

Local government reorganisation: key trends for VCFSE infrastructure

Thinking, planning and practical action for local infrastructure organisations

July 2026

NAVCA and ACRE have produced this resource as part of a project supporting the VCFSE sector and forming unitary and strategic authorities to work together through devolution and local government reorganisation.

Executive summary

This report summarises learning from NAVCA and ACRE's work with local infrastructure organisations and rural community support organisations¹ in six areas affected by local government reorganisation (LGR) and devolution. Funded by MHCLG and Lloyds Bank Foundation of England and Wales, the project explored how local infrastructure organisations need to respond to changing statutory boundaries, can sustain and strengthen relationships between the VCFSE² sector local authorities, and co-design future collaborations across new unitary authority or strategic authority footprints.

Key findings

- **LGR and devolution create major strategic challenges for local infrastructure organisations.** Existing funding relationships, geographic footprints, influencing routes and partnership structures are changing, requiring LIOs to look at how they convene, support and advocate for the VCFSE sector and rural communities.
- **Local infrastructure organisations are central to VCFSE influence.** LIOs provide the connective tissue between small and medium-sized VCFSE organisations and statutory partners, holding the strategic space to help the sector organise, communicate, collaborate and shape decisions that affect communities.

[1] For the purposes of this report, NAVCA and ACRE members will be described by the single term 'local infrastructure organisation'.

[2] VCFSE – voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise

- **The operating context is complex and unstable.** LGR is happening alongside devolution, Integrated Care System reform, neighbourhood policy development and often alongside changes in local political control, creating overlapping geographies and accountability arrangements.
- **Financial sustainability and capacity are immediate concerns.** District-based organisations may lose or need to rebuild core funder relationships, while larger-footprint organisations may need to engage with new or multiple commissioners at a time when leaders already face significant fatigue and limited resources.
- **Rural communities and smaller VCFSE organisations must remain visible.** Participants were concerned that rural deprivation, transport access, community resilience and the voice of smaller organisations could be overlooked as new structures focus on larger geographies or urban priorities.

Actions that participating local infrastructure organisations identified

- **Participants identified three main areas for collective action:**
 - Building a stronger shared case for the VCFSE sector.
 - Developing trusted engagement structures and terms of engagement.
 - Taking a stepped approach to deeper collaboration across local infrastructure.
- **A stronger evidence-base for the impact of VCFSE organisations is needed.** Local infrastructure organisations should use existing data, identify evidence gaps and translate this evidence into a persuasive partnership offer that demonstrates both the social impact and economic contribution of the VCFSE sector.
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- **Financial sustainability and capacity are immediate concerns.** District-based organisations may lose or need to rebuild core funder relationships, while larger-footprint organisations may need to engage with new or multiple commissioners at a time when leaders already face significant fatigue and limited resources.
- **Rural communities and smaller VCFSE organisations must remain visible.** Participants were concerned that rural deprivation, transport access, community resilience and the voice of smaller organisations could be overlooked as new structures focus on larger geographies or urban priorities.

Enabling the local infrastructure organisation response

- **Collaboration across existing infrastructure organisations must be built on trust.** Participants described a journey from relationship-building, through practical collaboration, towards shared visioning or more formal reform where this is in the best interests of the VCFSE sector.
- **Change should be co-designed, not imposed.** While merger or formal partnership may be appropriate in some places, participants emphasised that reform requires time, investment, generous leadership, board engagement, cultural sensitivity and skilled facilitation.
- **Local statutory partners have a critical enabling role.** They should provide data, clarity, resources and constructive challenge, while avoiding competitive funding approaches or using commissioning as a blunt instrument to force change.
- **NAVCA and ACRE can support local areas by sharing learning, tools and facilitation.** This includes signposting evidence sources, sharing examples of effective VCFSE partnership offers and engagement models, and supporting peer learning on infrastructure collaboration and reform.
- **National partners should recognise that local infrastructure reform requires sustained support.** The report argues that local infrastructure needs time, trust and investment to adapt effectively, rather than pressure to rationalise without the resources needed to do so well.

The central message is that NAVCA and ACRE members recognise the need for change, and to achieve that they need space and support to shape change proactively. Proactive co-design with the VCFSE sector, statutory partners and national stakeholders offers the best route to enabling VCFSE voice and strengthening outcomes for communities during LGR and devolution.

Introduction

Local government reorganisation (LGR) and devolution present significant challenges for NAVCA and ACRE members. NAVCA members act as the connective tissue between small and medium-sized voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) organisations and statutory partners. ACRE member acts as a bridge and enabler for rural communities and the services they need. As a result, the ability of members of both organisations to support, convene and advocate for the VCFSE sector and rural communities is directly affected by institutional change across the system.

LGR and devolution are particularly challenging because boundary changes will affect where many organisations work, how they operate, and the funder relationships on which they rely. In the coming years, neighbouring infrastructure organisations are likely to need new ways of working together if they are to continue strengthening and supporting the VCFSE sector and communities effectively.

