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Local VCSE infrastructure: What does good look like?



NAVCA

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Foreword

The voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector is a vital part of our social and economic fabric. It brings people together, builds trust, and delivers the services and connections that enable communities to thrive. Strong local infrastructure is what makes this possible, the unseen framework that supports collaboration, amplifies voice, and supports the organisations that make a difference every day.

This report, *'Local VCSE Infrastructure: What does good look like?'*, brings together national evidence, practice insight and learning from across the sector to describe what effective local infrastructure looks like, why it matters, and the conditions needed for it to flourish.

Developed by NAVCA, the national membership body for local VCSE infrastructure, it reflects more than three decades of experience working with local infrastructure organisations and partners. It highlights that good infrastructure is not defined by structure, but by relationships, by the trust, equity and shared purpose that enable communities and systems to work together.

We would like to thank all those who have contributed to this work, and who continue to champion and invest in local infrastructure. Your commitment to collaboration and community action remains central to building fairer, stronger places where everyone can belong and thrive.

We are especially grateful to colleagues across One Gloucestershire Integrated Care System for commissioning and supporting this work, and for their shared commitment to strengthening the role of the VCSE sector in creating healthier, more connected communities.

Signed,

Maddy Desforges OBE
CEO
NAVCA





1. Introduction and definitions

1.1 Purpose of this paper

The idea of infrastructure support for the VCSE sector can be a nebulous concept, one which is difficult to define, to understand what it looks like when it is done well, and the impact it has for communities. This note pulls together a number of reports to:

- clarify what is meant by local VCSE (or civil society) infrastructure, describe its functions and consider what difference it makes
- consider and briefly summarise the factors, conditions and considerations that influence its effectiveness
- answer the question: what would good local VCSE infrastructure look like?

1.2 Sources

This paper draws evidence from four main sources:

- The NAVCA (National Association for Voluntary and Community Action) **LIQA (Local Infrastructure Quality Accreditation framework^[1])** (updated July 2025), providing a set of clear criteria against which infrastructure organisations can benchmark their activities, quality, and effectiveness.
- The Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS)'s **Local Civil Society Infrastructure (LCSI) R and D Programme** (reports published July 2025) to develop the evidence base on local civil society infrastructure. In particular, the Final research report^[2] and What works report^[3].
- Walking a Tightrope: Exploring the conditions for effective local voluntary and community sector infrastructure^[4] (January 2025), a report commissioned by NAVCA from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University, to explore the internal and external conditions that enable effective infrastructure.
- Vision for Volunteering^[5], a 10-year (to 2032) national collaborative strategy to create a diverse, innovative, ambitious, equitable and person-centred future for volunteering.

1.3 Terminology and acronyms

Confusingly, different sources use different terms for the organisations being supported, the support provided and those providing it.



Local VCSE infrastructure (see definition and functions below): The DCMS report uses the terms **local civil society infrastructure functions**, and **organisations delivering LCSI functions**. In this paper, **local infrastructure organisation (LIO)** is used as a shorthand.

This paper generally refers to **VCSE (voluntary, community and social enterprise)** sector / organisations. **VCSE (voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise)** is preferred by some as it explicitly acknowledges faith-based organisations. Government sources (including DCMS research) often use the term **civil society** instead. The DCMS reports also use **FLO (front line organisation)** to distinguish the VCSE organisations being supported by infrastructure, from the organisations delivering infrastructure support (who are also part of the VCSE sector or civil society).

2. What is local VCSE infrastructure?

NAVCA has set out four functions of local infrastructure, These four functions shape, for example, the LIQA (Local Infrastructure Quality Accreditation);

- **Leadership and advocacy:** representing the VCSE sector, providing data and intelligence on the VCSE or communities, enabling VCSE or community voice
- **Partnerships and collaborations:** bringing organisations together within the VCSE and across different sectors; convening cross-sector partnerships; developing joint projects or collaborative responses
- **Capacity building:** advice, supporting funding applications, signposting, providing resources or training, supporting community assets, bespoke support
- **Volunteering:** promoting volunteering activities, facilitating volunteer engagement and offering brokerage.

These four functions align to the five functions identified by the LCSI research from DCMS:

1. Facilitating funding for VCSE organisations
2. VCSE organisational and strategic development, and training
3. advocacy with and for the VCSE sector with statutory partners
4. community participation, promoting community activities, volunteer brokerage and capacity building
5. convening to bridge together VCSE networks, build collaborations and partnerships within and between sectors.



