



NAVCA

Annual Conference

2025

The Power of Local Infrastructure

Conference write-up



We



The NAVCA Annual Conference 2025 was an opportunity for people to network, share ideas, and learn from one another. The theme, 'The power of local infrastructure', aimed to support NAVCA members to develop their strategic influence, engage with local networks, and gain tools and tips for practical action across a wide range of topics.

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How can we use AI ethically and effectively to support the voluntary sector?

Workshop host/s: Caroline Broadway, Dandelion Applied AI

Introduction: The workshop focused on Generative AI, which can be a useful tool, but here are some things you need to be aware of:

- AI has limited access to sources (only open access sources)
- Lazy, it will only do what you ask it to, treat it like a lazy assistant who knows nothing
- Hallucinations – it will answer even if it doesn't know, it makes stuff up, even making up links to mythical sources.
- AI tools are biased. They can amplify the bias that already exists in data sets.

Caroline listed **5 principles of ethics for AI:**

- accountability,
- transparency,
- fairness and bias (recency and people pleasing),
- privacy and data protection – check the GDPR of the tool, have policies in place about what staff can and can't use in AI
- safety and security.

They raised the issue of **sustainability** – AI data centres use a huge amount of carbon.

Everyone there had some experience with AI, and there were no sceptics or champions.

Key discussion points:

The workshop broke into 2 groups to discuss how to use AI in the right way. Each group looked at:

- What you would tell a new communications assistant.
- What considerations are needed if using AI for a funding application.

Funding

The National Lottery Community Fund said they were seeing a huge increase in bad AI written bids (mainly for Awards for All level bids). It had increased their workload hugely.

Advantages of using AI:

- It can be a time saver, especially for the more generic parts of bids. Although still needs time to set up prompts and info correctly.
- Levels the playing field for organisations that can't afford external bid writers
- Identify funding sources – can write briefs of potential funders helping you sift them quicker to find funders that fit your aims by
- Consolidate research out there and summarise your data
- Supports people who are neurodiverse and those with English as second language to write bids.

Negatives

- Is increasing volume of applications.
- Removes personality of organisations
- Needs the right input – you get out what you put in
- Can create applications that look similar – or even be identical – Lottery have seen this.
- Need for training and understanding to use well.

Comms

Brief it like a staff member, like a new assistant. Make sure they know:

- Brand guidelines.
- Brand story
- Personality and tone
- Examples of different copy
- Explanations of audiences
- Brief them about IP and copyright
- Cross check all their work

Advice on good tools to use: Copilot safe option, there's a business option. Chat GPT business. Gemini if you use Google. Claud is the most ethical, never trades your data.

You can find more information about Caroline Broadway and Dandelion Applied AI here: <https://dandelionai.co.uk/>

What does it mean to be a resilience translator?

This workshop explored the unique role that local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) can play in emergencies – not just as responders, but as translators of resilience between statutory services and communities.

Using the example of the Grenfell Tower fire, Kensington and Chelsea Social Council (KCSC) shared their experience of supporting local people through crisis and recovery. Their story highlighted a critical lesson: communities are already active when disaster hits – it's the system that often needs to catch up. Bridging this gap is where local infrastructure can play a powerful role.

Key roles for local infrastructure in emergency response and recovery:

- Being the bridge between local authorities and grassroots organisations, translating needs, knowledge, and priorities both ways.
- Educating statutory partners about the VCSE sector – local infrastructure is often the only organisation with the full picture.
- Mapping local assets and hubs before a crisis hits, to ensure communities are recognised in resilience plans.
- Helping design better response systems by being part of Local Resilience Forums and shaping process maps across sectors.
- Being a source of trusted information – both to communities during emergencies and to funders or systems needing local insight.
- Convening meetings and rebuilding trust, especially when public confidence in formal systems has been shaken.
- Mobilising volunteers, providing immediate support and sustaining recovery efforts over time.

Real examples shared:

- After the Southport riots, Sefton CVS worked to rebuild cohesion, support traumatised staff, and provide calm leadership through recovery.
- In a power outage, the LIO played a vital role in sharing key information both into communities and back to emergency services.
- KCSC worked with London Funders to ensure that funding reached the organisations already embedded in the community – not parachuted-in external groups.

What members said they'll take forward:

- *"I need to find out who the Gold Command is in my area and start a conversation."*

- *"There's a real tension between the hierarchical response structures and the human, place-based approach of local infrastructure – we need to understand both."*

This session reinforced the importance of local infrastructure in emergency planning, response and recovery. Not as bystanders, but as connectors, interpreters and leaders of community resilience. It's a reminder that resilience isn't just a system – it's a relationship.

How can we engage trustees in infrastructure from the outset?

Trustee role

- Lead not manage
- Ensure the organisation fulfils its purposes
- Not making money but being sustainable
- Ensure the organisation is managing its resources, including people

Infrastructure

It's not service delivery – how do you sell the importance of being a trustee?

- Shelter for the service delivery
- Scaffold and tools to fix and support the house
- The charities charity, the cause of causes
- Umbrella organisation, a bridge
- Birds eye view of the charity sector in your area, wider influence in the sector
- Amplifying local voices
- Create a portfolio of interests for trustees – roles they can step into, volunteering in delivery, linking with local government and other orgs, investing in your staff etc.

