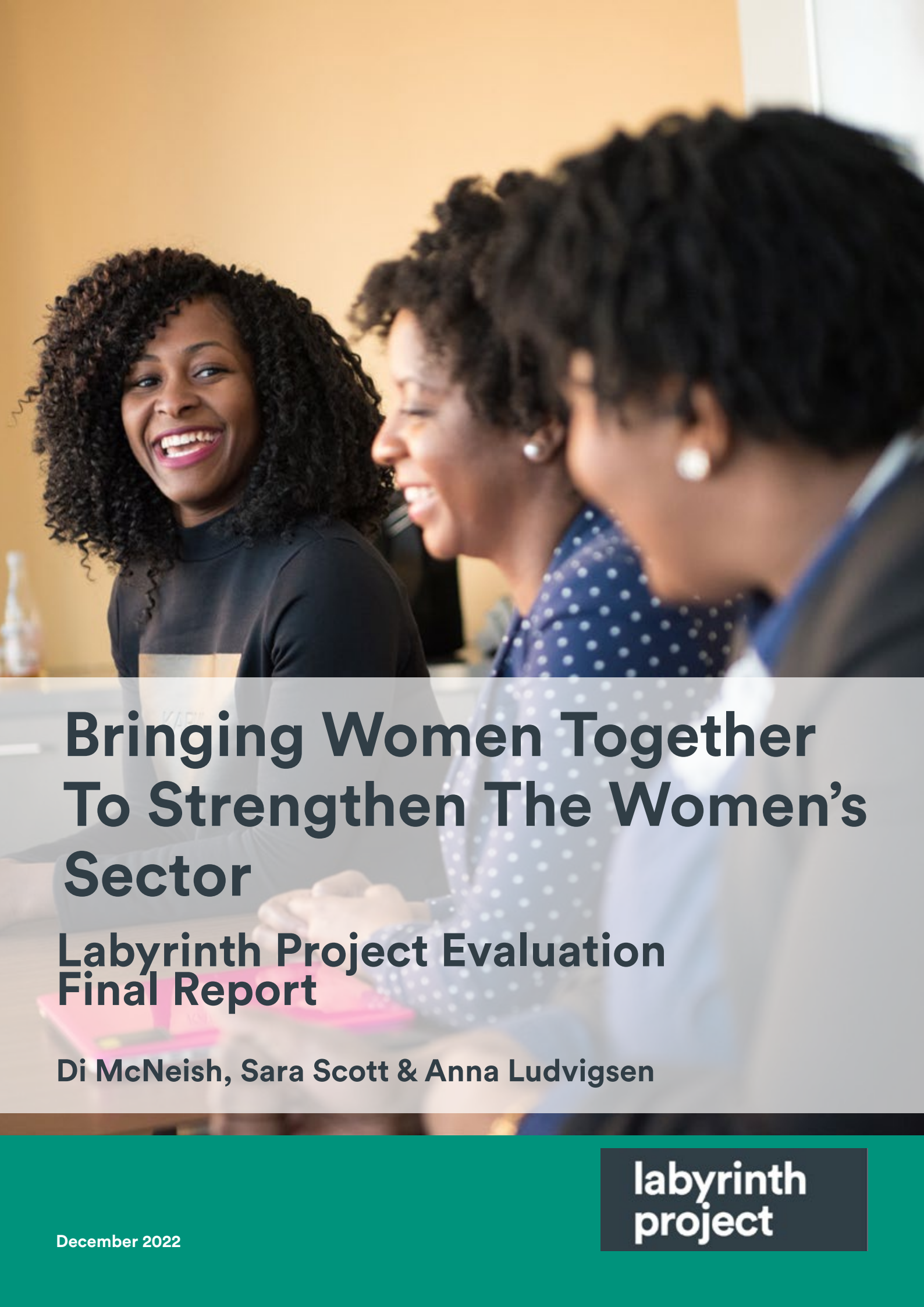


A photograph of three Black women with curly hair, smiling and engaged in conversation. They are in a professional setting, possibly a meeting or workshop. The woman on the left is looking towards the camera, while the other two are looking at each other. They are wearing professional attire; one has a black top, another a blue polka-dot top, and the third a grey blazer.

Bringing Women Together To Strengthen The Women's Sector

Labyrinth Project Evaluation Final Report

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December 2022

**labyrinth
project**

Contents

Summary	1
Labyrinth's Theory of Change	2
The Labyrinth Approach	3
What Labyrinth Achieved	5
Learning from Labyrinth	6
1. Introduction	7
1.1. About Labyrinth	7
1.2. Learning and evaluation	8
1.3. Labyrinth's theory of change	8
1.4. About this report	9
2. The work of the Navigators	10
2.1. Overview of the mapping exercises	10
2.2. A summary of common themes from the mapping	15
2.3. Beyond the mapping: what the Navigators have achieved	15
2.3.1. Building and strengthening networks across women's groups and organisations	16
2.3.2. Raising the profile of women's organisations and support for women	18
2.3.3. Addressing the needs of Black and Minoritized women	19
2.3.4. Meeting the needs of other marginalised groups of women	21
2.3.5. Building the capacity of organisations through training and support	24
2.3.6. Direct training and support to women and girls	25
2.3.7. Enabling women to have a voice	27
2.4. Creating a legacy from the work of the Navigators	28
3. The work of the training partners	29
3.1. Online training and attendance rates	31
3.2. Participant feedback on training	31
3.2.1. Training for Women service users	32
3.2.2. Training for professionals and volunteers	33
3.3. Feedback from training partners	36
4. The Empowering Women Fund	37
4.1. The work of funded organisations and groups	39
4.2. Outcomes for women	40
4.3. Outcomes for organisations and groups	41
4.4. Feedback from funded organisations and groups	43
4.5. Case studies	46
5. Developing a Centre for Excellence	52
6. Lessons learned from the Labyrinth experience	53
6.1. The skills, experience and calibre of partner organisations and staff	53
6.2. Commitment and support of partner organisations	54
6.3. The importance of context including Covid	54
6.4. The flexibility of the funding and the Navigator role	55
6.5. The value of the local mapping process	55
6.6. The pros and cons of online training	56
6.7. Training across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland	57
6.8. Training for women service users	57
6.9. Co-creation between training partners and Navigators	58
7. Conclusion	59

Summary

Funded by a 'Tampon Tax Fund' grant from DCMS, the Labyrinth Project was led by Solace Women's Aid in partnership with eight women's organisations in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and five training partners. Its overall purpose was to respond to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women and women's organisations by building capacity, stronger networks of support and shared learning across the women's sector locally and nationally.

Labyrinth's three main strands of work were:

Local Capacity Building through 'Navigators' hosted by local women's organisations in London, Hampshire, Birmingham, Leeds, Nottingham, Manchester, Glasgow and Northern Ireland, supported by training and consultancy from specialist training partners.

The Empowering Women Fund, a grants scheme providing both small 'seed funding' and larger women's sector grants to organisations led by and for women in order to build their capacity and develop sustainable ways of empowering women in their local area.

Developing a 'Centre for Excellence' to pilot a range of approaches to networking and sharing learning across the women's sector - including a website of information and resources.



Labyrinth's Theory Of Change

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Women often have a range of issues in their lives including violence and abuse, financial, employment and legal issues, but it can be hard for them to access the support they need across multiple agencies and there is a lack of joined-up, holistic, women-centred services. Many groups and organisations are doing good work with and for women, but many are small and are not well-connected or supported.

We believe the Labyrinth Project can contribute to change by building capacity, forging stronger networks of support and sharing learning locally

and nationally. We believe this can be fostered on a local level by mapping the support currently available, building connections and increasing the influence of the women's sector on local strategy and decision making. We also believe that Labyrinth can develop the capacity of groups and organisations through a grants programme and through training, information and access to specialist expertise. Nationally, we believe that Labyrinth can contribute to a stronger, better connected and more inclusive women's sector by developing a Women's Centre of Excellence to share knowledge, learning and best practice.



The Labyrinth Approach

Labyrinth piloted an approach to growing and strengthening the UK women's sector, making it better able to address intersecting inequalities and meet women's multiple needs based on the following five 'building blocks':

Connection

Navigators began by mapping the strengths and weaknesses of their local women's sector, to identify opportunities to improve connectivity between services, draw smaller, grassroots projects into networks and take awareness of women's rights and women's sector ways of working into a wider arena of services. At the same time, a national Navigator forum and regular action learning meetings enabled the sharing of ideas and initiatives. A series of Labyrinth Learning sessions took this a step further by providing opportunities for anyone involved in the women's sector to learn, share, and network.

Capacity and confidence

Connecting with a wider movement built the confidence and capacity of local organisations. In addition, having access to the expert knowledge and experience of national organisations, provided through training and resources, increased their ability to provide women with support and advice across a broader range of issues. The pilot Women's Centre for Excellence website has underpinned confidence and capacity by providing access to evidence, information about policy, funding and influencing opportunities. It also encouraged projects to share achievements and blog about their learning. At the same time, women service users who joined training sessions gained skills and confidence as individuals, while recipients of small grants emphasised the huge boost in confidence gained from their application being successful and the additional value of the capacity-building support provided by the Solace team.

Co-creation

Labyrinth recognised the importance of projects that enable women to care about, and for, each other through peer support and involvement in a movement to build a more equal world. In different localities, it enabled the increased voice and influence of women with lived experience of domestic abuse, homelessness, no recourse to public funds, seeking asylum, losing children to care, mental health issues and other complex needs. It did so by Navigators co-creating spaces where the women could participate on more equal terms with practitioners and by providing opportunities for women to speak directly to decision-makers.

Diversity

Mapping existing provision at a local level, in ways which actively sought to identify gaps, unmet need and unheard voices, ensured that an appreciation of women's different and sometimes divergent needs was reflected in the work prioritised by Navigators. In all cases, local work included a recognition of the ways in which forms of oppression and experiences of inequality intersect in women's lives and an emphasis on reaching out to Black and minoritised women and women's groups. Nationally, Labyrinth recognized the diversity of the women's sector and the challenges for small, unfunded groups - often representing the most marginalised women - to participate in wider initiatives.

Development

Labyrinth provided seed funding for some very small grass-roots groups, provided access to training and workshops for 'beginners' as well as established projects. Opening up training directly to women provided pathways for them to move from being recipients to providers of support to other women, speak out from their lived experience, or become practitioners and activists in the women's sector.

What the mapping found

Navigators used the findings from their mapping exercises to prioritise issues and develop strands of work. Although they identified some area-specific issues, there were also some common themes across all areas:

- A lack of support for minoritised women, particularly those whose first language is not English, for refugee and asylum-seeking women, especially those with no recourse to public funds.
- The increased barriers to support for women with complex needs/multiple disadvantages including those who experience intersecting inequalities.
- A lack of capacity to influence among smaller community-based groups
- Differential levels of connectedness across the sector in most areas
- The impact of the COVID pandemic on both individual women and organisations with small, volunteer run groups particularly hard hit.
- A low level of service user/women with lived experience voice at a strategic level.

What the navigators delivered

Navigators delivered, facilitated and co-ordinated a wide range of activities to address issues identified in the mapping including building and strengthening networks across women's groups and organisations, and raising the profile of women's organisations and support for women. Many of the navigators took specific actions to address the needs of Black and Minoritized women, as well as other marginalised groups such as homeless women and those with complex. Navigators provided training and support to both organisations and directly to women and girls, and they enabled women to have a voice and influence policy and practice.

Additionally Labyrinth distributed £300,000 in grants to 41 women's groups and organisations in England, Northern Ireland, and Scotland: 23 seed funding and 18 women's sector grants. They met their aim of giving priority to organisations working with marginalised groups and smaller groups and organisations, many of whom received their very first grant via Labyrinth.

Several of the initiatives developed by Labyrinth Navigators and many of the grantee projects are being sustained via other sources of funding and support.

What Labyrinth Achieved

Despite being operational for only 18 months and working within the context of Covid-19, Labyrinth exceeded all its original delivery targets:

- ✓ **34,889 women engaged through the project (original target 20,000)**
- ✓ **10,166 women supported with legal support (original target 1,310)**
- ✓ **356 women support through employment programme (original target 77)**
- ✓ **848 women supported with an economic issue (original target 74)**
- ✓ **310 women volunteering (original target 68)**
- ✓ **992 women service users attending training (original target 161)**
- ✓ **463 group work sessions delivered (original target 150)**

Labyrinth's training partners Surviving Economic Abuse, Working Chance, Rights of Women, the Scottish Women's Rights Centre and Equation have delivered an impressive range of free training sessions and events for over 1,000 participants – the quality of which were rated highly by professionals, volunteers, and women service users.

Grant funded projects achieved a range of outcomes for the women they worked with, including reduced social isolation, better mental health and well-being, opportunities to participate in education, volunteering and employment and better access to support and services. The grants also enabled groups and organisations to develop their capacity, including starting new services, recruiting more volunteers, training staff, developing partnerships and securing further funding.

Labyrinth sought to contribute a longer-term legacy to the women's sector by starting to develop a 'Centre for Excellence'. A website of information and resources to support good practice has been developed, and Labyrinth has piloted approaches to on-line learning and networking.



Learning from Labyrinth

The key ingredients of Labyrinth's success have been:

- The skills, experience and calibre of partner organisations and staff, including Labyrinth's central project team, the Navigators, their host organisations and the training partners.
- Commitment and support of partner organisations.
- Adapting quickly to different contextual factors, including the aftermath of the pandemic.
- The flexibility of the funding and the role of Navigators.
- Using the local mapping process both to develop relationships and to inform plans.
- Co-creation between training partners and Navigators.

Lessons have also been learned about the pros and cons of providing training on-line, how to ensure that training engages women service users, and the challenges of ensuring relevance and buy-in across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, Labyrinth has been an ambitious initiative with multiple strands and multiple partners fulfilling different roles in different locations across England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Despite the apparent mismatch between ambition and the limitations of timescales, our conclusion is that Labyrinth has been a very successful initiative. Take-up of, and feedback from, the grants programme, training offer, networking and local capacity building indicates a real appetite for growing and better connecting the UK women's sector, and the project has evidenced the value of the five building blocks in helping achieve it's intended outcomes. Labyrinth therefore appears to provide some solid foundations on which to build a national Women's Centre for Excellence to strengthen the UK women's sector and make it better able to meet women's multiple needs.



Introduction

1.1 About Labyrinth

Labyrinth was an initiative led by Solace Women's Aid and funded by a 'Tampon Tax Fund' grant from the Department for Digital, Culture, Music and Sport (DCMS). The overall purpose was to build capacity and forge stronger networks of support and shared learning across the women's sector locally and nationally. It also aimed to improve joint working between the women's sector and other systems and services which impact on women's lives (such as those for children and families) and to support women to navigate through complex issues, that had been heightened by the impact of COVID-19.

Labyrinth has involved a **partnership** of 15 organisations:

- Nine local women's organisations working in Scotland (Glasgow), Northern Ireland, and in six areas of England (Manchester, Birmingham, Nottingham, Leeds, London and Hampshire)
- Five training partners offering training and consultancy on women's employment, legal rights and economic abuse.
- A Learning and Evaluation partner.

Labyrinth has had a small co-ordination team based with Solace including a project manager, grants officer and communications officer.

Labyrinth has had three main strands which together make up a strategic approach to growing and strengthening the UK women's sector: making it better able to address intersecting inequalities and meet women's multiple needs, including their experience of violence and abuse, legal, debt and employment issues:

Local Capacity Building: The Labyrinth Project worked to develop the capacity and influence of the local women's sector through its partnership of women's organisations who employed Labyrinth 'Navigators.' The Navigator role included mapping the strengths and gaps in provision available to women in their area, building networks across and between sectors, facilitating access to training and other capacity-building opportunities and providing advocacy and support to increase the influence of the women's sector on local strategy and decision making. They were supported by the availability of training and consultancy from the specialist training partners.

The Empowering Women Fund: The Labyrinth Project's grants scheme, administered in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, provided funding to support organisations led by and for women to build their capacity and develop proven and sustainable ways of empowering women in their local area. The Fund was split into two strands: Seed funding grants for small women's groups to establish and run micro women's empowerment projects in their local area that support women to build skills and confidence and decrease social isolation; Women's Sector grants for women's groups and organisations to develop capacity to respond to changing needs in their communities and run projects over a fixed duration of at least 6 months.

