Four Functions of Infrastructure: Partnerships and collaboration

March 2024

This document is the second 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 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.
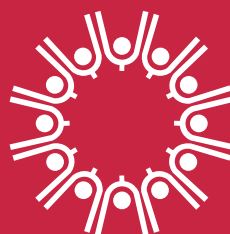
Volunteering

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.

Partnerships and Collaboration

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.

Partnerships and collaborations are built on strong relationships within the VCSE sector and between the VCSE sector, the LIO and statutory and other partners. Building networks and partnerships leads to collaborative working on shared ideas and projects, contributing to the strengthening of communities and places. It is the quality of relationships that makes the difference, and LIOs are usually at the heart of relationships across different sectors to ensure that communities and specific groups in need can access the activities, support and services they need. By collaborating, VCSE organisations can deliver contracts and services and access grants and other funding that they would not have been able to do otherwise.

This guide to the second of the four functions, *partnerships and collaboration*, lists the outcomes that are needed to support the local VCSE sector, and build the working relationships that will lead to organisations collaborating together and partnerships forming. 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 partnerships and collaboration 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.

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.
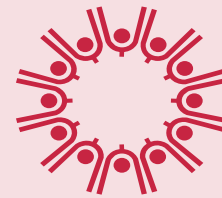
Example 1 – Establishment of an Inclusion Network

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.
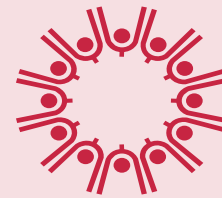
Example 2 – Partnership working with a specific purpose

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.
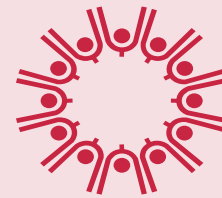
Example 3 - Getting the most from a local project

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.
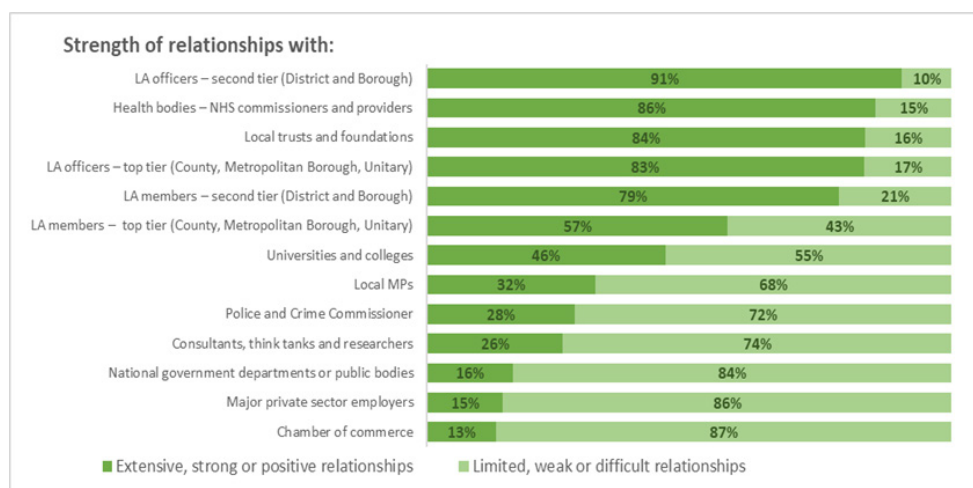
What does research tell us?

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

Strength of relationships with:

| Stakeholder	Extensive, strong or positive relationships	Limited, weak or difficult relationships
LA officers – second tier (District and Borough)	91%	10%
Health bodies – NHS commissioners and providers	86%	15%
Local trusts and foundations	84%	16%
LA officers – top tier (County, Metropolitan Borough, Unitary)	83%	17%
LA members – second tier (District and Borough)	79%	21%
LA members – top tier (County, Metropolitan Borough, Unitary)	57%	43%
Universities and colleges	46%	55%
Local MPs	32%	68%
Police and Crime Commissioner	28%	72%
Consultants, think tanks and researchers	26%	74%
National government departments or public bodies	16%	84%
Major private sector employers	15%	86%
Chamber of commerce	13%	87%

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
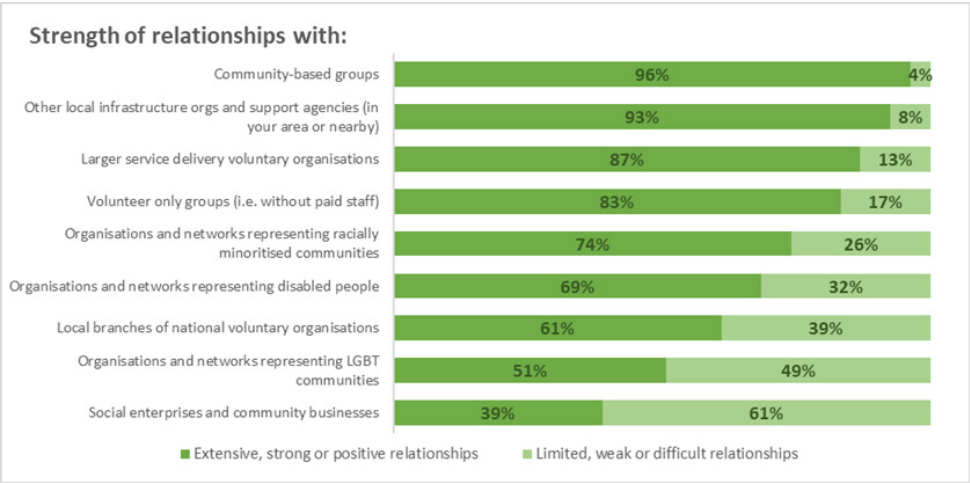
Relationships are limited or weak with social enterprises and community businesses. Social enterprises and businesses have their own very effective national infrastructure organisations and may not look to local provision for additional support. However, along with groups representing LGBT+ communities, 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?

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