



Local Civil Society Infrastructure (LCSI) R&D Programme: Final Reports Member Briefing #1 – 14 July 2025

Member Information

This research is good news for local infrastructure and strongly supports the case for local, quality provision.

The conclusions mirror those of [Walking a Tightrope](#) NAVCA's commissioned research published in January 2025.

The research identified five functions that LCSI provide, and these overlap with the [Four Functions of Local Infrastructure](#) and the outcomes for [Local Infrastructure Quality Accreditation](#).

The research is extensive, complex and nuanced. NAVCA will provide members with a series of briefings and resources to help you use the research to support your work.

DCMS have published the findings of a 12 month research project, carried out in 2024 on *Local Civil Society Infrastructure* [LCSI]. The purpose of the research was to develop the evidence base on LCSI in England by identifying the positive impacts of effective LCSI, the negative impacts of its absence and the conditions and approaches for building effective LCSI in areas where it is weak or non-existent.

Six research reports have been published which include an evidence review, quantitative data analysis, survey findings, case studies and 'what works.' The synthesis report is extensive and presents an incredibly complex and nuanced picture of LCSI. This first briefing for NAVCA members offers an overview of the main findings. Further briefings and resources will be produced as the findings are unpacked further.

All six reports can be accessed via: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-civil-society-infrastructure-lcsi-rd-programme-final-reports>

Headlines

1. There is no agreed definition of the organisations and functions of LCSI.
2. LCSI was identified to have five functions: facilitating funding, organisational development, advocacy, volunteering and community participation, and convening.
3. The most direct benefits from LCSI accrue to frontline VCSE organisations; with benefits to local communities through stronger frontline organisations and increased volunteering activities; and statutory bodies gain a greater insight of local needs, improvements in commissioning processes and local policy decisions.
4. LCSI is considered to be sufficient when it is characterised by the quality of the provision and the adaptation to the local context rather than by the extent of coverage.

5. The most important factor in the quality of LCSi provision is being knowledgeable about the local area.
6. LCSi organisations were seen as an effective bridge that can support open and honest communication between the VCS and public bodies especially in context of funding or commissioning relationships.
7. LCSi activities led to three broad outcome pathways of: better targeted resources, improved policy making, and increased community trust, empowerment and belonging.
8. There are no simple or straightforward answers to the question of how best to organise, support and strengthen LCSi.
9. Local infrastructure operates in a context in which there is no centralised point of power or decision-making and no universally agreed perspective on what it should do, how it should do it and how well it is doing.
10. LCSi works best when there is a close relationship with the public sector. This is easiest to achieve when decision-makers in local government and health systems take a strategic interest in LCSi that comes from a recognition of its value and its ability to contribute to their own priorities.
11. Strengthening LCSi will almost certainly continue to rest on taking a local first approach and on ensuring that any reform is delivered with patience, sufficient resource and recognition of local concern and sensitivities.
12. Enabling strong LCSi is based on a combination of factors: funding, local knowledge, effective relationships and local buy-in.

How is Local Civil Society Infrastructure defined?

There is no agreed definition of the organisations and functions of LCSi. For the purposes of this research, it is defined either by ‘organisation first’ — the functions and activities of a dedicated organisation serving a geographical area or a community of interest; or as ‘function first’ — the purpose and functions of LCSi carried out by a range of organisations. The functions are facilitating funding, organisational development, advocacy, volunteering and community participation, and convening.

Included in this research were: general local infrastructure organisations [such as NAVCA members], volunteer centres, specialist providers, service providers e.g. community accountancy.

There were an estimated 530 organisations delivering LCSi functions active in 2023.

What functions fall within local civil society infrastructure?

Five functions were identified, which correspond with the four functions of infrastructure developed by NAVCA and used by many members.

- **Facilitating funding** such as providing information about opportunities, influencing the design and targeting of grants or other forms of funding and co-ordinating local bids.
- **Community participation** including advice and signposting, promoting community activities, volunteer brokerage and capacity building.

