

Local Authorities and Local VCS Infrastructure: Encouraging Collaboration

Local Infrastructure and Local Authorities

During the pandemic, communities responded rapidly and creatively to its challenges. Local Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Organisations (LIOs) often led the community response, coordinating and mobilising volunteers, scaling up direct support and guidance, distributing emergency funding, facilitating networks and forums, and empowering community-led responses. They formed a key part of a sector wide response, working with Councils among others.

During this time, many local authorities (LAs) and LIOs deepened existing relationships and forged new collaborative ways of working to help meet the needs of communities. LIOs often provided a bridge between LA staff and services, and community organisations and volunteers. In light of the current cost of living crisis and the financial challenges for LAs and LIOs alike, we want to make sure we build on these developments to further strengthen LA and LIO partnerships and collaboration, and guard against any backward step.

Reaping the benefits of collaboration: key ingredients for success

Research carried out during the pandemic [2020-2021] suggests that there are several key ingredients which supported rapid and impactful collaboration between LAs, LIOs, the VCS and communities. These can be summarised as:

- making friends before you need them
- mutual respect
- proportionality
- playing the long game
- letting go.

Pre-existing relationships and partnership working: making friends before you need them

Prior to the pandemic, LAs, LIOs and VCS organisations worked collaboratively in many different formal and informal ways, through alliances, partnerships and forums. Some of these pre-existing structures were repurposed when COVID-19 hit, for example partnerships becoming a virtual meeting space for strategic leads from the LA, public health as well as local area coordinators and VCS organisations.¹ Mutual aid organisations were in some instances also drawn into collaborative structures, either directly or via the LIO. These multi-sector, multi-agency collaborations were holistic, place-based responses rather than traditional silo working.² **This emphasises the value of meaningful long term partnerships and collaboration between LAs and the VCS. These strengthen relationships, help to influence decision makers and lead to more effective and targeted action. with**

Recognising and valuing each other's strengths: mutual respect

Relationships that deepened in the pandemic were built on mutual respect, recognising and valuing the contributions by all parties to different parts of the system. Sharing intelligence was a key part of this. Where this worked well, LAs valued the intelligence coming from LIOs and the VCS and acted on it. For example the VCS escalating the disproportionate take-up of the COVID-19 vaccine amongst different communities leading to LAs adapting their communications and efforts to increase uptake. **The leadership and advocacy provided by LIOs enables the gathering of important intelligence to support the work of LAs and the VCS.**

¹ [Community responses to COVID-19: Striking a balance between communities and local authorities.](#) Wilson, M; A. McCabe and R. Macmillan. Third Sector Research Centre & Sheffield Hallam University. March 2021.

² [Burchell et al. 2020.](#)

Appropriate processes for the outcomes trying to be achieved: proportionality

Pre-existing relationships between the VCS and LAs helped identify the resources that were available across different communities with a rapid and effective response.³ Some LIOs enabled a fast and coordinated response, often providing a vital bridge between LA staff and services and community organisations and volunteers, e.g. by connecting the LA into networks of recognised organisations and into new groups. This approach helped navigate some of the challenges around risk, procurement and developed flexible funding including for core costs.⁴ **LIOs have the proven ability to connect local VCS with statutory partners for effective joint working. Investing in LIOs by contributing to core costs and unrestricted funds enables these relationships and connections to be sustained and developed for mutual benefit and common outcomes.**

Investing in & supporting community-led approaches: playing the long-game

Many LAs had invested in community engagement programmes, social and community action, Local Area Coordination (LAC), social prescribing and other types of asset or strengths based community development prior to the pandemic. Where these existing relationships between residents and local community and statutory services were already in place it was easier to mobilise the community response. Drawing on these existing structures enabled LAs to collaborate more easily with local communities and the VCS. Working closely with LAs, LIOs helped ensure that volunteering coordination took place alongside other activities so that where more complex support was needed it could be offered. **Retaining meaningful structures for support and coordination between LAs, LIOs and the VCS will enable LAs to collaborate effectively with local communities, and help encourage and nurture opportunities for volunteering. This approach will also contribute to future planning for emergency response and build community resilience.**

Stepping back, devolving action and decentralisation: letting go

During the pandemic, some LAs transferred control and responsibilities to VCS organisations, devolving action to the most appropriate local level. This approach required a clear understanding of the skills and resources available in the community, a clarity of roles and responsibilities, and knowledge of where community activity was and was not taking place. **This devolution of power and responsibility was only possible because of the previous community development and practical support provided by LIOs and VCS.**

Taking the Next Steps to Encouraging Collaboration

The pandemic underscored the benefits from proactive collaboration between LAs, LIOs and the VCS. This now needs to be consolidated and developed further.

1. Create real partnership structures to agree how to work together, with shared principles, joint objectives and collective campaigns and resources. Review impact and effectiveness annually.
2. Use these partnerships to share knowledge and learning between LAs, LIOs and the VCS. Make space to address system failures or cultural blockages, and create opportunities for shared learning.
3. Support leadership and advocacy in LIOs by investing in core costs to connect the VCS and LAs and to build long term relationships.
4. Offer unrestricted funds to LIOs and VCS to give flexibility, and use an intelligent commissioning approach to focus on outcomes over outputs.
5. Use partnership structures to devolve power and action to the most appropriate local level and fund LIOs to provide practical support to the VCS to do this.

³ [Wilson et al, 2021](#).

⁴ [Burchell et al 2020](#) and [Respond, Recover, Reset: the voluntary sector and COVID-19. The relationship with local authorities during the pandemic](#). NVCO, Nottingham Trent University, Sheffield Hallam University, Third Sector Research Centre. April 2021.