



Building community resilience: local infrastructure on the front line (final session at NAVCA Annual Conference, 14th May 2026)

In many neighbourhoods, growing disconnection and isolation are creating conditions in which extreme views can take hold. Local infrastructure organisations (LIOs) are increasingly seeing the impact of rising far-right activity – affecting staff, volunteers, local charities and community groups, and the people they support.

As conveners and connectors, LIOs have a vital role in bringing people together and building common ground. In this panel conversation with NAVCA members, we will explore what’s happening on the ground, how we can support staff and volunteer wellbeing, how to strengthen community connection, and what we can do collectively as a network to counter the far right.

Panel participants:

Sandra Meadows MBE (panel chair and Chair, NAVCA Board of Trustees)

Asma Aziz (CEO, Slough CVS, and trustee, NAVCA)

Lisa Goodwin (CEO, Connected Voice, and trustee, NAVCA)

Robyn Knox (Director, VCS Emergencies Partnership)

What are we seeing in local communities currently?

Since August 2024, many communities have experienced growing fear, division and polarisation, with a particular impact on the mental health and wellbeing of people from minoritised communities. Local VCSE organisations have been responding to increased tension and anxiety on the ground, and in some cases have had to scale back or withdraw services because of the impact on staff and volunteers. Symbols and displays intended to intimidate – including the use of flags in some areas – have further contributed to feelings of exclusion, fear and division within communities.

All this has led to diminished trust. People don’t know who or what to trust and are not sure how to take action to support others. We should not underestimate the positive impact of white allyship for minoritised communities – this is an important and a visible commitment of support. People are asking, *who in my community stands with me?*



Our focus must now be on building resilience in communities to rebuild relationships and trust.

How do you look after staff in this context?

We need to create different kinds of spaces for staff and volunteers to recharge and reconnect, learning from approaches like social prescribing. That might mean stepping away from day-to-day pressures, spending time together outdoors, or creating opportunities for reflection and breathing space. Sometimes people need space to pause and reset, rather than being asked to constantly talk about challenges. It's about recognising the pressure people are under and finding healthy ways to relieve it before it becomes overwhelming.

Creating spaces without pressure or agendas is increasingly important for staff and volunteers navigating stress and uncertainty. This could mean developing welcoming community spaces where people can pause, connect informally, and recharge, without always needing to focus on tasks or challenges.

NAVCA's *Caring for Connectors* workshop will explore these themes further, offering local infrastructure staff practical tools, peer reflection and space to think about wellbeing, resilience and sustaining energy in challenging times.

What is the cumulative impact of a perma-crisis?

There is an increasingly intersectional and cumulative impact of the risks facing society. Terror attacks, financial instability and other major shocks are becoming part of everyday conversation, creating a sense of permanent crisis within communities. Community engagement sessions show that people are highly aware of this ongoing uncertainty, but over time it can also lead to apathy, exhaustion and desensitisation. "Keep calm and carry on" is no longer enough as a response to the scale and persistence of these pressures.

At the same time, more VCSE organisations are merging, reducing services or closing altogether. While government rhetoric increasingly focuses on "whole society resilience", this ambition is not yet being matched by the long-term financial investment and people capacity needed to genuinely build resilient communities and sustain the organisations supporting them.



How do we make sure communities are included?

We need to keep telling positive, honest stories about what communities can achieve, helping to shift the narrative and offer an alternative to fear and division. Local infrastructure organisations have an important role in convening community leaders and creating safe spaces for difficult conversations – while also building the confidence, peer support and relationships needed to have them well. An important question in any convening work is: who is not in the room, and why?

Supporting volunteering is also critical, particularly for young people, as a way of strengthening connection, participation and belonging. Learning shared through the workshop led by Voluntary Action Leeds (at the conference) highlighted the importance of practical approaches to bringing diverse voices together, recognising that diversity is a strength that should be actively championed and defended. Building trust with community groups takes time, patience and consistency, particularly where language, digital exclusion or previous barriers to participation exist. Recruiting volunteers from within communities themselves – and supporting them to reach those most excluded – is a key part of creating stronger, more connected communities.

How can we work together to counter the far right?

Countering the far right and strengthening community cohesion is difficult, long-term work, and many local infrastructure organisations simply do not have the resources to run dedicated cohesion programmes on their own. However, LIOs do bring something vital: trusted relationships, deep knowledge of local communities, and the ability to convene people across different sectors and perspectives. By working collaboratively with organisations such as the Jo Cox Foundation and the Belong Network, alongside local partners, there is a real opportunity to respond collectively to extremism and division – recognising that this is work we are stronger doing together, rather than trying to tackle alone.

What gives you hope?

In **Slough**, everyone came together when all the flags went up and were strong together, offering a collective voice.

The citizens of **Bristol** pushed back hard against flags and hate marches and said this not will happen here.



In **Newcastle**, anti-asylum hotel protests happen weekly, but the counter protest is always bigger.

Volunteering can be a powerful antidote to division, creating opportunities for people to come together around the shared challenges facing their communities. With relatively small amounts of investment, volunteering can have a huge impact – particularly for people who need additional support to take part, where the benefits can be genuinely transformative. Many of the programmes that enabled this support have now disappeared, despite the long-term value they created.

Volunteering is also deeply embedded within many faith communities, where a huge amount of informal and often unseen support takes place. More broadly, there was a strong sense that communities themselves are best placed to understand local need. The less we prescribe solutions from the centre, and the more we trust communities with flexible funding and the freedom to respond locally, the more effective and targeted that support can be.