

Making the most of the Civil Society Covenant – a toolkit for NAVCA members

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Introduction

The [Civil Society Covenant](#), launched in July 2025, is a commitment from government to work in partnership with the voluntary and community sector (VCS). It gives a useful starting point for building and developing relationships with key stakeholders, locally and nationally. This toolkit is designed to help you, as local infrastructure organisations (LIOs), use the Covenant to develop and strengthen relationships with local authorities, health systems and other statutory partners.

NAVCA's aim is to provide tools and resources to help you engage effectively with statutory partners, build positive relationships, and increase recognition of the important role of local infrastructure, and the effective services LIOs deliver to local communities. Many LIOs already have strong relationships and partnership agreements with their statutory authorities, and this toolkit is designed to support areas where further development is needed.

Alongside the Covenant, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published research into Local Civil Society Infrastructure (LCSI) in July 2025, which demonstrates the impact of LIOs for VCSE organisations, communities and statutory partners. There is a rich [set of evidence and resources](#) about the importance role of local infrastructure, which enhances the argument that the Covenant offers a useful tool to build and cement relationships locally. The Local Civil Society Infrastructure research makes the case for the important role LIOs play in ensuring a thriving voluntary and community sector at place level. The research and the Covenant sit side by side in terms of influencing and making the case for closer relationships.

We would love to hear your feedback about the toolkit, and if there is anything else you would like to see from NAVCA. We are also looking for more member case studies about effective engagement and the impact of closer, strategic partnerships with local authorities. If you have any feedback or would like to share your story, please email comms@navca.org.uk

What is the Civil Society Covenant?

The Civil Society Covenant, published in July 2025, is a commitment from government to work in partnership with the voluntary and community sector (VCS). It recognises the VCS's vital role in delivering public value, strengthening communities, and shaping policy through lived experience and frontline insight.

Ministers have emphasised a clear intention to listen to and engage with VCS organisations of all sizes. The Covenant provides a framework for collaboration, transparency, and mutual respect with local and central government. Local VCS

infrastructure support organisations are an effective bridge between the VCS, local government and public sector bodies, contributing to a more capable VCS, stronger place-based systems and more resilient communities. The Covenant is a welcome step toward more inclusive and responsive partnership working. Importantly, the Covenant explicitly sets out the importance of close relationships locally as well as with national government – with local authorities, health systems and more.

Why the Covenant matters for local infrastructure

For NAVCA members, the Covenant provides an opportunity to formalise and strengthen local partnerships, especially where relationships need more development to highlight the strengths of the VCS. It offers a route to push for closer strategic working with the VCS, and for the role of local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) as convenors, connectors, advocates, and trusted voices for communities. The Covenant is clear on the benefits of working with the VCS, including trust and the knowledge the sector brings to making decisions and setting priorities.

By grounding national principles in local practice, the Covenant could help reset relationships with local authorities, health systems, and other statutory bodies. It creates space to:

- Build trust and mutual respect
- Embed collaboration and inclusion
- Recognise and resource the enabling role of infrastructure
- Strengthen community voice and participation

The key principles

The Covenant rests on four main principles:

Recognition & value – acknowledging the contribution and impact of civil society.

Partnership & collaboration – working together to co-design solutions and deliver better outcomes.

Participation & inclusion – ensuring diverse voices are heard and involved in decision-making.

Transparency & data – building accountability through openness and shared evidence.



The key principles explained

Recognition & value

The Covenant is about building stronger, more respectful relationships between government and civil society, while protecting the independence of both. It recognises the right of civil society to campaign, advocate and hold government to account, and the responsibility of government to make decisions on behalf of the public. It values the distinct strengths each brings – from civil society's trusted local knowledge and community leadership to government's democratic accountability. Importantly, it commits to open dialogue, mutual respect and fair treatment, even when views differ.

Partnership & collaboration

The Covenant promotes purposeful, collaborative working between government and civil society, recognising that better outcomes come from working together as equal partners. It calls for early and ongoing engagement, with government valuing civil society's evidence, insights and community voice. Both sides commit to creating the conditions for innovation, preventative action and long-term solutions, underpinned by fair funding and proportionate processes. By tackling barriers and fostering trust, the Covenant helps build sustainable partnerships that benefit communities and strengthen local impact.

