

NAVCA Annual Conference 2024 – Thursday 16th May 2024, Birmingham

The NAVCA Annual Conference 2024 was held at Austin Court in Birmingham on Thursday 16th May 2024. The conference brought together NAVCA members and partners from across England to network, share ideas and learn from one another.

Our workshop themes were divided into four strands, themed around the four functions of infrastructure (what NAVCA members do): leadership and advocacy, partnerships and collaboration, capacity building, and volunteering.

NAVCA members can view slides from workshops on the NAVCA website [here](#).

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Leadership and advocacy

How do we demonstrate the role and purpose of local infrastructure to an incoming government? (with Jill Hopkinson, Policy Manager, NAVCA)

Demonstrating the role and purpose of local infrastructure, whether to an incoming government or an established one, requires clear and relevant messaging. It means establishing an accurate and honest, and therefore convincing, narrative that reflects the strengths, challenges and opportunities of local infrastructure.

It is important in framing this though, to be making it clear **why** local infrastructure and the VCSE sector are important partners for government, **how** local infrastructure can work in partnership with government, **who** benefits and **what** government can do to enable and support this whole deeply interrelated ecosystem. Part of this might be about awareness raising or even educating about what local infrastructure does, its role and why and how it makes a difference.

We have to demonstrate the outcomes that local infrastructure can deliver. We have to show how these outcomes help partners achieve their strategic objectives. This is not just about our priorities or activities although what we do is very important, but what happens as a result of them.

Questions:

1. What does government need to know about local infrastructure?

Local infrastructure provides direct support for the VCSE sector and communities through:

- being an embedded long-term presence in a local area with significant knowledge of the needs and aspirations of local communities;
- bringing the voices of those with lived experience or furthest from public services into dialogue with service providers such as health and social care or local authorities;
- building partnerships and connections in local areas to strengthen support for communities and enable VCSE organisations to work together, including to deliver public services;
- providing leadership and advocacy for the VCSE sector, and for communities, building capacity of voluntary and community organisations and supporting volunteering.

2. Why is local infrastructure an important partner for government? What outcomes does it deliver that helps government achieve its strategic priorities and who are the beneficiaries?

Local infrastructure can help deliver central and local government priorities by:

- acting as a trusted partner, able to communicate with communities and those furthest from public services and bring their voices to the table;
- providing direct support for frontline VCSE organisations delivering public services or supporting the most vulnerable in communities;
- supporting early intervention and prevention, and providing an agile and rapid response in times of crisis (e.g. Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living);

- contribute to directly to local economic development through providing employment, supporting volunteering opportunities that help people move into work, leveraging additional funding and supporting organisations to make grant or contract applications.

Local infrastructure is in a critical position to support public sector reform because it:

- delivers outcomes that help other organisations achieve their outcomes
- delivers outcomes that benefit communities, VCSE organisations, local authorities, health systems and other statutory partners;
- has knowledge about local communities and is able to recognise the gaps in policy and the impact of them locally and communicate this with statutory partners;
- brings the voices of excluded into dialogue with local authorities, health systems and other statutory partners;
- has extensive knowledge and understanding of the VCSE sector.

3. What are the changes in approach or policy that are needed to achieve these outcomes?

There is need for systemic change in public policy, removing the barriers or poor policy decisions that create the problems to which the VCSE sector and local infrastructure respond. For example, local authority housing policy, underfunding of adult social care and children's services, the five-week wait for universal credit, the spare bedroom tax and the two child limit.

Specific changes in policy or approach that would enable local infrastructure to work more effectively and achieve outcomes for communities, the VCSE sector and statutory partners include:

- invest in local problem-solving, development and service delivery to make the changes needed, avoid devising another national programme for national change;
- create long-term stable and sustainable funding arrangements to allow planning and development by local councils, local infrastructure and the VCSE sector;
- change the dynamics to bring decision-making closer to the people affected by the decision;
- be innovative in how budgets are used, especially in relation to communities and those furthest from public services, and avoid dictating how money can be spent;

- see the VCSE sector, of which local infrastructure is a part, as an equal and equitable partner with other sectors including central and local government, statutory agencies business;
- enabling decision-makers (in central and local government) to gain the knowledge they need about the voluntary sector and local infrastructure, so that their decision-making is informed by knowledge and experience.