2.1 What difference does local VCSE infrastructure make?

DCMS Theory of Change for LCSIs^[6] (see appendix 2) identifies 3 outcome pathways showing how infrastructure activities contribute, via short- and medium-term outcomes for the VCSE sector, statutory partners and communities, to long-term positive outcomes and impact:

Pathway	activities related to	lead to (short and medium term)	resulting in (long term)
Pathway 1	facilitating funding, organisational development and convening	increased funding and financial management, better ways of working and increased connectivity	a vibrant VCSE sector that meets local needs
Pathway 2	organisational development, convening and advocacy	better understanding of communities and effective VCSFE representation in local decision making	improved policy making on local priorities
Pathway 3	community participation and organisational development	increased sense of community responsibility, increased skills/wellbeing/confidence of participants, and better understanding of communities	increased community trust, empowerment and belonging



NAVCA's four functions of infrastructure (leadership and advocacy, partnerships and collaboration, capacity building, and volunteering) map directly onto the DCMS outcome pathways.

NAVCA Function(s)		DCMS Outcomes Pathway
1 (Leadership and advocacy) and 2 (Partnerships and collaboration)	align most closely to the outcomes of	2: Improved policy making on local priorities
3 (Capacity building)		1: A vibrant VCSE sector that meets local needs
4 (Volunteering) – along with some of the convening aspects of function 2		3: Increased community trust, empowerment and belonging

3. What does good look like?

3.1 Funding and delivery models for local infrastructure

Funding

For LIOs to be effective, they need funding that is sufficient, sustained, and flexible enough to cover all their functions. Too often, resources are targeted at visible deliverables like capacity building or volunteering, while less tangible but essential activities—such as convening, advocacy, and representing the sector—go underfunded.^[2] At the same time, public sector partners frequently expect LIOs to provide intelligence, attend meetings, and engage communities without necessarily taking responsibility for resourcing this; when public sector resources are under pressure, funding for LIOs (rather than frontline VCSE organisations) often faces cuts.^[8]



Inadequate funding pushes LIOs into competing with frontline organisations for delivery contracts^[9] or charging beneficiaries^[10], both of which erode trust and disadvantage smaller groups. LIOs' strategic role can also give them privileged access to intelligence about new plans or opportunities; however:

"if every time we were saying, 'Give us that money and we'll run that project', then very soon, our relationship with our members and our wider sector would deteriorate because they would just see us lining our pockets." [11].

Sustainable resourcing, by contrast, allows LIOs to build deep local knowledge, retain skilled staff^[12], and remain independent and responsive to sector needs.^[13]

What does good look like?

The LIO has stable and flexible funding, enabling it to deliver all functions, secure additional investment for new workstreams, build trusted relationships, and advocate for investment in the VCSE sector. System partners value these functions and share responsibility for resourcing them proportionately.

Where LIOs operate a mixed economy which includes payment for some services, effective LIOs take action to remove barriers to access for less well-resourced organisations.

Delivery models

The DCMS research considered different models of LIO delivery and found that no one configuration was consistently more or less effective. There were pros and cons to both consolidated (one main or sole provider) and dispersed (involving a number of different providers) models.

More significant than the structure or configuration was quality of provision and the ability to adapt to the local context.^[14] Local knowledge, connections and relationships within the VCSE and across sectors, independence and a history of local presence were all important factors.^[15]



What does good look like?

There is a clear and coherent strategy and delivery plan, responsive to and codesigned with the local VCSE sector.

Providers of LIO functions have the local knowledge, connections, relationships, and skills to deliver effectively. LIO provision is visible to and trusted by marginalised communities. It strengthens 'by and for' VCSE organisations to 'do with'. Where there are a number of different providers they work together in a coherent way, having clearly defined responsibilities and lines of accountability.

LIO strategy, offer and outcomes are clearly communicated to VCSE organisations and strategic partners.

3.2 The Four Functions of Local Infrastructure

This section explores what good looks like in relation to each of the Four Functions; each of which has three indicators.

3.2.1 Function 1: Leadership and advocacy

Overarching outcomes

- We are leaders in our communities, strengthening our sector's voice and influence on key decision-makers and funders.
- We support and empower marginalised communities, working towards a more equal society.

Now, we will look at the three core components of this function of local VCSE infrastructure: strategy; leadership and influence; and equity, equality, diversity and inclusion.

Strategy

There is a coherent strategic vision for the VCSE locally, which is co-created with the sector.

Knowledge of and connections with local VCSE organisations are the cornerstones of local infrastructure, upon which credibility, legitimacy and effective service delivery are built:



“it is the connection with the VCSE sector that fundamentally anchors LIOs. The support for and from local VCSEs helps generate a mandate for the LIO, which contributes to its credibility and legitimacy both within the sector as a whole, but also in its relationships with statutory authorities.”^[16]

Good infrastructure needs an overarching vision and strategy, well understood internally and by external stakeholders, supported by strong leadership to drive it forward and provide clear direction to those delivering services.^[17]

Strong relationships and local knowledge, however, require time and resources to build and sustain them over time and as people, organisations and the local context change.