Participation & inclusion

The Covenant strengthens participation and inclusion by ensuring people and communities have a real voice in decisions that affect their lives. It promotes diversity, equity and inclusion, with government and civil society working together to remove barriers and make engagement accessible to all. By involving people with lived experience, co-producing solutions, and creating more opportunities for volunteering and social action, the Covenant supports stronger community resilience and a healthier democracy.

Transparency & data

The Covenant promotes transparency and shared learning by encouraging open communication, better access to data, and evidence-based decision making. Government and civil society commit to honest dialogue, timely feedback, and proportionate confidentiality. By sharing data, research, and lived experience, both sectors can improve understanding of need, strengthen accountability, and design more effective solutions together.

What's next?

The Covenant is published as an ambition for both Government at all levels and the VCS to use to come together and develop their approach. NAVCA will continue to influence nationally on how it is used, and advocate for local implementation to be a priority. We will support members to use the Covenant as a lever for stronger relationships.

The first steps from Government will be to:

- 1) Establish a Joint Council to oversee the implementation of the Covenant, bringing together different arms of Government and civil society.
- 2) Develop two strands of work to implement the Covenant well: one on commissioning and procurement, and one on local Covenant partnerships.

We will keep members informed as these are developed.

The Civil Society Covenant in practice: case studies

The Covenant is deliberately flexible – it's not a set of rules, but a framework that can be adapted to local needs. Locally, this means:

- Creating shared language and expectations between the VCSE sector and statutory bodies.
- Building on existing good practice to strengthen collaboration.
- Using the Covenant as a lever in conversations with councils, health systems, funders, and others.

How the Covenant is used will look different in every place, depending on what is already in place, existing relationships, and local appetite for change. Wherever you're starting from, it is a chance to use the research and the Covenant to build stronger, more strategic and trusted partnerships.

Examples of good practice

The Covenant builds on existing work in many places, including:

Greater Manchester:

[The Greater Manchester \(GM\) VCFSE Accord](#) was signed in November 2017 as a collaboration agreement between public bodies and civil society.

The Accord was established by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership with a group of GM-based civil

society leaders to build a relationship that would recognise and unlock the full potential of civil society to address inequalities in the city-region for the public's benefit.

The Accord has helped raise the profile of civil society organisations with local public sector leaders and put a spotlight on the value and expertise that they can bring. One resulting partnership is the Greater Manchester Violence Reduction Unit (GMVRU) between government, police, health, education, youth justice services, local authorities, other statutory agencies and civil society. The GMVRU is committed to taking a community-led approach in its efforts to prevent violence. This approach acknowledges the value and strength of civil society organisations in working closely with communities, to understand their needs, challenges and strengths in relation to violence prevention. It also places decision-making in the hands of communities, including setting priorities and agreeing funding for projects and interventions aimed at engaging children, young people and families.

VRU initiatives have included a civil society led StreetDoctors programme, which delivers training sessions for young people to act in a medical emergency. This resulted in 95% of young people knowing what to do if someone is bleeding or unconscious, and 85% being willing to act in a medical emergency.

An [Interim Report](#) suggests enhancing the Accord's visibility and embedding its principles across public sector organisations. This will enhance recognition of civil society's value across GM, thereby supporting increased involvement of VCSEs and increasing citizens' voices in GM wide work.

(Source: [Civil Society Covenant](#)).

Calderdale:

Calderdale Council's VCSE strategy 2024 to 2029 recognises the vital role of the voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in Calderdale, valuing it as a key partner in achieving the local vision to be an enterprising place, full of opportunity, where everyone can thrive in their community.

At the time of its creation, VCSE groups were facing reduced public sector funding, rising costs, and growing demand for services. Staff shortages, lower pay, and fewer volunteers added to the pressure. Central to its development and implementation has been Calderdale Council's recognition of the inherent value and expertise of the VCSE sector.

Co-produced with VCSE representatives, the strategy acknowledges the diverse and complex nature of the VCSE sector and its significant impact on Calderdale residents



and communities. It recognises the sector's contribution to society as well as to the local economy. [Research by Durham University](#) in 2023 reported that the total value of the VCSE in Calderdale was valued around £549.5 million. This figure includes sector expenditure, the value produced by regular volunteers, and value created for users of services.

