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Four Functions of Infrastructure: a guide for NAVCA members

February 2024



Four Functions of Infrastructure



Leadership and advocacy

Mobilising and encouraging community action, strengthening our sector's voice and influence on key decision-makers and funders.

Partnerships and collaborations

Creating opportunities and driving effective joint working, by building networks of local organisations and strategic partners.



Capacity building

Providing practical support and development for local people and organisations, to nurture skills and build community resilience.

Volunteering

Building an environment in which volunteers and their communities thrive, by encouraging and nurturing volunteering opportunities.





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About NAVCA:

NAVCA is the national membership body for local VCSE infrastructure organisations (LIOs) in England. LIOs provide support and development for voluntary and community action across England. Our members support hundreds of thousands of local charities, voluntary groups and social enterprises at a community level, helping them to thrive and deliver essential services.

Introduction

The work of local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) can be described as having four functions. These are: leadership and advocacy, partnerships and collaboration, capacity building and (support for) volunteering. This concept was co-produced by NAVCA and its member LIOs to provide a clear definition of what is at the core of effective high quality local VCSE infrastructure.

The four functions of local infrastructure provide a framework to understand the activities of LIOs, evaluate their outcomes and impact, and provide an assessment of the quality of support and services provided for the VCSE sector by LIOs.

This guide for NAVCA members aims to:

- explain the purpose and role of each function
- illustrate the outcomes of each function
- describe activities that contribute to the outcomes, drawing on case studies from members who have successfully completed the LIQA (Local Infrastructure Quality Accreditation)
- highlight relevant information from the research report *Connecting Locally* (2022)
- offer pointers for further development
- help make the case for local infrastructure organisations.

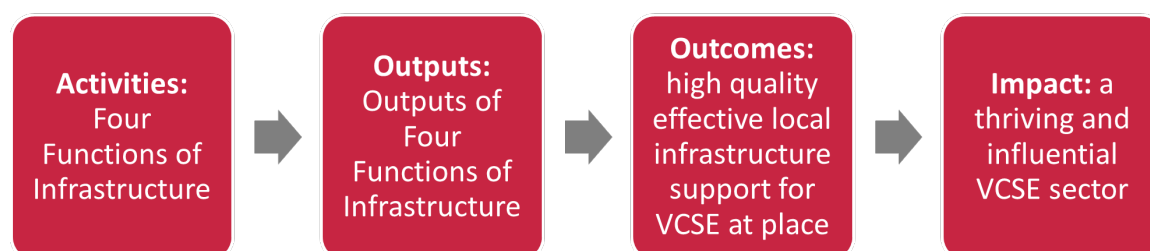
How to use this guide

The guide uses a theory of change to focus firstly on the outcomes of a function of local infrastructure, and then explore the activities that contribute to these being achieved. The case studies help provide more detail on how different outcomes for the function have been met in a real life situation. The case studies range from examples of problem-solving and quick responses during challenging circumstances, to proactive work to support and develop the VCSE sector and local communities and develop relationships with statutory partners. Research findings from *Connecting Locally* are presented to give more information on the range of practices and approaches that different LIOs take, what activities are important in relation to achieving the outcomes for the function, and why. The guide then offers some questions for reflection to help you think about your existing work and any plans for further development, including working towards quality accreditation.

Theory of Change for Local Infrastructure

It has become essential for LIOs to be able to demonstrate the difference that their work makes to VCSE organisations, communities and statutory partners. A theory of change can be used to demonstrate the unique outcomes and impact of LIO activities. The theory of change presented here sets out the overall impact of the work of LIOs so that every local area has a thriving and influential VCSE sector. This is the main purpose of LIOs, which exist not for their own sake, but for the benefit of the VCSE sector as a whole. The activities of the four functions of infrastructure with their outputs are the distinctive contributions that LIOs make to enable a thriving and influential VCSE sector. The outcomes used in the theory of change are the same as those used to demonstrate quality local infrastructure provision in the LIQA (Local Infrastructure Quality Accreditation).

Figure 1 - Outline Local Infrastructure Theory of Change



[Click here to download more information on a theory of change for local infrastructure.](#)

Leadership and Advocacy



LIOs are leaders in and advocates for the VCSE sector and the communities they work within. Through participation in local strategic groups, forums and partnerships, LIOs ensure the VCSE sector's voice is heard and used to influence and affect key decisions locally on funding and policy. Participation in local strategic groups often means leadership of strategic partnerships, membership of groups, or representative roles on behalf of the VCSE sector.

Outcomes

For effective leadership and advocacy to be occurring at place, the following outcomes need to be achieved through the activities that deliver the leadership and advocacy function.

1. The VCSE sector has a strong voice and influence on key decisions and relevant policy development.
2. The VCSE sector is informed about and supported to actively participate in local policy development and decision-making structures, including organisations representing those with lived experience and who are otherwise under-represented.
3. Local partners are better informed about the local VCSE sector and/or communities.
4. The organisation is recognised by the local VCSE sector and partners for its credible leadership role and ability to create links within the VCSE sector and across sectors.

Activities

There are numerous activities carried out by LIOs that contribute to leadership and advocacy for the wider VCSE sector in the local areas. These activities champion the VCSE sector to create positive change through bringing partners together from VCSE, public and private sectors. The following activities could be considered core activities to deliver the leadership and advocacy function. There will be other activities that also directly contribute to delivering the outcomes of this function.

1. Strategic planning by the LIO aims to provide leadership for the VCSE sector, respond to specific needs, prioritise representation and advocate for the sector with strategic partners.
2. The LIO represents and advocates for VCSE on local networks, forums and statutory partnerships. It is important that this is not about representing the views and approaches of the LIO but consulting widely with the VCSE to ensure that representation reflects the views and composition of

the sector, and acts in its best interests.

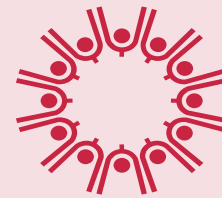
3. Dissemination and development of emerging plans that affect the VCSE, and advocate not only for the needs of the sector, but for what it can contribute across a breadth of policy and delivery objectives.

4. Activities to ensure equity, equality, diversity and inclusion are centre stage, with a focus on developing the skills and experience of sector representatives so that their lived experience can inform local plans and decision-making.

5. Facilitating inclusive consultation, particularly with easily excluded or under-represented groups. Gathering intelligence on VCSE to advocate and inform.

Case Studies

Examples of leadership and advocacy contribute to strategic leadership for the VCSE sector at place, advocacy for the VCSE with statutory partners, and contributions to problem-solving with the sector and statutory partners.



