

The Centenary Community Engagement Fund

Working Paper: Partnership working, current community challenges and interdisciplinary research opportunities

Reflections from the University of Leicester Centenary Community Engagement Fund Workshop. 10th November 2021

Stephen O'Connor, Rabah Aissaoui, Khudeja Amer-Sharif, Clare Anderson, Paul Baines, Caroline Baker, Rajinder Bhuhi, Karen Birch, Steve Bolton, Paul Brown, Shali Bullough, Cheryl Clegg, Martha Clokie, Rohini Corfield, Louise Cotton, Helen Dexter, Jenny Dnes, Tony Donovan, Christina Faull, Caren Frosch, Zinithiya Ganeshpanchan, Mark Grant, Katy Green, Tobias Gould, Maggy Heintz, Tristram Hughes, Furzana Khalifa, Charlotte King, John Knight, Colin Hyde, Sandra Lee, Diane Levine, Iris Lightfoote, Kevan Liles, Matt Lilley, Alison Lockley, Fransiska Louwagie, Nicola Mackintosh, Susan McEniff, Liz McIntyre, Laura Meagher, Kellie Moss, Marie Nugent, Stephen O'Connor, Maureen O'Malley, Nataly Papadopolou, Manish Pareek, Minal Patel, Adam Peel, Maya Platt, Pamela Richardson, Ruth Rigby, Teela Sanders, Sarah Scott, Kevin Sherrif, Laura Spencer, Elaine Stevenson, Eilidh Stringer, Priya Thamotheram, Joshua Vande Hey, Sarina Wakefield, Vivien Waterfield, Chris Wilkins, Gavan Wilmot (See Appendix B')

Foreword (Clare Anderson, Stephen O'Connor)

The University of Leicester's centenary celebrations provide a timely opportunity for academics, staff and students to endorse our civic mission and engage anew with partners and stakeholders in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (LLR). The University owes its existence to the foresight and commitment of local people, who in the aftermath of the First World War helped to champion and establish University College Leicester in 1921, in the belief that access to higher education would enable a better future for all in the city and counties. The College was awarded university status in 1957, and its history and fortune has been inextricably linked with the city and local communities in LLR. Over the years, we have worked passionately together to reap new opportunities, face immense challenges and help to improve lives in communities locally across the UK and internationally.

Community partnership and collaboration can readily be witnessed through the hundreds of academics, students and staff who are actively involved with mission driven charities and third sector organisations many of whom participated in the **Centenary Community Engagement Fund Workshop** in November. Our leading researchers also have very strong links with community facing organisations and major institutions such as the University Hospitals of Leicester Trust. The same is true of multi-disciplinary academic research teams collaborating proactively with charities, businesses, social enterprises and organisations in a wide range of sectors from social care to arts and culture.

This paper is concerned with the **Centenary Community Engagement Fund** just one of the new civic initiatives launched during our Centenary year. This Fund will provide £125,000 in philanthropic funding for novel interdisciplinary research with partners and for more sought after internships for our talented students. We were delighted that so many highly experienced leaders, managers and practitioners from local and national organisations joined academic researchers in the Workshop at Brookfield in November.

The day was highly motivating and through discussions, the knowledge, expertise, experiences and voices of charities/organisations who are strategizing, pivoting and addressing issues at the front line in communities were brought together with the specialist and interdisciplinary knowledge and perspectives of university researchers. This working paper now seeks to capture the key challenge

areas and themes from the Workshop discussions which will inform the framing of the new research programme and funding call supporting innovative collaborations.

Centenary Community Engagement Fund - Workshop report (Charlotte King, Laura Meagher)

The Workshop was attended by 18 colleagues representing academic departments from across the University together with 32 leaders, managers and practitioners from 25 charities and third sector organisations in LLR. Participants were invited to identify some of the most pressing core ‘challenge areas’ and issues facing their sectors, and to identify which of these challenge areas might be most research-tractable. The intention was to draw on lessons emerging from this Workshop to underpin a call for project proposals in 2022, for ‘Tiger Teams’ (i.e. specialist groups working together for a defined period of time).

