



Leeds
CITY COUNCIL

Leeds City Listening Project
Update Report
September 2021



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1. Introduction:

“Our ambition is for Leeds to be the best city in the UK: compassionate and caring with a strong economy; which tackles poverty and reduces inequalities; working towards being a net zero carbon city by 2030. We want Leeds to be a city that is distinctive, sustainable, ambitious, fun and creative for all, with a council that its residents can be proud of as the best council in the country. But most of all, in light of the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, we want Leeds to be a safe city”

(Councillor James Lewis, Leader of Leeds City Council and Tom Riordan, Chief Executive of Leeds City Council (*Best Council Plan 2020 – 2025 Tackling Poverty and Reducing Inequalities*)

Leeds is one of the fastest growing cities in the UK with people of different ages and from many different backgrounds, cultures and beliefs living and working alongside each other. The number of women living in the City represents half of the population and despite continued growth in the city we know that the benefits of economic growth are not reaching everyone. In 2017/18 almost a fifth of the Leeds population – over 170,000 people across the city were classified as being in ‘relative poverty’. (Relative Poverty measures individuals who have household incomes 60% below the median average.) with a number of our residents in low-wage and insecure jobs. Studies have shown that women are more likely to be disproportionately affected by poverty and disadvantage. Work has been taking place across the City for several years now to engage with and involve women and girls to understand the challenges that they face.

2. Background:

- 2.1 In April 2019 the council were successful in their bid for funding for the Leeds City Listening Project. The City Listening programme of work was targeted at marginalised women in communities who face multiple barriers to achieving their potential, particularly those who are likely to live in poverty, suffer from inequality and who are the furthest away from mainstream involvement and engagement. Leeds was one of only 3 cities in the UK who were successful in receiving City Listening funding from the Government Equalities Office. This funding was part of the legacy element of the Centenary Fund: Centenary Cities:100 Years of Votes for Women, which the council received in 2018 to deliver a programme of activity as part of the Women’s Suffrage Centenary programmes. The outcome of the Leeds City Listening Project was approved at Executive Board in April 2020.

- 2.2 It was decided that the best way to engage with women for the Leeds City Listening Project would be through a programme of focus groups. This offered the opportunity to engage with a diverse range of women and it was felt it would be less emotionally demanding on the women than one to one sessions. It was also in realisation that women would feel more comfortable and supported in a group setting as they would be able to offer each other peer support while discussing issues.
- 2.3 The project included a total of 112 focus groups taking place between May 2019 and March 2020 allowing us to engage with 1390 women. Trust was a barrier for many women, partners ran a total of 32 focus groups on our behalf, this was done mainly because they had a pre-existing relationship and level of trust with the women we wanted to engage with.
- 2.4 The focus groups reached a broad spectrum of women from across the City who were targeted by geography and identity. The priority was listening to the voices of marginalised, disadvantaged or disengaged women to identify and understand the barriers that prevent them from reaching their full potential. The project focussed on four key areas;
- Women who live in our targeted wards and priority neighbourhoods
 - Women who are our staff
 - Women by identity or theme
 - Women in new and emerging communities
- 2.5 The programme of work was targeted at marginalised women, particularly, those who are likely to live in poverty suffer from inequality, are disengaged and who are the furthest away from mainstream involvement and engagement. This was to ensure women in communities who face multiple barriers to achieving their potential are understood and are heard by policy makers and their views on potential solutions are considered.
- 2.6 Leeds City Council is one of the biggest employers in the City and approx. 61% of staff are female. The council recognises that it has a twofold role in supporting and developing women both as citizens and employees and would prioritise work with both of these groups to encourage them to discuss issues that affect them and to consider what they see as potential solutions to those issues.
- 2.7 The internal staff network ‘Womens Voice’ is currently undertaking work to refresh the network which will help to identify the key issues and priorities for women in the organisation, particularly, those women who are employed in lower paid, remote jobs who don’t always get the opportunity to have their voices heard. Central to this is improving how women are able to influence the decision making process and provide mutual support.
- 2.8 Leeds City Council works in partnership with Womens Lives Leeds which is a unique partnership of eleven women and girls organisations from across Leeds. Womens Lives Leeds are also the Womens Hub for the City which is part of the Equalities Assembly. The Equalities Assembly is a forum, made