Developing a 'Centre for Excellence': Labyrinth has also been a pilot for a 'Women's Centre for Excellence' for the sector. As well as the locally based capacity building and small grants it has drawn projects into a national network. It has piloted a range of approaches to networking and sharing learning via on-line training and webinars, accessible by women's sector organisations, groups, and individual women. It has also developed a website as a space to share information, resources and evidence and provide an on-line repository of knowledge and best practice relevant to the women's sector.

1.2 Learning and Evaluation

The Learning and Evaluation Partner for Labyrinth has been DMSS Research. This partnership has had a dual purpose: first, to help to evidence Labyrinth's journey towards its outcomes and achievements and, second, to contribute to the wider partnership's learning and project development. The evaluation has been based around the project's theory of change and was therefore focused on collecting evidence relating to the identified milestones. However, the learning and evaluation team have also helped explore the process of developing and delivering the project in order to capture learning on the barriers and facilitators encountered by the delivery partners operating in different geographical locations and the capacity development roles of training partners and the grants programme.

1.3 Labyrinth's theory of change

DMSS Research began by facilitating a theory of change workshop for project partners held via zoom in January 2021. This articulated the core issues which the Labyrinth project was aiming to address, and how partners believed that the initiative could achieve change. This theory of change is summarised as follows:

Women often have a range of issues in their lives including violence and abuse, financial, employment and legal issues, but it can be hard for them to access the support they need across multiple agencies and there is a lack of joined-up, holistic, women-centred services. Many groups and organisations are doing good work with and for women, but many are small and are not well-connected or supported.

We believe the Labyrinth Project can contribute to change by building capacity, forging stronger networks of support and sharing learning locally and nationally. We believe this can be

fostered on a local level by mapping the support currently available, building connections and increasing the influence of the women's sector on local strategy and decision making. We also believe that Labyrinth can develop the capacity of groups and organisations through a grants programme and through training, information and access to specialist expertise.

Nationally, we believe that Labyrinth can contribute to a stronger, better connected and more inclusive women's sector by developing a Women's Centre of Excellence to share knowledge, learning and best practice.

The workshop also set out the intended outcomes and milestones for Labyrinth. The full theory of change framework is contained in Appendix 1.

1.4 About this report

This is the third and final report from the evaluation and learning partner, following on from two interim reports produced in October 2021 and March 2022. Its purpose is to assess the progress of Labyrinth against the intended outcomes in its theory of change, to provide an overview of what Labyrinth has done to achieve this progress and to share what has been learned from the process.

Outcomes for September 2022 set out in Labyrinth's theory of change:

Outcome 1: Groups, organisations and women themselves have better knowledge of, and access to available support in each of the 8 areas.

Outcome 2: Groups are better connected with each other and with sources of expertise re VAWG, financial, employment and legal issues.

Outcome 3: Groups have improved capacity to support women in relation to these issues.

Outcome 4: The women's sector in each area has a stronger voice in local strategies and decision-making.

Outcome 5: Grant funding has enabled small groups to establish and develop themselves.

Outcome 6: Labyrinth partners have developed a strategy for sustaining the core elements of the project identified as most effective.

Outcome 7: There is a repository for sharing information, resources and evidence of what works which is readily accessible by women's sector organisations and groups.

Outcome 8: The evaluation and learning from across the 8 areas has enabled partners to identify core elements of effectiveness in strengthening the sector.



2. The work of the Navigators

Labyrinth had a Navigator post in each of the eight localities (with two post-holders in London), each hosted by a partner organisation. The first main task of the Navigators was to carry out a mapping to identify the main issues in their areas and the strengths and gaps in sector capacity.

2.1 Overview of the mapping exercises

London

There were two Navigator postholders for London, one based with Solace and one with Hopscotch, a Camden based women's centre which provides support services for Asian women and other minority women and their families on a wide range of issues including domestic violence, training, employment, housing and welfare benefits. Given the scale and diversity of the sector across London, the two Navigators focused their work on five London boroughs: Camden, Westminster, Tower Hamlets, Enfield, and Haringey. These were chosen because of prior links with Solace and Hopscotch services in these areas and the potential to build on these as well as create new partnerships.

In carrying out the mapping exercise, the London Navigators considered the barriers and gaps for all women but paid particular attention to the services available for women with multiple disadvantages and complex needs, as well as women from minoritized communities. They completed their mapping report by September 2021. This was a very comprehensive report based on feedback from 75 respondents, which discussed the barriers to, and gaps in, the support for women around legal, financial, employment and domestic abuse issues. It highlighted the very significant barriers faced by minoritised women and those with multiple and complex issues. It also highlighted the challenges faced by the women's sector, particularly specialist BME organisations.

Nottingham

The local partner was Nottingham Women's Centre which works across Nottinghamshire offering a range of services to help self-identifying women gain the confidence and skills needed to become stronger and more independent. They aim to provide a safe and supportive environment in which women can access support and counselling, find wellbeing activities, take part in training and activities, access learning courses or come along to free events.

In Nottingham, the Navigator role was mainly undertaken by two Women's Centre staff (although there were some changes in staff in the second half of the funding period). They had the advantage of already having a network of 27 local organisations and a wealth of existing intelligence about the sector in Nottingham, including via a small grants scheme which they co-ordinate. They were also able to draw on the knowledge of their caseworkers who directly support women and their Policy and Influencing Officer who has strong links with other agencies as part of her campaigning role. Consequently, they were able to collate much of this intelligence into a report produced in July 2021. Priorities highlighted in the Nottingham report included the opportunity to develop and strengthen collaboration and joint working between women's organisations and projects, support for people running organisations, especially those which are small, volunteer-led groups and organisational support including practical skills such as fundraising and effective outreach. The report also identified potential to support those wanting to set up new groups, especially for communities of women not currently served.

Manchester

The Labyrinth project in Manchester was led by the Pankhurst Trust (Incorporating Manchester Women's Aid). PTMWA was formed in 2014 as a merger between The Pankhurst Trust, which ran the iconic Pankhurst Centre with its museum and women-only activity space, and Manchester Women's Aid. Manchester Women's Aid is Manchester's largest specialist provider of domestic abuse services for women and girls.

The Navigator role has been undertaken by two job-share post-holders. Their mapping focused primarily on the city of Manchester, building upon PTMWA's existing links and networks. However, given the web of connections across Greater Manchester, it was also important to take account of the political, strategic, and economic context of the city-region, which comprises ten metropolitan boroughs. The mapping focused on exploring two separate but intersecting issues of women's experiences of insecure housing and homelessness, and migration, particularly women seeking asylum and those with no recourse to public funds, and the vulnerability that these groups of women have to violence and abuse. The rationale for this came from key themes raised by initial interviews, topics raised by prior research, the local policy context, as well as knowledge and experience gained from the work of PTMWA.

35 individuals from 20 organisations were consulted for the mapping which identified some key gaps in provision for women with insecure housing, particularly for those with no recourse to public funds. The mapping report also considered the strengths and gaps in the sector in terms of collaboration and partnership working and the capacity development needs of organisations. The Navigators concluded that Labyrinth could play a role in supporting organisations working with women experiencing homelessness and migrant women to develop, create stronger links, and build capacity. Priority areas identified included: advocacy for more gendered specific support, including women's only spaces in homelessness services and organisations supporting migrants; promoting better awareness of what groups and organisations exist for women in the area and developing stronger networks between these; working with a range of organisations to improve their understanding of, and responsibility towards women who have no recourse to public funds; strengthening the representation of services supporting women from diverse cultural backgrounds, including making use of existing strategic networks to give women a platform.



Leeds

Labyrinth was led by Leeds Women's Aid and the Navigator had extensive prior experience of the organisation and the wider sector in the city. Leeds has the advantage of many years of collaborative working across the women's sector including the development of Women's Lives Leeds, an alliance of 12 women and girls' organisations which work together to support women and girls to access holistic support to suit their needs and to get their voices heard on issues that affect them. This includes the Leeds Women and Girls Hubs which provide opportunities for any woman, girl, independent or professional, or from any women centred group or organisation to contribute to strategic decision making and to influence and shape services for women and girls across the city. A related initiative is a project to advocate for Leeds to become the UK's first 'Women Friendly City'.

Given the above context, the Navigator started from a good position regarding awareness of many of the strengths and gaps in provision and it was decided to focus on women who experience complex needs, an area in which it was already known there were gaps in provision. In carrying out her mapping the Navigator obtained feedback from 50 women across 11 organisations. The report identifies two priority groups for whom Labyrinth can make a difference in the time available: women who have their children removed and older women with complex needs. Other priority areas identified for the Navigator were: to continue to strengthen and develop women's networks across the city, and to ensure the focus remains on women who experience all complexities; to advocate for better provision for women with complex needs with a range of other agencies (e.g housing), to support and build good practice for practitioners working with women with complex needs and to increase the voice of women within existing networks.

Birmingham and Solihull

The lead partner was Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid, a well-established domestic violence and abuse organisation. Labyrinth work in this area was delayed due to the ill-health of the initial worker appointed to the Navigator role, so the main mapping activities were not able to start until a new Navigator took up post in September 2021. Consultation for the mapping was carried out via a survey and some interviews with key agencies and small number of service users.

Identified gaps in provision for women included access to and quality of housing, therapeutic and long-term support for women (particularly around the impact of domestic violence), befriending, access to legal aid/representation and support for financial issues/debt. Groups highlighted as facing particular barriers to accessing support were women with English as a second language, refugee women and those with mental health issues. With regard to the capacity of the sector, the mapping highlighted issues of poor communication, a lack of partnership working and limited opportunities for service users to have a voice. The report identified the need for increased networking amongst agencies, particularly for frontline workers, and a need for domestic abuse awareness training for professionals, particularly those working in debt advice, legal advice and employment/education support services.

Hampshire

Stop Domestic Abuse was the lead partner in Hampshire. They are a specialist domestic abuse organisation working across Hampshire offering refuge services, community-based support and services for children and young people. They also have a specialist harmful practices worker. The Navigator had the advantage of being part of a well-established organisation but faced the challenge of developing links across a very large geographical area which includes Portsmouth and some other smaller urban centres as well as some very extensive rural areas. The women's sector is not well-developed outside of Portsmouth and women's needs are largely met via non-gendered specific services and/or via a wide range of very small local groups, many of which are un-constituted. The Navigator job in Hampshire has therefore been quite different to those working in a city context where networks were already established.

The mapping exercise aimed to capture barriers and gaps in services for women, with an emphasis on those from minority communities and older women living in rural areas. The Navigator consulted 46 staff from Stop Domestic Abuse and 71 other professionals across 25 organisations. 1 service user was also involved. The main gaps in support included access to legal and other advice for women whose first language is not English, and older women in rural areas with poor access to transport and other services. Capacity issues identified included a lack of connectedness and awareness of other services among small community-based groups.

Glasgow

The lead partner in Scotland was the Women's Support Project in Glasgow, a feminist voluntary organisation which works to raise awareness of the extent, causes and effect of male violence against women, and for improved services for those affected by violence.

The Labyrinth work in Scotland was delayed due to the original lead agency withdrawing from the partnership. The Women's Support Project quite quickly came on board, but the Navigator did not take up post until in September 2021. However, as well as bringing her own extensive networks, the Navigator had the advantage of being based in a very well networked organisation. The priority in Glasgow has been to build stronger networks and capacity across groups for Black and minoritized women, for example to work with older African and Arabic women who are less well reached by domestic abuse services. The mapping focused on identifying good practice, gaps in service provision and barriers to access services for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic women, particularly those with the experience of harmful practices, and capacity building needs to better support women with experience of gender-based violence. Information was gathered via an on-line survey with 20 organisations, a webinar consultation involving 56 participants and a focus group with BAME service users.

Gaps and issues identified included isolation for older BAME women and a rise in mental health problems (exacerbated by COVID). The report noted a lack of support particularly for elderly African women and lack of language-appropriate, culturally informed, and sensitive provision in mainstream older people's organisations.

In relation to harmful practices, the mapping highlighted that whilst VAWG services tended to be aware of forced marriage, FGM and honour-based violence, there was a low level of awareness of, and support for, lesser-known harmful practices such as sex selective abortion, breast flattening, hymen reconstruction and widow rites. The under-representation of BAME women and of African-led organisations was highlighted as an issue at policy and decision-making levels, including in VAWG forums. The report also identified the need for better engagement and representation, as well as improved responses and services, for minority women and girls.

Northern Ireland

The Labyrinth lead in Northern Ireland was the Women's Support Network. Established in 1989, WSN is a membership organisation for community-based women's centres, women's projects and women's infrastructure groups in Northern Ireland. It has a network of over 500 organisations, including 11 women's centres.

The Navigator came into post in August 2021. A considerable amount of knowledge was already held across the WSN network, so the Navigator was able to use these connections to collate information and to link organisations into the available Labyrinth training. A challenge has been to ensure that the training and support available was appropriate to the different context of Northern Ireland. At the same time, this context is changing, giving rise to new challenges for organisations supporting women. For example, Northern Ireland is now home to an increasingly diverse population and the Navigator identified the need to identify the extent to which support is available to meet these more diverse needs.



2.2 A summary of common themes from the mapping

The mapping process in each area was inevitably shaped by a combination of local contextual considerations, pre-existing priorities and practicalities, so in analysing the resulting mapping reports it's important to note that we were not strictly comparing 'like with like' although there are some common themes across most of them.

There were some overarching issues identified in almost all the mapping reports:

- A lack of support for minoritised women, particularly those whose first language is not English, for refugee and asylum-seeking women, especially those with no recourse to public funds.
- The increased barriers to support for women with complex needs/multiple disadvantages including those who experience intersecting inequalities.
- The lack of capacity to influence among smaller community-based groups and organisations who often do not have a 'seat at the table' even in areas which are generally well-networked
- Differential levels of connectedness across the sector in most areas with even the most 'joined up' places having challenges - especially in relation to competition over funding.
- The impact of the COVID pandemic on both individual women (whose difficult lives have been made even harder) and on organisations. Small volunteer run groups have been particularly hard hit.
- The generally low level of service user/women with lived experience voice at a strategic level.

2.3 Beyond the mapping: what the Navigators have achieved

Labyrinth Intended outcomes by September 2022

Outcome 1: Groups, organisations, and women themselves have better knowledge of, and access to available support in each of the 8 areas.

Outcome 2: Groups are better connected with each other and with sources of expertise re VAWG, financial, employment and legal issues.

Outcome 3: Groups have improved capacity to support women in relation to these issues.

Outcome 4: The women's sector in each area has a stronger voice in local strategies and decision-making.

The final monitoring report produced by the Labyrinth central team for DCMS provides evidence of the sheer volume of work delivered and the numbers of women and organisations reached over the Labyrinth funding period – see box overleaf.

In this section, we highlight some examples of Navigators' work and achievements both in relation to the priorities they identified from their mapping and the outcomes Labyrinth hoped to achieve by September 2022.

Labyrinth Project Outputs

33,889 women engaged through the project (original target 20,000)

10,166 women supported with legal support (original target 1,310)

356 women support through employment programme (original target 77)

848 women supported with an economic issue (original target 74)

310 women volunteering (original target 68)

992 women service users attending training (original target 161)

463 group work sessions delivered (original target 150)

Most of the Navigators completed their mapping reports by September 2021 and moved on to developing work to address some of the priorities they had identified. This involved a fair amount of pragmatism, including setting goals which could reasonably be achieved within the timescale of Labyrinth funding and, where appropriate, building on or 'piggybacking' on existing initiatives where Labyrinth could add value. By being strategic in their approach, the Navigators were able to achieve a considerable amount within the time and resources available. In this section we summarise these, with some examples to illustrate the range of work completed.

2.3.1. Building and strengthening networks across women's groups and organisations

All the Navigators prioritised the development of stronger networks in their area. How they went about it varied according to context and the extent to which networks already existed. As we noted from the mapping exercise, a couple of areas had relatively few pre-existing networks. So, in Birmingham, for example, the Navigator devoted a substantial amount of her time to developing a network:

The mapping exercise in **Birmingham** identified a need for networking and more joined up working between groups, with many services noting they worked in isolation and weren't aware of other organisations in their area. A second identified need was for increased access to training on domestic violence, particularly for small organisations with no budget for training. The Navigator addressed these by setting up a regular networking group for smaller voluntary sector organisations and designing and delivering a free domestic violence awareness course for this group.

The Navigator faced challenges in setting up a network from scratch across such a large and diverse city without an existing group upon which to build. However, the groups who got involved in the network were very positive. They liked the input from external speakers as well as the opportunity to increase their links with other groups and to access new ideas and resources. Combining networking opportunities with access to free training was a successful formula for engaging groups.