What members have learnt and what members can put into practice:

We will use the information and discussions in this workshop to inform and shape NAVCA's work with the new government. We will also provide a resource for members to use locally during the election campaign and once the new government is in place.

How can we have effective influence on decision-making locally? (by Maddy Desforges, CEO, NAVCA)

Introduction:

One of the key roles of local infrastructure is leadership: leading the VCS, bringing people together, creating conditions to work together, and exploring great ways of doing things. Leadership can be understood as "influencing, guiding, inspiring others to a common goal." It is about developing a vision, communicating it effectively, and translating it into a reality, so others strive to achieve it.

As leaders, we have a responsibility to our own organisation and to the VCS locally. But if our common goal is to support thriving communities, we cannot do that from within our sector alone. We increasingly also have a cross-sector role to play, to influence local decision making to drive system change. We work with the public and private sectors – with the local authority, health system, police and crime commissioners and others; and with local businesses, bigger businesses who have a presence in our area, and with chambers of commerce. Our role as a convenor enables us to influence decisions. By working across sectors in a way others do not, we can build relationships. We have the skills and experience of working with both communities and the public sector to shape the agenda.

So, how can we use our leadership position within the VCS and across the system locally as convenors and connectors at place to influence decision making?

Questions:

Who are we trying to influence, who is in scope and why?

- Local authorities: service directors (adult social care, children's services, public health); elected members; senior council leaders and officers; public service commissioners etc.;

- Health systems;
- Communities — the people and VCSE organisations local infrastructure supports;
- Section 114 commissioners;
- Businesses;
- Anyone with power, but not necessarily money.

What are the barriers and how do we get round them?

Barrier	Good practice
Influencing capability not capacity — do we have all the skills we really need?	Be realistic, focused and visible
The time to develop effective relationships Need for long-term patient engagement	Capacity is an investment of time
Lack of understanding of the role of local infrastructure organisations	Clearly explain the role of local infrastructure to key statutory partners – what we do and what we don't do Ability to tell a good story to demonstrate worth
The need to be seen to have a mandate from the VCSE sector	VCSE assemblies bring people together – create the trust and mandate to represent the sector
Lack of data about the local VCSE sector VCSE sector not well understood or treated with suspicion	Collect data and evidence of impact – explaining to VCSE sector why this is important Case studies to show good practice
Changing priorities for partner organisations	Ability to tell a good story to demonstrate worth Being solution-focused
High turnover of staff in public bodies	Be part of recruitment panels, support induction of new staff and maintain relationships

Understanding where decisions are really taken and by whom	Form relationships with officers and do not wait for boards or formal meetings
Opacity or inertia in decision-making, especially in system leaders, hiding behind collective decision-making	Build a network around trust Find common priorities
Blame cultures – assume the worst and prioritise apportioning blame – as opposed to collective or constructive discussion towards a vision or solution	Use a framework of questions to identify what is important
Misinterpretation of procurement rules	Share good practice on procurement

What members have learnt and what members can put into practice:

That there are common issues that all experience in influencing, convening, partnership working and leadership.

Think about how to influence within an organisation e.g. people at different levels, in different places.

Long-term, patient relationship building is essential.

Need to demonstrate value and impact of local infrastructure and VCSE sector.

Partnerships and collaboration

How do we strengthen collaboration in VCSE healthcare commissioning? (by Angela Ellis Paine, Lecturer in Voluntary Sector Management at Bayes Business School, City University)

Introduction

The workshop highlighted the increasing need for collaboration between the statutory sector and VCSE sector to address prevention and health inequalities effectively. It emphasised the shift towards collaborative commissioning within health and care. Angela facilitated a discussion and gave an overview of Bayes Business School research in this area. The research was based on over 160 interviews across England, focusing on identifying enablers and challenges to such collaboration at various

systemic levels. The research outlined 12 building blocks for collaboration between the statutory sector and VCSE sector which can be found in their research briefing.