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Example 1 – VCSE Representation on Safeguarding Boards

The LIO acted as an interim VCSE representative on the Safeguarding Adults Board and supported a VCSE representative with specialist knowledge on the Safeguarding Children's Partnership, by convening a reference group from the sector. These arrangements were unable to provide the boards with the assurances they wanted on safeguarding practices in the VCSE sector due to a lack of information. The LIO proposed targeted research to provide a baseline on safeguarding culture and practice across the VCSE to include generalist and smaller grassroots groups, as well as specialist organisations.

This research demonstrated that greater support was needed by the sector to improve safeguarding knowledge and practice, particularly for specialist and small grassroots groups working with children and young people. A specialist officer has been employed to work with the sector. Representation on safeguarding structures has been updated and evidence can be used to demonstrate the needs of the VCSE sector.

Outcomes

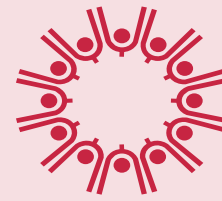
Outcomes directly related to this work:

- A commitment to improve safeguarding, through employment of a dedicated officer to support the VCSE sector through training, information and guidance.
- Improved quality of discussion regarding the VCSE and safeguarding, as this is now evidence-based.

This case study demonstrates the outcomes of the function:

- VCSE is informed and supported to participate in local policy development and decision-making structures.
- Local partners are better informed about the local VCSE sector and communities.
- LIO is recognised by VCSE and partners for its credible leadership role and ability to create links within VCSE and across sectors.





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Example 2 – Creating a Volunteering Strategy

Commissioned by the local authority to develop a new volunteering strategy for the area, the LIO carried out extensive consultation with the voluntary, community and faith sector. This included leading discussions at various forums for the sector, carrying out an online survey and seeking feedback on existing approaches and ideas. The consultation process was consultative and collaborative, with consistent themes emerging: the reduction in the number of people volunteering post pandemic; the need for succession planning for trustees of local organisations; support needed for refugees or other people with language difficulties; support and development for young people in volunteering to enable their journey to employment; and volunteering for civil emergencies. A new volunteering strategy is being co-produced with the sector to address these issues.

Outcomes

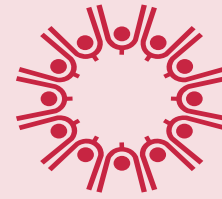
Interim outcomes as the strategy evolves, and prior to full implementation:

- The responses needed to the themes identified through consultation have been built into the emerging strategy.
- Specific work plans have been developed to support volunteering amongst young people and refugees, and a programme of work started to develop a trustee pipeline.

This case study demonstrates the outcomes of the function:

- The VCSE has a strong voice and influence on key decisions and relevant policy development.
- Local partners are better informed about the local VCSE sector and communities.
- LIO is recognised by VCSE and partners for its credible leadership role and ability to create links within VCSE and across sectors.





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Example 3 – Community Mental Health Transformation Programme

The Community Mental Health Transformation programme offers a more holistic approach to providing support and services for people experiencing severe mental illness. The VCSE were required to be part of the programme, with the LIO representing the sector on the steering group. The LIO was able to advocate for ring-fenced budgets for VCSE service delivery, commitments to VCSE involvement in pathway redesign and in both the steering and delivery groups. The LIO was also able to secure funding to support ongoing involvement, including the appointment of a dedicated project officer to resource and enable the VCSE to participate and contribute its skills and knowledge.

Outcomes

Outcomes directly related to this work:

- For the first time, five new core services were offered to the local VCSE sector, as place-based lots to provide housing support, financial inclusion, peer support, complex needs for addition and healthy lifestyles. A range of local VCSE organisations and VCSE partnerships have secured the contracts.
- An unanticipated underspend on the programme was used to provide a VCSE small grants programme to further develop services and capacity.
- All treatment pathways now have VCSE involvement in their design and development, leading to significant beneficial changes in delivery.
- The local mental health VCSE sector is now working much more collaboratively within itself and with local health systems.

This case study demonstrates the outcomes of the function:

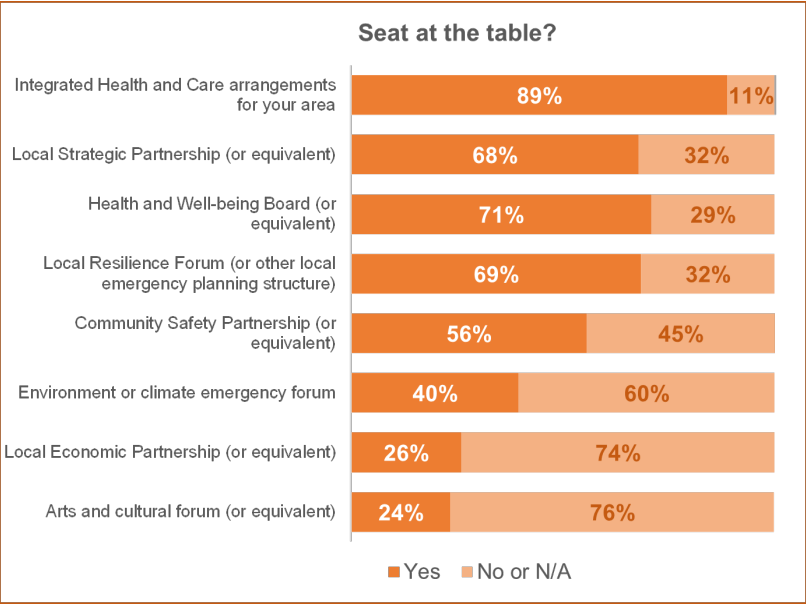
- The VCSE has a strong voice and influence on key decisions and relevant policy development.
- VCSE is informed and supported to participate in local policy development and decision-making structures.
- Local partners are better informed about the local VCSE sector and communities.
- LIO is recognised by VCSE and partners for its credible leadership role and ability to create links within VCSE and across sectors.



What does research tell us?

Recent research on local infrastructure, *Connecting Locally* (2022), showed that LIOs participate in a diverse range of groups and structures that contribute to leadership and advocacy roles in the local area. Figure 2 shows the presence of LIOs within different local strategic groups. 89% of LIOs had a seat at the table at local health systems, either by leading the VCSE sector to participate in ICS – VCSE Alliances, acting as a facilitator or enabler, or have a representative role for the sector. Around 70% of respondents were involved in local strategic partnerships, health and wellbeing boards or local resilience forums. Less frequently, there was some engagement with the now defunct local enterprise partnerships. Despite their often large budgets, VCSE have found groups responsible for economic development hard to penetrate and engage with.

Figure 2: Participation in local strategic groups



The reasons for participation in strategic partnerships and forums included championing the VCSE and ensuring grassroots groups are included in new strategies – particularly in relation to health systems.

