



Connecting Locally: what is local infrastructure?

Summary

Local infrastructure¹ is the direct support and services that the voluntary and community sector needs to thrive. Local infrastructure includes leadership and advocacy for the sector, creation of networks and relationships, development of partnerships and opportunities for collaboration, direct capacity building including advice, one to one support, training and information and support for volunteering. This is a unique service provided at place and available to every community organisation. Strong local infrastructure organisations enable communities to provide essential local services, work in partnership, source funding, build resilience and flourish.

What is local infrastructure, what does it do and why is it important?

The voluntary, community and social enterprise sector [VCSE] covers organisations working for social and community purposes. This includes small community-based organisations, informal groups, community or social businesses and charities. Sitting alongside this diverse group is local infrastructure which provides the basic leadership, support and services needed by local VCSE groups. In practice this involves capacity building, practical support, partnerships, leadership and advocacy that enables the breadth of the VCSE to better fulfil their aims and to strengthen their intended beneficiaries. Strong local infrastructure organisations enable communities to provide essential local services, encourage volunteering, obtain funding, build partnerships and resilience, and influence decision-making.

Local infrastructure is usually provided by a dedicated Local Infrastructure Organisation [LIO] operating within a defined geographical area, such as a district, county or unitary local authority. LIOs are inherently linked to place and responsive to the needs of communities in their area. LIOs have been typically developed by local people, are run and governed locally, understand and respond to local needs, help make connections and are interwoven with the VCSE, local authorities and other organisations, and so are a vital contribution to thriving communities.

LIOs offer a diverse range of services and activities, which are different in each area, responding to local needs and priorities and building relationships and networks. Services provided to VCSE organisations include: information and advice, facilitating VCSE networks and forums, training for VCSE staff, volunteers and trustees, volunteer brokerage, guidance on obtaining grants, financial management and governance, and representing and advocating for sector in strategic settings. Local infrastructure is important because it advocates for the contribution and impact of the VCSE sector in strategic partnerships and fora. It is able to leverage funds into an area through support for grant

¹ The report *Connecting Locally: local voluntary and community sector infrastructure in England*, published in November 2022, draws on research with local voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations in England who are members of NAVCA <https://navca.org.uk/research-project> This document draws on the research reported in *Connecting Locally*.

applications, financial and organisational development, and establishes partnerships for VCSE organisations to work together.

LIOs may be known as a 'CVS – Council for Voluntary Service' or more recently as 'Community Action' for a named place. Most LIOs are members of NAVCA – National Association for Voluntary and Community Action – the national membership body, and together we are part of the movement for local social action, active citizenship, strong communities and change.

Local infrastructure has four overarching functions to support VCSE

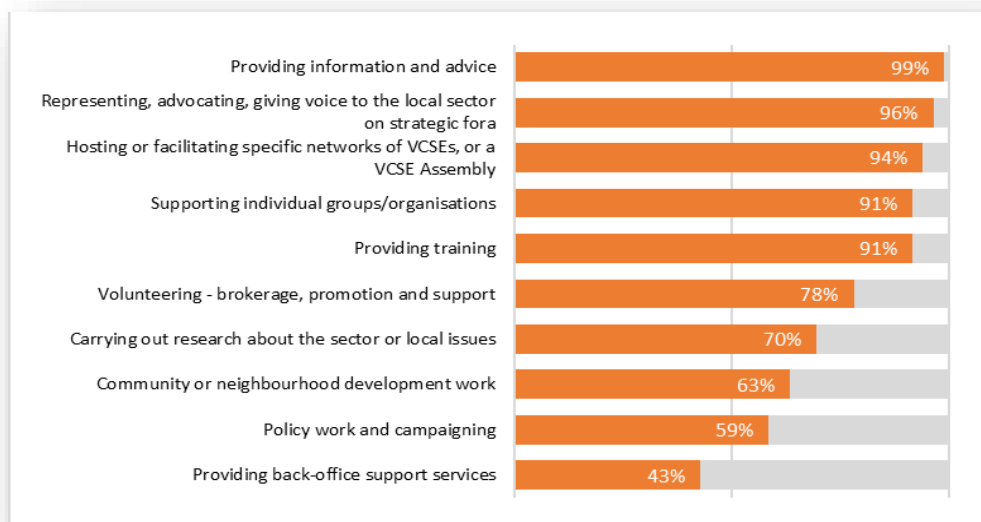
The Four Functions of Infrastructure describe the core work of LIOs: leadership and advocacy, partnerships and collaboration, capacity building and volunteering.