The event organisers and sector advisors agreed on the critical importance of bringing academics and community partners together to identify through discussion the key themes that would inform and frame the research call and foster rapport and maximise workshop outcomes. Appreciating both lack of time-resource and anxieties surrounding face-to-face activity, the intensive Workshop ran for 2.5 hours, with attendees grouped thematically at tables. Dr Laura Meagher, a consultant in strategic change in higher education and specialising in interdisciplinary and impact initiatives, facilitated the workshop. The Workshop design sought to optimise the available time by following four significant strands of activity; (i) identifying and clustering complex issues into core ‘challenge areas’ both shared and distinctive, (ii) prioritising challenge areas most likely to be addressed through future collaborations, (iii) unpacking and developing the core challenge themes, and (iv) establishing expected values for healthy project collaborations.

Each activity highlighted both shared and distinctive challenges across the LLR community. Together, the activities gathered input from participants in order to shape the foundations of a funding call

Identifying and clustering complex issues into core challenge areas both shared and distinctive

This section of the programme enabled the knowledge, experiences and voices of community partners to be heard and documented and better understand the landscape of core ‘challenge areas’. Evident through discussions across the room were both the depth of commitment and extraordinary work taking place in LLR communities despite contextual challenges including the considerable impact of general austerity and the pandemic.

Prioritising core challenge areas through a voting activity

Whilst all issues and challenges were recognised as important, the group prioritised the scope of future collaborative projects. Using the Mentimeter(TM) tool, participants were encouraged to cast three votes across the categories; (i) the most important challenges that can be addressed through University of Leicester-community organisation collaboration, (ii) challenges that require interdisciplinary action, and (iii) challenges that are LLR distinctive. The results are provided as Figures 2-4 in the Appendix A.

Unpacking and developing core challenge themes

Attendees joined groups focusing on their preferred themes for the penultimate strand of activity. A collective summary of challenge-specific issues and relevant points was documented to highlight the distinguishing characteristics of particular challenge themes. Specifically, an element of translation was incorporated to understand varied language use across different areas.

Establishing expected values for healthy project collaborations

The Workshop itself was an important step in cultivating new collaborations or further developing existing relationships. The final activity focussed on the importance of developing a strong sense of shared values and direction. The individual groups sought to identify key adjectives that would

characterise ‘healthy collaboration’ and then consider desired values themselves. This co-production activity informed our expected ways of working including practice that is mutually beneficial, democratic and dedicated to innovative modes of thought.

Challenge Areas

Three themes emerged from the discussions held at the Workshop, which we have termed ‘challenge areas’.

These are broad topics, where i) University and community collaborations are considered more crucial to developing evidence-based solutions, ii) challenges are so complex and multi-dimensional that interdisciplinary research is fundamental to solution-building, and iii) challenges are particularly salient to the significant socio-economic extremes and distinctive age and ethnicity profiles in the LLR region.

