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Four Functions of Infrastructure: Leadership and advocacy

February 2024

This document is the first of a four-part series on the Four Functions of Infrastructure, a concept co-produced by NAVCA and our members to help communicate and develop what local infrastructure organisations do. [Download the full guide here.](#)



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 collaboration

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



Capacity building

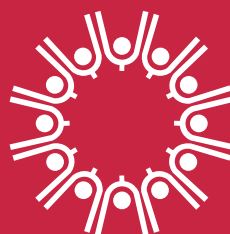
Providing practical support and development for local people and organisations, to nurture skills and build community resilience.

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.

Leadership and Advocacy

The four functions of infrastructure provide a framework to explain the activities, outputs and outcomes of a local infrastructure organisation (LIO). Each function has clear and specific outcomes that, when achieved, contribute towards the delivery of high-quality local VCSE infrastructure services.

When LIOs provide leadership and advocacy for the VCSE sector with health systems, local authorities and other strategic partners, they are able to represent the value, strengths and opportunities and needs of the sector and the communities they work within. Through contributing to 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.

This guide to the first of the four functions, *leadership and advocacy*, lists the outcomes that are needed to support the local VCSE sector, and build the relationships and influence to do this effectively. It offers examples of activities and outputs that contribute to the desired outcomes, and provides some case study examples from other LIOs. These are supported by relevant research drawn from *Connecting Locally*, which identifies a broader range of activities and outputs that contribute to the outcomes of the leadership and advocacy function. The final section of this guide suggests questions to help you to reflect on your current practices, inform plans for future development and any intention to work towards quality accreditation.



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.

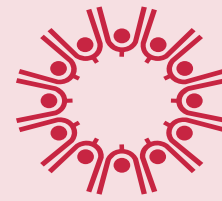
1. The VCSE sector has a strong voice and influence on key decisions and relevant policy development.

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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.



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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 – 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

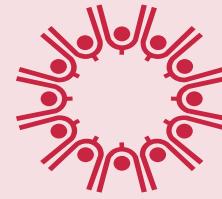
The outcomes from this project were diverse, and include:

- 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 – 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:

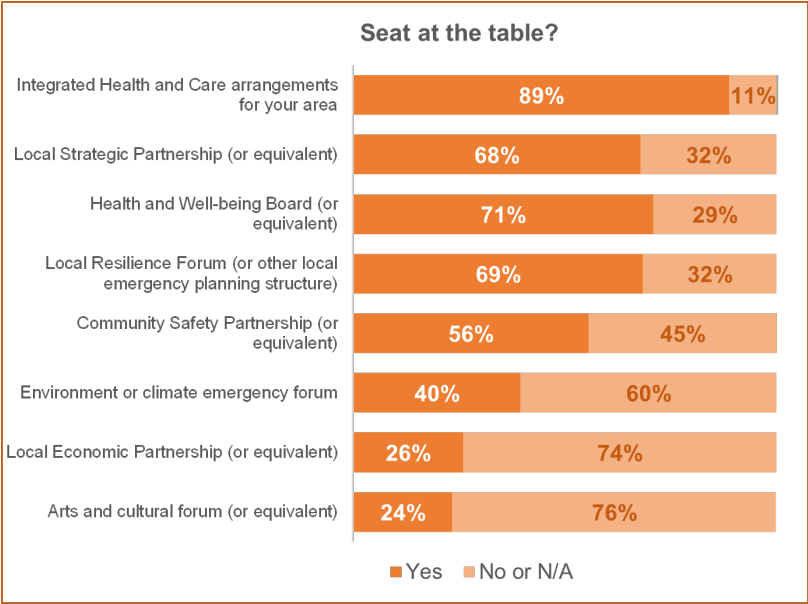
- The VCSE has a strong voice and influence on key decisions and relevant policy development.
- VCSE is informed and supported to participate in local policy development and decision-making structures.
- Local partners are better informed about the local VCSE sector and communities.
- LIO is recognised 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

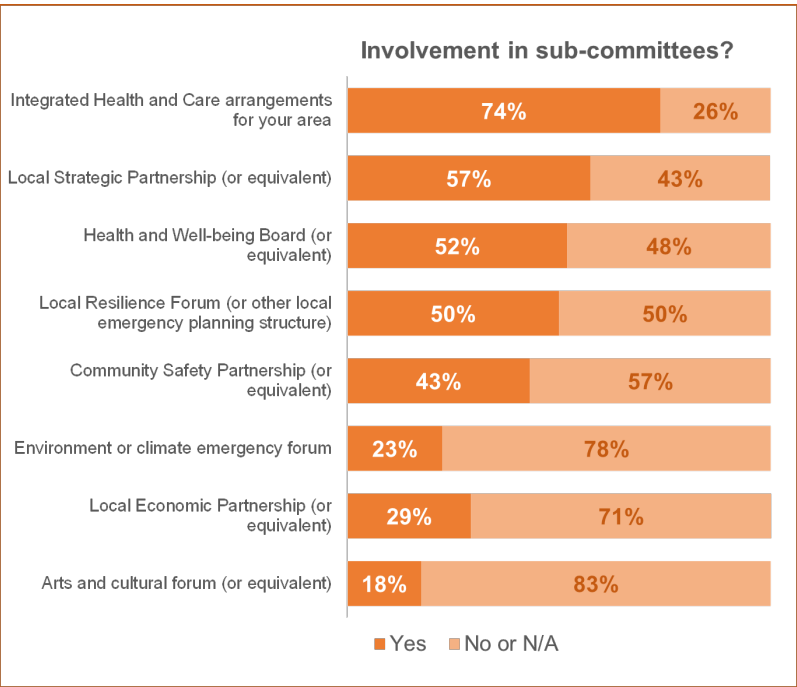
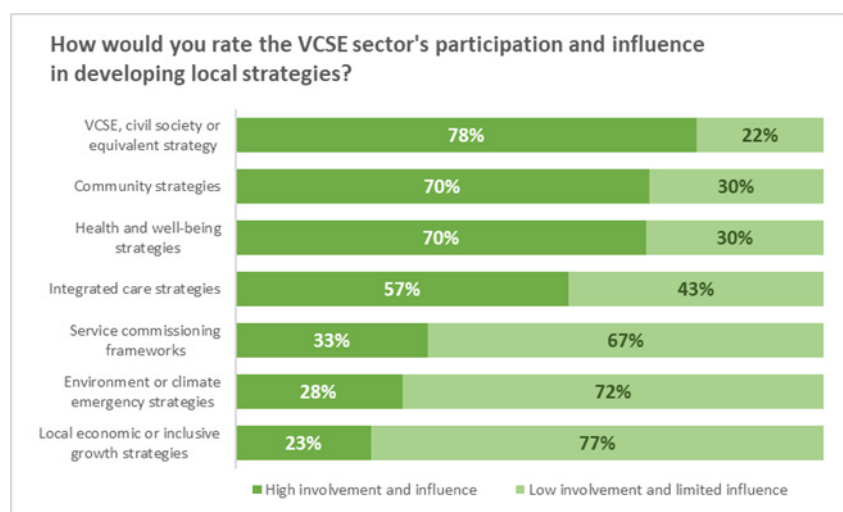


Figure 4 highlights participation and influence in local strategies, one of the outcomes of leadership and advocacy work. NAVCA members report high involvement and influence in developing specific local VCSE and civil society strategies (78%) or broader health and wellbeing and community strategies (both 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?



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