This concept was co-produced by NAVCA and LIOs to offer a clear definition of what is at the core of an effective local VCSE infrastructure offer. The Four Functions of Infrastructure emphasise the breadth of work that is necessary for thriving communities and VCSE sector.

The 2022 research *Connecting Locally* asked LIOs that are NAVCA members what work they do to provide local infrastructure support for the VCSE in their area. LIOs have a varied range of activities, reflecting local needs and priorities as summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: What LIOs that are NAVCA members do



These activities reflect the breadth of the four functions but also illustrate that the primary function of LIOs is to support the VCSE locally with activities that directly enable and strengthen the sector. There is a high degree of consistency between LIOs, indicated in the top five activities which are carried out by more than nine in ten of survey respondents, and the top seven, carried out by two-thirds or more of respondents.

When respondents to the *Connected Locally* survey were asked to rank these activities by relative importance in terms of meeting their organisational priorities, the results were quite different. As might be expected the most important activity was 'Supporting individual groups and organisations.' 'Representing, advocating, giving voice to the local sector on strategic fora' was the second most important activity, followed by 'volunteering – brokerage, promotion and support'. 'Providing information and advice' ranked fourth. Whilst the research does not give specific reasons for the difference, it perhaps reflects the emphasis that LIOs place on capacity building in the VCSE sector and the need to respond to local needs as a primary activity. Each of the four functions contribute to thriving communities and human flourishing.

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 are able to ensure the VCSE sector's voice is heard and used to influence and affect key decisions on funding and policy.

Leadership and advocacy can take many forms, including representing the VCSE in local Integrated Care System [ICS] arrangements, to influence decisions about health and social care locally, as well as bring the experience of communities to the table. Around nine in ten LIOs participate in ICS structures, while seven in ten represent the VCSE on local Health and Wellbeing Boards, Local Strategic Partnerships and Local Resilience Forums. This strategic level engagement is extended



through deeper involvement in and sometimes leadership / chairing of sub-committees of these groupings, indicating active advocacy and leadership.

The quality of relationships is key to effective advocacy and leadership, reflecting long term patient engagement between LIOs and local authorities, statutory partners and the wider VCSE sector. Local place based collaborations, where LIOs have equal relationships with local authorities and other partners, both strengthen partnerships and deliver for communities. LIOs have high involvement and influence in developing specific local VCSE and civil society strategies, and broader health and wellbeing and community strategies.

Without quality leadership and advocacy, the knowledge and understanding of the VCSE is lost from strategic decision making.

“what we’ve tried to instil in the sector is that, you know, it’s not just about money, it’s about influencing and having a voice about what’s happening in localities and [area] wide so we’ve been working on that quite a lot, to change attitudes”.

Leadership and advocacy are limited by the capacity and resources – much of this work is unfunded and has to be cross-subsidised from other contracts, though it is key to supporting and enabling the VCSE at place and achieving the desired outcomes. Frequently the LIO representative attending meetings of Local Strategic Partnerships or Integrated Care Systems will be the only person present who is not funded to attend as part of their paid role.

Like other partners, LIOs are also contending with rapidly changing structures, relationships and agendas, working with others to prioritise local needs in the area.

Partnerships and Collaboration

Places and communities are strengthened when organisations work collaboratively through building networks and partnerships between VCSE organisations and strategic partners to work together for common purposes. LIOs are typically at the heart of many local networks, and so the strength and quality of relationships between LIOs and their broad range of stakeholders are very important.

LIOs are very well connected - 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 minoritized communities, organisations representing disabled people and local branches of national voluntary organisations.

The strength of 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. The LIO may also act as the accountable body, bringing local VCSE organisations together to deliver a project.

Relationships with local authorities, local trusts and foundations, and local health bodies tend to be very well developed, with 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”*.

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”*.

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 and 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 one to one practical guidance and support provided to local VCSEs. Nine in ten provide this on this 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.