up of Equality Hubs, which helps ensure Leeds City Council is engaging with and involving the full range of citizens that live in Leeds in the decisions it makes. It offers all equality groups the opportunity to meet and work together to let the council know the issues that affect them. Women's Lives Leeds partner organisations ran a number of the focus groups, given their working relationship with service users.

3. Main Findings of The Leeds City Listening Project:

- 3.1 The Leeds City Listening Project found many women still face barriers when accessing services and they also face disproportionate social isolation, prejudice, and hate crime.
- 3.2 Although a large number of topics were discussed at the focus groups,¹⁰ areas were identified by the women who engaged in the focus groups as their main priorities, these 10 key areas were used to create the recommendations within the report. The 10 areas were;
 - **Mental and Physical Health and the Health Service**
Health, particularly mental health, was discussed in the majority of focus groups. Mental health has a big impact on women and the lack of access to services in local areas was raised as a concern on numerous occasions. Other barriers were often exacerbated if mental health issues were present.
 - **Family and Culture**
Family and culture was raised in a high number of focus groups. Conflicts between what women wanted to do and the expectation of families or communities were often identified as a barrier that would affect women. Women being expected to take on caring roles in the family was also an added pressure.
 - **Housing and Homelessness**
This was broken down into homelessness and housing issues. Women who were homeless would often be facing multiple barriers already and lack of housing made them feel even more vulnerable in the City. Housing issues included overcrowding, unable to get adaptations done to houses and concerns over privately rented housing.
 - **Children and the Education System**
Childcare was a barrier that many women experienced, this could be due to cost of childcare when working, lack of suitable childcare options for children with additional needs, lack of knowledge and awareness of apprenticeship schemes and children who have been/are in the care system.

- **Language Barriers**

Women who cannot speak English, or have English as a second language spoke about experiencing a lack of confidence to engage with people from other communities or struggling to understand employment, schools and benefits systems. A lack of available English classes in some parts of Leeds was a barrier for some women and the added pressure of learning another language discouraged some women from accessing services.

- **Financial Issues- Employment, Benefits, Accessing Financial Services**

Finances have a major impact on women's lives in Leeds and if women were experiencing mental health concerns they would often see these concerns heightened if they were also experiencing financial difficulties. Uncertainty around benefits affected women in many ways, including in some extreme cases where women would work additional hours at work, but not claim payment for these hours due to the fact they would lose money from benefit payments as a result.

- **Community Safety**

Many of the women who took part in the focus groups had experienced or witnessed crime or anti-social behaviour. On the whole women did not feel confident in challenging or reporting this behaviour as they feared reprisals from others in the community. Racism and hate crime were also discussed, with a number of women unsure of what constitutes such crimes or how to report them.

- **Aspiration and Confidence**

Low aspirations and confidence was a barrier to gaining employment or promotion in the workplace, this was something that also affected women employed by Leeds City Council. Women would like to see more confidence building sessions taking place in the community and at their workplaces to help increase their chances of successfully securing new job opportunities.

- **Local issues**

Some of the barriers identified were very local issues, but were raised numerous times or had significant impact. These included Leeds transport network, issues in certain areas in Leeds and the Leeds LGBT scene. Although some of these issues are specific to certain areas, it was acknowledged that many women across Leeds will have similar experiences.

- **Domestic Violence**

Lack of awareness of domestic violence support services or how to report domestic violence was raised during the focus groups. Women would also like to see more support for children who have witnessed domestic violence. Forced marriage was covered within the partner led focus groups

and raised concerns around fear, lack of awareness from professionals when dealing with disclosure and victims who have been conditioned to believe their experience is normal and do not access support as a result.

