



Bringing Women Together To Strengthen The Women's Sector

Labyrinth Project Evaluation Executive Summary

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project**

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Introduction

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 emphasized 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 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

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 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 minoritized 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 project 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 succeeded in exceeding all its original delivery targets:

- ✓ **33,468** 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 attending training (original target 161)
- ✓ **460** 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 its 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.





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ABUSE**

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TRUST**

equation

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WOMEN**
helping women through the law

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SUPPORT
PROJECT**

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come on in**

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