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Four Functions of Infrastructure: Capacity Building

May 2024

This document is the third 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

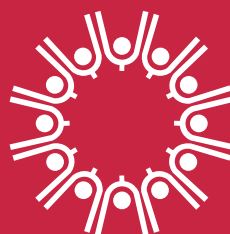
Providing practical support and development for local people and organisations, to nurture skills and build community resilience.

Volunteering

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



Contents



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Introduction to Capacity Building	4
Case Studies	
Example 1 – A New Capacity Building Offer	5
Example 2 – Being Funding Ready	6
Example 3 – Asset Based Community Development	7
What does research tell us?	8
Questions	8

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.

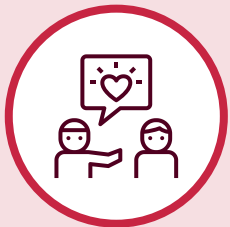
Capacity Building

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.



Providing capacity building to VCSE organisations is a core role for LIOs. Capacity building includes providing practical support, information, advice and training to help VCSE organisations deliver activities and services for their beneficiaries. Services may also include support for grant applications and other forms of fundraising, payroll or accounts. Capacity building can be both strategic and developmental, and is often provided on a bespoke basis for individual VCSE organisations.

This guide to the third of the four functions, *capacity building*, lists the outcomes that come from high quality support for and facilitation of the local VCSE sector. 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 capacity building 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.



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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

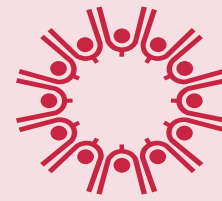
The outcomes of this capacity building work are:

- 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

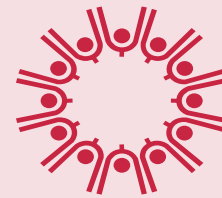
The outcomes are:

- 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?



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