of Covid..."*

There would be a benefit for Stakeholders and Forum Central to maintain a dialogue on the contribution COI Network can and needs to make to emerging social recovery agendas in Leeds. We note the work already achieved with Healthwatch through the Allyship model and opportunities to connect relationships and agencies through a fresh system leadership model.

*"It's such an opportunity to realise pre-covid 19 ambitions on inequalities and social development...COI Network can be at the centre of plans going forward...the CCG plans for example...  
It has credibility... energy..."*

*"(We need) to create an opportunity to have this conversation together...[COI Network] can be one of the brilliant things to come out of Covid..."*

*"I think it's been **really successful and really valuable** - it could be really important for addressing other common issues, for example, we all have vaccine-hesitant people - it's really important the recovery is going to be massive for a long time"*

Some felt it was a good time to 'regroup', take stock, and decide what the focus should be going forward. One respondent felt there was a **need to share what the successes of the network** have been to date, what has it achieved? This would help conversations about the future of the network as we move into the social recovery phase. The success indicators for COI Network may be an element that needs redefining in its next iteration.

*"there's work to be done on shaping the focus of the communities of interest network in the future - this need defining and recognising by the city need to secure buy in." And:*

*"I do think there's a role for it. I think it needs to be serviced...it needs to be slick. If it's going to make an impact. I think it needs to be well supported. And it needs an accountability and governance mechanism, but not a very strong one."*

A key part of the dialogue and planning for COI Network's future is the issue of resource; how the network is funded, supported, and delivered.

*"Capacity and resource doesn't come for free...the COI Network needs resourcing properly..."*

*"If we are serious as a city to support the poorest fastest...money needs to be available..."*

A longer term view

As local systems (e.g., health, care, community) shift towards the social recovery phase post covid there are opportunities to review and be deliberate in refreshing the mechanisms for supporting and increasing the participation and presence of diverse and seldom heard communities.

We heard numerous times from respondents that inequalities within and across communities have been amplified and further exposed during the covid Pandemic. We also heard that the COI Network is well placed to contribute to a system response that across time addresses these issues.

*"So, establishing the interface between the communities of interest and the network strategically... the work that we were doing was more difficult than I'd anticipated.... we were all shoved into a very difficult place...Nobody really had a blueprint for doing all of this stuff. And we were having to learn as we went along. And I think as part of that journey, we probably got focused on some very specific pieces of work, rather than necessarily stepping back and saying, how do we join these dots or better and I was trying desperately to join the dots, so was finding it difficult because of **territorial aspects of the relationships.**"*

At least two elements need to be addressed to inform this longer-term focus, these being:  
a) the future role of COI Network and Forum Central, and b) a focus on wider issues facing communities.

#### Future Role of COI Network and Forum Central

Bringing definition to the role of the COI Network and Forum Central seems timely as part of a broader dialogue and review of the covid response plan and planning for the social recovery phase. There is value in system leaders creating opportunities for this dialogue and for learning and future delivery to be defined. The work achieved in the Allyship relationship should be a useful example for learning.

*"I think that (the) tripartite relationship between Forum Central, Voluntary Action Leeds and the city council was quite an interesting one, I wouldn't say it was difficult with a capital D...[but] from a council perspective, we just want things done. ...it really just **needed the sector to be more coherent around that.** And I think we got there, it took a little bit of time ...I think we had our time again; we'd have sorted those things out far quicker... who's doing what, who's owning what, who's part of what, and getting that very clear.*

#### A focus on wider issues facing communities

Exploring the opportunities for the COI Network to contribute to and be located in wider place-based developments in Leeds needs consideration by Forum Central and stakeholder leaders. Given the COI Network's achievement through Forum Central organising its contribution to the covid response, there is potential for it to be aligned to and hardwired into wider issues facing the system and its communities.