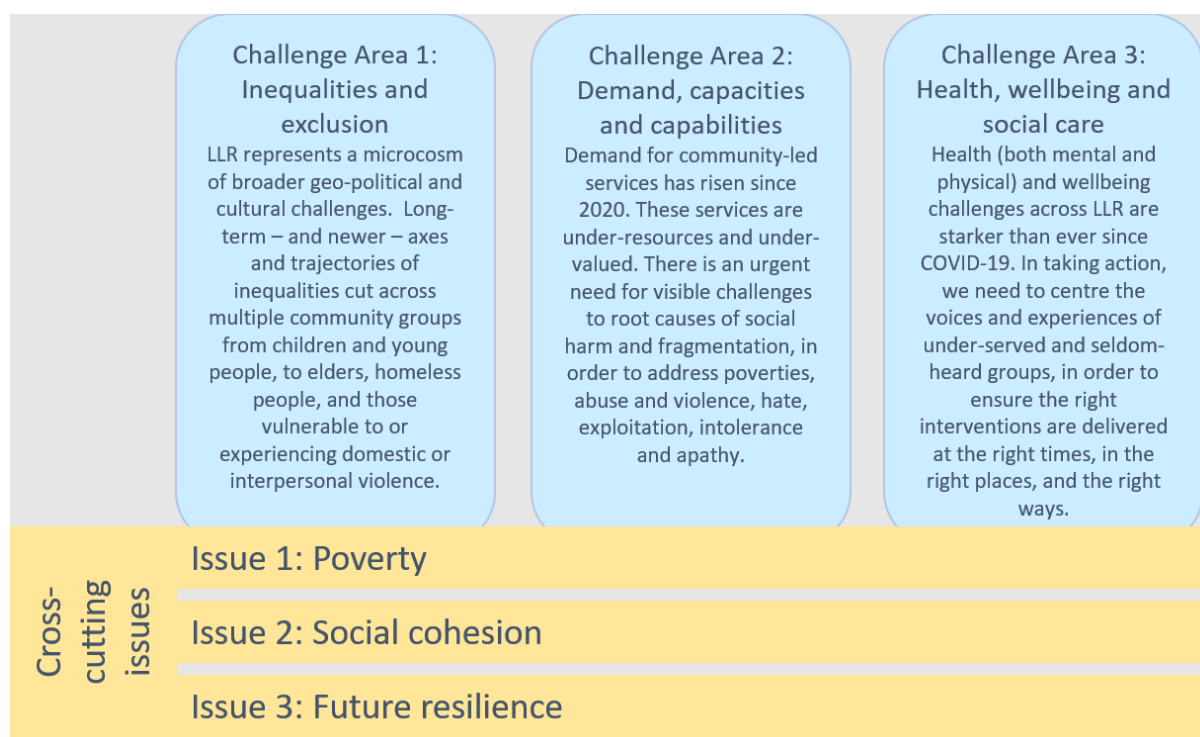


Figure 1: Challenge Areas for the Community Centenary Engagement Fund Tiger Teams

Figure 1 encapsulates an overview of these themes and issues as context for Community Centenary Engagement Fund ‘Tiger Team’ projects. We expand on each of the three themes below, building on the discussion during the Workshop, and conclude with a brief discussion of the three cross-cutting issues that have relevance to all of the themes. For each Challenge Area we start by providing contextual information regarding LLR in this Area. We then share some of the key issues raised during the Workshop. Each Challenge Area closes with a short consideration of the kinds of potential projects that could be funded in the future – these are by no means exclusive or preferred topics of study.

Challenge Area 1: Inequalities and Exclusion

Just under 1 million people live in the LLR region. In Rutland, 24% of the 37,000 population are aged over 65, in contrast to 12% in the city of Leicester, given the city’s large student population. In Leicestershire the age population profile is distinctive from the city and Rutland due to a slightly larger percentages of young people in the 18-24 age range (*again reflecting the residential student population*) and 40+ age ranges. Compared to national benchmarks, Leicester city has significantly higher proportions of Asian British, black British, mixed race and people from “other” ethnic groups,

in contrast to Leicestershire, and particularly Rutland, whose population report as 97% white. Socio-economically, the entire region experienced a sharp upward trend in claimants for Job Seekers' Allowance or Universal Credit since 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (LSR Online, 2021; Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust, 2020; *ibid.* 2017).

Many people living in LLR experience a good quality of life (Leicester City Council 2020). Population diversity and a rapidly growing youth population together provide the foundations for a vibrant socio-cultural context in which many are able to thrive.

However, the region still experiences large pockets of significant deprivation, and there are stark differences in quality of life between those who are living, learning and working in safe, comfortable circumstances, and those who are not. Even before the onset of COVID-19, some Leicester and Leicestershire communities struggled with inequalities and exclusion. For example, over 80,000 households were in relative poverty in 2019, and the city itself had the seventh highest poverty rate of 181 urban authority areas (Leicester City Council, 2020).

Some of the groups impacted most severely by the pandemic are already over-represented in terms of inequality in the city and county. Furloughs, redundancies, and pay reductions impacted 30% of low wage earners in contrast to 10% of the highest, and 30% of those living in relative poverty report being unable to afford basic living items over the past months. Similarly, young people are more than twice as likely to be in vulnerable occupations, and as a result twice as likely to have been furloughed or to have lost their job. Black, Asian and ethnic minority community members have experienced the double jeopardy of increased health risk from COVID-19 and economic risk, not least in relation to poor-quality housing or working conditions leading to increased risk of COVID-19 transmission (Leicester and Leicestershire Local Enterprise Partnership, 2021).

