

NAVCA's perspectives on DCMS Volunteering Research

March 2025

Context

On 3 February 2025, DCMS released three research papers conducted by a consortium led by Basis Social, alongside London Economics and New Philanthropy Capital, as part of the [Volunteering Research Managed Service](#) which explored [Digital Tools that Support Volunteering](#), [Promoting equity, diversity and inclusion in volunteering](#) and [Compared national enabling environments for volunteering](#).

Taken together, the papers draw a picture of a fragmented structure of support for volunteering that will be familiar to NAVCA members.

One positive from a local infrastructure perspective is that each paper highlights the role of local support as a crucial part of the jigsaw. For example, the first learning point from the [national comparisons research](#) is:

- Locally led approaches can improve efficiency and outcomes in both the short and longer-term: Using the knowledge and networks of existing local organisations helps new initiatives to function efficiently and effectively. Recognising the importance of place in people's motivations to volunteer is also seen as a route to retaining volunteers who want to support their communities.

This quote from the [equity, diversity and inclusion paper](#) makes clear the role that local infrastructure plays in leading positive change:

- *In any local area where there is strong support by the local authority or other funders for volunteer centres and where you have that volunteer centre really dedicated to equity, diversity and inclusion, you'll have a stronger kind of more robust offering from the organisations in that area in EDI and how they involve local people.* - Stakeholder

Each of the research papers include a great deal of detail. For this briefing, we have summarised the key points that we believe are most relevant to local infrastructure organisations and offered our perspective on how local infrastructure can support positive change in volunteering.

Key points: Digital

There are a lot of tools on the market, but none of them fully integrate both volunteer management and volunteer brokerage activities.

Some stakeholders feel it is important to take a strategic approach where a relatively small number of platforms are supported to develop a fuller offer. Conversely, other stakeholders argue that 'being strategic' will stifle innovation.

All agree that different tools should be easier to navigate, better signposted and interoperable.

NAVCA is working with partners to **make the case that volunteer management and brokerage platforms need to talk to each other**. For instance, national platforms can play an important role in promoting volunteering and enabling potential volunteers to find roles but for many, volunteering is something they aspire to do *locally*. Making this link from local to national is important and we hope to see a 'push of a button' approach to safely sharing data from one system to another.

Action you can take:

If you use a digital volunteering system, ask your provider to reach out to their peers to explore interoperability, and to commit to using Open Data Standards if or when they are developed.

Key Points: Equity, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) vary in the quality of their practice. VIOs also take very different approaches depending on what they do.

VIOs face challenges in accessing the tools and resources to help them develop their approach.

NAVCA knows that many members play a leading role in supporting better EEDI practice – for instance by using the Vision for Volunteering to design their local strategies - and then bringing volunteer managers together to co-design better solutions.

We are determined to play our part in enabling our members and the wider sector.

- We have already piloted a 'training for trainers' session to support members that are developing trustee diversity programmes and plan to continue that work
- We will explore how the NAVCA Allyship Programme can support better volunteering practice
- We have exciting plans for Volunteers Week 2025. This will be the beginning of a project to share the best of members' knowledge and practice around inclusive volunteering.
- Network meeting on 2 April which will focus on EEDI in Volunteering (<https://www.navca.org.uk/members-events>)

Action you can take

- Develop your diversity monitoring and use the data to target your services towards underrepresented groups
- Build deeper partnerships with organisations led by and working with underrepresented groups

Key points: National comparisons

Compared to other countries, the structures for enabling volunteering and investing in volunteering infrastructure are fragmented. It is important that any revised approach protects and values local connections and knowledge.

That said, the report identifies a lack of coordination around volunteering across central government and states that volunteering would benefit from higher profile within government. One option in the report is the development of a national volunteering strategy.

The report also identifies significant data gaps that increase the challenges in understanding the health of volunteering and its impact; this is a challenge that all stakeholders need to work to resolve.