What does good look like?

The LIO reaches wide and diverse VCSE organisations from across the different communities that exist locally. It regularly reviews and reflects on who is not being engaged and is proactive in finding ways to reach out.

There is a coherent vision, strategy and delivery plan co-created with the local VCSE sector and communicated widely to local stakeholders. There are clear objectives, measures of success and mechanisms to report and share learning.

Leadership and influence

The LIO is widely recognised and trusted by VCSE organisations and decision makers in statutory organisations locally as a credible leader and effective advocate for the VCSE sector.

LIOs have been described as “the hidden wiring of the VCSE sector”^[18], highlighting the importance of strong relationships and effective two-way communication within and between sectors:



“drawing information from the sector to share in strategic meetings with statutory partners, but also feeding back issues and developments from statutory bodies into the VCSE sector.”^[19] Through this, trust in the LIO as honest broker, champion and advocate for the sector, are built.

An LIO will always have to prioritise which meetings and partnerships it can realistically engage with. Enabling others within the VCSE sector to take on representational roles can add capacity and widen the range of voices – though frontline organisations (especially smaller ones) may need resource and support to make this possible.

What does good look like?

The LIO makes best use of its energy, skills and resources to build strong relationships with the VCSE sector and statutory partners.

There are regular, proactive two-way communication channels to share and gather information, intelligence and views using different engagement mechanisms, including supporting others in the sector to take on strategic and representational roles. The LIO is trusted by the VCSE sector and statutory partners alike as an honest broker and as a champion and advocate for the sector.

Equity, equality, diversity and inclusion

Diverse VCSE organisations, including those by and for marginalised communities, have the knowledge, skills, voice and opportunities to participate actively and effectively influence policy development and decision making, and are actively engaged in shaping local agendas and priorities.

To be credible as a sector advocate, the LIO needs to engage all parts of the VCSE, taking intentional action to ensure that diverse VCSE voices are heard – particularly smaller, grassroots organisations with the least capacity or ability to engage, and organisations by and for marginalised communities.



Genuine reach and connections are:

“essential for building legitimacy and understanding local needs to effectively represent the sector.”^[20]

This function also considers the LIO’s responsibility to model and show leadership in its commitment to EEDI, through the way it behaves, acts and delivers services.

What does good look like?

The LIO is proactive in forging connections and building relationships with a range of VCSE organisations, particularly those by and for marginalised communities, to ensure that it genuinely reflects the diverse communities that it serves.

It identifies and acts to address potential barriers to its own reach and works equitably with specialist partners to ensure high quality support for all communities. Through working to bring about change, and the behaviours and leadership it models as an organisation, leadership and commitment to EEDI are demonstrated.





Case studies

VCSE Resilience Survey – Calderdale

Context:

Following the closure of a local mental health service, **Voluntary and Community Calderdale (VAC)** launched a VCSE Resilience Survey to assess the financial sustainability of local organisations and highlight sector risks.

Action:

- Surveyed VCSE groups on funding pressures, resilience, and preparedness for the cost-of-living crisis.
- Presented findings at multiple system boards, ensuring decision-makers understood the fragility of the sector.
- Advocated for a formal VCSE Strategy co-produced with the sector and statutory partners.

Impact:

- Sector challenges recognised at the Health and Wellbeing Board, Urgent Care Board, and by council leadership.
- Development of a formal VCSE Strategy (approved September 2023), with VAC playing a central role in co-production.
- Strengthened credibility and legitimacy of the VCSE as an equal partner in local planning and governance.

This example shows how strong local knowledge and connections, combined with a coherent vision and advocacy, can drive strategy co-production that embeds the VCSE sector as an equal partner.





Case studies

Influencing local budgets through trusted partnerships - Community Works

Community Works (Brighton and Hove) developed trusted partnerships through e.g. giving presentations to councillors about Community Works and the VCSE sector, regular meetings between councillors and the Community Works team to discuss thematic policy areas. They galvanised their members and VCSE representatives to influence the City Council's budget proposals, successfully reversing most of the proposed cuts to the Communities Fund, youth-led grants, and the supported employment scheme for adults with learning disabilities.



Golden Thread – Hastings Voluntary Action (HVA)

The Foreshore Trust sought to invest in mental health and asked **HVA**, as the local infrastructure organisation, to convene VCSE partners. Instead of competing for contracts, nine grant recipients and a MIND officer co-designed a shared project, guided by principles of collaboration, integration, and learning.

HVA secured **£40,000 over two years** to implement the work. Activities included workforce development, with over 80 staff and volunteers trained in Making Every Contact Count and mental health awareness; improved referral pathways through a new online tool; and digital inclusion support, helping more than 70 people access devices, data, and skills to get online.