Our workshop identified a number of potential groups who may be at particular risk, and whose

Lived experience: Community Champions

Community Champions is a five-year project funded by the National Lottery Community Fund working across Harborough District in south Leicestershire, and some villages in north Northamptonshire. It helps isolated or lonely people (over 60) to change their lives for the better, regain their social confidence, and connect with people.

Dave, a volunteer, became a Community Champions befriender, and set up a Breakfast Club. "We now have a group of five or six turn up regularly on a Tuesday morning; people like myself who are on their own". It seems to particularly appeal to men, who can sometimes be harder to engage in projects like this. Dave thinks that this might be because, "It's something specific to do, it's 'Going to Breakfast Club' like going to bowling or golf... The regular contact has deepened relationships, "The evidence of success is that during lockdown people have kept in touch and been phoning each other, we're all in the same boat, we are all on our own so we're all starting from the same point". (Age UK)

challenges may overlap and intersect. They include in particular children and young people (especially those vulnerable to mental ill health or who are leaving care), older people, and those vulnerable to domestic violence (including intimate partner violence). We learned that there is an urgent need to challenge cycles of disadvantage and exploitation that disproportionately impact on women, children and young people, and people of colour.

Possible foci for this challenge area might include the drivers and/or levers through which inequalities are concentrated in LLR, as well as the rapid acceleration and deepening of exclusion across the region. Similarly of concern are risks to those who might be excluded from the labour market for a range of social, economic, or political reasons, thereby increasing marginalisation (particularly for young people). The impacts of

digital exclusion in the context of access to work, cultural lives, and remote working opportunities

are challenging issues, alongside the potential risks, and benefits, of education and skills policies focusing on future work skills rather than ensuring equity of educational experience.

Demand, Capabilities, and Capacities Challenge Area

During the COVID-19 pandemic the need for community and charitable support has risen (Chan et al., 2022), and social isolation has changed from a term that described the most vulnerable in society to a condition affecting many. Social isolation and economic uncertainty have impacted on the social fabric of life reducing people's resilience and health (Chan et al., 2022). The voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) sector has been a fundamental part of sustaining public life during the pandemic, and a wide range of grants pivoted to face COVID-19-providing increased front line, community led delivery.

The VCSE sector, which includes organisations of varying size, includes a wide range of charitable aims for public benefit. However, as need increases funding does not rise proportionately. There is still a misapprehension that the voluntary sector is staffed primarily by volunteers and is cost 'free', whereas they are purpose led organisations with the same overhead costs as any organisation for staff, buildings, and resources. There is now increasing demand for higher levels of service from the VCSE, yet this follows a long history of reduced public funding including: the change from Local Authority service level agreements to commissioning and tendering and reduced grants in terms of size and volume; and a never-ending push towards financial sustainability from diverse income streams including trading and social investment. There is also an increasing investment and involvement from organisations with a more social business and commercial models. In sum, austerity and competition have together changed the landscape of the voluntary sector with many large and middle-sized organisations disappearing (Chan et al., 2022).

Lived experience: E2Online

"During the Covid pandemic the NHS phoned a Beaumont Leys charity, E2online, to request volunteers to stand in car parks, just in case somebody wanted a conversation. The discussion included how this was not a good 'volunteer opportunity'. The NHS wanted to provide free social support and assumed this capacity could be turned on at a low level with little effort and no cost. However, good volunteering is defined by mutual benefit. To attract a volunteer there has to be value for the volunteer, training, support and expenses for food and travel. A good example of an attractive volunteer opportunity might be a well-managed garden make over, where the volunteer can have activity that gets them outside, develops skills and competencies, gives them exercise, enables them to meet new friends, build team working skills, with a clear and rewarding outcome, and a celebration BBQ at the end to say thank you." (BLP Adviser, E2Online)

Dayson and Woodward (2021) noted that VCSEs have displayed three particular 'capacities' in the South Yorkshire city of Sheffield since 2020: i) absorptive capacity in moderating the impact of COVID-19 in order to continue to provide the important services for local people; ii) adaptive capacity in making small changes in order to continue functioning, without making drastic changes to practice, and iii) transformative capacity to change fundamentally the practice or purpose of the organisation in order to survive and then seed/create long term change.