3.3 Along with the 10 main priority areas identified above, there were some obvious general barriers which emerged. These included;

- Lack of understanding/misconceptions/trust: many women talked about feeling like staff at organisations or services were targeting them or didn't understand the problems they face; this means that services/projects designed for them as a specific target audience may not be used by them as they do not feel comfortable or that they trust the organisations
- Isolation: in addition to older women this also included women who, due to mental health issues, find it difficult to leave their house; women moving to a new area; women who, due to local safety issues, stay indoors; women who, due to poverty, have few opportunities to go out. Women who have child caring responsibilities, this is particularly exasperated when children have additional needs and women feel uncomfortable attending play groups or asking family and friends to look after their child while they go out
- Mental health came up in almost all focus groups: ranging from living in a state of stress, depression, anxiety, dealing with bereavement, traumas, lack of confidence, etc.
- Predictable life stressors: school holidays, childcare costs, children's clothing and activities costs, Christmas
- Unpredictable life stressors: (mostly life-changing issues and financial issues) relationship break-up, illness/death of parents, children's mental health crisis, loss of a job, benefit/financial issues
- Self-care is a low priority: Many of the women prioritise their children's and family's wellbeing over their own
- General lack of knowledge of the services and support on offer- It was evident that for many women, some of the services or support they want already existed in some form, however they are not aware of it. This applied to services provided by the government, council or local Third Sector organisations in the City/their local area. Once women found out about services, many were willing to engage with them and use them- but their biggest barrier for many was discovering what was available.

3.4 A virtual meeting was held with the Minister for Women - Baroness Berridge. Baroness Berridge asked for the meeting to have a specific focus on Employment. A small number of women who were involved in the City Listening project, including council staff, the Lord mayor and the Women's Champion had the opportunity to speak directly with the Minister to discuss what worked well and what their barriers were regarding employment, this was especially pertinent as the meeting took place during lockdown, when many women were effected by employment issues.

- 3.5 The Government Equalities Office circulated the reports from all 3 cities who participated in the City Listening work to a number of government departments. There were a total of 214 recommendations made across the 3 cities reports. The Government Equalities Office have confirmed 2 key areas of focus for the City Listening Projects were used to influence the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, which was released in July 2021 and work on a Mental Health strategy which is ongoing.
- 3.6 Meetings have also taken place with the Government Equalities Office to feed back on the experience of the City Listening Project from a Leeds perspective, to help influence the process for future funding opportunities.

4. Progress Update

- 4.1 Since March 2020, there have already been several positive outcomes as a direct result of the work that took place. This included new peer support groups forming, existing groups meeting more frequently, groups recruiting more women volunteers to support new members or to help running additional sessions and organisations running more sessions that mirrored the City Listening format so they could hear directly from women about what issues affect them. Specific examples included; -
- Local play group looking to set up sessions for children with additional needs so parents felt less isolated and more relaxed around other parents in a similar situation to theirs.
 - Women who could speak English well offering to ‘buddy’ people who were finding it difficult to learn English.
 - Partner organisations who ran focus groups on our behalf confirmed that they have used the discussions in the planning of their services, to help them better understand some of the needs of their service users and shape services to try tackle some of the barriers they identified.
 - Partner organisations used some of the learning to refine upcoming funding opportunities to include and prioritise the barriers women in their groups had identified
 - Community Group: As a result of a focus group held in the west of the city, one particular group of women agreed they would like to continue meeting on a more regular basis. Subsequently, the group successfully applied for funding from Leeds Community Foundation, this enabled them to continue meeting in their chosen venue and organise supplies for group activities. The same venue went on to obtain more funding from Leeds Community Foundation to support the development of a cultural community café based at the centre. Activities at the café will include cooking, creative crafts, positive mental health, physical activities & health checks. One to one support will be available from staff and volunteers for those struggling or needing extra support with things such as debt, unemployment, ESOL, etc. meaning even more people in the community can be supported.