Collaboration was sustained through an Action Learning Set and a joint bid to NHS mental health transformation funding.

Golden Thread demonstrates how flexible, sustained funding enables infrastructure to convene partners, build trust, and leverage additional resources; strengthening the VCSE sector and improving outcomes for communities.



3.2.2 Function 2: Partnerships and collaboration

Overarching outcomes

- Convening cross-sector dialogue and collaboration between VCSE organisations and other sectors enables local communities and people, including marginalised communities, to be heard and to have influence on decisions and policies that affect them. We create opportunities for collaborative working by building networks and partnerships between local organisations and strategic partners.
- Through nurturing these relationships, communities are better equipped in both the development of ongoing projects and times of crisis.

Now, we will look at the three core components of this function of local VCSE infrastructure: intelligence and influence; VCSE connections; and cross-sector relationships.

Intelligence and influence

The contribution, expertise and diversity of the VCSE sector is understood, respected and valued by policy and decision makers, commissioners and other local stakeholders.

Effective LIOs have strong relationships at a strategic level with key public sector partners and decision makers (the 'top table') as well as operationally, across a range of services and departments, so that relationships and understanding are embedded at all levels.

"To be fair to our local government partners, there are really great relationships, and that makes a massive difference, because it does feel as though we are in it together. It might be tough, but we are trying to pull in the same direction, and we want the same things" (LIO)^[21]

An effective LIO also provides up to date and reliable intelligence about the local VCSE sector, its assets and activities, and the value of its contribution. It offers insights and links into a wide range of organisations, particularly into smaller, grassroots groups:



“Relationships with frontline organisations were seen as critical... by providing legitimacy, insights and connections...This was seen as especially valuable for smaller VCFSE organisations that struggle to have their voice heard at an individual level. In building this trust, LCSI organisations become more important partners for public sector leaders.”
[22]

What does good look like?

The LIO gathers, analyses and shares accurate and up to date intelligence on the local VCSE sector, and can evidence and clearly articulate the difference that the sector makes.

It has mechanisms in place to engage and consult with VCSE organisations – including those by and for marginalised communities.

This intelligence is shared with key partners and decision makers, leading to genuine change and influence.

VCSE connections

There is effective communication, collaboration and partnership within the VCSE sector, enabling robust collective response to community need and more effective service delivery.

An important function of the LIO is providing opportunities for VCSE organisations to convene and connect, developing relationships, fostering collaboration and peer support, improving knowledge of local assets and services, and enabling a stronger collective voice “knitting together” activities in the area and building resilience.” *[23]*

In areas LIOs are absent or weak, this can lead to feelings of fragmentation and isolation, duplication of services and competition, and poor information flows.



This particularly disadvantaged smaller and newer groups lacking the capacity and connections of more established VCSE organisations:

“it was specifically the lack of opportunities for participation and voice for newer, smaller and community-based groups that was noted. More established organisations would regularly come together, but it was felt that smaller organisations were largely left to fend for themselves.” [24]

What does good look like?

The LIO brings diverse VCSE organisations together in different ways, enabling relationships and connections to develop. A culture of mutual understanding, support, trust and sharing within the VCSE sector is fostered.

The LIO facilitates a strong collective voice for the VCSE sector and greater confidence in raising concerns with decision makers. Information sharing, peer support and collaboration are enabled and supported.

Cross-sector relationships

Policy and decision makers, commissioners, funders and other local stakeholders value the VCSE sector and use the convening power of the LIO to work with the VCSE sector.

Engaging with the VCSE sector, with its diverse and multiple organisations, perspectives and interests, can feel challenging for public sector partners.^[25] VCSE organisations, particularly smaller ones, can also find the public sector and wider system complex to negotiate and hard to influence.

Having people within the LIO with the “capabilities, knowledge, expertise, experience and approach” to understand the wider context and negotiate these complexities effectively is critical.^[26]



An effective LIO will convene opportunities for those from different sectors to come together as equals, have meaningful dialogue, develop mutual understanding and build relationships that feel equal, mutually respectful and 'grown up'. Strong cross-sector relationships lead to better decision making and more effective local systems.^[27]

"This increased [VCSE] influence opened the door to improving public sector approaches to commissioning, as well as highlighting the need for public services to take a more preventative approach in areas such as health and poverty."^[28]

What does good look like?

The LIO regularly convenes opportunities for people from different sectors and organisations to come together so that relationships of mutual understanding and trust develop, enabling honest (and sometimes difficult) conversations to take place. As a result, genuine and meaningful cross-sector collaboration, co-design and co-production, involving diverse VCSE organisations and communities, is the norm, leading to better policy and decision making and better outcomes for communities.