Questions to the group

- What is health and care commissioning like now?
- What would health and care commissioning look like if it was based on strong collaboration?

Key discussion points

- Members expressed the need for trust and transparency from public sector colleagues.
- That investment isn't trickled down into communities and funding is being spent ineffectively. Highlighting that if VCSE leaders had more information on the funding available, they could codesign cost effective solutions with communities.
- The group discussed brave leadership, the courage to challenge and say no sometimes, but doing this in a way that develops robust and strong relationships.
- The challenges and opportunities in shifting power upstream was discussed.
- The use of neutral spaces for public and VCSE sector to meet was welcomed by the group, feeling that it would support the development of relationships.
- The term boundary spanners were introduced to some in the group, with the research's infrastructure diagram providing a useful tool for members to visualise the complexities of their role.

What members have learnt and what members can put into practice

- The use of neutral spaces for public and VCSE sector to meet was welcomed by the group, feeling that it would support the development of relationships.
- Members reflected that the 12 building blocks which enable collaboration in commissioning were useful. Most used some of these building blocks, the research offered a practical way to develop more areas to improve collaboration.

Capacity building

How can we effectively and safely use AI? (by Sam and Sophie from the National Cyber Security Centre)

Introduction

The workshop led by the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) primarily focused on understanding and integrating artificial intelligence (AI). The introduction emphasised the role of NCSC as the UK's technical authority on cyber threats, highlighting its initiatives since its inception in 2016. It discussed the secure and responsible development, deployment and operation of AI, addressing the cyber security implications crucial for various organisations. The workshop introduced the potential uses of AI in the charity sector, such as developing fundraising materials, bid writing and service delivery, ensuring that members understand the importance and impact of AI on their operations and security.

Questions

The participants were asked to work in groups and think through several key aspects of AI integration:

- Challenges, tasks, or questions AI could help address within their organisations.
- Types of information, prompts, or data needed for AI tools.
- Ethical considerations related to AI use.
- Questions to ask AI software providers.
- Potential guardrails for AI implementation.
- Stakeholders to involve in AI discussions.
- Methods to verify the accuracy of AI-generated outputs or products

Key discussion points

- Ethical use of AI
 - Considerations around using personal data for training AI and the transparency of data used by AI systems.
 - The risks of staff uploading corporate information into personal AI software.
- AI risks
 - Including AI hallucination and data poisoning. This is where AI gives false information
- AI in cyber threats
 - How AI can enhance the capabilities of attackers, like using deep fakes and improving phishing techniques.
- Benefits of AI
 - Including efficiency, enhanced creativity, and the discovery of new ideas.
- Drawbacks of AI

- Such as machine bias, lack of human oversight, and the potential to de-anonymise data.

Learning and practical application

Members learned about the balance between efficiency and accuracy when implementing AI. They were encouraged to explore AI possibilities safely, develop AI policies within their organisations, and ensure strong cultures around risk management and technology. Practical applications include using NCSC's free Active Cyber Defence tools, obtaining Cyber Essentials certification, and utilising NCSC's e-learning resources to improve cyber resilience and educate staff about managing cyber risks.

[Find out more about NCSC here.](#)

Volunteering

How can we develop a local vision for volunteering? (by Becky Isaac, Vision for Volunteering Implementation Manager at Birmingham VSC)

Introduction

- Birmingham's volunteering landscape in 2022

The pandemic had presented challenges around recruitment and retention of volunteers, volunteer fatigue. Demand for new volunteers was increasing given the start of the cost of living crisis. There was a gradual reduction in local authority funding until the LA disinvested entirely. Together, these factors presented opportunities to reimagine volunteering and make it more flexible and accessible.

- Why Birmingham VSC decided to develop a Vision for Birmingham.