- 4.2 It is important to note that the Leeds City Listening Project completed in March 2020, which coincided with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore all findings were pre-pandemic. This has resulted in a significant shift in many of the recommendations and barriers women face. The pandemic also led to many social groups and support services that are available to women reducing their operating hours or closing completely during lockdown.
- 4.3 Since March 2020, the Leeds City Listening Project findings have fed into the following key areas to help shape the work taking place to better support women in the city;

- **Leeds City Council**

The Leeds City Listening Report was circulated to all the partners and organisations who took part in the project. The report has also been sent to council directorates, teams and groups who support women, including but not limited to;

- Gypsy, Roma Traveller Team
 - Domestic Violence Team
 - Women's Reoffending subgroup
 - Women's only COVID-19 vaccine offer
- **Community Safety**

Community safety was a key theme in focus groups with many women sharing that they did not feel safe in their local areas and/or in the City Centre, particularly in the evening and night time. The presence of crime and anti-social behaviour and damage to parks and green spaces were cited as issues which made women feel less safe. Women also commented that public spaces during night time economy hours felt particularly unsafe e.g. when leaving bars and nightclubs and in and around the train station.

These findings, along with other views expressed in relation to safety, have helped inform the Leeds and West Yorkshire bids submitted to the Safer Streets Fund Round 3 (focused on Violence Against Women and Girls) and the Safety of Women at Night Fund. The findings will also be used by a newly established collaborative working group which will be chaired by the Deputy Leader of Council and Executive Member for Resources. This working group will develop the partnership arrangements for developing the Leeds response to the Government's Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy which was launched in July 2021. The findings from the City Listening Project will be used to inform this work.

In addition to the Ending VAWG working group mentioned above, Leeds has also established a city centre VAWG Thematic working group. The aim of the thematic group is to develop a place based plan covering tactical and operational activity during the day, evening and night time economy issues (risk, threat and harm) in the city centre. The group includes representation

from elected members, council services from a wide range of directorates, partner organisations and women's support organisations. The group is intelligence and evidence lead, including listening to and acting on the voice of women and girls, including cross identity, race, faith and ability. The group will use the voice of women and girls to explore collaborative approaches, working with a range of stakeholders and other significant boards to influence, inform and advance response and activity. Findings from the City Listening Report have been used to further enhance understanding, knowledge and application to achieve better outcomes for women and girls.

- **Partnership working with Women's Lives Leeds**

In September 2019, Women's Lives Leeds (WLL) and their partners were successful in their bid for funding from the Comic Relief "Power Up" initiative. The Women Friendly Leeds initiative was one of 700 worldwide bids, of which only 7 applications in the UK were successful. The aim of the Women's Lives Leeds bid is to work towards making Leeds the first Women Friendly City in the UK. The Women Friendly City Initiative was identified as one of the best ways to ensure the recommendations from the Leeds City Listening Report were carried forward and built on, ensure women's voices continued to be heard in the City.

One of the key elements of the Women Friendly Leeds campaign has been to establish a network of ambassadors and allies. Ambassadors are expected to make a pledge demonstrating how they can support Leeds to become a women friendly city, they are also invited to attend meetings, promote the campaign and take Women's Lives Leeds recommendations on board within their organisations (if appropriate).

In June 2020, WLL developed a survey that focussed on the effects of COVID-19 on women in Leeds, a report was produced and the findings in the report were very similar to the findings of the City Listening Project, demonstrating that many of the barriers and issues affecting women were present before the pandemic and have been exasperated by it. By using the Leeds City Listening report to compare the results of the COVID-19 report it helped to identify trends, demonstrated a longer time frame for the results and increased the amount of women from different communities who engaged, ensuring an even greater number of diverse women had their voices heard. It also helped to ensure the findings of the Leeds City Listening report were still current and relevant despite the pandemic.

