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Four Functions of Infrastructure: Volunteering

June 2024

This document is the fourth 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.

Volunteering



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.

Volunteering is at the core of the VCSE sector and at the heart of thriving communities. Volunteers are essential drivers and contributors to so much social action, community activities and support for individuals. LIOs help VCSE organisations to recruit volunteers by offering a trusted brokerage or connecting service, which is based on local knowledge and need. LIOs often work with VCSE organisations to develop volunteer roles, help with onboarding and provide ongoing support, particularly in good volunteer management. LIOs may also have a role in coordinating a wider group of volunteers as part of emergency response as well as promoting volunteering locally.

This guide to the fourth function volunteering, lists the outcomes that come from the creation of a positive environment in which the value of volunteering is recognised and valued. It offers examples of activities and outputs that contribute to the desired outcomes and provides some case study examples from other LIOs, including on using the Vision for Volunteering to develop a volunteering strategy. 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 volunteering 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 - 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

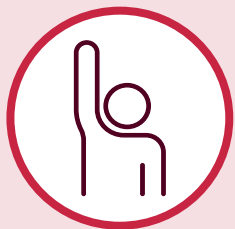
Interim outcomes are:

- 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

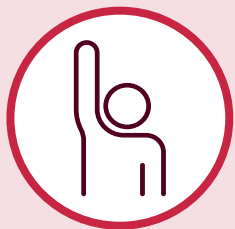
The outcomes of the project are:

- 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.

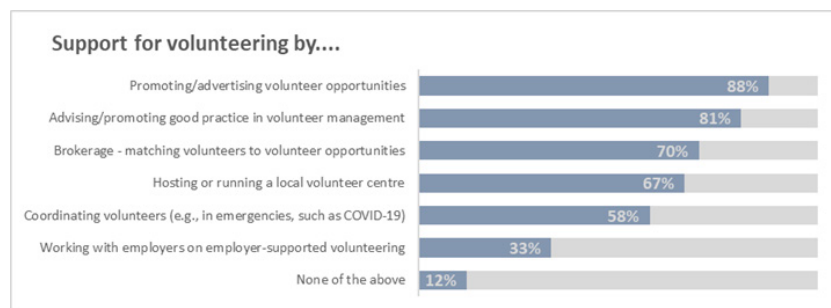
This case study demonstrates the outcomes of the function:

- 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.

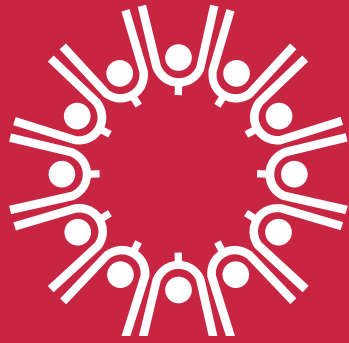
NAVCA's mission is to strengthen and champion a thriving and influential voluntary and community sector, through high quality local support organisations. To do this, every local area needs to have a LIO that can deliver outcomes of the four functions of infrastructure that are of high-quality, relevant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