Against the backdrop described, Birmingham VSC's own brokerage service / volunteer centre had become financially unviable and out of step with local needs. The launch of the National Vision for Volunteering (VfV) presented an opportune moment to unite Birmingham behind a shared vision for volunteering and to reignite support for volunteering.

- How BVSC developed a VfV

The vision was co-produced by citizens, voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise organisations, the public sector and academic partners in Birmingham, through an event and follow up activity held in November 2022. The event brought together stakeholders across the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise

(VCFSE) sector to share understandings and experiences of volunteering, volunteering management approaches and practices, and to identify the actions that needed to be taken to bolster volunteering in Birmingham.

- The action plan

The action plan centres around three key principles of Birmingham's Vision: Awareness & Appreciation; Collaboration; Celebrating Difference. Actions were drawn up supporting the three principles. To implement the action plan, the new role of Vision for Volunteering Implementation Manager was established, whose role was to implement the action plan, bring to life Birmingham's Vision for Volunteering, and to support Birmingham's VCFSE sector to effectively involve volunteers.

- Impacts, challenges and learnings over the past year

Impacts: Re-establishing BVSC as a source of support for volunteering; VfV as a tool to support development of best practice

Challenges: The funding landscape and securing funding

Learnings: Co-production is essential; the vision must be tangible and relevant.

Questions

- Do you have a shared local volunteering strategy or vision for your area?
- If yes, how does it work for you in practice? Is it currently effective or ineffective?
- If you don't have a local volunteering strategy or vision, do you think your locality could benefit from one? Whether you have a shared local volunteering strategy or not, how could you use one to bolster and further develop volunteering in your locality? How it could support your local infrastructure?

Key discussion points

Common themes and reflections included the following:

- Attendees agreed it would be useful to have a strategic vision and a clear offer for volunteering.
- Organisations continue to address challenges in resources, capacity and engaging with strategic partners. It would take time and collaborative working with the Council to develop a Vision.
- Lack of tools and funding to carry out the work.

What members have learnt and what members can put into practice

- A local VfV could be a vehicle to develop and move forward strategic partnerships and bring together key players to move forward a shared vision, rather than to just generally engage them in our work as an infrastructure organisation.
- Co-production is essential in the development of a VfV for the local area.
- Do groundwork to get buy-in e.g. activities and workshops to join local networks.
- Models for volunteering must be adaptive and responsive to current needs.
- Make the vision tangible and relevant. Offer practical ways for people to engage with the vision and implement it and to enact the principles in their context.

How do we meaningfully engage young people in volunteering? (by George Fielding, Policy and Public Affairs Officer at Volunteering Matters)

Introduction:

This workshop focused on identifying barriers in engaging young people in volunteering and finding solutions. George questioned whether the low numbers of young people involved in volunteering was apathy on behalf of the young people or the system that creates challenges to young people engaging in volunteering. He highlighted the positive benefits of supporting young people to volunteer and take social action.

He asked the group:

What are the current challenges in engaging young people in volunteering?

We considered practical barriers, from transport and service capacity to thinking about terminology used and vacancies offered.

Key discussion points:

This led to a whole group discussion looking at best practice and creating solutions to engage young people. These involved building partnerships with the places young people are and encouraging micro-volunteering, including online opportunities.

George also highlighted that young people were interested in taking social action and how to change the system for the better, so engaging them by asking what they want from our organisations to make it easier to work together and find out about the skills they want to gain. George highlighted research that cited the benefits of linking generations working together to tackle the needs of the area in which they live.

We spoke about terminology used by young people and whether the term volunteering was still the most appropriate and perhaps we needed to broaden or adapt the



language to include social action. Volunteering was likened to attempting to capture a butterfly in a jam jar and not wanting to damage it, so finding ways to allow it to work for everyone, with social action certainly being part of it.

What members have learnt and what members can put into practice:

This workshop gave participants the opportunity to share both issues and consider practical solutions in engaging young people in volunteering.