The language of volunteering can be off putting for some. As social changes have led to more people wishing to give their time in less formal ways, the report proposes stakeholders adopting new terms.

NAVCA welcomes the recognition that volunteering works best when it is supported locally. We are supportive of building on the Vision for Volunteering to create a national strategy *providing* any national strategy values *and resources* local activity. We will continue to make these points to DCMS, other government departments and stakeholders

Action you can take

- Review all three research papers and share some of the key points about the value of working local and of LIOs to share with stakeholders (see Annex A for some key quotes)
- Contact us at rich.warrington@navca.org.uk to share your thoughts or start a conversation on the [Connect online forum](#) in the NAVCA members hub

Annex A. Helpful extracts

In the EDI paper

There was a strong appetite for supportive resources and guidance that VIOs can use to improve their practice, which infrastructure organisations are considered well placed to provide. Training and tailored guidance were considered critical to catering to the wide diversity of the sector, and good practice sharing was also welcomed.

Having success with EDI in volunteering could be closely linked to the purpose and cause of the organisation itself. *Where facets of equity, diversity, or inclusion were part of the organisation's everyday work, strategy, and broader societal goals, this attracted a more diverse set of volunteers.*

Stakeholders as well as VIOs emphasised the role a supportive infrastructure played for VIOs. Local authorities, volunteer centres, Councils for Voluntary Services (CVSs) and funders were all considered important players in equipping VIOs to use volunteers effectively and to improve their practices towards better EDI.

In any local area where there is strong support by the local authority or other funders for volunteer centres and where you have that volunteer centre really dedicated to equity, diversity and inclusion, you'll have a stronger kind of more robust offering from the organisations in that area in EDI and how they involve local people.” – Stakeholder

Some VIOs and stakeholders felt there was a lack of overarching support across the sector, with local authorities and local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) that historically could support them with EDI being weaker than they once were.

We've also seen over the last 15 years a lack of resource and finances available as austerity has hit local authorities to support these grassroots community organisations, to develop those community relationships which are at the heart of creating a community which people can then volunteer and be actively involved.” – Stakeholder

Research published by NAVCA found that LIOs are working under increasingly difficult financial circumstances, as the cost-of-living crisis continues, and they experience the

impact of funding cuts to local authority service provision, meaning they must diversify their income streams (MacMillan et al, 2022).

In the Comparisons paper

Locally led approaches can improve efficiency and outcomes in both the short and longer-term: **Using the knowledge and networks of existing local organisations helps new initiatives to function efficiently and effectively. Recognising the importance of place in people's motivations to volunteer is also seen as a route to retaining volunteers who want to support their communities.**

Local infrastructure organisations often fund public benefit work, including volunteer engagement, through income generated from other activities. ***The funding model for such volunteering support is fragmented, pieced together from different sources, due to a lack of systems level overview.***

– (Academic interviewee)

Malvern Hills District Council in Gloucestershire...have a very engaged way of linking their local VCS sector with the council, with the NHS, and other organisations that linked well with volunteering...In Derby and in Hackney, there are similar examples of this.

– (England Official interviewee)

Volunteering infrastructure is seen by some to be hampered by a lack of strategic funding. The financial crash of 2008 meant cuts to local authority funding over the past decade, which has had a significant impact on funding for and the size and scale of local infrastructure (CEP, 2022; 360Giving, 2023). The majority of grant funding goes to frontline services or to specific policies and programmes with direct outcomes, rather than contributing to the enabling environment that creates the conditions for volunteering to happen (for example, helping organisations to ensure compliance with regulations affecting all their projects).

Research participants pointed out that when there is significant investment targeted at volunteering more directly, there are demonstrable positive impacts. For example, funding for the Youth United Foundation for uniformed youth volunteers has led to around 40,000 volunteering opportunities and a significant increase in volunteers, particularly in more deprived areas (YUF, 2016).