“my only agenda is going to be about promoting the voluntary sector, I don’t have any other agenda... I am not there hoping to be commissioned to deliver a huge thing, I am there to champion...”

The risks with participation in some groups and forums included a lack of strategic purpose so that they were simply talking shops with no action, or the VCSE representation was regarded as just fulfilling a ‘tick-box’ exercise, and so easily ignored.

Involvement in sub-committees of these strategic groups followed a similar pattern to general participation. This is shown in Figure 3. The chairing or leading of these sub-groups rarely falls to LIOs, although the highest prevalence of these sorts of roles were within health systems where

25% lead or chair a sub-group. One quote illustrates why participation in these groups is essential, particularly in relation to health:

“making sure that the local grassroots groups are not disregarded in terms of the new strategies that are coming out from the ICS.”

However, as these structures and partnerships are quite fluid and subject to change in light of events (e.g. during the pandemic) or changes in policy by local or central government, LIOs need to be aware of changes, conscious of their relevance to their own work and the wider VCSE, and be able to prioritise their engagement in order to maximise the benefits of participation.

Local authority-led forums tend to welcome participation by LIOs. NHS-led groups represent a more mixed picture, but are improving. There are a large number of potential groups to engage with, so prioritising is important, especially as participation is largely unfunded:

“Structures are shifting all the time, most effort is spent working at place level where services are delivered.”

Figure 3: Involvement of LIOs in sub-committees of strategic groups

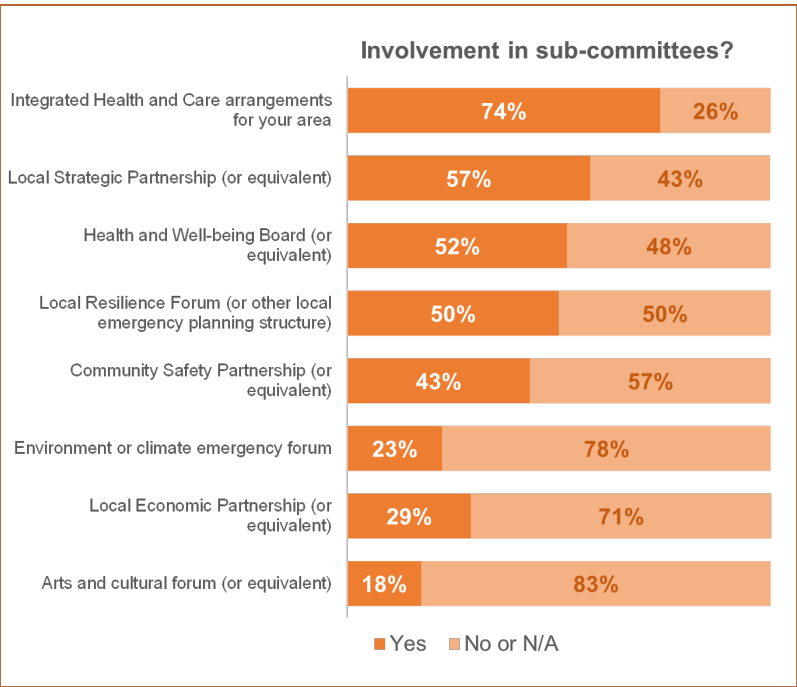
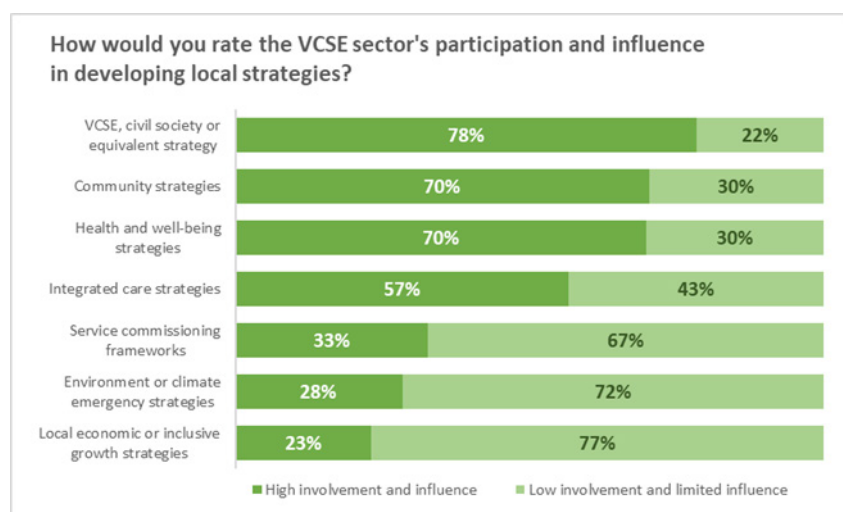


Figure 4 highlights participation and influence in local strategies, one of the outcomes of leadership and advocacy work. NAVCA members report high involvement and influence in developing specific local VCSE and civil society strategies (78%) or broader health and wellbeing and community strategies (both 70%). Worryingly, lower involvement and limited influence is reported over service commissioning frameworks (33%), environment or climate emergency strategies (28%) and local economic or inclusive growth strategies (23%).

Figure 4: Local VCSE participation and influence in local strategies



The picture of participation and influence is mixed, some LIOs are very well integrated into local systems and partnerships with significant influence. This may be because of the highly praised and respected work during the pandemic, the quality of relationships between key personnel in specific organisations, or the nature of previous work that demonstrated the value of a community-led approach. For other LIOs, there has been some progress based on these three reasons, but barriers still exist. These include bureaucracy, limited understanding of the VCSE sector by local authorities and statutory partners (and vice versa), limited opportunities to influence strategy production and decision-making, or procurement or commissioning processes that are not aligned to sector needs.

The wider VCSE sector may also not immediately see the value of influencing beyond leveraging money into it, so it has been important for LIOs to demonstrate the value of this work to VCSE colleagues.

Questions

LIOs have unique roles in a local area through leadership, building relationships, mobilising networks, and representing and coordinating the VCSE locally. This can be summarised as the convening and place leadership role of LIOs. The LIO needs to earn respect by advocating for the needs of the sector as a priority, which may at times be detrimental to its own needs.

- How does the LIO provide leadership for the VCSE sector? Can this be extended or developed?
- How does the LIO advocate for the VCSE sector and what are the outcomes of this?
- Who or what is missing from this leadership and advocacy work? Who is excluded? How can any

gaps be addressed?

- What actions are taken so that the VCSE has a strong voice and influence on decisions and policy development?
- How is the VCSE sector enabled to participate in local policy development and decision making structures?
- How are under-represented or excluded groups included, and the voices of those with lived experience heard and acted on?
- Are local partners better informed about the local VCSE sector and communities?
- Is this leadership and advocacy work recognised by the local VCSE sector and statutory partners?
Is it providing credible leadership and able to make links within and between the VCSE sector and other partners?