While these extraordinary representations of resilience are noteworthy, during our workshop we learned that they have come with a steep and unsustainable cost for VCSE organisations in LLR. Specifically, while we recognise the way in which activism and vibrant communities have made suffering visible, for many people living in our region their lived experiences are *hidden* poverties and exploitations, for example domestic and/or intimate partner violence, or hate. Addressing these

complex and intersectional challenges – particularly in the context of reducing funding sources - appears at times to be an insurmountable task.

Possible foci for this challenge area might include ways of supporting VCSEs in building their resilience pathways into the medium and longer term, for example through better understanding of efficient and effective organisational change and development and management of more sustainable and ‘higher value’ volunteering. They might address the need for social innovation practices or infrastructures that benefit and support more than one VCSE, advancing the recovery of the LLR region as a whole. They are likely to understand and demonstrate, for those beyond the sector, the true and extraordinary value of the work taking place each day. These insights might be framed in different delivery models that support future funding applications, philanthropic approaches, or more efficient fund management for VCSEs across the LLR region.

Health and Well-being Challenge Area

People living in the city of Leicester have, on average, shorter lives and more time in ill health compared to national rates. Those living in poor health are likely to experience two or more chronic conditions, often linked to smoking, obesity or inactivity (Leicester City Council, 2020). Over the last 10 years deaths from mental and behavioural disorders has increased significantly to 10% (dementia accounting for the majority of this). Just under 20% of the city’s 16+ population report low mental well-being scores, with the unemployed, long-term sick, disabled, or social renters most vulnerable to mental ill health. In Rutland, while outcomes are generally better than national averages, the ageing population presents particular challenges surrounding social care and age-related illness (Public Health England, 2021). The Joint Strategic Needs Assessments for Leicestershire has

identified priorities for the present, reflecting the wide range of concerns for children, young people and adults across the region (LSR Online, 2021).

For many of our workshop attendees, mental health and well-being was a concern. This issue arose across age ranges, demographic characteristics, and applied to those working with and for VCSEs as well as their service users/clients. Many acknowledged that our understanding of the relationships between health and well-being outcomes, factors within clients’ control, and factors outside their control is still nascent, not least because of the fluidity of those states. The complex interplay between physical and mental health was discussed by a number of groups, some of whom suggested that distinguishing between these may not be helpful, but a more holistic approach is necessary to achieve improved and enduring positive outcomes.

Lived experience: Focus Charity

‘Thomas’ is 16 and transgender. After traumatic bullying in primary school, his mum home-educated him. Suffering with depression, anxiety and social anxiety, his mum feared for his mental health.

With support from Focus’ staff and volunteers he made new friends with other young people and began to relax into the range of workshops, discussions, youth-led community projects, mentoring, and social activities they offered.

His sense of self-worth and confidence grew and he soon began to lead his peers in activities. Within six months of finding Focus, his mum said:

“As a parent of a very anxious and reserved young person who has struggled with his identity status, which has led to self-harm and very difficult times, I have much appreciated the support, guidance and opportunities your project has provided him. I do believe that he has not only grown and developed as a result, but your project may well have saved not only his mental health but his life” (Focus Charity)

Possible foci for this challenge area might explore health and well-being across sectors and age ranges, for example bringing together young and older people, co-creative or participatory/patient-centred approaches to understanding and addressing health and well-being needs, technologically-mediated approaches, or intersections with activism or the natural environment.

Cross-cutting issues

Three key cross-cutting issues arose from our Workshop discussions. These issues were considered as potentially relevant to all the challenge areas discussed above. We expand briefly on these issues here.