Calderdale Council has embedded the recognition of the VCSE's role in multiple other strategies in the borough. A key example is the Inclusive Economy Strategy, which sees a thriving VCSE sector as fundamental to achieving an inclusive economy. In Calderdale, the VCSE is a key part of the local economy, with the sector employing over 5,000 people, and supporting 13,000 as volunteers. As part of the Inclusive Economy Strategy, Calderdale will look to explore more career pathways for young people in the local VCSE sector, providing young people more opportunities to stay in Calderdale, with access to good quality work.

(Source: [Civil Society Covenant](#)).

Cheshire West Voluntary Action

Cheshire West Voluntary Action (CWVA) has developed a strong model of partnership working with their local council, showing how the Civil Society Covenant principles can work in practice.

Key features of their approach include:

- **Tackling health inequalities:** CWVA leads *Community Partnerships* across seven areas of Cheshire West, bringing together councils, health services and the VCSE to reduce health inequalities.
- **Strategic voice for the sector:** CWVA's leadership sits on key boards such as the Place Executive and Health and Wellbeing Board, ensuring the VCSE sector is recognised as an equal partner in shaping local health priorities.
- **Practical collaboration with the NHS:** Through the *Community Home First* programme, CWVA and local partners help people safely discharge from hospital, with community connectors based in local hospitals to link people into community support.
- **Embedding co-production:** Their *Local Voices Framework* ensures that people with lived experience are actively involved from the very start in shaping future services.

- **Long-term investment:** A three-year contract from the council enables CWVA to provide development and strategic support across the local VCSE sector.

Together, these activities demonstrate how strong, trust-based relationships between local infrastructure and councils can improve outcomes for communities – particularly around health and wellbeing.

This partnership model shows how the Civil Society Covenant's principles of recognition, partnership, inclusion and transparency can be lived out locally, creating a foundation for stronger, fairer, and more resilient communities.

(Source: [Cheshire West Voluntary Action](#), text by NAVCA).

Community Action Suffolk

Suffolk is a large, mainly rural county currently with a two-tier council system. Many local VCFSE organisations are small, but they hold vital information about residents and communities that is important for councils to know and understand. Community Action Suffolk (CAS), the local infrastructure organisation, plays a key role in connecting with the county and five district councils. Given the complexity of the system, a more formal way of working together was needed.

Two structures now bring councils and VCFSE organisations together with CAS: the Collaborative Communities Board (CCB) and the Voluntary Sector Leaders Group (VSLG). The CCB brings county and district councils, health systems, statutory partners and LIOs into one space to tackle key issues for communities. It began during the pandemic but built on an existing culture of collaboration. The board now continues to focus on prevention, targeted intervention and managing demand, ensuring needs are met and communities benefit from everyone working together.

CAS's chief executive co-chairs the board with a senior county council officer. The board links into wider strategies such as the Health and Wellbeing Board and oversees subgroups on issues such as poverty, food access, homelessness, early years support, and refugees. This approach reduces duplication across councils and partners, encourages collaboration, and helps direct funding to where it's most needed.

The CCB has enabled county and district councils to work together to distribute central government funds such as the Household Support Fund, making sure resources are allocated at the right level. It has also supported devolved delivery of programmes like Holiday and Food, where district councils and local VCFSE organisations are better placed to understand and respond to need. CAS ensures that the voluntary sector's voice and insight are represented. Alongside this, CAS convenes the Voluntary Sector

Leaders Group, a monthly meeting of VCFSE chief executives to share intelligence and problem-solve. The group is joined by the county council CEO and Cabinet Member, but the agenda is led by the sector.

One clear impact has been in emergency food provision. The tackling poverty subgroup of the CCB saw that while foodbanks and pantries had sprung up across Suffolk in response to crisis, many were struggling to stay sustainable.

Using council funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Household Support Fund, a food network sustainability project was created. CAS now facilitates this network, helping community food providers map services, share good practice, and overcome barriers. This ensures people referred for food support get the right help quickly, and small volunteer-led groups are better supported.

(Source: [LGA](#), text by NAVCA).

These case studies show that agreements work best when they are:

- Co-produced with the sector.
- Backed by senior leadership.
- Properly resourced.
- Embedded in day-to-day practice.

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) research into Local Civil Society Infrastructure (LCSI)

We welcomed the publication of [new research commissioned by DCMS](#), published in July 2025, on Local Civil Society Infrastructure (LCSI). It showed how LCSI supports the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector VCFSE and works with statutory bodies such as local authorities and health systems. This support has five distinct aspects: facilitating funding for VCFSE organisations, VCFSE organisational development, (support for) volunteering and community participation, advocacy and convening of the VCFSE sector with statutory partners. This research complements the Civil Society Covenant.