Partnerships and Collaboration



Places and communities are strengthened when organisations work collaboratively, through building networks and partnerships between VCSE organisations and strategic partners. LIOs are typically at the heart of many local networks and partnerships, and so the strength and quality of relationships between LIOs and their broad range of stakeholders are very important. The strength of relationships with external stakeholders is the building block for partnerships and collaborations that provide direct support for communities and specific groups in need, as well as

collaborations to deliver contracts and services and lever in grant and other funding. The LIO may also act as the accountable body, bringing a partnership of local VCSE organisations together to collaborate on a project or service.

Outcomes

For effective partnerships and collaborations to be happening at place, the following outcomes need to be achieved through the activities that deliver the partnerships and collaboration function.

1. There is effective communication, collaboration and partnerships among VCSE organisations, between sectors, with communities and people.
2. VCSEs influence and deliver services more effectively by working collaboratively through networks, formal partnerships and consortia.

Activities

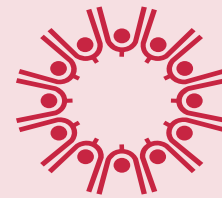
Building partnerships and enabling collaboration require time, patience, and the development of high-quality trusted relationships. For the outcomes to be achieved, there needs to be a focus on co-design and co-production and the space to build and lead partnerships that do not have any direct benefit to the LIO. There will be other activities that also directly contribute to delivering the outcomes of this function.

1. Relationships with stakeholders, voluntary sector partners and statutory organisations are analysed and well understood. These relationships are used to facilitate collaboration and information sharing.
2. Advocacy for co-design and co-production of services with VCSE, with statutory and other partners.
3. Facilitation of consultations between statutory partners, VCSEs and the local community.

4. Different types of formal partnerships and networks have been developed with leadership and ongoing support.

Case Studies

The case studies listed here show how essential the work of LIOs is to promote and enable local partnership working and facilitate collaborations with the VCSE sector.



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Example 1 – Establishment of an Inclusion Network

The LIO co-produced an area-based inclusion network, as there was no ability to coordinate or connect VCSE organisations working on equity, inclusion and diversity (EDI). The aim was to prevent silo working and enable the VCSE sector to learn from and support each other, increase capacity and skills, and address wider issues such as health inequalities, deprivation and quality of life. The new partnership brings together around 30 organisations working over a large and dispersed geographic area. This partnership highlights positive change and good practice, has been able to challenge discriminatory practices and start to develop equality of access for all people through drawing on lived experience of discrimination and exclusion. The network has now formed an informal partnership with other EDI networks in the region, and links to the Integrated Care System EDI workstream.

Outcomes

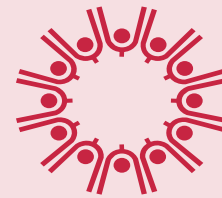
The outcomes include:

- Through collaboration, the organisations in the network have shared data, resources and knowledge to improve practices and challenge inequalities.
- The network benefited from a sub-regional partnership opening links to EDI workstreams within health systems and other sources of funding.

The outcomes demonstrated are:

- There is effective communication, collaboration and partnerships among VCSE organisations, between sectors, with communities and people.
- VCSEs influence and deliver services more effectively by working collaboratively through networks, formal partnerships and consortia.





Example 2 – Partnership working with a specific purpose

The LIO partnered with a county-based environmental organisation to involve local communities in a river restoration project. The local people were disengaged from the area after decades of industrialisation. The two organisations partnered initially in a 12-month development phase, running a range of community events and other consultations to shape a large scale funding application for several million pounds, which drew in 17 different partners including local business, environmental groups, VCSE organisations, local authorities and other statutory agencies. A dedicated community engagement officer has been employed to develop relationships with local people across the area and support them to engage with the project. At least 50 community groups received small grant funding to deliver their own projects, community groups and other volunteers were recruited and supported to record wildlife, and a project for young people working through existing youth groups was set up to record and curate an oral history of the area.

Outcomes

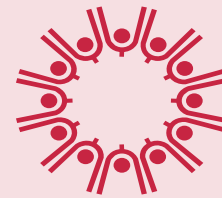
The outcomes from this project were diverse, and include:

- Strengthened relationships between the LIO and local communities, building trust and leveraging funding into communities that might otherwise not feel they have the capacity to apply for funding.
- People who might not normally get involved in community activities, including young people or excluded groups, have been enabled to participate.
- Volunteers participating in different parts of the project have developed the skills and confidence to go on to additional training or education.
- A deeper working relationship between the LIO and the other main partner, which has led to further partnership projects engaging communities.

The outcomes demonstrated are:

- There is effective communication, collaboration and partnerships among VCSE organisations, between sectors, with communities and people.
- VCSEs influence and deliver services more effectively by working collaboratively through networks, formal partnerships and consortia.





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Example 3 - Getting the most from a local project

A regional programme funded by Sport England to encourage people to become more active was delivered via partnerships operating at a local authority level, with a local steering group. After the initial stages of the programme, which focused on inward investment on facilities, the LIO advocated for wider VCSE sector and community engagement. Communities felt isolated from the programme and documentation was not in accessible language or formats. The LIO worked with the local authority, VCSE organisations and community representatives to provide a simple application for the funding available so community groups could benefit, refreshed the language of relevant documents, and drew in the wider community and VCSE organisations to share their knowledge, views and insights. This involved a co-production approach with the Youth Parliament, a collaborative of community groups and potential applicants to the funding stream.

The local steering group adopted a shared leadership approach with a co-chair whose responsibility was to work with the programme manager to engage key partners, and enable task and finish groups to work towards dispersed leadership in very local areas.

Outcomes

The outcomes are:

- Local communities and VCSE organisations were able to participate in co-production of a programme that became relevant and accessible to them.
- Community organisations have representatives, particularly those with lived experience, who participate in decision-making and influencing.
- The programme is strengthened using local knowledge and intelligence from a wide range of sources.

The outcomes of this function are met:

- There is effective communication, collaboration and partnerships among VCSE organisations, between sectors, with communities and people.
- VCSEs influence and deliver services more effectively by working collaboratively through networks, formal partnerships and consortia.



What does research tell us?

