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local focus national voice

Connecting communities, enabling common ground:

The role of local infrastructure and
the VCSE sector



NAVCA

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Summary

- The voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector is key to creating the places and spaces that support community life and bring people together.
- Local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) are essential to a strong VCSE sector. They bring organisations together, provide coordination, and strengthen skills and capacity - helping groups to grow, adapt, and thrive.
- LIOs exist to strengthen and equip VCSE organisations - supporting their development and creating the conditions for honest, non-confrontational conversations.
- While the local work of VCSE organisations, particularly community groups, is crucial, it is only one part of building stronger cohesion. As a sector, we also need to be willing to have the difficult conversations that tackle the root causes of disconnection.
- VCSE organisations play a crucial role in strengthening social cohesion and supporting a more civil society. Supported by local infrastructure organisations, they can campaign effectively in their communities and contribute to a national movement working alongside the statutory sector.



Introduction

England today feels like a place ill at ease with itself. In some places, communities can live separate lives. Across the country, discussion has become polarised and we are witnessing a rise in extreme politics.

There are complex and overlapping drivers of social disconnection:

- There is a growing gap between rich and poor households, and many people believe that the system is rigged in favour of the rich;
- Covid has undermined our sense of 'in person' social relations;
- Social media drives us into echo chambers and polarises views;
- Many people feel that it has become easier for discriminatory, exclusionary and far-right views to be expressed openly.
- Many people believe that communities need greater 'integration', and some also challenge the idea of multiculturalism.

Common ground exists where people feel connected – through shared spaces and activities that bring communities together. Research by This Place Matters describes this as 'associational life'.^[1] Conversely, social disconnection breeds in communities scarred by poverty and where associational life has been hollowed out by an absence of common space and activity.

Community organisations are the backbone of creating and sustaining vital spaces of connection. To create common ground, they require investment, organisational development support, and networking opportunities to build relationships across communities. Local VCSE infrastructure organisations (LIOs), NAVCA members, specialise in providing this vital support.

Whilst critically important, creating the spaces for communities to come together is not the full story. Doing things together builds trust and helps us to begin to understand each other better. However, it does not – on its own – enable us to have the open and honest conversations about the systemic challenges we face, or to explore our differing world views. Too often we share space, but we avoid difficult discussions.

[1] Social cohesion: a snapshot (2025) <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/research/social-cohesion-a-snapshot/>



NAVCA members have told us that more people in their organisations, across the VCSE sector and beyond, would benefit from developing skills in holding non-confrontational dialogue. As place-based conveners, local infrastructure organisations are well placed to develop learning programmes that embed this approach.

The VCSE sector has social connection and mutuality at its heart, and most VCSE organisations would acknowledge that building common ground is everybody's responsibility. However, each VCSE organisation approaches social cohesion through the lens of its particular work. The work of the VCSE sector and its statutory partners could have greater impact through a movement of place-based campaigns that show our shared commitment to building common ground, highlighting the work that is already being done. LIOs have an important role to play as the hubs around which to build these campaigns.



Social cohesion: where we are now?

Following the racist riots in England in 2024, Citizens UK, UCL and More in Common launched [This Place Matters](#), a project designed to understand how socially connected UK citizens feel, make proposals for how we might nurture social cohesion, and foreground the work of people and communities who are working to repair the fault lines that divide us.

The results of the project's [first public opinion research](#) in May 2025 drew a sobering picture of how disconnected from each other many of us feel, with 44% of British people saying they sometimes feel like they are strangers to those around them. It explored how economic insecurity, the impact of Covid, the growth in social media, and the loss of shared spaces and activities all play into this sense of disconnection. The picture around migration and multiculturalism was more mixed – whilst most people wanted more to be done to encourage 'integration', people did not see ethnic minorities as less British than those who are white, and views were split around whether multiculturalism benefits or threatens our national identity.



In August 2025, This Place Matters' most recent report mapped social connection in Britain and found that around half of Britons feel disconnected from the society around them.^[2] They set out broad categories for those areas that feel disconnected and those that are better connected.

Disconnected communities:

- The left behind
- Areas of high ethnic diversity and historically low levels of integration
- Commuter areas.

Connected communities:

- Affluent suburbs
- Rural areas
- Areas of high ethnic diversity with historically high levels of cross-community integration.

Social disconnection and isolation can have a damaging effect on communities, creating the conditions where people move to political extremes. NAVCA members have reported that they are seeing an increase in hate incidents targeted at community organisations, people from minoritised communities, colleagues, and volunteers.

Government has begun to recognise these challenges through the Pride in Place Strategy, with programmes such as the Common Ground Award, which is explicitly aimed at investing in community spaces. However, action to date seems out of scale with the challenges faced and does not do enough to invest in human connections as well as physical spaces – connections which do not happen by accident.

Strengthening the VCSE sector, and the enabling role of local infrastructure

The VCSE sector is rooted in a deep tradition of mutuality – people coming together around shared interests, a common purpose, and a desire to act collectively. Bringing people together is where community organisations (the largest part of the VCSE sector) excel. It is the community centres, the volunteer-led sports clubs and the men's sheds where people build the relationships that sustain them.

[2] This Place Matters: A social connection map of Britain (2025)

<https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/latest-insights/this-place-matters-a-social-connection-map-of-britain/>



By working collectively, we can bring more people together, build relationships, and start to erode the othering which creates division. Some of this will not look like or be labelled as building social cohesion – it will look like bringing people together to do the things they care about. The power of this work must not be underestimated.