- **Organisational** development such as support for operational management and strategic development, training for frontline staff and bespoke work with organisations.
- **Convening** including bringing together networks of frontline organisations, building collaborations and partnerships across, between and within sectors and arranging community-led activities.
- **Advocacy** such as contributing to strategic cross-sector meetings, intelligence sharing with decision makers and the local VCFSE sector and representing the views of the local sector and decision makers.

How can we measure whether sufficient [in terms of coverage and quality] LCSi is present in the local area?

Sufficiency of LCSi is characterised by the quality of the provision and the adaptation to the local context rather than by the extent of coverage. Relevant factors included:

- being knowledgeable about the area
- being well connected
- the quality of relationships, which are reliant on the extent to which decision makers in local government and public sector, value LCSi.

Funding

LCSi funding was analysed as a proxy for its ability to deliver support. Areas with larger numbers of civil society organisations tended to have higher total LCSi expenditure per capita. There was no evidence linking higher LCSi expenditure to increased foundation or survival rates of civil society organisations.

Stakeholders emphasised the need for sufficient, consistent and flexible funding to enable LCSi organisations to fulfil their core functions effectively. Funding also needs to be long term and sustainable. With it LCSi organisations can become fully embedded in the local landscape, build knowledge, skills and credibility, and establish strong relationships with stakeholders. This contributes directly to legitimacy and trust. Without sustainable funding it becomes more difficult to deliver core functions and show impact and could lead to competition with frontline organisations.

Quality

The most important factor in the quality of LCSi provision is being knowledgeable about the local area. Other factors contributing to quality of LCSi provision include:

- the dedication of leaders to be involved and understand local needs with strong connections to and trusted relationships with the VCS
- strong relationships with the public sector and local stakeholders, where there is parity of esteem, mutual respect and collaboration, particularly with local authorities and health systems
- the LCSi organisations is recognised by public sector partners as having the potential to help achieve their objectives and support local communities
- being independent of public bodies

- being collaborative nature, connecting with VCS, statutory bodies and funders

LCSI organisations were seen **as an effective bridge** that can support open and honest communication between the VCS and public bodies especially in context of funding or commissioning relationships. Relationships with VCS organisations could be undermined where infrastructure organisations were heavily funded by statutory authorities, not seen as independent, or without adequate reach or connections to smaller grassroots groups.

Participants from LCSI organisations emphasised how in-depth knowledge and strong relationships require sufficient staff and retention planning. Case study participants from LCSI organisations believed that typically, they are reliant on a few key staff, meaning staffing changes were a risk to the sustainability of the organisation.

Absence of strong LCSI

The absence of strong LCSI coupled with limited resources and capacity among key stakeholders, meant there was no strategic overview or knowledge of the scale, scope, potential and priority needs for support of the VCS. Knowledge about and support for the sector remained patchy, ad hoc and improvised. Communication flows about and through the VCS were limited, and stakeholders reported that initiatives were often developed in isolation.

A weakened LCSI led to a ‘disjointed’, ‘fragmented’, ‘dispersed’ and ‘un-coordinated’ VCS, with perceived consequences for duplication of services and competition within the sector. Without strong co-ordination, participants noted that information flowed less readily, and organisations were not as aware of each other’s work. There was seen to be ‘no big picture’ view of what was happening in the locality and how people could connect. Smaller and newer frontline organisations, often lacking the capacity and connections to engage, might be further disadvantaged by the lack of LCSI sharing information and opening opportunities in an area. Additionally, the locality becomes a ‘cold spot’ in terms of successfully sourcing funding for the VCS, making fewer applications for funding with potential implications for the VCS and community needs. Without effective LCSI there were limited routes for the VCS to work with statutory partners.

What are the impacts, benefits and costs associated with strong or weak LCSI and to whom do they fall?

Assessing the impact, costs, and benefits of LCSI is inherently difficult due to complex attribution chains, a wide range of activities, and diverse organisational structures. Through the development of a Theory of Change, the research project identified how LCSI activities led to **three broad outcome pathways**:

1. better targeted resources
2. improved policy making
3. increased community trust, empowerment and belonging.