The LIO acts as an honest broker, enabling the formation of new partnerships to respond to tenders and / or develop new VCSE-led projects and programmes.



Case studies

Capacity for collaboration, partnership and leadership – Community Action Redbrige

Community Action Redbrige recognised the lack of capacity and effective mechanisms in the Redbrige 'place' for VCSE collaboration, partnership and leadership. They worked to ensure there was meaningful communication and partnerships within the VCSE and between different sectors in Redbrige. This built trust and enabled the VCSE and communities to be respected as equal partners and leaders by statutory partners, addressing the historical power imbalances of commissioning relationships and building recognition of the importance of lived experience.

Bristol Voice and Influence Networks – Voscur

Context:

Voscur reshaped its approach to sector engagement after recognising that its former Sector Leaders network did not fully represent the diversity of Bristol's VCSE sector. Building on research from Black South West Network, Voscur established three new Voice and Influence Networks – for Communities of Practice, Communities of Place, and Communities for Equalities.

Action:

Each network provides dedicated spaces for different parts of the sector, with equalities-led and grassroots groups supported to participate through tailored approaches such as evening sessions and accessible briefing materials. Collectively, the networks gather insight, share knowledge, and co-produce questions, responses, and solutions with decision-makers.

Impact:

The networks have influenced local and national agendas, including the Civil Society Covenant, Bristol City Council's Social Value commitments, NHS 10-Year Plan engagement, and West of England mayoral hustings. More than 70 organisations are now actively engaged, including many smaller, volunteer-led groups previously excluded.

This shows how an LIO can convene diverse voices, broker relationships, and translate community insight into systemic influence at local and national levels.



3.2.3 Function 3: Capacity building

Overarching outcomes

- Local VCSE organisations have the support, tools, and confidence to grow, adapt, and sustain their work.
- Communities benefit from stronger, more resilient organisations that can meet local needs and unlock resources.

Now we will look at the three core components of this function of local VCSE infrastructure: response to need; building VCSE capacity; and sustainability.

Response to need

The strengths and needs of diverse local VCSE organisations are identified, and solutions to maximise potential and build capacity are co-designed and developed with them.

The local VCSE sector is very diverse; organisations have different resources, capacity and support needs and need different kinds of support at different times. Without a clear service offer, co-designed with VCSE organisations and responding to local needs, an LIO risks being spread too thinly, or being pulled in different directions, and also of working where there is capacity to engage rather than where there is priority need for support ^[29].

Having wide reach into diverse VCSE organisations, having proactive communication and relationships, and taking time to engage enables the LIO to co-design its capacity building offer so that it provides what is genuinely needed, in the way that is most effective.

What does good look like?

The LIO co-designs its services with VCSE organisations and communities, to ensure it understands strengths, current and emerging needs, barriers and potential solutions locally, developing and targeting its activities in response.

It engages and supports organisations by and for marginalised communities and address barriers to their participation.

There is a clear and clearly communicated support offer, and the LIO is able to evidence and articulate the outcomes, learning and impact of all its activities.



Building VCSE capacity

Local VCSE organisations understand their own strengths, skills, assets and development needs and the diverse communities they serve, and can access the advice, support and information they need to respond, and secure funding to grow, develop and sustain their work.

“Although LIOs can be embedded in multiple sets of relationships across sectors, it is the connection with the VCSE sector that fundamentally anchors LIOs [...] strong relationships between LIOs and the VCSE sector are based upon trust and are bolstered by regular contact and good communication” ^[30].

This trust often starts from relationships built through tangible support such as training, outreach work, or funding advice, delivered by staff who are seen as knowledgeable, approachable, professional and trusted, understanding the communities they work in.^[31]

While frontline LIO support is often responsive to VCSE organisations bringing a particular need or issue, effective infrastructure is asset-based and holistic, encouraging and providing tools for organisations to reflect on all aspects of their activities, resourcing and governance, and providing opportunities to learn and develop.

Recognising the skills and assets that exist within the sector, LIO convening activities create opportunities for VCSE organisations to network, share resources, collaborate and to support and learn from each other:

“when you’re a small organisation, finding the time to link in with others, your networking is incredibly time-consuming...it takes a lot of commitment to bring groups together.” ^[32]



What does good look like?

The LIO supports local VCSE organisations to assess their strengths and identify areas for development. It provides information, guidance and training that builds capacity of different kinds of VCSE organisations, including signposting to external resources and sources of support.

VCSE organisations are encouraged, enabled, supported and facilitated to share their skills, strengths and assets with each other.

Sustainability

This function includes, but goes beyond, funding advice (though cascading information about funding opportunities, particularly to smaller organisations, is an important aspect). It also involves helping organisations become 'funding ready', and develop the skills needed to prepare credible funding bids.