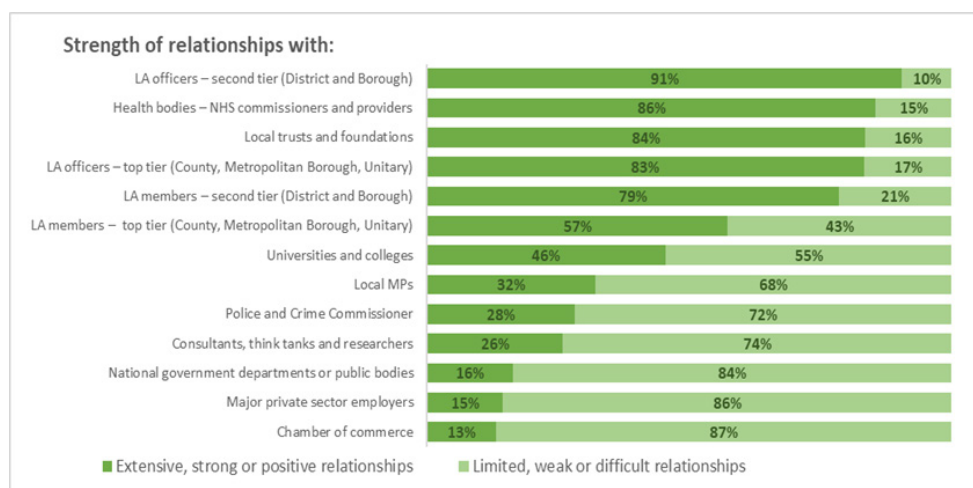
LIOs are very well connected across their area, across sectors. Strong relationships with external stakeholders are the building blocks for partnerships and collaborations that can provide direct support for communities and specific groups in need, as well as collaborations to deliver contracts and services and lever in grant and other funding.

Figure 5 shows how LIOs rate the strength of relationships with external stakeholders (based on a scale of 1-6, where 6 represents the strongest and most positive relationships and 1 the weakest). Relationships with local authorities, local trusts and foundations, and local health bodies tend to be very well developed, with more than eight in ten LIOs reporting that they were extensive, strong or positive. One interviewee described the approach they took:

“it’s just about building that trust and building that whole relationship [...] you are finding that common ground”.

This comment emphasises the importance of the quality and trust in relationship between people in key roles that gives a framework for partnership and collaboration.

Figure 5 - Relationships between LIOs and external stakeholders



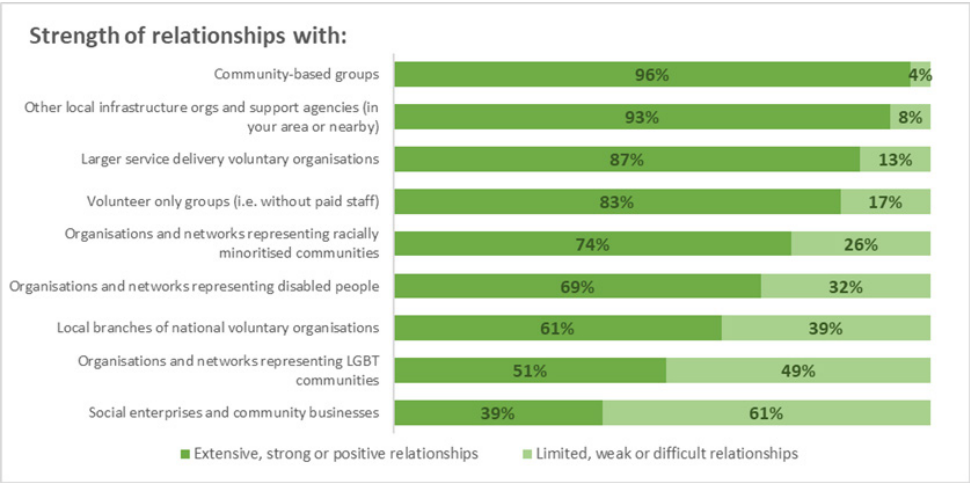
For relationships with local authorities, these tend to be stronger with officials than elected members, reflecting regular interaction. Universities and colleges often act as anchor institutions in their local area, but more than half of LIOs report limited, weak or difficult relationships with this core employer. Relationships with major private sector employers and the local Chamber of Commerce are limited or weak for more than 8 in ten LIOs, in all likelihood demonstrating the separation between business and the third sector in so much of civic life. These three bodies might be a priority for further relationship-building, to facilitate partnership working and collaboration on mutually beneficial projects.

Similarly, relationships with politicians such as MPs and the Police and Crime Commissioner would benefit from strengthening for many LIOs, both of whom have considerable influence in local politics and can help leverage funding for the wider sector and the LIO.

Figure 6 shows the strength of relationships between LIOs and the VCSE sector as a whole.

More than eight in ten report extensive, strong, or positive relationships with community-based and volunteer-only groups, other local infrastructure and support agencies, and larger service delivery voluntary organisations. More than six in ten LIOs report extensive, strong or positive relationships with groups representing racially minoritised communities, organisations representing disabled people and local branches of national voluntary organisations.

Figure 6 Relationships between LIOs and other VCSE organisations



Relationships are limited or weak with social enterprises and community businesses. Social enterprises and businesses have their own very effective national infrastructure organisations and may not look to local provision for additional support. However, along with groups representing LGBT+ communities, these relationships are generally more limited or weak. This is something that could be a priority for development, particularly as the LGBT+ community is under pressure currently and more community groups are looking to become community businesses rather than charities.

Inevitably, relationships can vary and change rapidly but are always central to making things happen locally. As with all partnership work, building effective relationships is an ongoing, painstaking effort:

“Relationships are very personal and can change as people move”.

It is also important to note that relationships may be variable within each category reported here.

As with all relationships, it is people that matter most in cementing and building on them. High-quality, long-term relationships are often affected by turnover of staff in key roles or staff cuts. Additionally, if relationships are difficult or break down, unless personnel change it can be extremely hard to recover and rebuild from this.

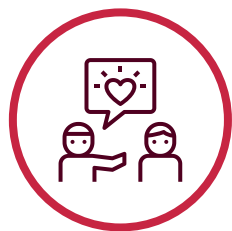
Questions

Effective partnerships and collaborative working are an extension of effective leadership and advocacy with and for the VCSE sector. This is part of the unique role of convening at place and is a key contributor to a thriving VCSE sector. Partnership working takes time, determination and patience. It is largely unfunded work that can have significant benefits for the LIO, bringing in funding to local communities or groups, enabling delivery by the VCSE and potentially offering income to the LIO. There are also significant opportunity costs for other work carried out by LIOs.

The need to cover these costs can lead to LIOs turning to service delivery to bring in the required additional income. Whilst this may be necessary and complementary to existing work streams, it should not be the focus of work for an LIO and should not involve the LIO competing with the sector they are aiming to support for the same contracts or grants. At their best, the role of developing partnerships or forming collaborations to deliver services is about enabling the wider VCSE sector and local communities to thrive.