The Theory of Change shows how these ultimately lead to a broader **impact** of:

- more capable VCFSE organisations

- stronger place-based systems
- more resilient communities.

LCSI organisations responding to a survey identified with a higher level of confidence that their work led to positive short and medium term outcomes including:

- increased funding for VCSE organisations
- stronger relationships between VCSE organisations and strategic partners
- better alignment between VCSE services and local needs.

In the survey responses LCSI organisations had a lower level of confidence regarding their outcomes on policymaking, community engagement practices and diversity within VCSE organisations. However, the findings of the case studies offer a more nuanced understanding demonstrating **stronger evidence that LCSI activities resulted in better targeted resources and improved policy making.**

From the case studies where there was well-established LCSI provision [three of the five areas] key benefits accrued to:

- frontline VCSE organisations have increased access to funding sources, greater connections and increased confidence to take ideas to decision-makers
- this may benefit local communities through stronger frontline organisations and increased volunteering activities
- statutory bodies gain a greater insight of local needs, improvements in commissioning processes and local policy decisions.

The evidence for a direct link between LCSI and local communities is weaker than for other beneficiary groups, reflecting how LCSI organisations tend to be one step removed from activities within local communities.

What factors and models are effective in strengthening local infrastructure?

There is limited evidence on what works in strengthening LCSI. This research emphasises the importance of working with the grain of local context, as the environment in which organisations operate plays a significant part in shaping, enabling and constraining actions and interventions.

Stakeholders consistently identified three approaches to support the improvement of LCSI:

- addressing challenges within the funding system
- enhancing strategic buy-in
- building on good quality relationships to develop more formal structures.

Approaches to improvement in LCSI need to reflect and work within the complexity of the local context. **Local infrastructure operates in a context in which there is no centralised point of power or decision-making and no universally agreed perspective on what it should do, how it should do it and how well it is doing.**

Strengthening LCSI will almost certainly continue to rest on **taking a local first approach** and on ensuring that any reform is delivered with patience, sufficient resource and recognition of local concern and sensitivities.

Implications

There are no simple or straightforward answers to the question of how best to organise, support and strengthen LCSI. LCSI is by its very nature local and so:

- LCSI is fundamentally embedded in and related to local context and history of the VCS, the communities in which it operates, relationships with statutory stakeholders
- the value of LCSI is negotiated amongst multiple stakeholders and realised in each place in the legitimacy, trust and connections LCSI makes and facilitates
- LCSI is at its best when it meets the needs of a local place through:
 - forging relationships to build bridges across and between sectors
 - understanding and working through the power dynamics within the VCS sector and with statutory bodies and funders
- LCSI's strongest claims for impact are in strengthening and joining at the VCS to better target resources to meet the needs of communities.

LCSI varies hugely in configuration, activities, coverage, strength and impact. Whilst it is positive in demonstrating responsiveness to local context it also raises questions about spatial equity and a postcode lottery. If the perceived strength and resources available to LCSI differ between areas what implications does this have for VCS organisations seeking to access support in different places? What are the implications for the strength of the VCS, its access to resources and its work with communities?

Strong LCSI is based on a combination of factors, drawing on funding as well as local knowledge, relationships and local buy-in. This research on strengthening and improving LCSI suggests a need for a balanced approach, between:

- Principles that can helpfully be debated at the national level and conversations and decisions that must occur locally.
- Leaning into the nimble, organic, responsive strength that characterises so much of civil society and developing structures and frameworks that embed good practice and guard against the loss of key personnel.
- Prioritising near-term cost-savings and investing in future effectiveness.

Reflecting these themes, stakeholders identified three areas that can support the improvement of LCSI:

- Addressing key challenges within the funding system
- Enhancing strategic buy-in from local decision-makers, including by:
- Building on good-quality relationships to develop more formal structures, increasing resilience to change and reflecting the local context, supported by a formal approach to ensuring the inclusivity of LCSI that supports all communities and organisations.