The limited timescale of Labyrinth meant that the network was not totally established by the time the Navigator finished which leaves a question mark over its future. Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid are not resourced to continue supporting it and it remains to be seen whether the organisations involved will continue it without that additional support. However, the experience has identified both a need and an appetite on the part of smaller organisations to be better networked, which is useful information should further funding for outreach work become available.

By contrast, **Nottingham Women's Centre** already supported a network of organisations in their area prior to Labyrinth but were able to use the additional capacity of Labyrinth to engage organisations in influencing activities. They were also able to raise awareness of the Women's Centre and other organisations through events such as their Open Day.

An Open Day run at Nottingham Women's Centre brought together 92 women of all backgrounds, many of whom had never been to the Centre before. Other groups and organisations were invited to host sessions, to provide activities to encourage more women to come along. Some groups like Heya, a local Arab women's group, brought along some of their own women who could then use the opportunity find out more about Women's Centre and other women's groups in the city.

Holding the open day on a Saturday and offering free childcare enabled the event to reach a wide audience. The Centre was described as 'bustling with a great energy', and the event was such a success that there are plans to replicate it annually. Staff members commented:

“ I met some brilliant people during my tours, several of which I signposted to reception because they'd like to run groups and courses for us. I was blown away by just how many people want to use their specialisms to help people at our centre. I met loads of first-time attendees, some students, some older, some new to Nottingham, some have been members for years. Great day all round. ”

“ It truly was a fantastic day. Every woman and Partner Agency I spoke with really enjoyed the event. For some, it was their first time at the Centre and were amazed at what we do here with supporting women and the courses we run. I had a few asking how they can get a job here. That says it all, doesn't it? ”

In other areas, some networks existed but engagement was patchy. In Manchester, for example, the mapping provided an opportunity to make new contacts and build on existing relationships. It resulted in the Navigators developing a network of contacts who shared information on a wide range of issues including funding, training, employment opportunities and events which the Navigators have been able to forward on in a targeted manner. The mapping also revealed that many smaller organisations were unaware of the activities or even the existence of some of the networks and mechanisms for women to influence planning and decision making in Greater Manchester. Navigators worked to promote these networks to their Labyrinth contacts to increase participation and influence in discussions and consultations that happen across the women's sector.

Some of the network development carried out by Navigators focused on specific areas of work. For example, in Leeds the Navigator set up a practice forum for professionals working with women with complex needs whilst in Manchester the Navigators prioritised the development of a stronger network of organisations supporting women experiencing homelessness.

2.3.2. Raising the profile of women's organisations and support for women

Leeds was an area where there were already some very good networks prior to Labyrinth. However, as part of the mapping the Navigator identified some gaps in these networks, particularly for Black and minoritized women and groups. It was decided to convene an event to both showcase existing 'by and for' women's organisations alongside mainstream services. In partnership with the Women's Lives Leeds Culturally Diverse Women's Hub, the Labyrinth Navigator supported this event focusing on culturally diverse women's safety.

The **Culturally Diverse Women's Safety Event** held in **Leeds** aimed to respond to concerns identified through the mapping, that some Black and minoritized women had difficulties in accessing and receiving services. Some women felt that services weren't for them or that they didn't take their needs into account.

The event was held in July 2022 and multiple agencies invited to participate. The event was attended by over 130 women and there was great engagement from many domestic abuse services who used the opportunity to share information about what support was available to women. There were groups from local third sector organisations Shantona, Nari Ekta, Asha, Hamara, Engage and Voluntary Action Leeds. The event also brought together some groups not previously reached in the mapping e.g. Hawa Bah – two women who work with small groups of women who have experienced FGM.

Women Friendly Leeds had a stall for the Women's Culturally Diverse Hub which showcased opportunities for women from Black and minoritized backgrounds to specifically influence life in the city.

Statutory organisations also had a presence including the NHS and the police. Female officers from West Yorkshire Police were there to talk to women informally about safety concerns. NHS services showcased their perinatal services and a specialist service which offers leaflets and posters in differing languages and formats. The NHS also held a women-only vaccination clinic at the event.

2.3.3. Addressing the needs of Black and Minoritised women

The above example from Leeds is just one of several examples of Labyrinth Navigators aiming to improve the support available to Black and Minoritized women. This was a priority identified in all the mapping reports and Navigators tackled it in a variety of ways. Support to refugee and asylum-seeking women was identified as a priority issue in several areas including London, Hampshire, Manchester and Northern Ireland, and in both London and Manchester support to Afghan refugees accommodated in ‘bridging’ hotels became a key element of the Navigators’ work. This example was provided by the Manchester Navigators:

Manchester Afghan refugee women’s group

In September 2021, Manchester welcomed evacuated refugees from Afghanistan. They were accommodated in ‘bridging hotels’, intended to be temporary until more permanent housing solutions could be found. They needed essentials including clothing, toiletries, toys and medication as well as support to learn English, understand a new culture, navigate complex systems, engage in activities to support wellbeing and to support the educational and play needs of children while they awaited school places. These were gaps that the Labyrinth Project was well placed to address.

Our Afghan refugee women’s group welcomed over 100 women over the course of the project, and we supported approximately 50 additional women through our women’s rights sessions. Outcomes included improved wellbeing, increased ability to access services independently (e.g the Mustard Tree), routes into volunteering and employment. For example, one woman said after a session: “I felt really happy after today’s makeup session, and I really enjoyed it. I like going to the sessions with other people and getting the chance to socialise. I enjoy the different activities, like painting and sewing, and going to Mustard Tree.” Another woman who had just arrived from Pakistan the night before came to the group nervously, but after being welcomed by one of our volunteers in a mutual language (Urdu) and engaging in detailed conversation about feminism amongst other things, she left with a completely different demeanour and some new friends.

A woman who is skilled in making clothes wanted to gain volunteering experience. We supported her to formally register with us as a volunteer to lead sessions sharing her skills. She was provided with training and induction for the role and will be provided with a reference / letter of recommendation that she can use for future volunteering or employment opportunities. Additionally, we employed another woman who had moved on into permanent accommodation as an interpreter for our sessions (including some training and support).

Over the school summer holidays the Navigators also delivered simultaneous activities for children, engaging new volunteers to run these. These continued throughout September on a smaller scale for the pre-school children and to ensure that their mothers could engage with the women’s group activities.

In addition to weekly wellbeing sessions, the Navigators delivered women’s rights sessions which have proved very popular – so much so that they have been asked to come back to deliver these women’s rights’ sessions again in all hotels for women newly arrived or who weren’t able to attend previous sessions.

In Glasgow, the Navigator's mapping highlighted the issue of the exclusion of many Black and Minoritized communities and the tendency for BAME representation to be mainly via South Asian groups. The Navigator was successful in reaching many different groups as part of her mapping and engaging them in focus groups and other consultation. She described her approach as being very much informed by her awareness of social capital in each of the communities – finding those who have a leadership role in their community - not necessarily a formal one, but women who are well-networked, well respected and have influence in their community, often acting as role models. The Navigator came into the role with the advantage of already being well networked herself including having good links both with BAME groups and the VAWG sector. She has been able to use this knowledge in her Navigator role to build a stronger network of like-minded women who are keen to see change. A good example of such women is the group of volunteers the Navigator recruited, trained and supported to develop three audio-visual resources, tailored to different communities:

In **Glasgow** the Navigator worked with the Media Co-op and a group of seven volunteers to produce three audio-visual animated resources on the topics of Bride Price, Positive Parenting and Services. These were produced in English and four other languages. The volunteers contributed to all stages, including scripts and visuals. The volunteers also translated the scripts and on-line text, and recorded the voiceovers in Swahili, Lingala, French and Arabic.

Because these volunteers came from different backgrounds, it was important to start with some training to develop a shared understanding of gender-based violence, a concept which can mean many different things to different communities and cultures. The training also covered the social norms in communities and how these can change, including domestic violence and coercive control and harmful traditional practices.

Following the training, the volunteers worked with the Navigator to develop scripts for resources specific to their communities. One of the most important features of these resources is that the content was shaped by the women themselves. The scripts were initially written in English and the women did the translation into the language of their communities in such a way that it was made meaningful. Many direct translations from English to other languages do not take account of differences of meaning or that concepts expressed in English do not always have an equivalent in another language. These resources have been translated so that they genuinely 'speak to' the communities they are intended for. Interestingly, one thing the Navigator says she would now do differently is that she would do the translation the other way round – in other words, start with the language of the community and translate it into English.

The resources were launched on 31st August 2022 with two of the volunteers contributing to the panel discussion. The resources have been uploaded and are free to use by individuals, community activists and practitioners, and be of particular interest to those working with marginalised or newly settled communities in the UK.

The women who volunteered for this project did so because they wanted to do something for other women in their community. They mostly had full-time jobs so had to do this work in their spare time. But they derived some benefits from it for themselves too. For example, they have had the opportunity to get involved in delivering sessions, facilitating group discussions and developing their public speaking skills. For those who are part of communities where women do not traditionally get involved in public speaking, this has been both a big challenge and a huge achievement as illustrated by their comments:

“ I’d never done anything like this before. It was such a lovely opportunity to share what we know about our countries and our cultures. ”

“ I’d never done a film before. I learned a lot, I improved my confidence, and I’m taking what I’ve learned to other people in my community. ”

In Northern Ireland, the Navigator has been supporting groups formed to provide mutual support for women experiencing abuse, including refugee and asylum-seeking women for whom routes for justice are not available. They have formed a self-help group linked to grass roots groups to provide signposting and support. The Navigator has supported them with workshops and training sessions to ensure they are fully informed on the existing support available and provide practical support to assist them in setting up a constituted body to access funding.

2.3.4. Meeting the needs of other marginalised groups of women

The Navigators’ mapping reports highlighted other marginalised groups of women who are frequently under-served by mainstream services. In some areas the Navigators decided to use some of the additional capacity available via Labyrinth to prioritise these groups. In Manchester for example, as well as refugee women, the Navigators also focused their work on women’s experiences of homelessness:

In **Manchester**, the Navigators noted that historically the experiences of women had not been considered when tackling homelessness and designing services. For example, the ‘A bed every night’ scheme was initially set up in 2018 with mixed gender spaces only. Although the mapping found that more recently there has been greater awareness of the needs of women experiencing homelessness, it also revealed some major gaps and barriers to women in accessing safe and appropriate support, a key one being the lack of women’s spaces within organisations which support both women and men. The Navigators have advocated for more choice for women and improved gendered specific support through promoting the Labyrinth trainings to better equip staff with the knowledge on topics such as domestic abuse, including economic abuse and women’s rights, and by working directly with organisations to promote ways to work well with women. For example, they worked closely with the Mustard Tree, a partner organisation in the Afghan refugee women’s group, to make sure the project retained a woman only space; they supported staff to access trauma informed practice training and discussed ways the training could be applied in practice.

The Navigators also used their links with the Manchester homelessness involvement group (WHIG), a Manchester Homelessness Partnership Action Group advocating for more specialist and trauma informed homeless accommodation and services for women. Attendance and membership of the group, particularly from women with experiences of homelessness had declined because of the pandemic and the move to online meetings. The process of mapping local support for women in Manchester provided Navigators with the opportunity to build new contacts and relationships which they could bring to reinvigorate the group. As a result, they were invited to take up the position of chairs and coordinators for the group.

They aimed to build the participation of women with experiences of homelessness by making the group as accessible as possible for them. This has included holding the meetings at organisations supporting women so that women can be supported to attend in a space that is already familiar to them, for example at the Booth Centre, holding meetings during the time they already hold their women's group.

Navigators worked with women coming to meetings to co-design a webinar entitled “Working well with women and reducing barriers – women and homelessness”. Ideas and content for the webinar were produced through several meetings and planning sessions. The target audience were people not already engaged with women's sector networks, including staff, managers and service commissioners involved in designing, managing or delivering services to women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage. 49 people attended and the webinar resulted in new collaborations and ideas for future work, including working with a GP surgery who want to include women with experiences of homelessness in a re-design of their services. Additionally, Navigators have taken the group's political asks to the Manchester Homelessness Partnership's board which includes commissioners and decision makers from Manchester City Council.

“ Being part of the Action Group has felt like we have space where our opinions are heard, and we can hear about what other support is available, and what's going on across the city for women. ”



In Leeds, the mapping demonstrated that even in a city where support for women is relatively cohesive and accessible, groups of women who experience complex needs are still the least likely to access appropriate services. One of the groups identified was women who have their children removed. Labyrinth local lead organisation, Leeds Women's Aid used some of the funding to commission Leeds Women's Health Matters, a local partner organisation with expertise in this area to run a group for women, with Labyrinth values and workplan as its focus:

Rosebuds Group for Women with Children Removed

It is widely acknowledged that women who have had children removed from their care, live with the experience of multiple traumas - the traumas that contributed to the removal of their children, the adversarial Social Care assessment and Family court processes and the trauma of living without their children. This leaves them isolated and vulnerable and at risk of exacerbating these traumas through repeating past patterns of behaviour and experiencing more difficult situations. There is very little support available to women who have had children removed from their care, both locally and nationally. In Leeds the Rosebuds project, supported 30 women each week, providing a warm, welcoming space where women had the chance to talk and be heard by a community they created.

Rosebuds' purpose was to empower women to find their voices, to be heard and to know where support was available; to support them to make the positive choices and changes in their lives that years of difficulties and trauma kept from them. Women who are educated about what is available to them become empowered women. Women who have rediscovered their voices are powerful women. With this in mind, the focus for the group was "Growth and Change" – providing the structure for a year of sessions. Meetings were weekly, for two hours each session. 36 sessions were delivered over the 11 months of the project – running over the holidays wherever possible. The first step was creating a space where the women felt safe to open up about their experiences.

Alongside wellbeing and healthy relationship sessions, the group sessions were designed with the outcomes of the Labyrinth project at their heart. These included introducing women to other services available in Leeds and sessions on managing money, budgeting and dealing with debt and employability support.

The women who attended the group all had experienced violence in their lives, resulting in poor mental health and low esteem and self-confidence. Each week the group discussed issues that impact on how women feel, and what we can do to feel stronger and more empowered in our lives. Through "Growth and Change" women were supported to identify areas of their lives where change was needed to allow them the space to grow. As part of this, a six week "Living Life to The Full" course was delivered. Based on an evidence-based CBT approach, this teaches a range of life skills to improve wellbeing and resilience.

The women said that over the time they attended, they felt stronger and had found their voices. Over many years of suffering abuse and being shut down, Rosebuds was a place where they rediscovered voices that had been silenced. When other services attended, the workers often commented on how vocal the women were about their thoughts and feelings. Rosebuds allowed women to practice using their voices again. "I'm not kicking off in meetings anymore, I can just tell them about what I think now". "I've just got off the phone to my solicitor, and it's the first time I've not shouted at her, she couldn't believe it". "It was hard to tell my Social Worker about how I felt about the foster carers, but I did, and it sounds like she actually listened to me. It was great".

The women involved in the group described what it meant to them:

“ Before we came to group, we felt lonely, nervous about meeting new people, we were discouraged and depressed, isolated and worried about talking to professionals. We asked “Where do I belong?” We felt like failures and that we had been failed. Coming to group has changed that. We have felt peace again. We have found our voices and feel hopeful about the future. We feel less angry because we feel respected. We feel encouraged because we are not fighting alone anymore. We are a community. We are Women. We are warriors. We are independent. I know I can do what I want to, and I have found self-acceptance. ”

2.3.5. Building the capacity of organisations through training and support

One of the roles of the Navigators was to link local organisations and individuals into the training offered by the Labyrinth training partners. We describe this work in more detail in section 3. However, alongside this national offer of specialist on-line workshops, most of the Navigators also identified local training needs, and many developed bespoke sessions designed to meet the specific needs of groups and organisations in their area. For example, in Birmingham, the Navigator not only linked small organisations into the national Labyrinth training sessions, but also developed a specific domestic abuse awareness course tailored to their requirements. Similarly, the Navigator in Hampshire, identified many small groups, often operating in rural areas or small towns which were not well-networked, and which had very little access to training on domestic abuse issues. She spent a significant amount of time building up relationships with such groups and providing individually tailored sessions.

In Scotland one of the challenges involved in promoting the national Labyrinth training was ensuring its relevance to the Scottish context. The Navigator and the Women’s Support Project addressed the need to meet Labyrinth’s training targets in two ways: by designing and delivering its own training and by collaborating with the Scottish Women’s Rights Centre on joint webinars:

In **Scotland**, the priority focus was on Black and Minoritized women and on harmful practices and provided both practitioner training and workshops for community groups / women from BAME communities. Some of these were planned and delivered with partner agencies who have specialist knowledge. Topics have included ‘Working with minoritized women: domestic abuse and no recourse to public funds’; ‘Understanding the impact of trauma on survivors’; ‘Culturally Responsive Practice’; and ‘Raising awareness of FGM’.