Strengthening, growing and networking the VCSE sector is a key building block in creating the spaces for people to come together. It is the convening, connecting and bridging activities of local infrastructure and community anchor organisations that support this work.

Research commissioned by DCMS into Local Civil Society Infrastructure (LCSI), published in 2025, found it delivers tangible benefits: improving access to funding, strengthening connections, and boosting confidence, which in turn supports stronger frontline organisations and increased volunteering in local communities.

The research also shows that local infrastructure provides an essential 'convening' function, bringing VCSE organisations together and building relational bridges to statutory partners. For example, there is huge power in the work local infrastructure organisations do to host communities of practice for staff and volunteers who are working to build common ground. Bonds between community organisations could be strengthened and deepened if local infrastructure, in partnership with initiatives such as The Jo Cox Foundation's More in Common Network, was better resourced. With this support, they could focus more explicitly on building social connection.

Organisations like the Jo Cox Foundation, the We're Right Here campaign and programmes such as Near Neighbours have led the way in bringing together different organisations in ways that build connections

across communities as well as within them. Their work shows that when community organisations come together across cultural and geographical boundaries, they generate a powerful multiplier effect – building shared purpose and common aims that lead to real change. LIOs have a role to play to partner with, support and enable organisations already working locally and help develop the work further.





Building capacity and confidence to explore the drivers of disconnection

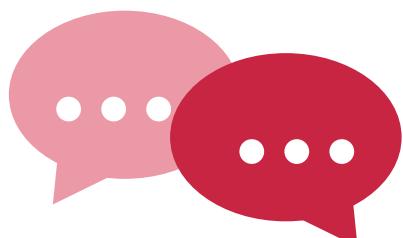
The work of community organisations and the wider VCSE sector helps to provide the spaces where people connect. But where trust has broken down or there are few touchpoints between people, there is the risk that we share space but ignore the systemic drivers that lead to disconnection, and avoid the conversations that help us to understand each other.

To really understand each other, people need to feel confident to safely take part in open and honest dialogue about contested ideas. Having the confidence to enter into and sustain these often uncomfortable conversations – whether they are one to one or facilitated – requires ‘safe spaces’, and participants to have skills in non-confrontational dialogue.

There are several approaches to enabling non-confrontational dialogue that VCSE organisations can take. Whilst some conversations might take a restorative practice informed approach, others might focus more on analysing the systemic issues that drive discrimination and disadvantage. Whichever approach or combinations of approaches taken, the intention of this dialogue should be to foster strong relationships and enable participants to address difficult issues through open, honest and compassionate communication within a framework that focuses on safety, respect and learning.

Whether it is a member of staff feeling able to considerately challenge a colleague in a workplace, or a facilitated conversation between community organisations with strongly differing views, more of us need to have a working knowledge of approaches to non-confrontational dialogue. Investing in the capacity and building the confidence to hold open, honest conversations across communities would help us better understand and address the root causes of disconnection.

There is a huge opportunity to embed these skills, if LIOs choose to make this dialogue a priority, working in partnership with specialists in the field. While it requires investment and capacity, the impact for communities would be substantial.





Working together to celebrate community connection

To make this positive change, we need a stronger VCSE sector, which has the capacity, skills and confidence to build on the trust communities place in it. VCSE organisations need to be able to build social connections, find common ground and a stronger civil society through their everyday work and in campaigning.

When VCSE organisations work together, they achieve far more than they could alone. With local coordination by LIOs, they can unite to create a national movement for change. We call on partners, especially from the statutory sector, to work alongside us to strengthen communities and build common ground.

By creating a movement, we can build on the desire people have to work together on what matters to them. By celebrating the work of community organisations, we can create a shared picture of how we want our cities, towns and rural places to be. More in Common partnerships, enabled by the Jo Cox Foundation, show this collective campaigning in action. These campaigns need to be supported and championed by statutory partners, like local authorities.

A key strength of effective local infrastructure is how it is deeply embedded in the places it works. It is ‘of communities’ and ‘for communities,’ whilst playing a convening role and bridging to statutory partners. This means local infrastructure is well placed to act as an enabling hub, bringing together community organisations that are building common purpose. **Local infrastructure can create the conversations and events that highlight community needs and showcase the shared values of local organisations.**





What next?

Across the country, there are thousands of organisations that are playing their part in bringing people together. As social disconnection grows and drives people to political extremes, all partners and funders must now redouble their efforts by:

- supporting and investing in community organisations working to bring people together, and amplifying their work
- investing in skills in non-confrontational dialogue
- recognising and investing in the crucial networking and convening work of local infrastructure, and their partners that specialise in social cohesion work.

NAVCA members across the country are already working with community organisations to build partnerships and campaigns that strengthen communities. We are asking all local infrastructure organisations to make finding common ground a key priority, doing what they can within their available resources.

We share the ambition of our members in strengthening social cohesion. We will continue to prioritise our resources towards amplifying the work of community organisations and the campaigns that are making change. We will continue to build partnerships with organisations that share a commitment to finding common ground. We know that collective action can push back against hate and help build a more connected, more civil society. We will make the case for the investment that is needed to strengthen the VCSE sector and have the important conversations that can bring communities together.

By working together, we can accelerate the changes needed to meet the scale of the challenge and play our part in bringing people together, strengthening connections, and building cohesion and understanding.



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