NAVCA members have provided practical support to over 3600 local VCSEs in 2021-22. The need and demand for this sort of capacity building work is growing, with nearly half of LIOs reporting that requests for this help had increased over the last year and over half expecting demand to grow in the next 12 months.

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.

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.

Volunteering

Volunteering, whether formal or 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.

Nine in ten LIOs provide some form of support for volunteering, sometimes working in partnership with or hosting a locally based specialist volunteer centre. 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 co-ordinate 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 fora. LIOs join up the dots in promoting volunteering both on the ground and strategically.

From the *Connecting Locally* research 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 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.

Making the Case for Local Infrastructure

LIOs are a longstanding and established model for supporting local VCSEs and creating thriving communities. LIOs themselves identify three parts of their work that indicate effectiveness and quality. These are: providing practical advice and support to VCSEs [capacity building]; building connections and relationships within and between sectors [partnerships and collaboration]; and enabling voice, advocacy and influence for local communities [leadership and advocacy].

The VCSE is not a single corporate entity inherently able to organise and represent itself, as the staff and volunteers involved in VCSE organisations are rightly focused on delivering their objectives effectively and sustaining their organisations. LIOs are able to act as a connector, enabler, advisor and advocate for the VCSE, ably demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic when the partnership working and co-ordination provided by LIOs was invaluable for local authorities and VCSE alike. It was noted in the *Connecting Locally* research that if LIOs were not present in an area they would need to be invented. During the cost of living crisis LIOs are again facilitating and coordinating those VCSE organisations providing the safety net for millions of people.

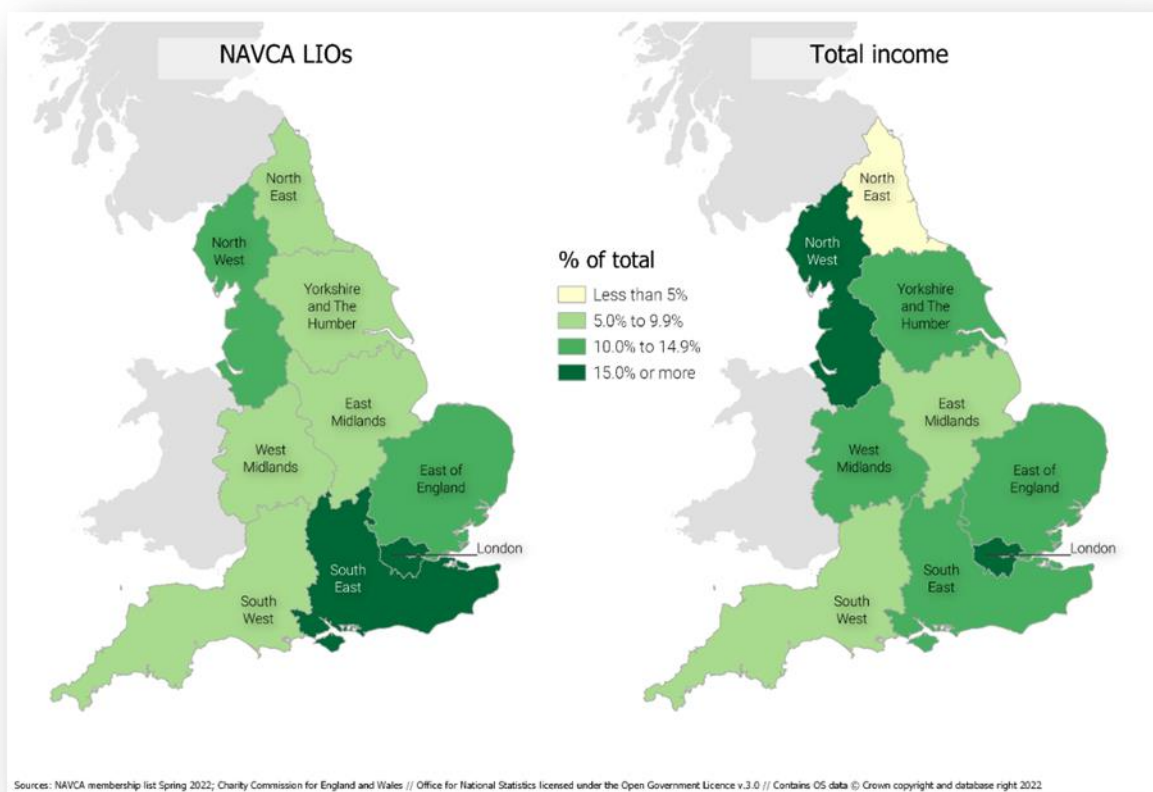
Despite the diversity and extent of the VCSE, and demonstration of the significance of infrastructure support during the pandemic, the relevance and value of LIOs is not always recognised by local authorities, statutory partners or indeed wider parts of the VCSE sector itself. Straightened financial circumstances means that funding is often targeted at direct delivery without accompanying investment in wider support the sector itself wants, such as capacity building, collaborations, or advocacy. Yet LIOs' direct support for charities brings in additional funding for the sector and communities. One LIO reports that for every £1 spent on local infrastructure support an additional £3.50 of funding for VCSE frontline delivery has been sourced. Another LIO states that fundraising support for VCSE organisations, which cost around £25K per year to deliver, brought in £600K in a year for the sector.