*"**need to get the community of interest network better known in the city, for connecting to those kind of big-ticket items...**[e.g., climate change agenda], ...why doesn't the network make an offer to say, 'we're a bit about COVID at the moment', but hey, we can help move this conversation on... It's really thinking about **elevating the communities of interest network as a key partner network in the relationship for a range of other things**, bringing it out of the COVID. And bringing it out of the dark into the light more and saying, Well, you know, there's this new player in town, how might we best utilise that capability to progress? What were the things that we want to see the City be greater?"*

*"I'd be thinking about **how we might hardwire these arrangements into the way that we do business in the City more broadly.** It doesn't just have to be about the Pandemic, .... But I think we need to hardwire it...so that could apply to, for example, raising educational standards.... how we tackle social and economic deficits in the City, which may disproportionately impact those communities of interest - tackling poverty and inequality, the green agenda ..."*

### 3) Recommendations for Forum Central and for the Wider System

Forum Central should share the findings and recommendations of this evaluation with members of the COI Network, especially those who did not participate, so they have the opportunity to comment and contribute to the discussion on the issues raised.

#### 3.1) Recommendations for the organising and delivery of COI Network:

- a) There ***needs to be a process to review participation in the COI Network*** and extend its membership to include representatives from communities of interest that haven't engaged or are emerging in Leeds, especially those representing the most marginalised groups. Direct consultation with community members (from different COI) on the role, value and focus of the Network could be a valuable part of this review.
- b) The COI Network ***needs to define a clear purpose*** going forwards to address ongoing health inequalities for the most marginalised groups.
- c) The focus of the agenda for the COI Network would benefit from ***a more co-produced ethos***. Involving members in setting the themes, schedule, and process for working together could engender wider participation and 'ownership.'
- d) ***Further explore the identified themes and topics of high interest to members*** to agree on a future work focus and identify opportunities for partnership working. These topics included (health, social) inequalities and intersectionality; Anxiety and mental health challenges; Employment, finance challenges; Supporting vaccine-hesitant people; Plans to resume face to face models of working; exploring creative ways of working in partnership.
- e) ***Communication of the COI Network's work and its information updates needs review***. Some comments indicated the information was detailed, numerous, and too frequent.

#### 3.2) Recommendations for working with Strategic Partners/Stakeholders:

- a) Forum Central/COI Network should ***review and articulate*** its contributions to system stakeholders, e.g., knowledge, expertise, relationships, reputation in readiness for social recovery planning, and action on inequalities.
- b) Forum Central with ***local commissioners/funders need to plan how best to fund/resource COI Network*** to contribute to emerging system developments.
- c) Forum Central should ***review and articulate its methods and approaches*** to growing community representation, sharing this with system partners and funders.
- d) The COI Network needs to ***avoid crossover and duplication*** with other inclusion, diversity, and equity (IDE) fora and groups. Forum Central should set out a review process that articulates COI Networks fit, place, and relationship to/with other representative groups and fora.
- e) The implementation of Integrated Care Systems (ICS) sets out a clear duty to reform place-based health, care, and support with providers and commissioners; there are requirements for the VCSE sector to play a key role in this reform. ***Forum Central should look to define its role and relationships in this emerging system***, building on its recent work to date with Healthwatch and the Allyship Leadership model. Forum Central, through the COI Network, is also well placed to provide a platform for engagement with communities as part of ICS action on inequalities and prevention.
- f) ***COI Network and Forum Central system should review and refine its plans for action to support communities into the social recovery phase***. This can be achieved in part in discussion with COI Network members and through intelligence and insight from other system planning fora, e.g., health and wellbeing board.

## APPENDIX A: List of organisations who took part in this evaluation

Organisation – COI Network members	COI represented
Women's Lives Leeds, Freedom4 Girls, Asha, Women's Aid	Women and Girls
Advonet	People with Autism
Voluntary Action Leeds (VAL)	Various
Leeds Older People's Forum (LOPF)	Older people
Turning Lives Around	Homeless / at risk of homelessness
Leeds Jewish Housing Association / Leeds Faiths Forum	Faith communities
Leeds Society for Deaf and Blind People	Deaf and Blind People
Mind	People with Mental Health problems
Home start	Young families
Hamara	
<b>Wider Stakeholders</b>	
Health Partnerships Team	
StreetGames	
Healthwatch	
Leeds city council - Public Health	
Leeds city council - Migration Team	
Leeds city council - Communities	
Leeds CCG	
HUB OPAL	
HUB Hamara Centre	
HUB Rainbow Junction	
HUB New Wortley CC	