As part of wider work funded by MHCLG and Lloyds Bank Foundation of England and Wales to sustain and strengthen VCFSE and local authority relationships through LGR and devolution, NAVCA and ACRE explored the strategic opportunities and risks involved in co-designing infrastructure collaboration across new unitary authority areas.

The work included a desk-based review of previous collaborations and mergers, alongside interviews with leaders who had managed change in different ways. Six areas were selected to reflect a mix of local characteristics and stages on the LGR pathway:

- Surrey
- Hampshire, Solent and the Isle of Wight
- Norfolk and Suffolk
- East and West Sussex
- Derbyshire
- Lancashire

Individualised workshops were designed for infrastructure organisations in each area, informed by preparatory conversations with selected leaders. Following each workshop, participants received full notes, a brief synopsis of key themes, and a summary of the commitments they had made to develop their collective approach.

This report brings together the overarching themes from all six workshops. It identifies three areas where participants saw a need for collective action:

- Build a shared case for the statutory sector to deepen its relationship with small and medium-sized VCFSE organisations.
- Work with the VCFSE sector to establish leadership and advocacy structures that can influence decision-makers and co-design the documents that frame the VCFSE – statutory sector relationship.
- Take a stepped approach towards closer working across local infrastructure organisations.

For each area, this report sets out the action NAVCA and ACRE will take to enable change, alongside recommendations for local infrastructure organisations, statutory partners and national stakeholders.

1. Exploring the challenge

1.1 LGR will require significant changes in how local VCFSE infrastructure organisations influence, convene and deliver support.

Most NAVCA members operate across one or more local authority footprints, while ACRE members generally work at county level. Their support offer to the wider VCFSE sector, and in many cases their core funding arrangements, have been designed around those existing geographies. Local government reorganisation therefore presents a direct challenge to the way many infrastructure organisations are currently structured, funded and positioned.

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Attendance at the workshops was strong, with almost all the infrastructure organisations identified by NAVCA and ACRE taking part. This level of engagement indicates that affected local infrastructure organisations across the six areas recognise LGR as either an immediate or emerging strategic challenge. Participants were clear that its impact is likely to be substantial, particularly in relation to funding, influence and the relationships that underpin effective support for the VCFSE sector.

Participants identified their most immediate concern as financial sustainability. For district-based organisations, LGR may mean that their primary funder no longer exists in its current form. Organisations operating across larger footprints are also likely to face disruption, as they may need to build relationships with a greater number of commissioners, or with different commissioners altogether.

Participants also emphasised that their strategic role is central to their work. This role is highly relational, depending on trust, access and continuity with senior officers, elected members and system partners. Anticipated changes in key staff and political leadership therefore create a significant risk: they may make day-to-day influencing more difficult and, more importantly, weaken the ability of LIOs to position the VCFSE sector effectively within new unitary structures.

Changing boundaries will also require different working relationships between neighbouring LIOs. This is relevant across all areas, but it becomes particularly acute where new unitary boundaries cut across existing infrastructure footprints. For example, parts of a city's rural hinterland may move into a city unitary currently served by a different LIO, requiring organisations to revisit roles, relationships and responsibilities.

Many participants were concerned that pockets of rural deprivation and the specific challenges facing rural communities could be overlooked as new unitary authorities face pressure to focus on urban deprivation. Issues such as transport access and community resilience will need to remain visible. This creates an important role for local infrastructure organisations in continuing to support the VCFSE sector in rural areas and ensuring that emerging policy is effectively rural-proofed.

1.2 LGR is taking place in a wider context of system churn

One of the most important roles of LIOs is to provide the connective tissue that enables effective relationships between the VCFSE sector and statutory partners. This convening and relationship-building role is central to how the VCFSE sector gains visibility, influence and access within local systems.

Re-shaping relationships with new unitary authorities would be challenging in its own right. However, this task is made more complex by the parallel establishment of Mayoral Strategic Authorities and the reshaping of Integrated Care Boards. LIOs recognise that both will become increasingly important to the future influence and financial sustainability of the VCFSE sector. In some areas, these structures are not coterminous, creating additional complexity for organisations that are already working across multiple geographies and accountability arrangements.

This wider system instability is further intensified by uncertainty about future council political control, including the potential for instability where councils move to no overall control. Changes in political leadership may affect the priority given to the VCFSE sector, the appetite for partnership, and the consistency of relationships on which effective engagement depends.

At the same time, local infrastructure organisations are working to ensure that the VCFSE sector remains visible in emerging neighbourhood policy. This includes advocating for approaches that work with and through the VCFSE sector in Pride and Place and providing capacity-building support to parish and town councils. Participants were clear that, if the VCFSE sector is to be effective at neighbourhood level, it also needs support, coordination and voice at local authority level. Local infrastructure organisations are therefore trying to navigate changes at the neighbourhood, local authority and sub-regional levels simultaneously.