Where the LIO is weak or absent, funders report local 'cold spots' with fewer or poorer quality applications, particularly for small grant funds.^[33]

This function links to wider convening and capacity building activities: facilitating collaboration and the sharing of assets, and organisational development, enabling VCSE organisations to use resources more effectively.

An effective LIO will also engage and influence funders to ensure resources are targeted and disseminated locally for best impact. Some LIOs themselves become local grant-givers, securing, managing and disseminating funds to their sector.

What does good look like?

The LIO enables and supports VCSE organisations to sustain, expand, improve or adapt their services and activities. It uses a range of methods: providing information on funding sources, supporting organisations to develop new routes of income generation, capacity building to enable organisations to become funding ready and prepare credible proposals; securing and supporting or managing the dissemination of funds that benefit the local VCSE sector.



It uses local intelligence and connections to influence and shape how resources are used and disseminated more effectively. Other forms of support that help VCSE organisations' sustainability, such as sharing resources, in-kind support or collaborative arrangements are sourced, promoted and facilitated.

Case studies

Saving community assets - Up For Yorkshire

Up for Yorkshire saved a community asset for residents in Selby through consultation, co-design work and positive partnerships with community groups, the police, the Council, the Parish Council and youth services. [Read a full case study here.](#)



Supporting small organisations to navigate commissioning - VAST

VAST supports small organisations to navigate the commissioning landscape, forming a working group with sector leaders to investigate problems and identify solutions. VAST met with senior executives of Staffordshire Integrated Care System and Stoke-on-Trent City Council to give evidence alongside representatives of small businesses and Staffordshire Chambers of Commerce at a commissioning and procurement Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Unlocking opportunities for underrepresented communities - Community Action Redbridge

Community Action Redbridge's tailored support for underrepresented communities helped a small local group supporting women of colour to set themselves up as a registered organisation. They were provided with guidance and advice which enabled the group to secure funding and to develop the group's plans for the future.





3.2.4 Function 4: Volunteering

Overarching outcomes

- Barriers to participation are identified and removed, with intentional outreach to marginalised communities.
- Organisations are supported with the skills, tools and resources to engage, value and retain volunteers effectively.
- Volunteering contributes to stronger community resilience and creates pathways for personal development, with volunteers gaining skills, confidence and leadership experience.
- The LIO champions a culture where volunteering is recognised and embedded across sectors, and influences policy to create conditions where community action can flourish.

Now we will look at the three core components of this function of local VCSE infrastructure: promoting and enabling volunteering; increasing participation and reducing barriers; and influencing policy and practice.

Promoting and enabling volunteering

There is a positive environment for volunteering in our communities; the value of volunteering is recognised by partners from other sectors and by local people. As a result, volunteering is flourishing locally.

The Vision for Volunteering, a 10-year collaborative national strategy, strives for a future where a culture of volunteering is part of everyone's life and volunteer roles are given the recognition they deserve.^[34]

This function includes raising awareness of the personal and community benefits of volunteering, enabling connection between those seeking to volunteer and those seeking volunteers; as well as the community development and capacity building function, enabling and supporting people to come together to pursue causes that matter to them.

It includes appreciation and celebration of volunteers, as well as working with organisations to ensure that volunteers are engaged and supported in ways that lead to a positive and beneficial experience.



What does good look like?

The LIO promotes volunteering locally and actively raises awareness of its positive impact, for individuals and communities. It encourages people to be active in their communities in ways that are meaningful to them.

It understands the local volunteering landscape and supports diverse and developing forms of volunteering, encouraging the involvement of volunteers in developing new opportunities or organising community activity.

Good practice is identified and shared; organisations are equipped with the knowledge, skills, resources, connections and tools to develop new opportunities, recruit, manage, support and volunteers effectively and celebrate and show appreciation for their contribution.

Increasing participation and reducing barriers

Communities and volunteers are enabled to develop new and different kinds of activity, social action and community participation in response to needs, and barriers to volunteering are removed.

The Vision for Volunteering envisions a future where it's easy for people to give their time and energy to the causes they care about, they feel welcomed, and the benefits are equally distributed. ^[35]

This includes, but goes beyond, making it easy for people to find out about and engage in volunteering. It involves understanding and tackling the barriers that exclude some people as well as developing roles and opportunities for people's diverse lives, life experiences and needs.

It also involves working proactively with volunteer-involving organisations to foster inclusive cultures, facilitate learning and address discrimination and inequality. The LIO itself needs to be open to change, and willing to collaborate with organisations by and for marginalised communities to make sure that everyone is included.



What does good look like?

The LIO is proactive in making volunteering welcome and accessible to people from all sectors of the local community. It promotes and enables volunteering and community action in different kinds of organisations and communities.