## APPENDIX B: List of COI Network members

Alzheimer's Society	Leeds Irish Health and Homes
BARCA Leeds	Leeds Jewish Housing Association
Basis Yorkshire	Leeds Mind
Bevan Healthcare	Leeds Older People's Forum
BHI (Black Health Initiative)	Leeds Society for Deaf and Blind People
Carers Leeds	Leeds Women's Aid
Chapeltown CAB	NHS
Community Matters	NHS Leeds CCG
Deafblind UK	PAFRAS
FDM (For Disability Mobility)	PAFRAS
Freedom4Girls	Sense
Gateway Church	Simon on the Streets
GIPSIL	Solace
Hamara Healthy Living Centre	The Advonet Group
Health for All	Third Sector Leeds
Healthwatch Leeds	Touchstone
Home-Start Leeds	Turning Lives Around
Leeds City Council	Turning Lives Around - Beacon Leeds
Leeds City Council (Public Health)	Unique Improvements Ltd (Leeds Cancer Awareness Project)
Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust	University of Leeds
Leeds Dads	Voluntary Action Leeds
Leeds Faith Forum	West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership
Leeds GATE	William Merritt Centre
Leeds Involving People	Yorkshire MESMAC



## APPENDIX C: Pertinent Issues identified by COI Network members (Jan' 21)

Communities of Interest	Dec 2020	Jan 2021	Navigating information and guidance	Access to essential provision and services	Social isolation and boredom	Abuse, domestic violence and safeguarding	Mental health	Concerns as restrictions lift/future lockdowns	Digital exclusion and guidelines	Digital health exclusion	Risky behaviours	Stigma and hate crime	Loss/delay of income	Disproportionate/differentiated health risks	Loss of routine/structure	Increased roles and responsibilities	Vaccine/messages/myths	Feedback from the COI network which also enables us to identify gaps in representation
Communities of Interest																		
Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Migrant communities																		
Black, Asian, ethnic minority Communities																		
Carers																		
Deprived Communities and people facing high levels of inequality																		
People who Experience Domestic Violence																		
People with Drug and/or Alcohol addiction																		
Faith Groups																		
Gypsies and Travellers																		
Homeless/no Fixed Abode																		
Men																		
People with Learning Disabilities and/or Autism																		
People from the LGBTQ+ Community																		
People with Long-term Health Conditions																		
People with Mental Health Issues																		
People with Mobility Issues																		
Older People																		
People with Sensory and/or Physical Impairment																		
Prison Leavers and Ex-Offenders																		
Sex Workers																		
Single Parents																		
Women (including maternity)																		
Young People and care leavers																		



## APPENDIX D: Example resources produced by the COI Network


Notes and recordings from the online COI Network sessions can be accessed at:

<https://forumcentral.org.uk/communities-of-interest/>

An example of a 'Flashcard' produced to share and summarise current key issues raised by the COI Network is below:

**Connecting Communities of Interest During Covid-19**  
**#TogetherLeeds #PositivePartnerships**

### Leeds Communities of Interest Current Issues



**Week Commencing 22nd March 2021.**

- Issue around fear and confidence / excitement of people with CEV emerging from restrictions (CEV paused from 31st March) and people around them being sensitive and aware
- Concerns from YLL re 950 school aged children have been deregistered from education settings, challenges around allocation of school places.
- Increase in calls to carers helpline needing mental health and emotional support.
- Anxiety around the roadmap and reopening of services from the PSI network.
- Concerns from women and girls and safety concerns when services begin to offer face to face support.
- Oral health inequalities ongoing – Healthwatch are raising this regionally

**Anticipated**

- The need to support rebuilding physical and social confidence across all sectors.
- Possible 3<sup>rd</sup> wave

Looking back at the last update...

Week Commencing 08.02.2021

- Unemployment, anxiety, and phobias to reopening the city.
- Rise in substance and domestic abuse
- Vaccine hesitancy within some women's areas which include breastfeeding or causing fertility issues, not enough trials have been done.
- Paused treatments and hospital waiting lists – when will this restart?
- Staffing of foodbanks once people/volunteers go back to work.
- Exhaustion/fed up moods/social isolation.
- People expressing concerns about being called vulnerable.
- Confusion and some stopped taking medication to have the vaccine.
- Dental care and treatments, unable to register with dental practices.