The Navigator also worked with communities to raise awareness of gender-based violence, including sessions with Hope Scotland, an organisation working with families that are affected by sickle cells, and planning sessions in collaboration with Waverley Care, a Scottish organisation that provide support to communities affected by HIV, Hepatitis, etc.

The Navigator also worked with Labyrinth training partner, Scottish Women’s Rights Centre on webinars on topics including ‘Immigration and gender-based violence’, and ‘Asylum and gender-based violence’. These attracted good attendance and positive feedback from participants.

Other examples of local training include:

- ‘Leeds Labyrinth Legal Light Bites’, lunch-time sessions for professionals on specific aspects of the law on topics such as Forced Marriage
- In Northern Ireland the Navigator secured support from a legal expert to develop up-to-date legal information and deliver training to professionals, volunteers and service users.
- In Birmingham the Navigator designed and delivered domestic abuse training for small organisations
- In London, Hopscotch created a Human Rights toolkit for Hopscotch Programmes staff and volunteers, to strengthen existing advocacy, casework and advice work and make it more human rights focused.

2.3.6. Direct training and support to women and girls

As well as providing training and capacity building support to organisations, Labyrinth Navigators have directly engaged with women who use services to provide training and where appropriate, direct support. The work carried out by the Hampshire Navigator in the final quarter of Labyrinth gives a flavour of the range of support provided:

In the final quarter of Labyrinth funding, the **Hampshire** Navigator developed and delivered 19 **workshops in women’s refuges**. Women explored healthy/unhealthy relationships and with the workshops aiming to increase awareness of tactics used by perpetrators, empower women to recognise abuse and seek support and ultimately break the cycle of abuse. Topics included abusive behaviours such as “love bombing” - exploring what tactics looks like, feel like and why perpetrators use them. In addition to the face-to-face workshops a virtual workshop was delivered to women in refuge and those in the community.

The Navigator also directly supported a service user residing in refuge who had complex immigration issues and no recourse to public funds. The service user was not aware of their immigration status and due to missing paperwork, was struggling to provide evidence. The Navigator worked alongside other professionals supporting the service user to attend solicitor appointments and contact the Home Office who identified she was an overstayer. Following this the Navigator supported refuge staff to continue the work which led to the service user gaining status in the UK and recourse to public funds.

Throughout the project the Navigator has been providing regular drop-in sessions at women’s spaces in Portsmouth and Winchester. An interviewee from ‘Minerva’, a centre for women involved in the criminal justice system told us how valuable this had been for them:

“ [The Navigator] approached it really well. She was very open and allowed women to bring their own issues and work at their own pace. She engaged some women I really didn’t expect to engage and I’m aware that some have taken up additional support from Stop Domestic Abuse. ”

There are many other examples from the work of the Navigators. For example, as well as the training provided to asylum seeking and refugee women, the Northern Ireland Navigator has also provided support to women living in areas under the control of paramilitary groups, including culturally aware ‘bystander’ training to support shared learning and greater awareness of how we can change the roots of a culture that normalises violence against women and girls.

In some cases, the Navigators worked closely with other organisations to reach groups of women, as in this example from London:

Adding value to a grass-roots women’s project in London

‘Be Lifted’ began as an exercise class for women accompanied by vibrant music (hence the name). But it rapidly became apparent to the facilitator that the issues in the lives of women attending went far beyond getting a bit fitter. ‘Be Lifted’ has developed into a grass roots community led organisation to uplift women and young girls through the power of reading, fitness, positive music and community led interaction projects.

Last year the ‘Be Lifted’ founder attended a Surviving Economic Abuse workshop provided by Labyrinth and wanted to use some of the materials to increase other women’s understanding of economic abuse. She contacted the London Labyrinth navigator and found that a lot more than a few Powerpoint slides might be available.

“ Be Lifted had been invited into a local primary school originally to run some fitness sessions with some of the Mums. The school selected Mums who were single parents or had experienced some domestic abuse or mental health issues and invited them to come along. The other criteria was they had just a daughter at the school and the girls came along too, sometimes to join in or to play alongside. Most were Muslim women from Somalia or Eritrea but there were also a couple of white working class women. ”

The navigator devised and delivered a 5 week programme for the group. It was marketed as being about women’s safety so some women came along thinking they were coming to a self defence class! Sessions started off fairly light - about a range of safety issues including anti-social behavior; then moved onto domestic abuse, talked about unhealthy relationships and the importance of supportive friends.

“ At different times the group talked about women’s health, money, violence, depression, dementia. The Labyrinth sessions were brilliant and the women really bonded despite language differences and not knowing each other before. Some of the conversations were fascinating, revelatory across generations and understanding different gender expectations and ambitions – and just the life experience of different girls and women....We are a small, local project and being able to tap into [the Navigator’s] knowledge and networks really expanded things for us and also directly for the women in that group ”

2.3.7. Enabling women to have a voice

The empowerment of women with lived experience was a core aim of Labyrinth and Navigators have pursued this in a variety of ways.

Some of the work has been at an individual level – for example, providing training, support, advocacy, volunteering opportunities etc to individual women to increase their knowledge, skills and confidence, to facilitate access to support or provide opportunities for them to express their views and share their experiences.

There are also numerous examples of Navigators working with groups of women to enable them to have a voice more collectively. Many of the examples already described have this group level of empowerment at their heart. And Navigators have brought women together specifically to influence local policy and practice. For example, in Leeds the Navigator has supported the development of a domestic violence victim-survivor group:

Domestic Violence victim-survivors group in Leeds

Initially working with the DAVA (Domestic Abuse Voice and Accountability) Forum for third sector partners, there were various conversations with partners as to what good service user engagement looked like for them. A survivor's group was established, and the Navigator facilitated participation. There have been around 12 women engaged in total and six regularly show up. They have met with the Deputy Mayor, a police Superintendent and a senior Housing Manager and the chair of the Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board. They attended several DALPB meetings supported by the Navigator and have fed back into the developing strategy.

The group has been such a success that the local authority will now be funding a much bigger “voices” piece of work, incorporating a women's coordinator, a LGBT voices worker, a men's worker and a children's worker. They are all part time posts to be embedded within third sector organisations. They will work together to deliver voices to feed into strategic consultations and deliver creative pieces of work looking at survivor voices tools for training statutory agencies.



Another example comes from Nottingham, where women's views and experiences of childcare are shaping local strategy, as the Policy Officer from Nottingham Women's Centre explained:

Nottingham Child Care Campaign

In 2021, through our casework and engagement with women in Nottingham, we identified that unaffordable childcare costs and their impact on women's ability to work was a significant issue. We conducted an online survey and interviews with women to capture a wide range of women's experiences. To ensure that the voices of a diverse group of women were at the Centre of this campaign, we held several sessions of 'listening circles' with local women groups including Nottingham Muslim Women Network and Heya Women. Survey feedback showed that 60.7% of women responding said the cost of childcare affected the number of hours they worked. 72.1% said they had either left their job or reduced their working hours because of childcare responsibilities. Examples provided included:

"I have felt unable to go for promotions at work due to balancing the costs of further childcare vs extra salary from a promotion."

"If I worked full time and sent my older son to a childminder after school it would no longer make it viable for me to work. It's touch and go as it is. I stay in work for sanity and mental health, not for the cash it brings."

Using information from our surveys, focus groups, and social media polls, we developed a policy brief advocating for measures to improve the accessibility, affordability and flexibility of childcare. We distributed the policy brief to local decision makers, including Nottingham City Council. When Nottingham City Councillor Rebecca Langton read the preliminary findings in the policy brief, she supported our call for policy change and better situation for parents at a local level. In November 2021, a motion went to full council in Nottingham as a result of the policy brief.

We are now in collaboration with Nottingham City Council to drive this campaign and a steering group was immediately formed with members of Nottingham Women's Centre and the Nottingham City Council. Together we have designed an action plan that includes engagement with Department for Work & Pensions (DWP), Human Relations teams, trade unions, the Families Information Services, as well as the running of surveys, listening circles and research and development of best practices for inclusive recruitment. We have designed an employers' guide to inclusive recruitment with recommendations on flexible working options, support for women in recruitment processes as well as paternity leave options to enable women share childcare responsibilities in the family.

The Navigator in Northern Ireland has also been engaging with service users and professionals and has identified key people of influence to strengthen their lobbying. The Women's Support Network in partnership with the Women's Policy Group launched primary research on the views and experiences of the community around women's safety and experience of VAWG. This brought together experts in this field who represent women who are marginalised and statutory agencies to present the research at Stormont. The research was welcomed and demonstrated the demand for services on VAWG and the under-resourcing of this sector.

In Manchester the Navigators described what they learned from their experience of developing the webinar on homelessness.

“ It taught us lots about the challenges and benefits of co-production. For example, it took longer to plan and deliver than we initially anticipated. This was because we encountered difficulties ensuring the continuity of those involved - both professionals who have other busy jobs and women who are leading uncertain lives with many challenges as well as finding times suitable for all involved to get together to plan. Other challenges included coming to a consensus about content when there are many different (and valuable) ideas presented and ensuring as far as possible that contributions of women were meaningful... We also learnt that the benefits of co-production are not only in the outputs but also in the processes. For example, bringing women together to discuss an issue provides an opportunity for learning for all those involved, it provides opportunities for new connections to be made and it provides opportunity for ideas to grow and evolve both in the context of the task at hand but also in other ways. Women also told us that they felt heard and valued being part of something that is striving for change based on their own experiences. We also learnt ways we could improve the experience and increase the participation of women with experiences of homelessness such as considering accessibility and providing support through trusted professionals. ”

2.4 Creating a legacy from the work of the Navigators

Labyrinth intended outcomes by September 2022

Outcome 6: Labyrinth partners have developed a strategy for sustaining the core elements of the project identified as most effective.

Labyrinth was a very time-limited initiative and it's extremely challenging to create much sustainability within such a timescale. However, in all eight local areas there were tangible examples of work either being sustained or creating some kind of legacy. Here are some examples:

In Manchester, the Labyrinth Project has supported the development of a new team at the Pankhurst Trust Manchester Women's Aid focused on promoting equalities. This builds on collaboration developed between the Navigators and other initiatives early on in the Labyrinth project. For example, Navigators were able to identify and refer women they worked with into the Queen Bee Coaching project which provides free coaching to enable women from diverse backgrounds to realise their full potential and rise to positions of influence. The new team of 'Navigators' will continue to build on the work done for Labyrinth by taking the learning, networks and partnerships forward into new projects. For example, through Labyrinth a strong partnership has been built with the homeless organisation, the Booth Centre, who they will continue to work with on the Women's homelessness action group as well as on newly formed The Greater Manchester Homeless Action Network (GMHAN) Lobbying Task Group.

In addition, the Manchester Navigators work with Afghan refugee women was so well received it has led to a further funding stream to continue this work.

In **Leeds**, key elements of the Navigators work will continue under the umbrella of the Women's Lives Leeds Alliance. Labyrinth funding to the Rosebuds group for women who have had children removed from their care, acted as a bridge and has enable them to access financial support to continue. And as noted, the local authority has agreed to fund an extended version of the Domestic Abuse Voices initiative.

In **Nottingham**, the Labyrinth partner, Nottingham Women's Centre, plans to continue many streams of work that were supported by Labyrinth, including the policy and influencing work and work with women's organisations through its women's organisations network. They also hope to explore other sources of funding for partnership and collaborative work. They also noted that Labyrinth had been a great project for bringing colleagues' work together within and across teams and they plan to continue this collaboration.

In **Hampshire**, the Navigator is staying with Stop Domestic Abuse in another role so her contacts gained through Labyrinth will not be lost. Stop Domestic Abuse intend to continue running group workshops for women residing in their refuges across the county on a rotational basis alongside support sessions. These will be a mixture of domestic abuse sessions, healthy relationships, budgeting, accessing benefits and entitlements etc. Stop Domestic Abuse are also planning to maintain a women's services directory for Hampshire that will be updated and developed post-Labyrinth. The Navigator's work to support refugees will also continue via another SDA worker.

3. The work of the training partners

Labyrinth intended outcomes by September 2022

Outcome 2: Groups are better connected with each other and with sources of expertise re VAWG, financial, employment and legal issues.

Outcome 3: Groups have improved capacity to support women in relation to these issues

Five of the Labyrinth partners were brought on board specifically to provide training and support in their areas of specialism. These were Surviving Economic Abuse, Working Chance, Rights of Women, the Scottish Women's Rights Centre and Equation. Since Autumn 2021, the training partners have delivered an impressive range and number of free training sessions and events targeting professionals and volunteers, and women service users. We summarise these below:

Surviving Economic Abuse (SEA)

Surviving Economic Abuse works to raise awareness of and transform responses to economic abuse, primarily through training, policy and campaigns. As part of the Labyrinth project, SEA has developed five online training workshops for women service users and six for professionals and volunteers, including a 'train the trainer' workshop.

Between August 2021 and September 2022, SEA scheduled 107 training sessions addressing different aspects of economic abuse, including debt, housing and banking, in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A total of 573 people attended SEA training.

SEA also produced an economic abuse 'conversation kit' with resources to support women's centres, groups and forums to raise awareness about economic abuse with victim-survivors. SEA also had an existing resource 'What is economic abuse?' translated into eight languages.

Working Chance

Working Chance focuses on the employment opportunities of women with convictions. Its employability programme offers ongoing one-to-one support and training to enable women to take up and sustain employment, as well as working with employers to find those opportunities.

Working Chance developed six workshops for women covering CV writing, interview and workplace skills, effective communication and teamwork, as well as DBS checks and disclosing convictions to employers. Another three training sessions for professionals and volunteers were also developed, addressing employability needs, providing practical job seeking support around CV writing and interview skills, and supporting women to disclose convictions.

Between August 2021 and September 2022, Working Chance delivered 64 training sessions to 259 participants.

Rights of Women (RoW)

Rights of Women provides specialist legal advice to women in England and Wales through its telephone advice lines. It also offers access to training and legal guides for professionals supporting survivors of violence against women and girls.

For Labyrinth, Rights of Women developed and delivered a range of online training sessions aimed at professionals and volunteers in England, spanning four areas of law – family, criminal, immigration and asylum, and employment law. Training sessions included introductions to the law in relation to domestic abuse injunctions; migrant women and immigration control; coercive control and the law; and sexual harassment in the workplace.

Between August 2021 and September 2022, Rights of Women delivered 17 training sessions to 188 participants. In addition to training, Rights of Women also produced five legal guides (including for women themselves) which are available on Rights of Women's website. These were downloaded 9,750 times over the duration of the project.

Scottish Women's Rights Centre (SWRC)

The Scottish Women's Rights Centre is a collaborative project between Rape Crisis Scotland, the University of Strathclyde and JustRight Scotland to providing free legal information, advice, representation and advocacy support to women in Scotland affected by violence and abuse.

For Labyrinth, SWRC delivered five webinars for professionals and volunteers, addressing issues such as Brexit and Settled Status, asylum and immigration in relation to and gender-based violence; and forced marriage. Three of these were co-produced with the Women's Support Project. Five factsheets or guides accompanying the webinars were also produced, and with supplementary funding, these resources were translated into seven community languages. A total of 262 professionals and volunteers attended the five webinars, with additional requests to share the webinar recording.

Scottish Women's Rights Centre originally planned to deliver similarly themed webinars targeting women service users, but given the focus on harmful practice, decided instead to produce short video clips from the webinars. These were used to run social media campaigns for women. The first social media campaign was viewed 1,800 times. Video clips were subsequently also translated and captioned in different community languages and are available on YouTube.

Equation

Working mainly in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, Equation works with young people in schools, offers guidance and training to professionals, runs a helpline for male survivors, and delivers campaigns to raise awareness about and prevent domestic abuse.

For the Labyrinth project, Equation had a somewhat different role than the other training partners. Their aim was to develop and adapt a toolkit with guidance and templates for other women's organisations to deliver a 'Help a Friend' campaign within their local areas. The aim of the campaign is to help people recognise signs of abuse in their friends' relationships and to signpost them to available, local support. Templates included social media and blog posts, print material such as flyers and posters. The delivery of the toolkit was delayed due to internal capacity issues. However, Solace was able to pilot the resources to run their own locally tailored 'Help a Friend' campaign in London. The toolkit will be available to access via the Centre for Excellence.