How can trustees engage?

- Do a skills audit and create roles both for existing trustees and to advertise to fill the gaps
- Have project champions, who get involved in organisation project work and can report back to the Board
- Ambassador roles – creating connections outside the organisation. Networking. Need to consider the balance of people's time and meetings.
- Staff engagement – helps to demystify the board. Can include informal mentoring. Reduces the risk of failure through CEO as wider connections are there and other voices get heard.

Conflict resolution – from direct experience with the board of a struggling organisation who needed lots of support

- Keep sending the relevant information/activities
- Work on the chair, get them onboard
- Get trustee engagement on the agenda
- Expect small scale activities and build from their
- Keep language simple
- Offer training to trustees where needed – finance etc.
- Ensure there is a code of conduct
- Recruit new trustees as needed.

How can local infrastructure organisations diversify their income streams?

With traditional funding streams under growing pressure, many NAVCA members are exploring how to make income generation a strategic part of their work. This workshop, led by Hannah Reid from Community Action Suffolk (CAS), offered a look at how LIOs can build trading models rooted in their values.

What does a strategic income mix look like?

CAS is working towards 50% of its income from trading, aiming for £800k–£1m. To get there, they've made income generation a key internal priority, asking: "Can we trade this service – and should we?"

They've also developed four subsidiaries, including:

- Insurance services, grown from supporting village halls to providing charity cover UK-wide
- IT services
- DBS checks (not profit-making, but vital for social purpose)
- Community oil buying, now outsourced (Community oil buying groups allow residents to combine their heating oil orders to potentially reduce costs.)

Start with a service-by-service review of what you offer, and think carefully about whether it needs to sit within a subsidiary if it's not part of your core charitable purpose.

Shifting mindsets and building buy-in

Creating a culture where income generation is embraced is just as important as the financials. CAS developed:

- Staff “Espresso sessions” to generate ideas and overcome the “I’m not a sales person” mindset
- Clear income targets, tied to social purpose
- A trial-and-error approach that accepts not every idea will stick
- A focus on core values — for example, they kept DBS checks in-house even though they don’t generate a surplus

Key learning points for NAVCA members:

- Charging for services is becoming more accepted, especially as grants decline
- Community orgs are also trading more — so the narrative that “charities don’t sell” is shifting
- Funders need support to understand sustainable models — one member raised the importance of tapered funding that gradually shifts towards trading
- Set minimum cost recovery thresholds (CAS won’t bid below 20%)
- Partnerships can unlock opportunity — such as working with private sector partners to deliver income-generating services like IT recycling or parking
- Be prepared to challenge complacency and rethink assumptions about what your organisation “does” or “doesn’t do”

How do we include people who have been marginalised from volunteering?

The workshop host outlined the advantages of having volunteers from marginalised communities. Attendees had a group discussion on common barriers their organisations had observed to volunteering through the lens of marginalised groups, whilst also considering strategies that attendees organisations had used to address barriers being faced.

There was a general recognition that there was a significant number of volunteers that may need additional support and resource to access volunteering opportunities, which made them harder to place, if at all. Attendees who ran volunteer centres highlighted needing to challenge expectations and perceptions of VCS organisations, with the volunteer centre needing to support some VCS organisations to adapt their

organisational mindset on what to expect from volunteers, and to change their structures in place for volunteers.

Possible ways to place volunteers or retain them were discussed. Getting all staff involved with those volunteering, not necessarily delegated to one team member and ensuring that they were being provided with regular welfare checks, in the same way as with a staff member.

VCS organisations could also consider ways to restructure without it being a drain on resources. Possible examples were condensing the induction process and using the parkrun model of having low skilled roles that are easy to access 'turn up and buddy up', or engaging volunteers in an event, such as in a welcome role, or using volunteers training volunteers.

Stereotyping around volunteering could mean that people didn't see themselves represented as volunteers, so the importance of comms and language was highlighted. A further suggestion was offering flexible positions as a one off in a group, to then help individuals get into other volunteering roles.

Finally, the group suggested being clear when responding to requests for companies wanting their employees to do a volunteering day. This could involve charging to arrange this or asking to use their corporate skills, e.g. marketing.

How do we reframe conversations and build confidence in networking?

Workshop host: Jennifer McCanna (<https://mccannacoaching.co.uk/>)

The group discussed some commonly held beliefs about networking that hold us back. What holds you back? What is the gremlin is saying? E.g. 'you are not expert enough', 'you don't have anything useful to say'. The group discussed some ways to combat these feelings, including choosing a different way of looking at things, and reframing in a positive way. E.g. What belief about you, and about your objective here today can you get behind? "I have some interesting information about what my organisation has been up to? I'm here to learn from other interesting people." We can choose a better belief that will serve us better.

The group talked about some practical openers/questions/strategies for starting networking conversations that feel good. Being genuinely interested; being yourself; adopting a coaching mindset - non judgemental, curious and positive.

The group talked about how understanding how our bodies as well as our brains can support in feeling confident - the vagus nerve and how it can help us.



The group explored techniques to support us to feel confident in the moment e.g. power-posing and positive body language. Participants learnt how to use how their body feels to check in with how they are feeling and using their body choose a better feeling thought or way of moving through a room.