How the LCSI research links to the Civil Society Covenant

- **Shared recognition of infrastructure's value**
 - The Covenant's principles of *recognition and value* are underpinned by LCSI research, which evidences the critical role of local infrastructure in supporting the VCSE sector through increased access to funding, greater connections and increased confidence, with benefits to local communities

through stronger frontline organisations and increased volunteering activities.

- Statutory bodies benefit from gaining a greater insight into local needs, improvements in commissioning processes and local policy decisions through LCSI organisations acting as an effective bridge that can support open and honest communication between the VCFSE and public bodies. Members can use this evidence to strengthen the case for fair recognition from councils, health systems, and funders.

- **Evidence for partnership and collaboration**

- LCSI research highlights infrastructure's role in convening, working in partnership, and enabling collaboration. LCSI organisations were seen as an effective bridge that can support open and honest communication between the VCSE sector and public bodies, especially in the context of funding or commissioning relationships.
- LCSI works best when there is a close relationship with the public sector so that decision-makers in local government and health systems have a strategic interest in LCSI, recognise its value and know how LCSI supports their own priorities.
- This directly supports the Covenant principle of *partnership & collaboration*. Members can point to this research when negotiating stronger roles in local partnerships.

- **Demonstrating participation and inclusion**

- The research shows how infrastructure supports volunteering, participation, and amplifies marginalised voices. The most direct benefits from LCSI accrue to frontline VCSE organisations with benefits to local communities through stronger frontline organisations and increased volunteering activities.
- This links to the Covenant's *participation & inclusion* principle – and gives members a practical evidence base to argue for resourcing this role.

- **Transparency and data**

- LCSI research provides information and data on the scale, functions, and impact of infrastructure. LCSI is effective when it is knowledgeable about the local area and is adapted to the local context.

- LCSI leads to three broad impacts of more capable VCFSE organisations, stronger place-based systems and more resilient communities.
- This can be used locally to advocate for greater transparency in decision-making and to show the importance of investing in evidence-led infrastructure support.

How NAVCA members can use the research with the Covenant

- **In discussions with local authorities or health systems**
 - Combine the Covenant's principles with LCSI findings to demonstrate why infrastructure organisations are essential partners.
- **In funding bids or partnership negotiations**
 - Use the LCSI evidence to show the system-wide *impact* of infrastructure and argue for sustainable investment.
- **In communications with stakeholders**
 - Draw on key information from the research to strengthen your narrative: "this is not just our view — national research confirms it."
- **To benchmark your own work**
 - Map your local activities against the LCSI functions (funding facilitation, community participation, organisational development, convening, advocacy) to show how you can deliver on the Covenant in practice.

Making the most of the Covenant

The Civil Society Covenant is designed as a framework for collaboration, transparency, and mutual respect between civil society and local and national government. Its intention is to create the conditions where voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations are recognised as equal partners, able to shape decisions and contribute their expertise alongside statutory bodies. Achieving this requires open communication, a commitment to shared values, and clear mechanisms for joint working. It also means ensuring diverse voices are heard in decision-making, sharing data and evidence to build trust, and embedding mutual accountability so that partnerships deliver outcomes for communities.



The template letters and PowerPoint below provide a starting point for using the Covenant to build relationships. We encourage members to use and adapt the resources to suit your local context.

Template letter to local authority or health system

To: Council leader / Chief Executive

From: [Your name/your role/your organisation name]

Subject: Strengthening partnerships through the Civil Society Covenant

Dear [Name],

I am writing on behalf of [organisation name], the local voluntary and community sector (VCS) infrastructure organisation for [place]. Our role is to support local charities, community groups, and social enterprises, and to connect them with statutory partners so that together we can achieve better outcomes for our communities.

We are reaching out to you about the **Civil Society Covenant**, a new framework that sets out principles for stronger, more effective partnerships between government and civil society. It emphasises recognition and value, collaboration, inclusion, and transparency – principles which can help us develop and strengthen our local relationships.

We would like to work with you and your team to explore how the Covenant can be applied here in [place]. Specifically, we would welcome:

- A shared conversation about how the Covenant can help us deliver better outcomes for local people.
- A commitment to recognising the value of our local voluntary and community organisations, particularly in reaching and supporting marginalised communities.
- Opportunities to co-design approaches that reflect the strengths of both the statutory and voluntary sectors.