3.1 Online training and attendance rates

Between August 2021 and September 2022, three training partners – Surviving Economic Abuse, Working Chance and Rights of Women – offered 185 online training courses. 103 courses were offered to professionals and volunteers; 71 to women service users; and 11 courses targeted both audiences.

A total of 1,020 participants attended training sessions across the year – 814 professionals and volunteers; 144 women service users; and 62 participants attended training for both. This was an average of 5.5 participants per session, although this varied between 7.9 for professional courses, 2 for the women's training courses and 5.6 for sessions attended by both audiences.

Across the year, 43 scheduled courses (23% of those offered) were not delivered either due to cancellations or because none of the registered participants attended. Over half of cancelled sessions (26 or 60%) targeted women service users.

3.2 Participant feedback on training

Following the training, participants were asked to complete an online feedback form. Between September 2021 and September 2022, we received 507 forms – 441 from professionals and 66 from women service users. Combined, these represent over half of the 1,020 people who attended training during this period (50%) - a good response rate, especially considering that the form was completed online following the training.

The training feedback survey proved to be a useful tool. The Labyrinth team introduced a successful process where participant feedback was shared monthly with individual training partners. This developed a high level of ownership over the data and allowed partners to identify further information that would be useful for them and request additional questions along the way. In evaluation interviews, the training partners highlighted how having regular access to feedback data had been beneficial. The feedback comments were studied every month, positive comments were celebrated internally, and suggestions taken onboard and used to adapt and improve the training along the way. Working Chance, for example, had shortened their sessions in response to participants saying they found it difficult to take four hours off during their working day, while Rights of Women introduced a new entry-level training course to bridge a knowledge gap in the sector.

3.2.1. Training for Women service users

Who attended the training

As the short feedback form completed by women service users asked few demographic questions, we know relatively little about who they were and their motivation for attending.

Most were from London . The remaining participants lived in other parts of England, including Manchester, Wigan, Trafford, Newcastle, Yorkshire, Norfolk and East Sussex. Only one participant lived in Scotland and one in Northern Ireland.

Most women had heard about the training from their local organisation. A few had found out about the training sessions via social media – especially Solace’s twitter account - or through personal networks.

Feedback on training

Feedback from women service users was very positive. The majority said that the training had been ‘very useful’ (55 participants or 86%). In terms of relevance, the majority had found the topic ‘very relevant’ to them (61 participants or 93%). Participants used words such as ‘helpful’, ‘insightful’, ‘fantastic’ and ‘informative’ to describe the training, and were also very appreciative of the facilitators who delivered the training:

“ The training and the trainer were absolutely brilliant ”

“ She was very open to letting individuals talk and give their own experiences. Just the right amount of interactivity, not too much pressure, but just enough to make it engaging ”

“ Kind and respectful approach about such a sensitive subject ”

When asked what they would do differently as a result of having attended the training, participants highlighted appropriate, practical and thoughtful suggestions, indicating that they had benefited from the training in a way that was intended. Many women also highlighted that they had gained confidence, were more knowledgeable, knew where to get support and information or were more aware of communication skills.

‘One-to-one training’

Overall, the attendance figures for training sessions targeting women service users were disappointing. Sign-up numbers were low and those that signed-up frequently did not attend, meaning that one-quarter of sessions (27%) were cancelled on the day and a further one-in-five (21%) sessions had one participant only. When only one woman attended she would be given the option to postpone but many decided to continue with a one-to-one session. Feedback from the training providers and attendees suggest that in such a situation, women often appreciated and valued the individual attention and support. For example, one woman fed back that:

“ I went into this session emotionally and intellectually wounded from a negative work experience and I received desperately needed reassurance... [Trainer] actually turbo boosted my confidence... The generic training itself was extremely useful and relevant to my needs, but that moment of personal reassurance was undiluted salvation and relief and it was invaluable to me. That one-to-one webinar turned out to be something of a lottery win for me. ”
(Woman participant)

¹ This question was introduced in November 2021, and hence we only know where two-thirds of women lived (n=45).

3.2.2. Training for professionals and volunteers

Who attended the training

Of the 441 professionals and volunteers who completed the feedback form, the majority described themselves as staff or professionals (90%). Only 4% were volunteers, whilst another 5% were 'other', primarily students or founders of small organisations, generally unpaid.

Most participants were based in England (86%), with smaller numbers in Scotland (10%) and Northern Ireland (2%). Three people were based in Wales (1%) and two overseas.

Participants came from 208 different organisations, including Labyrinth's partner organisations. In fact, almost a quarter of training participants (23%) came from eleven Labyrinth partner organisations.

Participants were primarily based within the women's sector, such as women's centres, domestic abuse and sexual violence organisations or within organisations supporting a specific group of women, such as Jewish, Muslim or Chinese women or young mothers. Some participants worked for organisations with a broader focus, such as children's centres, or for organisations with a specific focus, such as mental health, housing, criminal justice, advocacy or education. A few participants were based within local authorities or governmental departments, such as Department for Work and Pension, working, for example, as a domestic abuse specialist, or within early intervention.

Overall, there was a good fit between participants' roles and organisations and the Labyrinth project's aim of building capacity within the women's sector. The range and number of organisations represented among training participants suggest that the Labyrinth project has been able to reach a broad selection of women's sector organisations, at least in England and to a lesser degree in Scotland.

A large proportion of participants mentioned that they had received information about the training via email, either directly from the Labyrinth team or partner organisations or they had been told about the training by their manager or colleague. A few had become aware of the free training opportunities via social media. A network of information sharing within the women's sector, of circulating emails and newsletters, and personal recommendations appear to have been the main source of information about the training offer.



Feedback on training

Professionals' and volunteers' feedback on the training they had attended was very complimentary, with many using terms such as 'excellent', 'informative', 'well-structured', 'inspiring', 'engaging' and 'very useful'. When asked what they found useful about the training, participants highlighted a range of aspects. This included the resources, toolkits and information provided, the training style and the range of learning tools used during the training. Others mentioned that the practical advice and suggestions had been useful.

Many mentioned that information was communicated clearly, in plain English and that the trainer was good at explaining key concepts and definitions. Participants described trainers as having been 'knowledgeable', 'engaging', 'friendly' and 'approachable', and that they had created a space which allowed for learning and reflection. Such comments were backed up by the fact that the vast majority (96%) of participants 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the trainer had helped participants share, reflect and learn during the course. Four respondents disagreed and twelve were not sure.

“ [It] was a very thorough training and varied. The trainer was knowledgeable and easy to listen to. (Professional participant) ”

Taken together this suggests that the training was both accessible and useful.

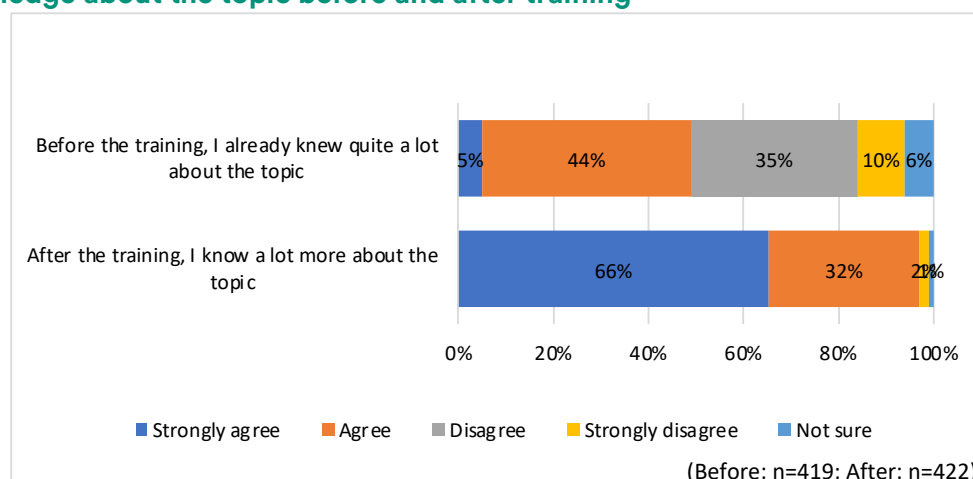
Knowledge and learning gained

To gauge whether the Labyrinth training programme was meeting a need within the women's sector, we specifically asked participants about their knowledge before and after the session.

Figure 1 below shows that half of the respondents said that they believed they already knew quite a lot about the topic before doing the training (49%). This was especially participants attending training delivered by Surviving Economic Abuse and Working Chance. Participants who attended training delivered by Rights of Women, which focused on legal processes and the courts, were more likely to disagree. This highlights a gap in participants' existing knowledge about legal matters.

Despite believing at the outset of the training that they 'knew quite a lot already' the majority of respondents (98%) also agreed that 'as a result of the training, I now know a lot more about this topic', with two-thirds 'strongly' agreeing (66%) that they knew a lot more after the training. Participants who attended training delivered by Working Chance (75%) and Surviving Economic Abuse (67%) were especially likely to 'strongly agree' that they had learnt a lot.

Figure 1. Knowledge about the topic before and after training



Outcomes for the sector

Focusing on the main aims of the Labyrinth project, the feedback form explored to what extent the training would help build capacity and facilitate better links within the women's sector, to better support women service users.

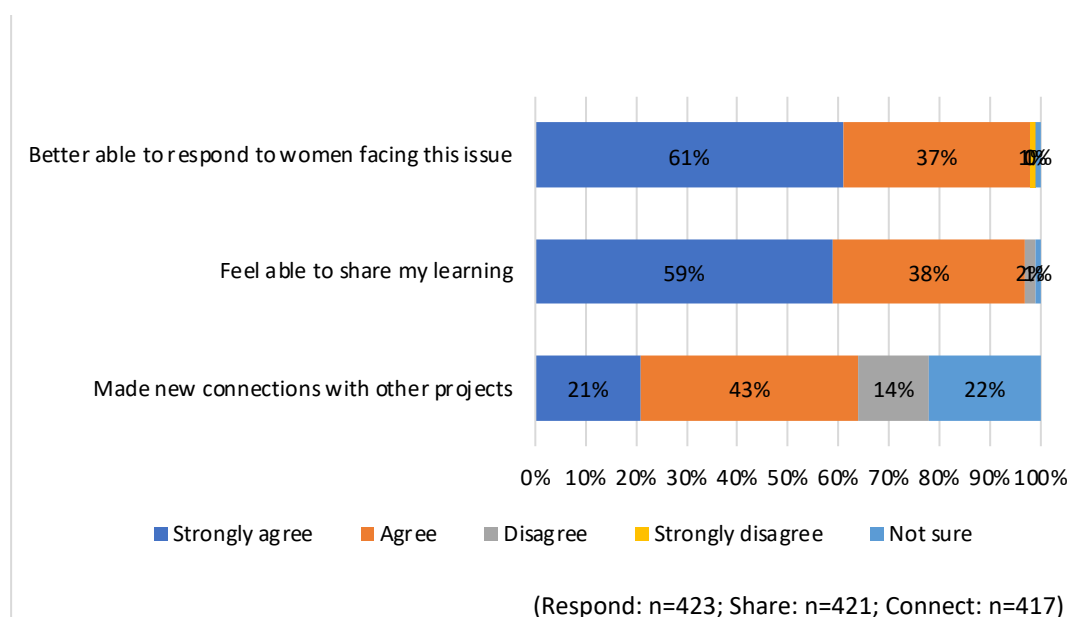
As figure 2 below shows, most respondents (98%), 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that, as a result of the training, they felt better able to respond to women facing the issues addressed during the training. This is a very encouraging finding, especially as over half (61%) 'strongly agreed' that they felt better able to respond to the women they work with. This indicates that through the provision of high-quality free training the Labyrinth project is very likely to have had a positive impact on how participants respond to and support women in the future.

Following the training, most attendees also felt better able to share their learning within their own organisation or project – over half (59%) 'strongly agreed'. Again, this is a very positive finding for the Labyrinth project as it suggests that attendees felt able to cascade their learning to other staff and volunteers within their organisation, and consequently benefit the sector more widely.

In terms of building connections and increasing the opportunities for practitioners to network with other within the women's sector, over half of respondents (61%) believed that the training had enabled them to make new connections with other projects. Participants especially valued having the opportunity share and learn with others doing similar work.

However, not everyone felt the training had allowed them to build new connections (14%) disagreed and almost a quarter (22%) were not sure – for some respondents this was because other participants came from outside their local area or country.

Figure 2. Outcomes from the training



Changes to practice

Over 300 respondents (75%) provided their thoughts about what they would do differently as a result of having attended the training. Overall, the comments were well thought through, which indicates that learning outcomes were being met. For some this was course specific, such as looking out for signs of economic abuse:

“This training has made me want to recognise this type of abuse in its own right and take it more seriously than perhaps I have done previously, which will enable me to support my clients better.”

“I will review our current harassment policy (which includes sexual harassment) and ensure that it encourages a working culture that looks to the perpetrator’s actions, not the victims.”

“Be more inquisitive when working with people. Give them a chance to work things out for themselves and not give them all the answers.”

Others mentioned more general intentions, such as sharing their learning with colleagues, volunteers and women service users, to raise awareness and influence practice within their organisation and more widely. The resources provided during the training were described as being helpful to do this.

Many participants commented that the training had increased their confidence in using appropriate language, recognising and addressing issues, and relaying information, and consequently made them feel better able to support women through their work. Others highlighted that the training had increased their awareness of specialist support services that they would signpost service users to in the future.

3.3. Feedback from training partners

Overall, training partners were very positive about their involvement with the Labyrinth project and how it had progressed. Training partners had developed a good working partnership with the Labyrinth team and had found the team responsive to any queries or issues. As the lead partner, Solace was described as having been successful in bringing partner organisations together and holding the project together well.

At the end of the project, training partners were pleased that they had been able to meet their ambitious project targets. In addition, partners highlighted the flexibility of the Labyrinth funding, which had often enabled them to develop and test activities outside their core offer. Some had, for example, translated their resources into a range of community languages for the first time, while others had broadened their geographical reach into different regions and nations. For some, the Labyrinth project had allowed them to explore new delivery formats and technologies, such as using social media to run awareness campaigns or deliver webinars to professionals. These activities were described as building their capacity in areas they hoped to continue or expand going forward.

4. The Empowering Women Fund

Labyrinth intended outcomes by September 2022

Outcome 5: Grant funding has enabled small groups to establish and develop themselves.

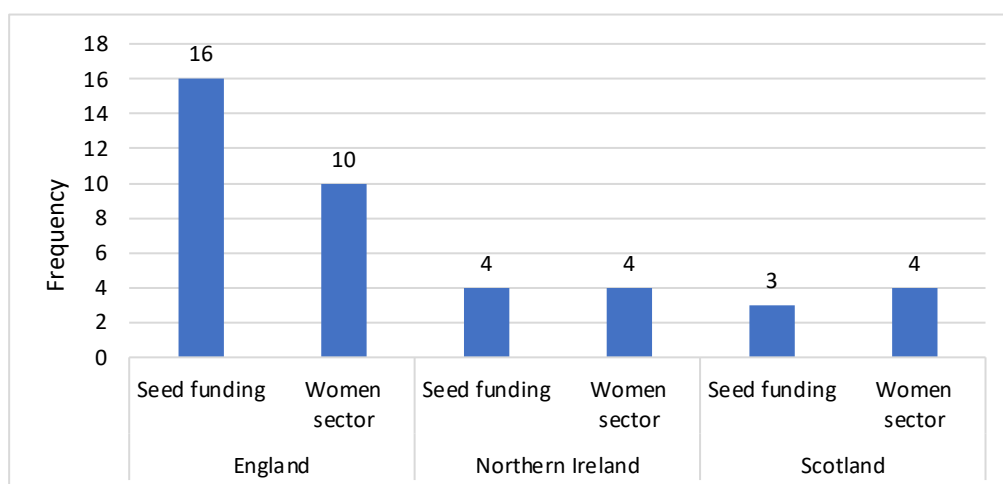
A core feature of the Labyrinth project was a grants scheme dedicated to funding women's organisations and groups. The Empowering Women Fund aimed to build the capacity and sustainability of the women's sector through supporting and networking with smaller groups and organisations.

Available to organisations and groups in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the Empowering Women Fund was composed of £300,000 divided into two funding streams:

- Seed funding grants (£500 to £1,000)
- Women's Sector grants – split into small grants (£1,000 to £5,000) and large grants (£5,000 to £25,000)

Labyrinth was successful in rapidly setting up and publicising the grant scheme so that by May 2021 the scheme had received 613 applications, applying for a total of £9.3 million. In late summer, the Empowering Women Fund's independent panel awarded a total of £299,660 to 41 groups and organisations in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. 23 were awarded a seed funding grant and 18 a women's sector grant. Figure 3 below shows the distribution of seed grants and women's sector grants by country. For a full list of grantees see the appendix on page 61.