- Issue 1: Poverty

Poverty in the city is inextricably linked with ill-health (physical and mental), and those living in most poverty in the city have much lower life expectancies compared to those living in more comfort. More widely across the LLR region, there is evidence of parity with national trends, such as increases in child and pensioner poverty, and more households struggling with debt than ever before (Earwaker & Bestwick, 2021). During COVID-19 low-income households suffered disproportionately to their high-income counterparts. Moreover as we enter 2022, when the pandemic future is still uncertain, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates a third of low-income households face approximately £5bn in unpaid bills (Heatherington, 2021; Earwaker & Bestwick, 2021). The workshop recognised the complexities of this cross-cutting issue, in relation to our deep understanding(s) of the issue, the potential for sustainable interventions or solutions that are both evidence-based and resource-light.

- Issue 2: Social cohesion

A recent study by Lalot et al (2021) resulted in a startling, but arguably predictable finding; that those local authorities in England that prioritised financial investment in social cohesion programmes since 2018 had been more likely to benefit from social cohesion during the pandemic. Their conclusion is that medium/longer term investment is likely to lead to stronger, more connected, and more resilient communities, as represented by increased social activism, trust, personal relationships, political trust, and more positive attitudes towards immigrants. These positive outcomes are already linked in the literature (e.g. Borkowska & Laurence, 2021; Gearhart & Joseph, 2019) to positive outcomes more widely, such as reduced crime levels and increased progress through educational stages. The workshop acknowledged, however, that while there are examples of successful social cohesion both locally and nationally, sustainable change requires multiple levels and forms of action and interaction to manifest.

- Issue 3: Future resilience

For our purposes here, we define resilience as a system's capacity for change. Ann Masten, a world-renowned psychologist, defines resilience as, 'the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development' (2014). This definition is remarkably similar to that of the leading systems ecologist Carl Folke who describes resilience as, 'the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, and feedbacks, and therefore identity' (2016). Both definitions, from very different fields of study, emphasize the need to understand the ways in which human and non-human systems deal successfully with shocks and disturbances in order to thrive despite adversity (Ungar & Theron, 2020). COVID-19 is not the first shock we have experienced, and in the context of climate change and socio-political turmoil we know there are more to come. Building our capacities to adjust to current and future stressors will require the best combinations of our personal strengths as individuals and organisations, along with strengthening and nurturing our connections to others and indeed other systems.

Values

A number of values emerged during discussions at the Workshop, which will underpin the funded projects during 2022. At the heart of these is the shared desire to produce collaborations that are long-term, sustained and equitable across all sectors and disciplines, a mutual valuing of expertise and experience, and building trust through transparent and mutually-supportive ways of working.

Conclusion

During the Workshop, participants co-produced the framing for upcoming collaborative and innovative projects, tackling issues of pressing importance in the LLR region. The framework captured and expanded upon in this Working Paper will guide not only the Centenary Community Engagement Fund Tiger Team call, but also subsequent collaborations in future phases of the long history of connection between the University of Leicester and the people living and working in the region.

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Please vote for up to three CCAs that you think need to be addressed through community/university collaborations