While responding to the COVID-19 report, many women stated that they felt a significant increase in pressure due to additional childcare issues, financial concerns, caring for elderly vulnerable and shielding relatives. Women also stated how they believed COVID-19 would be impacting their work and employment, this meant that many of the women felt their mental health had suffered during COVID-19. As a result, Women's Lives Leeds obtained funding for a number of 'Thank You' packs, as a way to recognise what the women had experienced and dealt with during COVID-19. The Leeds City

Listening project supported Women's Lives Leeds to identify women and groups in the city who could be sent one of the packs.

A group mapping exercise was also undertaken including data from the Leeds City Listening project, this helped WLL to identify which women's groups were taking place in the City and when. The pandemic stopped many groups from meeting face to face, however a number of virtual groups were identified and many of these groups were contacted to offer an opportunity to feed into future work with WLL campaigns.

Women's Lives Leeds also produced a Women's Safety Survey, to understand more about women's feelings towards safety in Leeds. The survey was launched in May 2021 and was open for 4 weeks. The survey focussed on areas such as women's experiences, how safe women felt in general and in specific locations, how confident women felt in reporting issues, what measures women took to protect themselves, what makes women feel unsafe and the impact of this; and finally, what changes would help women to feel safer. The survey was completed by 1371 women who live and/or work in Leeds, responses were collected mainly on-line with paper versions also made available. The full findings report will be made available in September, however early indications show that the demographics of respondents matched well to the demographics in Leeds, with the exception of under 18's cohort who had fewer responses to the survey. Overall, most women indicated that they felt fairly safe when out and about in Leeds during the day, however, the majority of women responding did not feel safe after dark. A large proportion of women also stated that they believe 'being a woman' impacts their personal safety in Leeds. Work is already being planned to support women to feel safer at night, including safe spaces and promoting initiatives such as Ask Angela

Other partnership work between Leeds City Listening project and WLL also looked at the following areas;

- Social Prescribing- mental and physical health was a barrier for a number of women in the focus groups. Work is ongoing to further discuss social prescribing opportunities and awareness for women.
- Financial inclusion- issues surrounding benefits, employment and financial concerns featured highly in the Leeds City Listening project and were one of the highest in the COVID-19 survey. Meetings have taken place with the council's Financial Inclusion team, with a view to creating a simple document to help women know where to turn for financial support and also to increase awareness of financial support to the Women's hub so this can be fed back to the wider communities. Work is currently ongoing.
- Language barriers and support for newly arrived women- WLL were directed to the council's Migrant Access Project (MAP) to talk about how information on rights and women's issues could be made available for newly arrived migrant women. Work is currently taking place to make this information available via GP's, recognising this is likely to one of the first places women who are new to the City are likely to visit.
- Influencing at a national level

5. Way Forward

- 5.1 The council will continue partnership working with Women's Lives Leeds, with particular focus on the following key areas:-
- Mental and physical health support for women in City, including supporting WLL GP guidance for women who are newly arrived to the city to understand their rights and how to access support services if needed
 - Promoting and supporting work focussing on women's safety in the City, including circulation of the WLL 2021 Safety Survey to relevant council directorates and teams to influence and support future work programmes
 - Continued work to identify and map women's groups in the City as they begin to meet again as COVID-19 restrictions lift
 - Further meetings will be planned between the Women's Hub and council directorates to gain further in site and understanding of how policies and programmes of work will impact on women and to ensure women continue to have their voices heard in the city
- 5.2 Leeds City Listening Project should continue to feed into council projects and areas of work to ensure the voice of women continues to be heard and influence decision makers
- 5.3 Support the work that is currently ongoing in collaboration between the West Yorkshire Mayor's office and Leeds City Council in regards to Violence Against Women and Girls