Figure 3. Successful grantees by country and type of grant



The average grant for the seed funding was £975 (range £500 - £1,000), while the average amount awarded for the women's sector grant was £16,817 (range £3,168 - £24,836).

The Empowering Women Fund specifically prioritised groups or organisations that were led by or worked with marginalised groups. Table 2 below shows the Labyrinth project was successful in identifying and awarding grants to groups and organisations that work with marginalised women, including Black and minoritised ethnic groups, deaf and disabled women, older and younger women, and LBT+ women. Other grantees were led by or worked with, for example, rural, pregnant or homeless women, as well as new mothers.

Table 1. Marginalised groups funded

	Number	Percentage
Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)	21	51%
Deaf and Disabled women	6	15%
Older women	4	10%
Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (LBT+)	2	5%
Other	8	20%
Total	41	101%

* Note: column totals may not sum due to rounding

Another aim of the Empowering Women's Fund was to support small women's groups to build capacity and to run micro projects in their local areas, especially through the seed funding grant. An analysis of grantees' organisational structure by the type of grant awarded shows that while most grantees were registered charities (67%), the seed funding grantees had a mixture of organisational structures, including constituted groups (39%), community interest companies (22%) and un-constituted groups (17%). This suggests that the grant scheme enabled small women's groups to apply for and win funding – often for the first time.



Please see the Labyrinth website for details about funded organisations and the grants awarded: <https://www.solacewomensaid.org/empowering-women-fund/grantee-stories> [accessed 31 October 2022]

Table 2. Organisational structure by type of grantees

	Women sector grantees		Seed funding grantees	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Registered, exempted or excepted charity	12	67%	1	4%
Constituted community group	0	0	9	39%
Community Interest Company limited by guarantee	1	6%	5	22%
Charitable incorporated organisation (CIO)	3	17%	1	4%
Un-constituted community group	0	0	4	17%
Other	2	11%	3	13%
Total	18	101%	23	99%

As part of the Empowering Women Fund's monitoring process, women sector grantees were asked to complete a mid-way report and a final report, while seed funding grantees completed a final report only. By October 2022, the Labyrinth team had received 27 mid-way reports and 25 final reports. These were analysed to assess progress, outcomes and learning. We also interviewed six grantees for the case studies.

4.1 The work of funded organisations and groups

As the Labyrinth project came to an end, the Empowering Women Fund grantees had delivered their projects with women in their area. Although a few grantees had altered their proposed activities as their original plans were no longer feasible, only one seed funding grantee was unable to deliver their project due to personal circumstances.

Covid restrictions during autumn 2021 and winter 2022 did impact delivery for some grantees, especially for organisations working with disabled and health-vulnerable women who had often been shielding during the pandemic and were cautious about meeting face-to-face again. Some projects decided to delay their start date, while others were able to run groups online. Organisations also experienced the impact of Covid infections as staff, facilitators and women were absent due to illness and quarantining. Nevertheless, despite such challenges, women-led organisations and groups knew what they wanted to deliver in their area and with support from the Empowering Women Fund were able to do so.

Most organisations and groups focused on improving the mental health and well-being of women or building their confidence in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic. Five projects worked to support women who had experienced domestic abuse or violence against women and girls, while another five projects offered education, skills and employment support. One project provided LBT+ refugee women with legal support, and another offered debt and financial support to young women with learning difficulties.

³ Although seed funding grantees were not expected to complete a midway report, many did.

Grantees largely worked directly with women as part of their project, often by offering group sessions with a focus such as yoga, mindfulness, walking, craft activities, poetry writing or sleep advice. Others offered training courses with an emphasis on upskilling women for example, in IT and business skills or leadership with the aim of women being in a better position to take up employment, set up their own businesses or become volunteers. Others focused on enrichment activities and trips or one-to-one mentoring.

Common to all the projects was the focus on women supporting women. Support also generally took place in women-only spaces, whether this was face-to-face, via a helpline or on zoom. This seems to have been highly valued by women and organisations alike.

4.2 Outcomes for women

Information provided by funded projects strongly suggest that the Empowering Women Fund met a need within local communities and that women benefited directly from grantees' work.

Most grantees had collected some feedback information from their users, whether it was on post-it notes or a feedback form and some had written up case studies. A few had gone to a great deal of effort to evaluate their impact, by using, for example, standardised pre- and -post tools or carrying out individual interviews with women participants. One organisation had commissioned an external evaluation consultant. Consequently, many were able to give some indication or examples of how women had benefited.

One group had, for example, used their seed funding grant to provide one-to-one sessions for disabled young women in order for them to regain their confidence to attend group dance sessions. The project documented how fifteen young women had joined or re-joined group sessions and had built friendships as a result of the support provided.

Another group had partnered with local businesses to deliver workshops and one-to-one business support to Black and minority ethnic refugee women. Sessions had focused on social media marketing, accounting and business planning to enable participants to set up or further develop their enterprises. Midway through the training, two women had actioned their business ideas, one to sell organic skincare products and the other hot sauce, while another six women had made positive alterations to their existing small businesses.

Overall, projects appear to have achieved a range of different outcomes for the women they worked with, with some common themes:

- Reduced social isolation
- Better mental health and well-being
- Improved self-esteem and confidence
- Feeling empowered as women
- Improved opportunities to participate in education, volunteering and employment
- Better access to support and services.

Feedback from women themselves illustrate some of these outcomes:

“ I attend most of the groups and I enjoy coming as otherwise I would still be in bed all the time depressed. I’m learning / re-learning things again, making new friends, getting a laugh. Getting a lot of help from everyone and the staff are brilliant ”

(New mother, Scotland)

“ This course has been amazing for my mental health. I have laughed, cried and made new friends. I have learned new skills during the mindfulness class. This helps me cope better with my anxiety. ”

(Older woman, Northern Ireland)

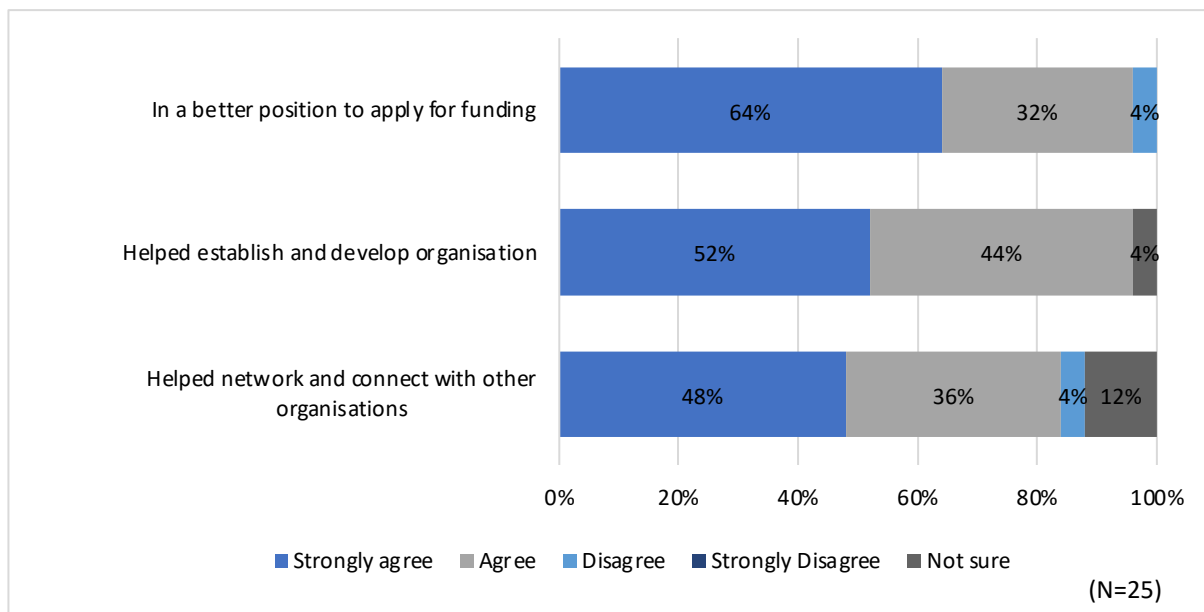
“ I moved to [here] after leaving a long-term abusive marriage because living in the same area as my husband became extremely difficult due to his continued intimidation and repeated stalking and threats. I knew no-one... I was offered the opportunity to participate in the Craft Group at [name of organisation]... This was actually a difficult process for me because I wasn’t comfortable or confident at all about being in the company of very many people when I first started at the Group because I never went out without my husband, and for many years had hardly been out at all. After attending the Group for the last number of months I can definitely say that I am now much more comfortable mixing with people and feel much more confident about putting forward what I think in a group of people... It has enabled me to meet people from the local area and to build up a small network of friends and acquaintances... I’ve also recently communicated to the Key Workers decisions that I’ve made by myself, and I’ve very much felt supported in those decisions, which makes me feel like I can maybe make okay choices for myself. ”

(Woman, Scotland)

4.3 Outcomes for organisations and groups

The Empowering Women Fund aimed to build capacity and support the sustainability of women’s groups and organisations. At the end of their funding period, grantees were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements. As figure 4 below shows, the majority of the 25 funded organisations who had submitted their final report, ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ that they were in a better position to apply for funding (96%) – one disagreed (4%). A similar high proportion (96%) agreed that the grant had helped establish and develop their organisation. Slightly fewer, but still the majority (84%) agreed that the grant had helped their organisation network and connect with other organisations – one grantee disagreed (4%) and three were not sure (12%).

Figure 4. Impact of grant funding on organisations and groups



Grantees' mid-way and final reports highlighted a range of organisational benefits derived from the grant scheme. Additional resources had allowed many of the funded organisations to achieve one or more of the following outcomes:

- Develop and establish new services for women within their local community
- Attract new or sustain existing volunteers, through improved recruitment, training opportunities and support for volunteers
- Develop staff through training
- Improve systems for collecting data and information about their service users
- Better evidence a need within the community for additional funding
- Develop partnerships to improve support, signposting, or referral pathways locally
- Gain access to business banking
- Secure further funding for delivery

“Connections have been made & visits to [local] community centres... and [worker] has engaged with family support workers in the Somalian community”

(Mid-way report, women sector grantee)

“The whole [staff] team are better equipped and informed, so that [we] as an organization, become an accessible and appropriate service for LGBT+ clients.”

(Mid-way report, women sector grantee)

“ Gathering data on our service users is crucial to understanding who is using our service and who is not... Past data on service users was all paper based. All staff now trained on [system], and all records now held there. ”

(Mid-way report, women sector grantee)

Many grantees, especially smaller or newly established groups expressed how they had gained confidence in themselves as organisations and their vision and ability to deliver within their community. For some, the funding had allowed them to test out their ideas to see whether other women in their community would be interested in, for example a coaching programme for Muslim women to learn about iconic Muslim women in history as a springboard to develop their own creativity and writing skills. The process of applying for and being awarded a grant had given many of these groups a boost of confidence and a desire to continue their work in the future.

“ We are still finding our feet with what we think is possible for [our group] and how best we can run this to keep it focused on and run by women of colour. Getting this support tells us we are doing something right and there are funders out there who can see what we are doing ”

(Final report, seed funding grantee)

“ Although it was a short programme, it was a very big step for us as a new community organisation. We have really valued the funding and the initial support and encouragement provided by [the Labyrinth team] when I was trying to articulate my ideas. ”

(Final report, seed funding grantee)

4.4 Feedback from funded organisations and groups

As a new grant-making scheme, the central Labyrinth team actively sought feedback from grantees and while some may have been hesitant to provide critical feedback directly to their funders, feedback appeared genuine and frank.

The application process

As part of the pre-application support offer, the Labyrinth team organised two well-attended ‘how to apply’ webinars. The first seed funding webinar attracted approximately 90 participants, while the women’s sector webinar hosted 200 participants. This high level of interest two weeks after the Empowering Women Fund was launched shows that the Labyrinth team and partners were effective in raising awareness about the grant scheme, as well as the need within the women’s sector for funding opportunities.

Feedback from grantees about the application process was very positive, with most saying that the Labyrinth team had done ‘very well’ in explaining the eligibility criteria for applying and the applications process to them. Grantees generally also said that the Labyrinth team had responded very well to any requests for advice and information during the application process.

“ I thought there’s no way that we would be considered because we’re just a small fish in a big pond... And I had already decided I wasn’t going to apply and then maybe a few days or something before the closing date, [someone we work in partnership with] sent me a WhatsApp saying about the funding opportunity... It just gave me that wee extra incentive to apply for it. So, I was really surprised when [we got it], anything that we would normally apply for would be local. So, this is the first time... ”

(Women Sector grantee)

Ongoing support and communication

Grantees also frequently mentioned how they had appreciated the ongoing support and flexibility shown by the Labyrinth team for when things did not go to plan. The team was described as approachable, friendly and efficient, which had helped grantees deliver their project.

“ I think the team is doing an amazing job and the communication has been a pleasure. Anytime I require assistance they contact me back and help me with any issue / request I have. ”

(Mid-way report, women sector grantee)

“ We appreciate the support and understanding that Solace Women’s Aid has given [us]. They have been flexible in their approach and have been supportive when we were struggling to meet the original outcomes of the project due to increased referrals. ”

Final report, seed funding grantee)

‘Funding Plus’ support for grantees

Drawing on research in the grant-making sector and feedback from grantees, the Labyrinth team developed a ‘Funding Plus’ programme of learning and networking opportunities. This was offered to all the Empowering Women Fund grantees (and also to those organisations that had not been successful in their application) to support organisations and groups going forward. The Funding Plus programme included regular newsletters; information about and access to Labyrinth’s free training programme delivered by training partners; workshops on evaluation and co-production delivered by Labyrinth’s evaluation and learning partner, and online networking events.

The programme was well-received and grantees commented on how they had enjoyed training and other events. We know that participants from at least eight different funded organisations and groups attended the Labyrinth training programme – and one grantee attended at least three different training sessions.

“ The mailings about other funding opportunities are helpful, we use funding info platforms but it is always useful to hear about opportunities. ”

(Mid-way report, women sector grantee)

“ Really appreciate the support, the positive interactions and the extra training available from Labyrinth project, thank you. ”

(Mid-way report, women sector grantee)

4 This number may be higher as some grantees may not have completed the training feedback form.

However, it was also clear from the feedback that while grantees wanted to attend networking events and training, they, like the rest of the women's sector, had many conflicting demands on their time, and consequently often did not have the capacity to benefit from such offers. In one training session, delivered by the evaluation and learning partner, one grantee logged into the online session on a mobile device, in a parked car with a young child sleeping in the backseat hoping to catch ½ hour of the session. While this may be an extreme example, it does illustrate the constraints experienced by women in the sector as they juggle work, volunteering and childcare.

Future needs

Grantees mentioned many positive outcomes from their grant and their relationship with the Labyrinth project. All but one grantee strongly agreed or agreed that they felt in a better position to apply for funding, and feedback highlights that most are likely to seek further funding to continue activities. However, feedback also shows that funding is an ongoing concern as most organisations rely heavily on external funding to deliver their work with women. Requests for information about funding opportunities and advice on how best to apply were also some of the most frequently mentioned support needs mentioned by grantees.



4.5 Case Studies

Granaghan and District Women's Group, County Derry

Location: Northern Ireland

Target audience: Rural women

Grant: Women's Sector

Working in their local community for almost thirty years, Granaghan and District Women's Group is run solely by volunteers. Having initially started as part of a regeneration initiative for rural disadvantaged areas, the group delivers activities to local women to enhance their mental, physical, social and emotional well-being.

When the Covid pandemic brought everything to a standstill in March 2020, the group was able to draw on a previous partner to upskill their committee on how to use zoom and Facebook Live, and soon after their programme of activities was delivered online, including yoga, cookery session and baby massage. Because online courses were all offered for free during Covid the group lost a substantial amount of income.

The women's group usually applies for small local grants, so were both surprised and pleased to be awarded a grant from a national funder. Coming at the right time too, the Women Sector grant enabled the group to continue to deliver an array of classes and activities, including self-care, meditation, relaxation, cookery, yoga, Pilates and craft classes – a total of 80 discrete sessions over the yearlong project. Initially, some sessions took place online, but as restrictions were lifted and face-to-face activities returned, the group implemented Covid safeguarding procedure to keep participants safe. This included restricting the numbers of participants according to social distancing rules, write a track and trace policy and fundraise for hand sanitiser, face masks, plastic gloves and thermometers. However, the women were pleased to be back together and often expressed a feeling of sisterhood or comradeship, especially for women living on their own.