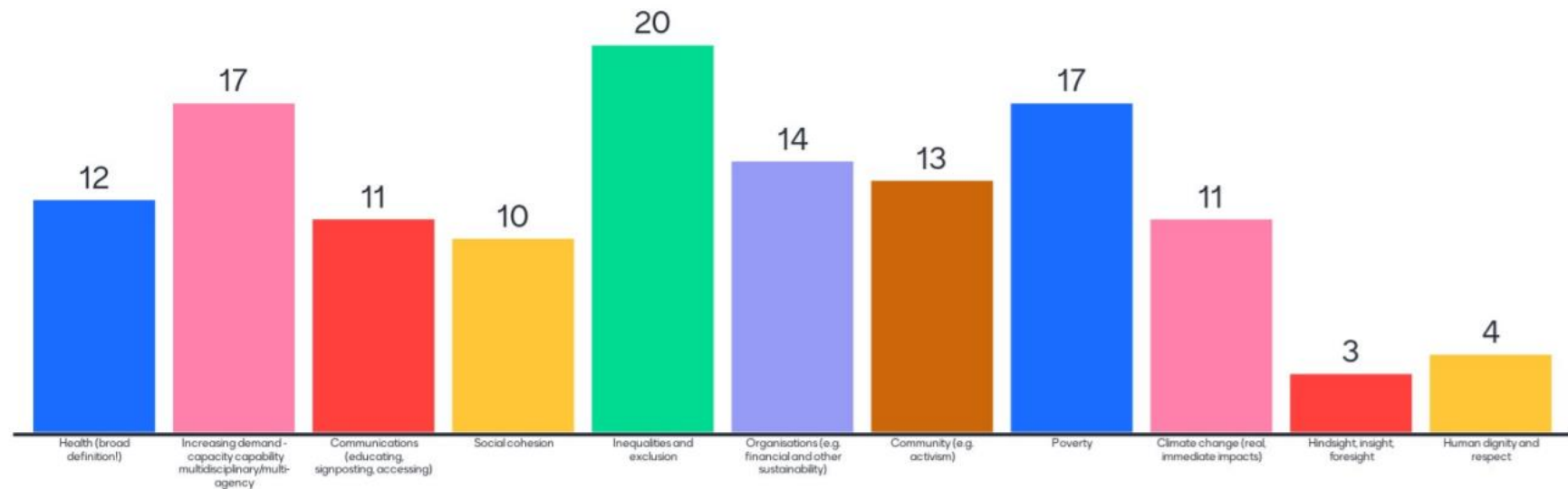


Figure 2: Workshop voting task 1. X axis categories: Health (broad definition); Increasing demand, capacity and capability, multidisciplinary, multi-agency; Communications (educating, signposting, accessing); Social cohesion; Inequalities and exclusion; Organisations (e.g. financial and other forms of sustainability); Community (e.g. activism); Poverty; Climate change (real, immediate impacts); Hindsight, insight, foresight; Human dignity and respect

Vote for three CCAs that are so multi-dimensional that we need to work across disciplines to address it

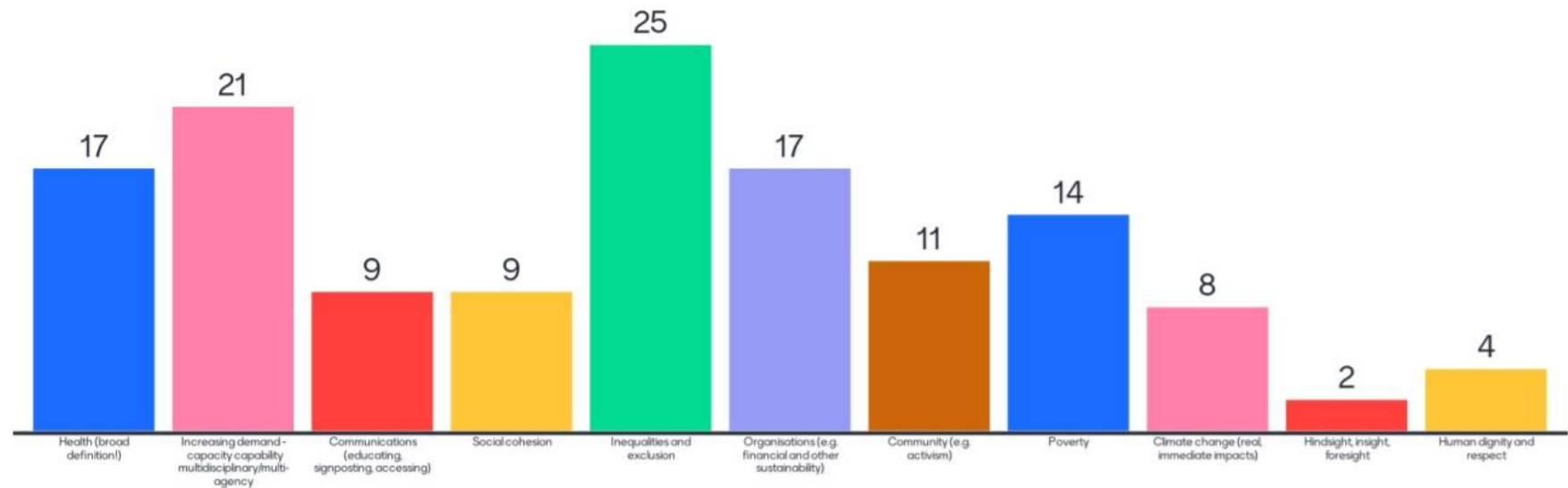


Figure 3: Workshop voting task 2. X axis categories: Health (broad definition); Increasing demand, capacity and capability, multidisciplinary, multi-agency; Communications (educating, signposting, accessing); Social cohesion; Inequalities and exclusion; Organisations (e.g. financial and other forms of sustainability); Community (e.g. activism); Poverty; Climate change (real, immediate impacts); Hindsight, insight, foresight; Human dignity and respect