It listens to and collaborates with organisations by and for marginalised communities and experts by experience, to understand and meet the needs of diverse communities. It identifies and takes intentional action to address barriers, exclusion and discrimination.

It promotes, facilitates and supports the development of different ways for people to contribute, according to their lives, life experiences, needs, motivations, passions and the things that matter to them.

Influencing policy and practice

Partners and stakeholders have a good understanding and knowledge of volunteering, best practice and the impact of changes in policy and practice.

The LIO works across sectors to ensure a culture where volunteering is welcomed, recognised, appreciated and enabled. An effective LIO acts as a champion to all kinds of volunteering: formal, organised and informal volunteer activity as well as other forms of community action and community activism, including those that challenge established ways of working or the status quo.

The Vision for Volunteering suggests that a genuinely volunteer enabling culture trusts communities and organisations to experiment and learn^[36] – an environment that is overly prescriptive, hierarchical or bureaucratic, or afraid to fail, can stifle community action.

What does good look like?

The LIO is well-informed about local and national policies, practices or opportunities and considers their impact on volunteers, volunteering and other forms of community action.

It is proactive in lobbying, campaigning and / or influencing to create a volunteer enabling culture, which fosters empowerment and innovation, and to improve the experience of and appreciation for all those who contribute to their communities.



Case studies

Micro-volunteering – Dudley CVS

Dudley CVS launched Voices for Change, a micro-volunteering programme offering flexible, bite-sized opportunities such as proofreading, feedback on health strategies, and participation in NHS recruitment panels. This model made volunteering more accessible, particularly for those unable to commit long-term. It also helped spotlight volunteers' contributions through social media and Volunteer Week celebrations, inspiring wider participation.



Volunteering with Special Educational Needs – Volunteer Centre Thurrock

Volunteer Centre Thurrock worked with young people with special educational needs to understand why they were reluctant to volunteer. Findings showed barriers such as fear of not fitting in and reluctance to commit long-term. As a result, local organisations adapted roles, created short-term placements, and incorporated flexible tasks. This not only increased opportunities for young people but also built lasting connections with education providers, embedding inclusive volunteering practice.

Knowsley Heritage Grants – One Knowsley

One Knowsley's Heritage Grants enabled 25 community projects with over 1,000 residents engaged in volunteering. By targeting under-represented groups, the programme diversified volunteering in heritage activity, supported new organisations to access funding, and produced a Heritage Engagement Toolkit. The approach demonstrated how small grants and tailored support can unlock creativity, broaden participation, and attract significant follow-on investment.





Key messages

Good local VCSE infrastructure is not just about activity, it's about clarity and coherence. It means that the sector and its partners can see what is being delivered, why it matters, and who is responsible. At its heart are four core functions—**leadership and advocacy, partnerships and collaboration, capacity building, and volunteering**—which together enable organisations and communities to thrive. When these are delivered in a joined-up way, with clear roles and accountability, infrastructure becomes a trusted, visible and effective part of the local system.

Key messages:

- **Funding matters:** Infrastructure works when it is sufficient, sustained, and flexible. Under-funding of convening and advocacy weakens the whole system.
- **Quality over structure:** There is no single right delivery model, local knowledge, relationships, independence, and adaptability are what drive impact.
- **Equity is non-negotiable:** Engaging by-and-for organisations and smaller grassroots groups builds legitimacy, reach, and better decisions.
- **Intelligence with purpose:** Regular, two-way insight from the VCSE sector—especially from smaller groups—improves policy, commissioning, and prevention investment.
- **Capacity that lasts:** Targeted support, peer networks, and fair access to resources strengthen organisational resilience and unlock funding.
- **Volunteering as a system asset:** Inclusive, flexible pathways into volunteering boost community resilience and personal development.
- **Shared outcomes:** Agreeing a common set of outcomes keeps partners aligned and demonstrates value to funders and the public.



Conclusion

Local VCSE infrastructure is the **hidden wiring** that makes places work: it amplifies community voice, brokers equal partnerships, grows organisational capacity, and enables inclusive volunteering. Where it is **properly resourced and co-designed with the sector**, systems see better policy and commissioning, a stronger VCSE sector, and communities with greater trust, belonging, and agency.