The grant also meant that their Open Doors Club, a group of young people with additional or complex needs who met every Wednesday evening, could enjoy a range of craft sessions. This particular group of both younger and older women has been running consistently for over 20 years, and has more regular participants now than ever before

“ Our group normally thrives on small grants and funding pots from local councils, generally below £1,000 so, to be awarded this larger grant meant we could concentrate on continuing to deliver first class activities instead of focusing on securing relevant funding.” ”

(Final report)

Pregnant Then Screwed, England-wide

Location: England

Target audience: Pregnant women and mothers

Grant: Women's Sector

Pregnant Then Screwed was established in 2015 in response to the founder's experience of workplace discrimination when pregnant. Since then, the organisation has grown both in size and reach, and now employs five members of staff, engage over 100 volunteers who support approximately 5,000 women a year. As an organisation Pregnant Then Screwed runs a helpline for women affected by pregnancy and maternity discrimination in the workplace delivered by experienced HR volunteers, and a peer mentoring programme that supports women taking their case to an employment tribunal, as well as running high-profile campaigns and lobby government on issues, such as childcare, enhanced maternity pay and paternity leave.

The Covid pandemic had a detrimental impact on women, including working women, as many was furloughed, made redundant or struggled with childcare, and as a result the number of calls to the helpline increased by over 400%. This high demand for support has been sustained since the pandemic. Recognising a clear fit with the Empowering Women Fund's criteria of being women-led and women-focused, Pregnant Then Screwed applied for a Women's Sector grant to help build organisational capacity in two areas – by providing additional training for existing volunteers and to establish a new mental health helpline.

Volunteers are key to delivering the helpline, and as the helpline has grown so has the pool of volunteers. Volunteers are already well versed in workplace issues, but Pregnant then Screwed wanted to offer a robust training programme that focus on diversity and inclusion, to help increase the number of marginalised women it supports. By offering training in, for example anti-racism and disability issues, and in vicarious trauma to help support volunteers themselves, the organisation has been able to better retain existing volunteers and to attract new volunteers.

With an upgraded telecom system, also funded through the Women's Sector grant, Pregnant Then Screwed launched their new mental health helpline in summer 2022. While the original plan had been to operate the helpline independently, this was revised due to the additional risks involved in supporting people with mental health issues. Working in partnership with the charity Mind to deliver the helpline together, has enabled Pregnant Then Screwed to offer further support to a group of women they know are more likely to feel isolated and depressed as a result of pregnancy and maternity discrimination.

Inspiring Yarns, County Down

Location: Northern Ireland

Target audience: Older women

Grant: Seed funding

As a new social enterprise, Inspiring Yarns considers yarn-based craft activities to have an important role in helping people through difficult times and in bringing women together to reduce social isolation. Having seen how the Covid pandemic had negatively impacted women's mental health in their community, Inspiring Yarns wanted to organise taught workshops and yarn-focused social groups in their community to improve coping mechanisms through new skills and social networks.

The project initially planned to target women who had experienced domestic abuse, but as a new organisation it struggled to recruit participants through its social media channels and also didn't yet feel ready to make connections with women's organisations in the area who did work with survivors. In conversations with the Labyrinth team, Inspiring Yarns re-envisioned their project focus and instead decided to deliver two menopause groups. The well-attended groups ran over five weeks and focused on different menopause-related topics each week, while the women knitted or crocheted small self-care products, such as socks or face scrubbies. The friendly and social setting, the dual focus on crafting and learning, facilitated an environment where women felt safe to share their experiences and discuss current and historic taboos related to menopause and its symptoms.

“ I felt so lonely and isolated as a result of my menopause symptoms, I honestly thought I was losing my mind at times as a result of forgetfulness, but this course has helped me realise that this is a common occurrence and there should definitely be more courses like this to help others who are feeling this way.”

(Participant, Northern Ireland)

“ The knitting helps distract me when my symptoms are at their worst, at first it was very difficult to think about talking about my own experiences but the rest of the group and the teachers were very understanding and there was no pressure to talk if you didn't want to. ”

(Participant, Northern Ireland)

The seed funding grant allowed Inspiring Yarns to pilot these sessions, and the success of the groups have meant they were able to secure further funding to deliver menopause and crafting groups more widely in their community over the next 14 months.

“ Although we do want our services to be open to anyone and to challenge the gender and age bias around yarn crafts and textiles, we recognise that in the main our service users are women... this is [therefore] a service that we want to add to our core offering because menopause has such a significant impact on mental health and feelings of isolation ”

(Final report, Northern Ireland)



Plucky Skates, London

Location: England

Target audience: Young Black, Asian and minority ethnic women

Grant: Seed funding

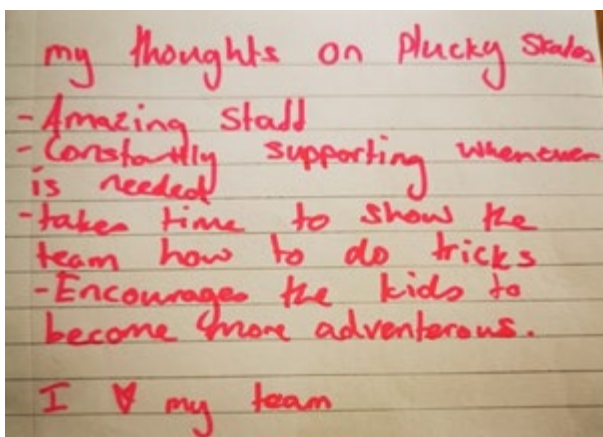
Plucky Skates is a small grassroot organisation currently run by two women in East London, who, with the support of volunteers, offer roller-skating sessions to young women in the community.

Although established in 2018, delivery was severely impacted by Covid-19, as sessions were cancelled and Plucky Skates were forced to return an unspent grant. However, the seed grant from the Labyrinth's Empowering Women Fund meant that Plucky Skates has been able to pick up its work and run a 12-week programme targeting vulnerable teenage girls in a local secondary school. With support from the Labyrinth team, Plucky Skates has also opened a digital business account. Having previously been refused access to High Street banking, this is a significant improvement for the organisation's sustainability.

New equipment, including roller skates in different sizes, wrist guards and ice packs funded through the seed grant, has allowed young women to take part in activities and learn new skills in a safe and supportive environment. Delivered by qualified roller-skating coaches who are also experienced youth mentors, weekly sessions offer participants a mixture of skating instructions and social time.

Feedback from the young skaters, many who are young carers or have experienced bereavement, suggests that sessions provide a fun space where they can socialise without feeling judged, make new friends and form relationships with supportive adults. The coaches have also noticed that roller skating as an activity creates a physical intimacy, which makes participants feel more confident in themselves, less isolated and better able to support each other, as they enjoy skating and learning together.

Going forward, Plucky Skates hopes to deliver more school-based sessions, but they will also continue to offer affordable and accessible skating sessions in the community.



The Women's Group, East Dunbartonshire

Location: Scotland

Target audience: Disabled women

Grant: Seed funding

The Women's Group is an established group of women who identify as having a learning disability or who are diagnosed as on the autistic spectrum. Group members live across East Dunbartonshire, a large and mostly rural area north of Glasgow. Ranging in age from late teen to early sixties, most of the women live with family members and often face barriers to participation. The group was originally set up by female staff in the local authority, and is now an independent constituted group co-ordinated by the members with support from staff when needed. The goal is to create a safe female-only space where participants can socialise while also learning more on topics like women's bodies, friendships, intimate relationships and other skills needed for independent living, as well as taking part in some fun, new activities.

Prior to the pandemic the women used to meet once a month to socialise and do self-funded activities together, such as visiting a local museum or go on picnics. Following lockdown in March 2020, the group moved 'online' with weekly WhatsApp videocalls and lots of messaging in-between.

The Women's Group applied to the Empowering Women Fund to help the group reconnect with existing and new members once restrictions were lifted, and they were all incredibly excited and proud of their achievement when they found out their application had been successful. However, as face-to-face meetings continued to be delayed due to Covid restrictions in Scotland and ongoing concerns about the risk to the women's health, staff were able to organise for regular art packs and healthy cooking packs to be delivered to their homes. While doing the activities independently, the women were able to share photos and talk about their experiences on their weekly call. The combination of activities and video calls has helped the intergenerational group of women stay in touch, build friendships and support each other through difficult times. A few group members who didn't feel comfortable meeting online also received the art packs and have shared photos of their creations making them stay connected with the other women in a way that they feel comfortable.

The staff who support the Women's Group have also been able to build a wider network with other women's sector organisations, for example by attending a Labyrinth peer learning event. Going forward, the Women's Group hopes to start meeting in person again soon, initially outdoors as the weather gets warmer, to do dance and yoga sessions, funded by the seed grant and delivered by a local organisation with experience of engaging disabled people in sport and physical activities. With many new people waiting to join the Women's Group, such activities will enable a growing number of women to reconnect and continue to do activities they enjoy together.



Central and Western Integration Network, Glasgow

Location: Scotland

Target audience: Black, Asian and minority ethnic women

Grant: Women's Sector

Established in 2009, the Central and Western Integration Network is a Scottish charity that works with individuals and groups to support asylum seekers, refugees, migrant workers and black and minority ethnic people to promote integration in Glasgow.

Working in partnership with a Community Activator from the Glasgow Community Food Network, the Central and Western Integration Network received a grant from the Labyrinth project to set up and run a Women's Farming Group for refugees and asylum seekers.

The twenty-odd women who took part in the group came from across the world, including Libya, Nigeria, South Africa, Malawi, Iran and Glasgow. All had an interest in food and farming, although for some sessions were more about something to do, than to gain skills for volunteering and employment.

The comprehensive introduction urban farming was split across 24 sessions, and the group learnt about topics such as ecological urban farming, producing and marketing products to sell, foraging wild plants, food sovereignty, community agricultural models and developing a social enterprise. In addition to cooking and eating together, the women were also able to visit a number of local farms, gardens and social holdings, to meet urban farmers and learn about bee and hen keeping, small scale livestock and milking, apple pressing and soap making using goat's milk. Some women also gain a food hygiene certificate allowing them to work or volunteer within the catering sector.

For some participants the benefits of the group were mainly social, such as cooking together, sharing food and recipes with other women in a similar situation. For others the project was an opportunity to build capacity and local contacts within community farming, and has been a springboard to get involved in other related activities. One graduate from the Farming Group has, for example, since started her own social enterprise, managed to get a plot and a small funding pot to experiment with growing African vegetables on an allotment in Glasgow. Her aim is to meet the needs for crops within the African diaspora and to ensure that the knowledge of African indigenous farming practices and food cultures are preserved and celebrated in Scotland.

The project produced a booklet called 'Sow a seed, grow a world' based on the women's experiences of being involved in the Farming Group, and which documents their ideas, photos, share recipes and places to visit in and around Glasgow.

“ The farming group has been great – very knowledgeable. It has boosted my confidence in exploring outdoors more with my kids. I've learnt a lot about herbs and natural foods along with growing my own. The group was the highlight of my week. ”
(Participant, Scotland)



5. Developing a Centre for Excellence

Labyrinth intended outcomes by September 2022

Outcome 7: There is a repository for sharing information, resources and evidence of what works which is readily accessible by women's sector organisations and groups

Tampon Tax funding generally facilitates only very short-term initiatives. Labyrinth aimed to ensure a longer-term legacy from the funding by incorporating the initial development of a 'Centre for Excellence' for the women's sector.

The concept of a Centre for Excellence is still evolving, but the two main elements that have been developed so far are the creation of a website to act as a repository of information, evidence and resources to support good practice across the women's sector, and the piloting of approaches to on-line learning and networking.

The Labyrinth website has been set up, along with submission guidelines and some basic criteria for inclusion/publication. The site was 'soft launched' to the sector to coincide with International Women's Day 2022. The website now contains a range of reports, resources and information including blogs from Navigators, the Learning and Evaluation team and other Labyrinth partners. However, the current website is probably best described as 'work in progress'. It currently provides an indication of the kind of resources a Centre could make available in the future, but more work is required to make it a fully usable and searchable library/information resource.

However, the concept of a Centre for Excellence was always intended to be more than an on-line 'store house' of resources: the fundamental idea behind Labyrinth was that it would help to create more dynamic and participatory ways of sharing and learning. Labyrinth has piloted several approaches to this, not least via the on-line training provided by remaining partners and described in section 3 above. In addition, Labyrinth encouraged sharing and learning between partners: the Navigators met regularly on-line to share their learning including via action learning sessions facilitated by the evaluation and learning partner. Labyrinth also provided learning opportunities for applicants to their grants scheme, an initiative which was widely appreciated.

Another development has been the Labyrinth Learning Series. This was launched in May 2022 as a series of on-line skill and idea-sharing workshops for the women's sector. The series consisted of 20 to 50-minute lunchtime sessions to provide examples of innovative work that can be adjusted to different local contexts, provide opportunities to network with colleagues from across the UK and share potential solutions to some common challenges. Topics have included:

- Supporting Survivors of Harmful Practices (presented by Women's Support Project, Glasgow),
- Turning Practice into Policy (presented by Nottingham Women's Centre),
- The Women Friendly City Movement (presented by Leeds Women's Aid),
- Effective grant writing tips and learning from the Labyrinth Empowering Women Grant Scheme (presented by Solace Women's Aid),
- Communication between frontline and management teams (presented by Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid),
- Social Media tips for the Women's Sector (presented by Solace Women's Aid)
- Awareness Raising Campaigns (presented by Equation).

The sessions took place live over Zoom and were open to all sector practitioners, with the recordings available on the Centre for Excellence website and on YouTube.

Take-up and feedback on these sessions suggests an appetite for networking opportunities across the women's sector which could be an important element of an ongoing Women's Centre for Excellence if funding were available.

6. Lessons learned from the Labyrinth experience

Outcome 8: The evaluation and learning from across the 8 areas has enabled partners to identify core elements of effectiveness in strengthening the sector.

Labyrinth has been an ambitious initiative with multiple strands and multiple partners fulfilling different roles in different locations across England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. It has also been delivered within a very short timescale of around 18 months. Most Navigators were in post by June 2021, but others did not start until September 2021. The training provided by the national training partners was piloted in August 2021 but did not start full delivery until September. And the whole initiative has been delivered in a context affected by Covid.

Despite the apparent mismatch between ambition and the limitations of timescale, our conclusion is that Labyrinth has been a very successful initiative. As earlier sections of this report illustrate the volume and range of activities delivered has been extremely impressive and, overall, Labyrinth has made considerable progress towards the outcomes it set itself by the end of the funding period. So, what have been the key ingredients of Labyrinth's success, and where things have not worked so well, what can we learn from the experience?

6.1 The skills, experience and calibre of partner organisations and staff

A key ingredient of success has been the staff appointed across the whole of Labyrinth, from the central team to the local Navigators.

The small **central team**, particularly the Labyrinth project manager, had the challenging task of co-ordinating all the strands of the initiative. The importance of this role cannot be underestimated, and it was fulfilled with great skill. The feedback from Navigators, training partners and grantees was overwhelmingly positive. The central team managed to combine organisational efficiency with a flexible, warm, relationship-based approach which demonstrated a real understanding of local challenges and contexts.

The **Navigators** were pivotal to the success of Labyrinth. They all came to the role with prior experience of the women's sector and usually with specialist knowledge and expertise on relevant issues such as VAWG, women with complex needs, Black and minoritized women etc. Many took up the post with already well-established networks, and this was a great asset to Labyrinth. Most of the Navigators also brought skills and experience in what might be termed a 'community development approach' to working with groups and organisations – they had the skills to engage with people productively and in a short timescale.

The calibre of the national training partners was also key to the appeal of the training offer. Having access to expertise from highly respected training partners was important to attract participants from women's organisations who have numerous competing priorities for their time. The staff involved in designing and delivering the national training brought credibility and expertise and made the training worth participants' investment of time.

6.2 Commitment and support of partner organisations

As the lead organisation, Solace has demonstrated a strong commitment to Labyrinth including dedicating the necessary managerial and communications support. Labyrinth partners have been complimentary about the partnership approach of Solace throughout.