As the local infrastructure organisation, [organisation name] is well placed to convene local VCS voices and ensure the Covenant's principles are put into practice. Some examples of our work include:

(Insert your own examples here – we have provided some template ideas)

- **Developing or refreshing local partnership agreements** that set out how the community and public sectors work together, often structured around agreed themes or priorities.
- **Taking responsibility for cross-sector programmes** that tackle inequalities in specific areas (e.g. health, housing, or neighbourhood priorities), ensuring community voice is embedded in local planning.
- **Representing the voluntary and community sector at strategic boards and decision-making forums**, acting as a trusted voice and ensuring the sector is seen as an equal partner.
- **Holding regular meetings with senior leaders in councils, health systems, or other statutory partners** to build relationships, align priorities, and shape future services together.
- **Securing long-term contracts or agreements with statutory partners** to provide ongoing strategic and development support to the local VCSE sector.
- **Collaborating with other community sector organisations to deliver joint programmes**, such as supporting hospital discharge or improving access to community-based support.
- **Coordinating alliances and thematic partnerships** (e.g. around mental health, food, or youth services) that act as single points of contact for the statutory sector and influence commissioning.
- **Developing local frameworks for co-production**, creating consistent ways for people with lived experience to be involved in shaping services from the start.

We look forward to working with you to support and strengthen communities in [place].

Yours sincerely,

[Name]

[Role]

[Organisation name]

Template letter to local VCSE sector:

Dear voluntary sector colleagues,

We want to share some important news about the **Civil Society Covenant** — a new national agreement that sets out principles for how government, statutory bodies, and the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector should work together.

The Covenant is built on four key principles: **recognition & value, partnership & collaboration, participation & inclusion, and transparency & data**. These principles are designed to strengthen relationships between statutory bodies and the VCSE sector, ensuring that communities are genuinely involved in shaping local priorities and services.

As your local infrastructure organisation, our role is to:

- **Champion the sector's value** with local authorities, health systems, and funders.
- **Connect VCSE groups with decision-makers**, so your voices are heard where it matters.
- **Support collaboration** across the sector and beyond, making sure opportunities are shared and partnerships are inclusive.
- **Provide evidence and insight**, drawing on local experience and national research (including the recent DCMS Local Civil Society Infrastructure report) to show why our sector is essential to thriving communities.

What this means for you

The Covenant offers a framework to strengthen local relationships. You can use it to:

- Point to a national commitment that recognises the VCSE sector as an equal partner.
- Start or reset conversations with councils, health bodies, and funders.
- Demonstrate the value of your work with reference to both the Covenant and national research.

We will be working with our local partners to embed the Covenant into practice and make sure it benefits organisations like yours. In the meantime, we encourage you to reference the Covenant in your own conversations with statutory bodies, and we are here to support you in doing so.



If you'd like advice, resources, or practical support in using the Covenant locally, please don't hesitate to contact us. Together, we can make sure this national agreement translates into real change for our communities.

Kind regards,

[Name]

[Job title]

[Local infrastructure organisation name]

PowerPoint

We have created a template PowerPoint for you to use in meetings with stakeholders. It covers many of the topics from this toolkit, including an introduction to the Covenant, how the principles could apply in practice, and what's already working in your area. Please adapt the text to suit your local context. [Download the PowerPoint via the NAVCA member hub.](#)

Engaging with NAVCA

We want to learn from your experience of engaging with the Covenant. Please let us know:

- What's working well locally.
- Barriers or challenges you're facing.
- Opportunities you've identified.

NAVCA will gather member insights and feed them into national conversations. Get in touch with us at comms@navca.org.uk.

Useful links:

- NAVCA blog about Civil Society Covenant:
<https://www.navca.org.uk/news/what-the-civil-society-covenant-means-for-local-infrastructure>
- Download all NAVCA resources, including policy briefings and more, via our Member Hub: <https://www.navca.org.uk/members-area-resources>
- Sign up for NAVCA events, including policy briefings and discussions, here: <https://www.navca.org.uk/members-events>

- Start a conversation with other NAVCA members via NAVCA Connect:
<https://www.navca.org.uk/members-network-forum>
- Read the full Civil Society Covenant here:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-society-covenant/civil-society-covenant> (published 21 July 2025)