- What approach do you take to partnership working and bringing collaborations together?
- Is there effective communication, collaboration and partnership working among VCSE organisations, with partners in other sectors, and with communities and people?
- Are VCSEs able to influence and deliver services more effectively by working collaboratively — if so, how?
- How do you ensure that excluded groups and under-represented communities are involved in relevant consultation and partnerships?
- Are the costs of partnership working covered? If they are cross-subsidised, are these sources of support sustainable?
- What is missing from partnership working? How could any gaps be filled?

Capacity Building



LIOs help voluntary and community organisations to fulfil their potential through providing practical support, information, advice, training, and sometimes services such as payroll or accounts. This capacity building work is both strategic and developmental. It helps VCSE organisations to have the strong foundations needed so that they can deliver their goals, become more resilient and contribute to flourishing communities. The most critical work of LIOs is the specific practical guidance and support provided to local VCSEs. Nine in ten LIOs provide this on a bespoke basis, which can take the form of specific advice on issues like governance or strategic planning, advice on sourcing funding or completing grant applications, broader community development work supporting communities, or regular information and guidance.

Outcomes

The outcomes demonstrate how the VCSE benefits from capacity building activities, whether one-to-one or through training and learning opportunities, resulting in improved knowledge, skills and sustainability.

1. In partnership with the local VCSE sector and its stakeholders, the strengths and needs of the sector are identified, and solutions to maximise potential and strengthen capacity are developed.
2. Local VCSE organisations access high-quality support, advice and facilitation, which extends their knowledge, skills and sustainability.
3. Local VCSEs are more knowledgeable about needs and priorities in their community, including those from seldom heard and under-represented communities, and can adapt their activities in response.

Activities

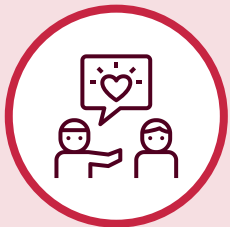
The range of topics addressed within the capacity building function is vast. These might include information and direct support for new start-ups, advice on governance and trustees, registering with the Charity Commission, financial management, recruitment of volunteers, publicity, communications and social media. Examples of these activities include but are not limited to:

1. Responding to needs of the sector through consultation and engagement, with a focus on marginalised or excluded groups.
2. Providing high quality relevant information, training, support and resources for VCSE.

-
3. Enabling VCSEs to assess their performance and plan for development.
 4. Identification of relevant funding and grants to support sustainability of VCSE.

Case Studies

The case studies here illustrate the diversity of activities that contribute to capacity building, from bespoke one-to-one support for organisations to free online resources.



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Example 1 - A New Capacity Building Offer

In order to move from limited, reactive support for the VCSE sector, the LIO commissioned an independent study which consulted over 120 organisations to identify their capacity building needs. Six key themes were identified as important for the VCSE: financial sustainability; volunteer recruitment and development; management training and development; facilitating collaboration and connection; a framework to support collaboration and specialist advice and guidance.

To address these priorities and, adopting an asset-based community development approach focusing on the strengths that already exist, the LIO provides services on three levels: free information, advice and signposting; training; and consultancy work. Information, advice and support clinics run via Zoom, phone or in person, with a free 30 minute organisational health check. This quickly identifies the areas of further support needed, which are provided either through further training, bespoke consultancy or referral to other sources of support. The service is increasingly well-used by local VCSE organisations.

Outcomes

The outcomes of this capacity building work are:

- By providing a developmental approach to support and capacity building, VCSE organisations are able to address their needs on a step by step basis.
- The LIO is able to provide proactive, relevant and specific support for VCSE organisations which contributes to their effective functioning and sustainability.

The outcomes of this function are met:

- In partnership with the local VCSE sector and its stakeholders, the strengths and needs of the sector are identified, and solutions to maximise potential and strengthen capacity are developed.
- Local VCSE organisations access high quality support, advice and facilitation which extends their knowledge, skills and sustainability.





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Example 2 - Being Funding Ready

A community-based charity providing emergency food, financial advice and hardship support asked the LIO to provide facilitation and guidance for the trustees to develop a plan to prepare for a large-scale funding application. Working with trustees, volunteers and staff, the LIO designed a strategy day to help the organisation to develop a shared vision for the future, create a business plan to achieve the vision, and shape the funding application. The day enabled the collective knowledge of trustees, volunteers and staff to inform and influence the vision, strategy and business plan, provided clarity on the future direction of the charity, and identified what further support and development was needed.

Outcomes

The outcomes are:

- The charity was able to draw on the knowledge and experience of trustees, volunteers and staff to shape its own future and inform strategic planning and funding applications.
- There is longer-term sustainability for the organisation as it now has an agreed vision, strategy and business plan.

The outcomes of this function are met:

- In partnership with the local VCSE sector and its stakeholders, the strengths and needs of the sector are identified, and solutions to maximise potential and strengthen capacity are developed.
- Local VCSE organisations access high quality support, advice and facilitation which extends their knowledge, skills and sustainability.





Example 3 - Asset Based Community Development

The capacity building work of the LIO did not have the capacity to target communities that had historically low engagement with the LIO or statutory partners. With specific funding, a Community Officer was appointed for two wards with high levels of deprivation, low indicators of health and wellbeing and high levels of additional care needs.

The initial role of the Community Officer was simply to get to know the people, area and existing community groups, businesses, public buildings and activities. This was long-term, patient work that extended over a five-year period, meaning that relationships could be built with local people and public sector professionals. The importance of this approach was that it allowed local people's priorities to come to the surface, and the Community Officer was then able to support, connect and put a framework in place to enable them to come to fruition. Over several years, an informal community network was developed to organise collaborative events with different community groups. By the time of the pandemic, the community groups and network had developed sufficient strength and capacity to be able to organise to respond to local needs and priorities without outside help.

Outcomes

These may be quite intangible for these sorts of projects, which are built on the quality and timeliness of relationships. The following outcomes can be identified:

- Without predetermined targets or objectives imposed from outside, the community have formed trusted relationships and networks, developed the skills and capacity to meet their own needs and aspirations and to respond to a crisis situation.
- The LIO demonstrated that long-term, patient engagement working with the assets already present in community (focusing on abundance rather than absence) provide the foundations for building community strength and resilience.

The outcomes of this function are:

- In partnership with the local VCSE sector and its stakeholders, the strengths and needs of the sector are identified, and solutions to maximise potential and strengthen capacity are developed.
- Local VCSE organisations access high quality support, advice and facilitation which extends their knowledge, skills and sustainability.
- Local VCSEs are more knowledgeable about needs and priorities in their community, including those from seldom heard and under-represented communities, and can adapt their activities in response.

What does research tell us?