Vote for 3 CCAs that you believe are distinctive to living in LLR

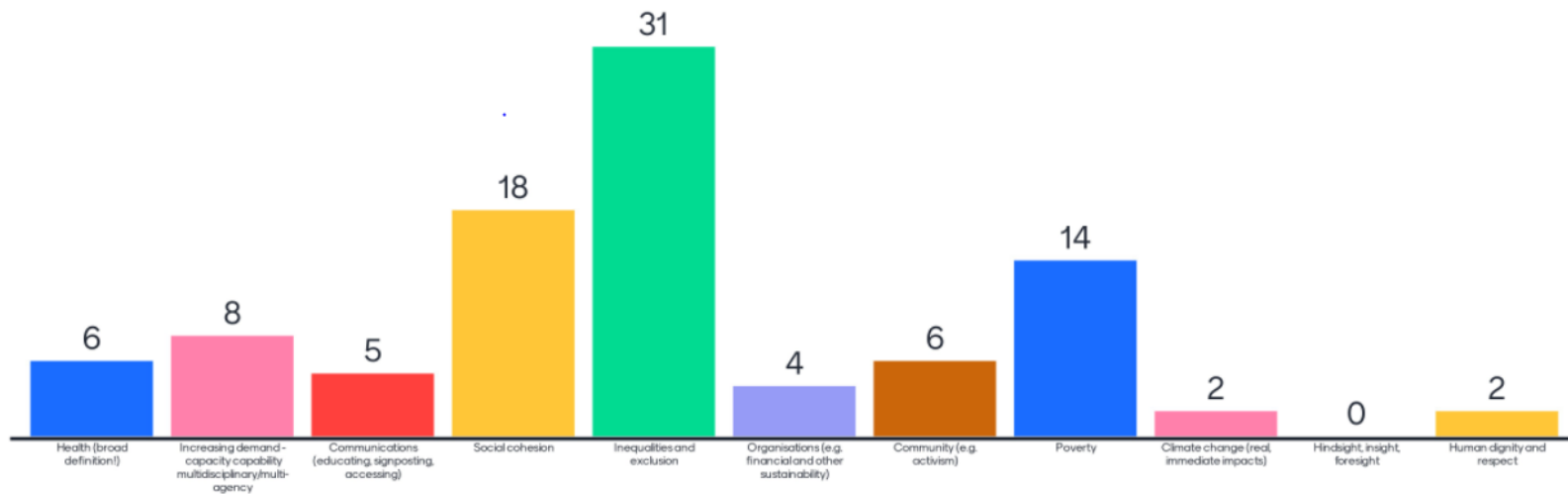


Figure 4: Workshop voting task 3. X axis categories: Health (broad definition); Increasing demand, capacity and capability, multidisciplinary, multi agency; Communications (educating, signposting, accessing); Social cohesion; Inequalities and exclusion; Organisations (e.g. financial and other forms of sustainability); Community (e.g. activism); Poverty; Climate change (real, immediate impacts); Hindsight, insight, foresight; Human dignity and respect

Appendix B: Organisations participating in the workshop¹

Action Homeless
Afro Innovation Group
Age UK Leicester
Charity Link
Community Money Advice
Fareshare Midlands
Focus
Highfields Aventure Playground
Highfields Centre
Highfields Community Association (Centre)
Home-Start UK
Leicester City of Sanctuary
Leicestershire and Rutland Community Foundation
LOROS
Leicester YMCA
National Youth Agency
Reaching People
Shama Women's Centre
The Race Equality Centre
The Sparks Arts for Children
The University of Leicester
Voluntary Action Leicestershire (VAL)
Voluntary Action South Leicestershire (VASL)
Warning Zone
Women's Aid Leicestershire
Zinithiya Trust