Similarly, all the Navigators commented on the support from their host organisation. This is not something that can be taken for granted – sometimes organisations sign up to projects with good intent but if the work is not part of their normal core business it's very easy to leave postholders isolated and unsupported. This does not seem to have happened with Labyrinth, despite the work being outside the normal remit of some of the hosts.

6.3 The importance of context including Covid

For Navigators, the nature and extent of host organisations' existing networks was one contextual factor influencing progress. Other factors included geography – working across a large rural area such as Hampshire is quite different to working in a city such as Leeds or Nottingham. The London context is quite different to that of Manchester and the contexts of Scotland and Northern Ireland differ from each other and from England. A lot of the differences in how the work of the Navigators has progressed can be largely attributed to contextual factors.

The one contextual factor common to all local areas was Covid. For much of the Labyrinth funding period Covid restrictions meant that all interactions had to be done remotely, including the mapping and the training. Establishing new relationships can be more difficult without face-to-face contact, and during periods of lockdown and beyond many organisations and groups ceased their activities, only resuming them in the latter part of the Labyrinth funding period. Once face-to-face activities resumed, groups had a host of competing priorities and engaging with Labyrinth was not necessarily high on their agenda. As one partner organisation noted:

“ It has been quite challenging to deliver training whilst organisations are working with reduced capacity due to either increase of service demand or staffing shortages in the aftermath of the pandemic. Some training sessions that were sold-out had a big dropout on the delivery day, with practitioners sending last-minute apologies. In relation to community-based sessions, some workshops had to be re-scheduled multiple times, as collaborating organisations had to prioritise their direct service provision over capacity building, networking and prevention work. ”

Some Navigators commented that for many women who use services on-line training was less appealing and less accessible, particularly for minoritized women with little or no English and older women who were not up to date with technology.

On the other hand, some Navigators noted that carrying out their role virtually had been less problematic than they'd expected, with on-line contact being more flexible and less time-consuming than face to face and some professionals being more, rather than less, available. They also commented that for some women being able to access training and other activities on-line was an advantage.

6.4 The flexibility of the funding and the Navigator role

Several of the Navigators and their host organisations commented on how valuable it had been to have flexibility in how they interpreted the role and made use of the Labyrinth funding. The broad nature of the project brief allowed partner organisations to put the designated resources into local issues determined by the mapping exercise. As one Navigator put it:

“ It is so refreshing to have a funding stream which is not fully prescriptive. Having a responsive funding approach enabled work to be continued and developed that would have evaporated. ”

Flexibility also meant that Navigators could re-focus attention on new and urgent needs as they presented. On the other hand, the breadth of the Navigator role did make it more challenging to clarify expectations. Some Navigators commented that the size of their areas combined with the scale of need meant that there were far too many potential priorities to address in such a limited time, so some difficult decisions had to be made.

6.5 The value of the local mapping process

In some of the areas the mapping process was particularly valuable. Navigators and their host organisations commented on how useful it had been not only to identify priority issues but also to establish relationships and networks and gain new insights. Some host organisations noted that they had used the intelligence gained from the mapping to inform their own learning.

“ Through the project [our team] has gained a more in-depth understanding of the needs in the women's sector, especially following the pandemic. This sparked discussions about the team's approach to partnerships, both internally and externally. Learning about the different local needs across the UK, the similarities and differences has given our team a broader view of the issues facing women and the women's sector, as well as ideas for engaging with a wider audience. ”

On the other hand, the mapping was a time-consuming exercise within a very time-limited project. Some areas were able to 'short-cut' the process because of knowledge and networks they already had but, for some, by the time they had completed their mapping there was only a year in which to deliver their workplans. This was particularly the case where there had been delays due to staffing or other issues.

6.6 The pros and cons of online training

On the back of the Covid pandemic, all sessions provided by the training partners were delivered online. This was largely successful, particularly for organisations and their workers and volunteers who were mostly familiar with online delivery by the time Labyrinth training started. It was less straightforward for women service users, as the relatively low take-up suggests. Some women with lived experience do not have ready access to the technology required and for women with literacy challenges or English as a second language, there may be additional difficulties in accessing on-line training. On the other hand, on-line sessions can be experienced as more accessible by women with disabilities, living in rural areas etc.

The success of on-line training depends not only on its delivery, but the processes in place prior to delivery – in particular, the promotion of the training so that potential participants are aware of it, and easy processes for signing up. In terms of promotion Labyrinth developed a comprehensive training brochure which was ‘marketed’ to the sector in a variety of ways, including via the networks of Navigators. This was largely successful although some Navigators commented that number of courses contained in the brochure made it quite daunting for some small organisations trying to work out what was most relevant to them, and a brochure alone was unlikely to be the best way to reach many women service users who often need more personal support and encouragement to engage in training.

Eventbrite was the system used for sign-up. This is a widely used system, and although not always experienced as the most user friendly, it has the advantage of being open to everyone, so it supports accessibility. A potential pitfall of this open access is the risk that the training is accessed by people who want to disrupt it. One training partner addressed this by developing a specific safeguarding protocol to ensure that all participants were safe, and their confidentiality upheld. Another problem of open access registration is that participants may sign up to courses which are not suitable or intended for them. For example, initially, some professionals signed up for sessions targeting women service users, and on a few occasions had to be asked to leave a session that was going to be inappropriate for them. This issue was resolved by the Labyrinth team who vetted the participant list before sessions and contacted any participants where there were doubts about their role.



6.7 Training across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland

Given that the legal context differs between the three nations, training providers had to be prepared to address such differences. As legal rights organisations, Rights of Women only delivered training within an English legal context, while the Scottish Women's Right Centre only targeted a Scottish audience. However, Surviving Economic Abuse developed new training content which allowed them to deliver appropriate training in Northern Ireland and Scotland, as well as in England. SEA also established new partnerships in Northern Ireland and Scotland in order to signpost women to local organisations that could provide individual support if needed.

Overall, the take up of training in Northern Ireland and Scotland was poor. Attempts to address this included developing country specific flyers and working with the local navigator to promote the training. As attendance improved, word of mouth also helped, as participants recommended upcoming sessions within their professional network. In Scotland, lead partner, the Women's Support Project achieved a successful collaboration with the Scottish Women's Rights Centre on a webinar series which was well-received and joint promotion of other training did help to increase take-up towards the end of the 12 months training programme. Unfortunately, these strategies did not have the same effect in Northern Ireland and attendance continued to be very low.

The main lesson to be taken from this is that for training to be successful a four-nation approach needs to be adopted. Our interviewees in Scotland and Northern Ireland suggested that there is a perception that training provided by England-based organisations will not be relevant to their context (sadly, a perception sometimes supported by experience). This means that training providers need to work a lot harder to get a foothold and this takes time – more time than Labyrinth funding allowed. The alternative is for a more collaborative approach to be built in from the start.

6.8 Training for women service users

There were limited numbers of women who attended sessions for women service users. Throughout the year, partners worked with the Labyrinth team to improve attendance and different strategies were trialled. However, although targets were mostly met, attendance figures remained low across the year. Feedback from Navigators and others suggest possible reasons for this, including difficulties for some women in accessing the technology required for on-line courses, some women not feeling sufficiently confident to do the training, especially in isolation and with people they didn't know (rather than as part of a small group of women already known to them), and the topics and 'pitch' of the training not always being appropriate to women's needs:

“ The national training offer is a good one for front line staff but it's the wrong model for women themselves to engage with. The offer for them needed to be by group not as individuals ”

The short timescale for delivering all the sessions was also undoubtedly an issue. Had there been more time for training partners to work collaboratively with Navigators to develop more bespoke training for particular groups, then take up may have been greater. As one Navigator put it:

“ The training offer to women themselves – I feel the idea was good but not sure it worked in practice. It's very hard to get the information out there and I suspect it got lost. It would have taken more groundwork from me to get the reach and I didn't have the capacity for that. Professional engagement was better, but for women there tends to be a big gap between the support they need for themselves and a broader training agenda ”

6.9 Co-creation between training partners and Navigators

The synergy between the work of the Navigators and the training on offer by the national training partners varied from place to place. In Glasgow, the Scottish Women's Right Centre and the Women's Support Project co-produced webinars, with the findings from the Navigator's mapping exercise shaping the subject areas addressed. This did not really happen to any great extent anywhere else. Two of the five training partners regularly attended Navigator meetings and were able to build contacts, but with a few exceptions, conversations with Navigators about delivering training to specific groups of women or practitioners in their area did not materialise. With the exception of SEA, who had a full-time postholder dedicated to Labyrinth and could therefore be more flexible, the training partners were using their Labyrinth funding to create and deliver the outputs agreed and they had limited capacity left for networking with other Labyrinth partners and Navigators.

Some Navigators had valued having the training offer when they were doing the mapping as it meant they had something to offer organisations rather than just demanding information. However, others felt that there was not a good fit between what the national training offered and the priorities they had identified locally. As one interviewee put it:

“ The national training offer] was locked in before we did our mapping so the demands didn't come first. Lot of the grass roots groups really need organizational stuff re applying for funding or governance – and they need focused mentoring support rather than formal training. And the bigger orgs don't need the DA training cos they already have the specialist expertise – many had done SEA training already. Also, we offer face to face training to women ourselves and that's more accessible to lots of women than on-line stuff ”

In an ideal world, the programme offered by training partners would have been developed after Navigators completed their mapping so that it could be tailored to the local needs identified. Ideally there would also be more co-design and co-creation of the training offers to generate greater local buy-in. However, given the timeframe this would have been impossible. Labyrinth was undoubtedly successful in raising the profile of the training partners in the local partner areas and extended their national reach. In particular, it enabled Rights of Women to provide training outside London and introduced many projects to the existence of Working Chance and the campaigns and services provided by SEA.



7. Conclusion

The impetus for the Labyrinth project came from two main sources. One of these was Solace's recognition of the confusing complexity of services which women needed to access in order to escape domestic abuse and build new lives for themselves and their children. They wanted to find ways to make this easier – particularly for the most disadvantaged women - by promoting more joined-up working and supporting women's services to be better able to meet multiple needs.

The second impetus was the emergence of a '4th wave' of feminism after decades in which the women's movement had been in eclipse. A new wave of activism amongst younger women, greatly facilitated by the media revolution, was much more inclusive of Black and minoritized women and girls and involved a greater appreciation of the intersections of different forms of oppression. Labyrinth was a project which hoped to ride this wave and use it to inspire a revitalisation of the women's sector.

Labyrinth piloted an idea of what might be needed to grow and strengthen the UK women's sector and make it better able to address intersecting inequalities and meet women's multiple needs based on five 'building blocks' of:

- Connection
- Capacity and confidence
- Co-creation
- Diversity
- Development

Connection

Through the mapping of provision and need, Navigators built a picture of their local women's sector – its strengths and weaknesses – and were able to identify opportunities to improve connectivity between services, draw smaller, grassroots projects into established networks and take awareness of women's rights and women's sector ways of working into a wider arena of services. The examples provided in this report illustrate the range of new and stronger connections that have been made via Labyrinth at a local and national level.

At the same time, the national Navigator forum and regular action learning meetings enabled the sharing of ideas and initiatives. Local projects borrowed tools and resources from each another and Navigators collectively reflected on their learning about what worked in building connection, involving small, unfunded groups and working with Black and minoritized women. The Labyrinth Learning series took this a step further by providing opportunities for anyone involved in the women's sector to learn, share and network.

Capacity and confidence

Connecting with a wider movement built the confidence and capacity of local organisations in and of itself. In addition, having access to the expert knowledge and experience of national organisations, provided through training and resources, increased their confidence in extending local provision through the capacity of individual practitioners to provide women with support and advice across a broader range of issues.

The pilot Women's Centre for Excellence website has underpinned confidence and capacity by providing access to evidence from research and evaluation, information about relevant policy developments, funding and influencing opportunities. It also encouraged projects to share achievements and blog about their learning. Most of the Labyrinth groups and organisations had no previous experience of such a sector specific national platform.

At the same time, women service users who joined training sessions gained skills and confidence as individuals, while recipients of small grants emphasized the huge boost in confidence that they had gained from their application being successful and the additional value of the capacity-building support provided by the Solace team.

Co-creation

The Labyrinth initiative recognised the importance of projects that enable women to care about, and for, each other through peer support and involvement in a movement to build a more equal world. In different localities, it enabled the increased voice and influence of women with lived experience of domestic abuse, homelessness, no recourse to public funds, seeking asylum, losing children to care, mental health issues and other complex needs. It did so by Navigators co-creating spaces where the women could participate on more equal terms with practitioners and by providing opportunities for women to speak directly to decision-makers. Navigators also co-created bespoke workshops and courses to meet the needs of small community projects and with and for specific groups of women.

Diversity

Mapping at a local level, in ways which actively sought to identify gaps in provision, unmet need and unheard voices, ensured that an appreciation of women's different and sometimes divergent needs was reflected in the pieces of work prioritised by Navigators. In all cases, local work included a recognition of the ways in which different forms of oppression and experiences of inequality intersect in women's lives and an emphasis on reaching out to Black and minoritized women and women's groups.

Nationally, Labyrinth recognized the diversity of the women's sector and the challenges for small, unfunded groups - often representing the most marginalized women – to participate in wider initiatives.

Development

Achieving freedom and equality for all women is a long-term goal. To achieve it, feminism needs to constantly renew itself by developing the next generation of activists and practitioners and growing and nurturing new organisations and ways of working. Labyrinth provided seed funding for some very small grass-roots group, provided access to formal training and informal workshops for 'beginners' as well as established projects. Opening up training directly to women supported organisations to provide pathways that would enable women to move from being recipients to providers of support to other women, speak out from their lived experience, or become practitioners and activists in the women's sector.

In conclusion

The pilot has tested the Labyrinth theory of change as extensively as was possible in an 18 month period, and it has evidenced the value of these building blocks in helping achieve the eight intended outcomes. They appear to provide solid foundations for a national Women's Centre for Excellence to grow and strengthen the UK women's sector and make it better able to meet women's multiple needs.

Our Grantees

Women's Sector Grants

- Hope and Better Safe Life Away from Harm, [ACCM \(UK\)](#)
- Therapeutic Crafts, [Argyll & Bute Rape Crisis](#)
- Lady Labyrinth...Mind..Body..Spirit, [Atlas Women's Centre](#)
- Connecting Rural Women, [Benbradagh Community Support](#)
- Developing Capacity and Strengthening Core Team, [Bluebell Care Trust](#)
- Best Version of You!, [Cassandra Centre](#)
- Women in Ecological Urban Farming, [Central and West Integration Network SCIO](#)
- Doing it For Ourselves, [Globalmama Enterprises Ltd](#)
- Bouncing Back from Covid!, [Granaghan & District Women's Group](#)
- Group Support for Inverclyde and Renfrewshire, [Home-Start Renfrewshire and Inverclyde](#)
- Legal Advice for LGBTI Migrant Women, [Micro Rainbow CIC](#)
- Back to Work, [Misgav](#)
- Move On Support for Homeless Women with Complex Needs, [Rowan Alba](#)
- Pregnant Then Screwed Helplines, [The Motherhood Plan](#)
- Healthier for Longer, Voices Women's Group
- YWHP, [Young Women's Housing Project](#)

Seed Funding

- Arts and Crafts, Come Paint with Us
- The Growth Project Girls Group, [Dipped in Creativity](#)
- Outreach and Training on Mental Health, [Gabriela](#)
- Self Defence Classes, [GRACE](#)
- Community Well Being Campaign, [Hamara Assra](#)
- Her Story, Come Outside
- Mixing Roots, [Hive South Yorkshire](#)
- The Inspiration Tree, Hope Inspired CIC
- Expressive Stitch, [Idaraya Life C.I.C](#)
- Dance Inc 1 to 1s, IgniteYou CIC
- Inspiring Yarns, [Inspiring Yarns](#)
- Community Connect, [KAG Advocacy CIO](#)
- Reconnecting the Women of Kildoag, [Kildoag Woman's Group](#)
- MumSing, [Little Bean Theatre](#)
- Our Time, Our Time Women's Group
- New Challenges, New Opportunities, [Peterborough Latvian Supplementary School](#) (Family Club)
- Plucky Skates, [Plucky Skates Ltd](#)
- Skills and Confidence Building, [Sahelis](#)
- DAMSEL (Disability Aware Mentoring Support Entrepreneurial Ladies), [SAMEE](#)
- THRIVE Empowerment Project, [Sikh Women's Aid](#)
- Leadership Unlocked: Building a Resilient Community for Care Affected Females, [Sister System](#)
- Suffolk Women's Group, [Suffolk Community Forum](#)
- We Can Do It Too!, The Women's Group 2021



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