NAVCA members provided practical support to over 36,000 local VCSEs in 2021-22, with 90% indicating that this represents either about the same or an increased level of demand. The need and demand for this sort of capacity building work is undoubtedly growing, with over half expecting demand to grow in the next 12 months. Nearly all NAVCA members (nine in ten) provide training for local VCSEs, with estimates suggesting that over 42,000 people from the VCSE sector have been on training courses provided by NAVCA members in the last year for which figures are available. Much of this kind of practical support and community development work focuses on assistance with fundraising and funding bids, bringing additional resources into local areas. This work has helped local VCSEs secure an estimated £139m to support their work in 2020-21.

Most LIOs have a dedicated staff team for this work, which may be funded through core grants or contracts, often from local authorities. Alternatively, staff may multi-task across a range of roles and activities, drawing on their expertise and experience, with external specialists brought in where needed. However, what is more noticeable from the research is how such practical support for VCSEs in many LIOs is funded through a complex patchwork of sources, rarely on a full cost recovery basis, and cross-subsidised from other grants and contracts.

Questions

Supporting community development and providing relevant services for the VCSE sector is a core part of the capacity building work of LIOs. This work needs to be directly relevant to the needs of the sector locally.

- How do you identify the strengths and needs of the sector? Is this knowledge up-to-date? If not, how will it be refreshed?
- What other services or sources of support need to be put in place for the VCSE sector to thrive?
- How does the VCSE know about and access your services?
- How do VCSE organisations know about the needs and priorities of their community? How are VCSE organisations supported to adapt their activities in response to these needs?

Volunteering



Volunteering, both formal and informal, is at the heart of thriving communities. LIOs encourage and nurture volunteering opportunities, so that people can build connections and work together on things they care about, driving positive change locally. The value of local volunteering support is that it offers a trusted brokerage or connecting service, based on local needs and knowledge of the VCSE. This support for volunteers is then linked to other LIO support services and networks as an integrated whole. Other support includes providing advice or promoting good practice in volunteer management. LIOs also coordinate volunteers as part of emergency responses locally or nationally – a role that was an essential part of volunteer recruitment and support during the Covid-19 pandemic and remains in place through participation in local resilience forums. LIOs join up the dots in promoting volunteering both on the ground and strategically.

Outcomes

Volunteering is core to the VCSE sector, and needs to develop and evolve to respond to the changing interests, and the ability of local people and communities to participate in voluntary activity. LIOs can lead this work by creating a positive environment where volunteering is valued and not exploited by strategic partners.

1. LIO supports and develops a positive environment in which the value of volunteering is recognised, and volunteer activity is flourishing.
2. Partners and stakeholders have good understanding and knowledge of volunteering, best practice, and impact of changes in policy and practice.

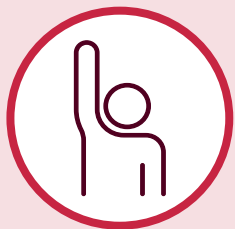
Activities

There are a diverse and extensive list of activities that support, facilitate and help develop effective good practice in volunteering, which can be summarised as:

1. Promote volunteering, support development of new forms of volunteering. Share good practice.
2. Reduce barriers to volunteering especially for excluded groups.
3. Raise visibility of volunteering and show its value.

Case Studies

These examples of support for volunteering demonstrate the impact LIOs can have when a strategic approach is taken to strengthen the capacity of volunteer-involving organisations and volunteering is promoted in new ways to reach new groups.



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Example 1 - Building Better Opportunities

The Building Better Opportunities – Inspired Supported Volunteer project, running since 2017, aims to source suitable volunteer placements for people experiencing extensive health or learning difficulties. Participants on the programme face numerous barriers to employment and often have complex needs. Through providing initial one-to-one support, the client is enabled to choose from a range of volunteer roles that can offer the supportive environment needed. The LIO works with a network of local VCSE organisations to increase the diversity of opportunities available, and has created a Volunteering for All Partnership agreement for volunteering involving organisations. The agreement provides a brokerage service for participating organisations and works together to ensure the additional support needed for the volunteers is in place.

Outcomes

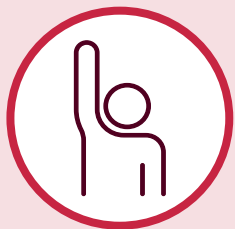
Interim outcomes are:

- Offering one-to-one support for people with complex needs to help them into volunteering has provided direct benefits to the person, for example through improved confidence, learning new skills, addressing isolation issues or contributing to returning to employment.
- The creation of a specific network and partnership agreement with volunteer-involving organisations able to support people with complex needs, has enabled a diverse range of volunteering opportunities to be offered. Additionally, organisations have received help to host these volunteers.

This case study demonstrates the outcomes of the function:

- LIO supports and develops a positive environment in which the value of volunteering is recognised, and volunteer activity is flourishing.





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Example 2 – Turning Emergency Response into Long Term Volunteering

Over 700 volunteers were quickly recruited to support housebound residents during the pandemic. A successful scheme was created to provide telephone support, collecting shopping and other necessities, and even dog-walking. It became clear to the LIO that this could only be a time-limited service and needed to be brought to an end as restrictions eased. This needed to happen without causing harm to either the people being supported or the volunteers. The LIO worked with the local voluntary sector to evolve this emergency response into a structured system of practical and emotional support for people who needed it over the longer term. Two schemes were created in partnership with local voluntary organisations. One provides for practical needs, and also acts as a triage and signposting service to ensure people have full access to all sources of support available locally from the VCSE sector and statutory partners. The second is a telephone befriending service set up in partnership with a specialist local VCSE organisation. A network of volunteer managers was also created to share best practice and respond to the changing nature of volunteering post-pandemic.

Outcomes

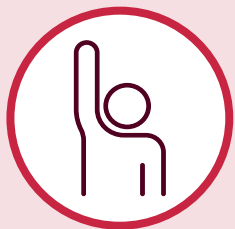
The outcomes of the project are:

- First-time volunteers who stepped forward as part of emergency response have been inspired and encouraged to continue volunteering.
- Existing voluntary organisations have been supported to enhance and diversify their volunteer offer through the creation of the volunteer managers network.
- The development of a new befriending service to provide informal befriending support on an ongoing basis based on individual need.

This case study demonstrates the outcomes of the function:

- LIO supports and develops a positive environment in which the value of volunteering is recognised, and volunteer activity is flourishing.
- Partners and stakeholders have good understanding and knowledge of volunteering, best practice and impact of changes in policy and practice.





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Example 3 – Supporting Volunteering without a Volunteer Centre

The LIO has been commissioned by the local authority to provide support for volunteering, following closure of the independent volunteer centre. Instead of offering a traditional volunteer placement service, the LIO provides capacity development to support organisations to enhance their volunteering offer, as well as promoting volunteering to the general public and the business sector. A new post has been created to grow participation in volunteering and mentor volunteering involving organisations. A new dedicated website has been co-produced with VCSE organisations and, importantly, tested extensively by existing and potential volunteers. Opportunities advertised on the site are heavily promoted by the LIO through dedicated social media and other channels, with campaigns to reach specific audiences, such as corporate social responsibility teams, or address specific needs.