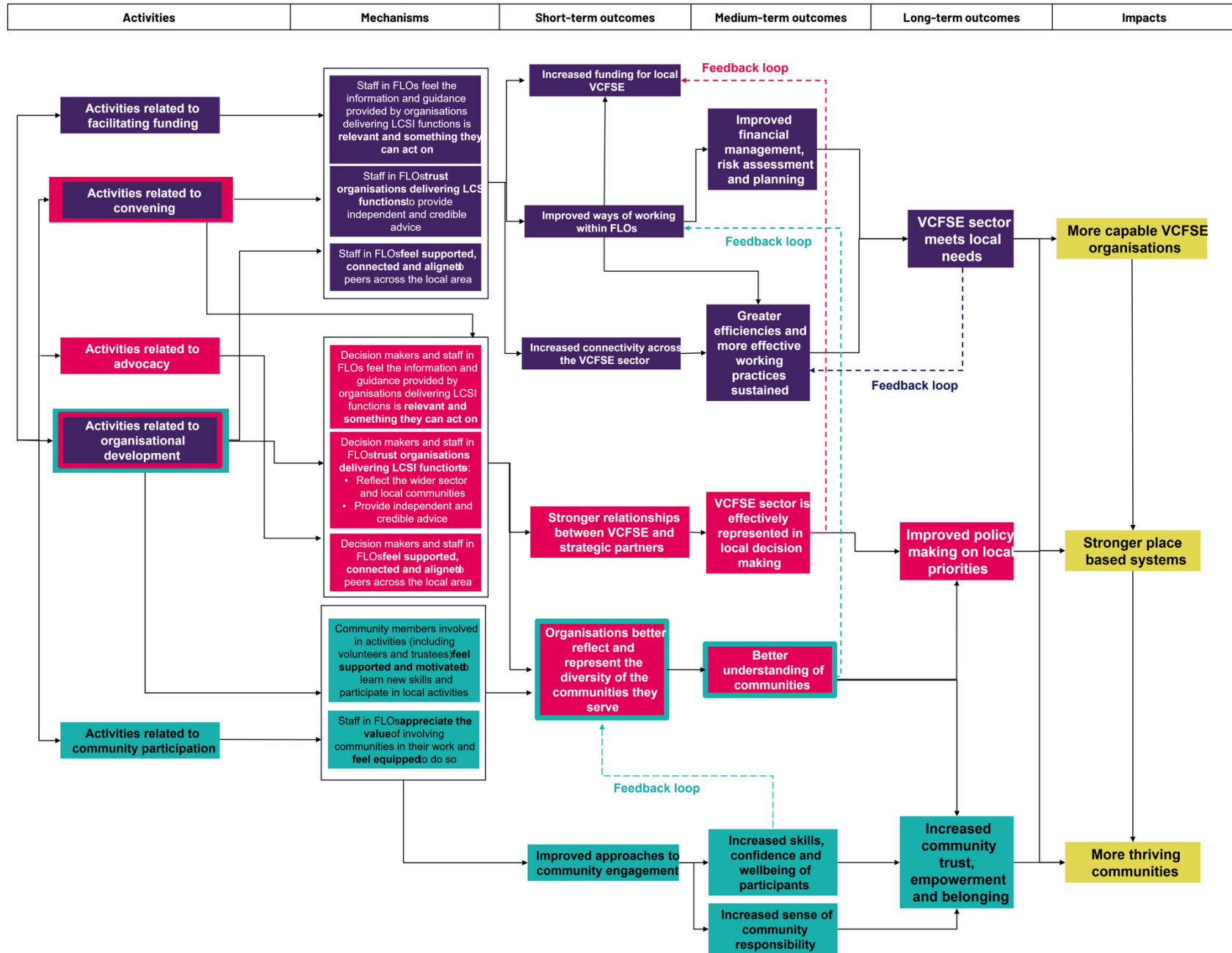
We invite partners across local government, the NHS, funders, and communities to **endorse this approach, commit to multi-year, flexible resourcing, and co-own a clear delivery plan.**

Together, we can embed a consistent, place-based infrastructure offer that is easy to access, accountable, and focused on outcomes that matter to residents.





Appendix 1: Theory of Change for Local Civil Society Infrastructure [37]





Sources

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- [11] DCMS 2025b p20
- [12] CRESR 2025, p10
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- [37] Taken from DCMS 2025a, p30 (Impacts, Costs and Benefit)

This report was commissioned by One Gloucestershire Integrated Care System (ICS) to inform the radical change needed to develop a coherent and equitable approach to supporting the VCSE sector across the county. It draws on NAVCA's national evidence base, insight from local partners, and learning from effective infrastructure models elsewhere.

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NAVCA (National Association for Voluntary and Community Action) is the national membership body for local voluntary and community sector (VCS) infrastructure organisations in England.

Our vision is that every local area has a thriving voluntary and community sector, and strong social action to drive justice and active citizenship.

NAVCA members support over 165,000 local charities and voluntary groups across the country, helping them to thrive and deliver essential services within their communities.

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Contact

NAVCA (National Association for Voluntary and Community Action)

www.navca.org.uk

comms@navca.org.uk

[LinkedIn](#)