As one LIO put it: *"infrastructure enables the VCSE sector to access the support it needs to be able to deliver its services safely, legally, with agility and successfully, and provide support to the community which alleviates some of the pressures placed on statutory services."*

The Network of Local Infrastructure in England

NAVCA – National Association for Voluntary and Community Action² – is the national membership body for LIOs. The NAVCA network extends across all regions of England – as shown in Figure 2 – covering 80% of distinct local authority areas and representing 84% of the population. LIOs are concentrated in the most deprived fifth of local authority areas, representing 91% of the population in these areas. Two thirds operate within a single district, borough or unitary authority.

Figure 2: NAVCA members: number and total income (2020-21) by region



Six in ten LIO members have an annual income of between £250K and £1M – the median average income is £596K. One quarter have an annual income of £1M or more, while one in six have an annual income below £250K. In the financial year 2020-21 collectively the network had an income of £173M and expenditure of £157M. This is just under one fifth higher than previous years, due to additional funding to support activities during the pandemic.

The main sources of funding for LIOs are local government (£62M), local health bodies (£37M) and grant-making trusts and foundations (£31M). Larger NAVCA members [£500K - £1M plus] are funded

² As of January 2023 there were 181 members. <https://navca.org.uk/>



proportionately more by local government and health bodies, compared to smaller members, which are funded proportionately more by grant-making trusts and foundations.

NAVCA members employ an estimated 3,467 full time equivalent staff in total, and work with around 11,446 volunteers, providing 16,576 volunteer hours each week. This large scale workforce provides the essential support needed by the VCSE sector.

Together NAVCA's members form a movement that brings strength of expertise and experience to help communities to become resilient and thrive. The web of networks and connections, depth of relationships, and aggregated knowledge and intelligence that LIOs have enables the VCSE to have greater impact, especially in times of need.

What is NAVCA?

Together with its 181 LIO members, NAVCA makes up a movement for local social action, active citizenship, strong communities and change. NAVCA acts as an umbrella body for LIOs providing information, resources and advocacy for the local sector – helping to share insights and learning from across the country, and promoting effective local infrastructure. It does this in four ways:

- Networks and connections – using the combined knowledge and experience of the NAVCA network to think and work together on key challenges.
- Information gathering and sharing – analysing data, communicating key intelligence and sharing information so that LIOs are better equipped to plan and deliver their activities.
- Relevant tools and resources to support the quality and effectiveness of LIOs.
- Influencing system change – advocating for the changes needed to make a real difference locally and nationally using the collective experience and insight of the network.

Connecting Locally opens the way for a more serious and strategic conversation on two questions.

1. What might a firmer and more secure funding settlement to support the role of local VCSE infrastructure look like, and how might it be realised?
2. What reasonable expectations might work alongside such a settlement, about how VCSE infrastructure should be organised and what it would deliver, in terms of level of service, quality and outcomes?

Together LIOs form a movement for local social action and active citizenship, and gain strength from being part of the NAVCA national network that provides relevant resources, mutual support and quality accreditation.

For more information

Connecting Locally: local voluntary and community sector infrastructure in England
<https://navca.org.uk/research-project>

NAVCA <https://navca.org.uk/>

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University
<https://www.shu.ac.uk/centre-regional-economic-social-research>