Outcomes

The outcomes of the project are:

- VCSE organisations have been enabled to develop their volunteering offer so that there is a consistent pipeline of volunteer opportunities available.
- Potential volunteers have a dedicated and relevant website where local volunteering opportunities are listed and easily accessible.
- Volunteering has more visible and frequent promotion than previously through targeted advertising and engagement.

This case study demonstrates the outcomes of the function:

- LIO supports and develops a positive environment in which the value of volunteering is recognised, and volunteer activity is flourishing.
- Partners and stakeholders have good understanding and knowledge of volunteering, best practice and impact of changes in policy and practice.





Example 4 – Developing a Vision for Volunteering

Commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council in July 2022, Community First Oxfordshire and Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action worked together to develop a new strategy for volunteering in the county. This aimed to recognise the changing landscape of volunteering and acknowledge the challenges and opportunities post-pandemic. This work coincided with the launch of the national **Vision for Volunteering**. Through a survey, a series of open meetings, discussion groups and with 13 storytellers, over 350 people volunteering for more than 470 organisations contributed to the thinking, planning and development. Common themes were identified from volunteers' experiences, and this was distilled into 10 key principles for volunteering, with an action plan created. The council's strategic aims were integrated into the work so that the council can see how volunteering helps meet their aims. [See the full report here.](#)

[Click here to download the visual minutes created at Oxfordshire's discussion session in May 2023.](#)

Outcomes

The outcomes of the project are:

- An action plan has been developed that enables the VCSE sector, local authorities and other partners to respond to and implement the themes of the Vision for Volunteering.
- The responsibility for supporting and developing volunteering opportunities and volunteers themselves is a shared responsibility across sectors.
- The principles that are important to support and enable volunteers and volunteering across Oxfordshire are well-known and can be applied by any organisation.

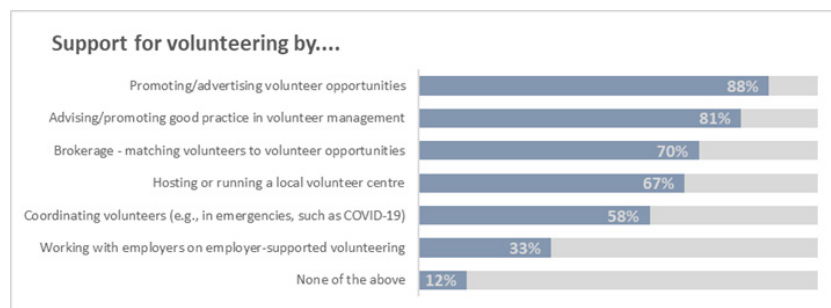
This case study demonstrates the outcomes of the function:

- LIO supports and develops a positive environment in which the value of volunteering is recognised, and volunteer activity is flourishing.
- Partners and stakeholders have good understanding and knowledge of volunteering, best practice and impact of changes in policy and practice.

What does research tell us?

Nine in ten LIOs provide some form of support for volunteering, sometimes working in partnership with or hosting a locally-based specialist volunteer centre. Whilst 81% provide advice or promote good practice in volunteer management, and just over two thirds either run a volunteer centre or offer a volunteer brokerage or matching function, only one third work with employers on employer-supported volunteering.

Figure 7 - Support for Volunteering



The coordination of volunteers remains an important role for over half of LIOs and, for those who do not support volunteering, the main reason given is because other volunteers centres provide this service locally.

It is estimated that around 330 FTE staff and volunteers are devoted to work supporting volunteering across LIOs. In 2021-22, it is estimated that NAVCA members have dealt with over 225,000 volunteer enquiries and that around 30,000 organisations have used volunteering services. Nine in ten of these are local VCSEs which emphasises the importance of LIOs in recruiting and supporting volunteers.

Questions

The landscape of volunteering is changing and adapting all the time. Volunteers are essential to vibrant communities and human flourishing, and have played a vital part in the country's response to the pandemic and cost of living crisis. For several reasons, volunteers are becoming harder to recruit to all types of tasks and roles, and to retain. Therefore, organisations that support, develop and enable volunteers have a responsibility to demonstrate and promote evolving good practice in volunteering: encouraging flexibility and collaboration, recognising who is excluded from volunteering and putting the gifts, skills and expertise of the volunteer at the centre.

Increasingly, government and parts of the public sector see volunteers as a crucial contributor to the delivery of public services, particularly in health and social care but not limited to these sectors. The NHS Volunteer Responder programme, instrumentalises volunteering into purely task-based, service-led, time-limited volunteering. Yet most voluntary activity is based on relationships formed between volunteers and with other people they interact with, including paid staff and, where appropriate, clients.

The Vision for Volunteering creates the opportunity for VCS organisations to rethink how they work, share power and practise meaningful inclusivity with precious volunteers. As leaders of the VCSE, local infrastructure organisations have the opportunity to enable VCSE organisations to make the most of this opportunity.

- How are you using or how do you plan to use the Vision for Volunteering to extend and develop your practice in supporting and enabling volunteers, and that of the wider VCSE sector?
- How do you contribute to creating a positive environment for volunteering?
- How do you keep partners informed about volunteering activities and opportunities?
- How do you demonstrate the effectiveness of volunteering?
- How do you encourage best practice in volunteer management?

Concluding Comments

This resource has many uses. It can help inform statutory partners and external organisations about the work of local infrastructure and why it is so important. It can be used as an organisational development guide to give assurance that the work that you are doing is delivering the outcomes needed by the VCSE sector and the communities they work within. Working through the document will help you think about demonstrating impact to achieve the LIQA (Local Infrastructure Quality Accreditation). Note this is not a blueprint for exactly how local infrastructure services should be delivered, but it provides examples of what good high quality local infrastructure looks like, does and what happens as a result.

NAVCA's mission is to strengthen and champion a thriving and influential voluntary and community sector, through high quality local support organisations. To do this, every local area needs to have a LIO that can deliver outcomes of the four functions of infrastructure that are of high-quality, relevant and appropriate for the local area.

This document represents a call to action so that all NAVCA members are delivering high quality outcomes for the VCSE sector, communities and statutory partners.

References

Macmillan, Rob, Leather, David and Stuart, Jo, 2022. *Connecting Locally: local voluntary and community sector infrastructure in England* <https://navca.org.uk/connecting-locally>

The Vision for Volunteering <https://www.visionforvolunteering.org.uk/>



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