Workshop participants also reflected that neighbourhood policy will require carefully co-designed collaboration between community anchor VCFSE organisations and infrastructure organisations. Developing these relationships will be challenging while policy is still evolving and while local authority structures are also undergoing significant change.

The role of LIOs is itself broad. NAVCA commissioned research, *Walking a Tightrope*³ highlights how statutory partners and the VCFSE sector place different, and continually changing, demands on local infrastructure organisations. This includes expectations from statutory partners that local infrastructure organisations will convene, translate and broker relationships across the VCFSE sector, often without adequate funding for that function.

These pressures are compounded by differing views across local infrastructure organisations about the best route to achieving positive outcomes for the VCFSE sector. Some organisations place greater emphasis on smaller spatial footprints and granular local knowledge, while others argue for larger footprints that provide greater strategic capacity and influence. This debate mirrors wider political discussions about the future shape of local government. For local infrastructure organisations however, the challenge is particularly acute: they must navigate local politics while also negotiating what form of infrastructure will best serve the VCFSE sector in the future.

1.3 LIO leaders are operating with limited funding, limited capacity and significant fatigue

In this context, LIOs are being asked to manage several strategic priorities at once. They must engage with statutory partners during a period of significant system instability, prepare and position the VCFSE sector for new structures, work collaboratively to influence emerging bodies such as Mayoral Strategic Authorities, support the development of neighbourhood working and consider their sustainability whilst also rethinking how they work with peer organisations in the best interests of communities and the wider VCFSE sector.

They are doing so with very limited time, capacity and resource. Given the range of demands they face, many LIO leaders reported that it is difficult to create the space needed to take a collective approach to co-designing infrastructure that can engage effectively with new unitary authorities. Openness to co-design is also shaped by differing views about the best route to achieving outcomes for the VCFSE sector.

[3] Hamer, Stuart & Mcmillan (2025), *Walking a Tightrope: Exploring the conditions for effective local voluntary and community sector infrastructure*, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University

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This work is also deeply relational. Organisational histories, previous patterns of collaboration or competition, and the personal relationships between leaders all shape how inclusive and constructive conversations about the future can feel. These factors can either create the conditions for shared leadership or make collective change harder to progress.

This does not mean that LIOs are inactive. Workshop participants shared examples of leaders coming together to develop a shared understanding of the roles they currently play, and the roles they may need to take on in future. In one area, leaders from peer organisations attended an externally facilitated away day to begin exploring a shared vision. In others, organisations are already considering how they might move more quickly towards shared services or more formal future partnerships. However, progress is necessarily gradual. The work is complex, the operating environment is uncertain, and leaders often have very limited capacity to step away from day-to-day demands.

Some participants acknowledged that merger may, in certain circumstances, be in the best interests of the VCFSE sector. However, merger requires substantial upfront investment, sustained leadership capacity and careful attention to organisational culture. Several participants also reflected on difficult previous experiences of forced merger, including the long-term impact on staff relationships and trust with the wider VCFSE sector. In areas where forced merger has taken place relatively recently, organisations may not yet feel ready to begin another round of structural conversations.

2. Where members are most focused

2.1 Positioning the VCFSE sector

Participants were, understandably, focused first and foremost on their core purposes; ACRE members on supporting rural communities and NAVCA members on positioning the VCFSE sector to sustain and grow its role within new structures. Across new unitary footprints, Mayoral Strategic Authorities, neighbourhood policy and reshaped health systems, participants could see clear opportunities to strengthen relationships for wider social good.

For many, this means working together to generate evidence that makes the case for the VCFSE sector as a core statutory sector partner. Participants highlighted the importance of demonstrating both the social impact of the VCFSE and its economic contribution. The economic case was seen as particularly important in strengthening the role of small and medium-sized VCFSE organisations in activity devolved to Mayoral Authorities.

Workshop participants often cited State of the Sector studies as a useful starting point for building this evidence base. However, there was broad recognition that these studies may not be sufficient on their own. Evidence needs to be translated into a succinct, persuasive offer to statutory partners, supported by a shared way of making that offer.

A great deal of work is already taking place, but too often it depends on one or two organisations to carry the load. Participants also identified challenges around trust, particularly where a lead organisation is expected to act fairly on behalf of all partners, and around the practical task of gathering the right information across local peer networks.

What LIOs can do:

- Identify existing data sources, including internal and publicly available data, and agree what gaps need to be filled to make a credible case for partnership with the VCFSE sector.
- Agree a lead organisation, or group of organisations, to develop an offer to statutory partners, with clear accountability back to the wider collective.

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- Actively shape the offer to forming authorities, covering both infrastructure support and the wider contribution of the VCFSE sector.
- Consider sharing the cost of commissioning independent support to help develop a persuasive and evidence-based offer.

What NAVCA and ACRE will do

- Signpost data and information sources that can help make the case for the VCFSE sector.
- Suggest data that local infrastructure organisations already hold, or could collect, to strengthen this case.
- Share case study examples where infrastructure organisations have prepared and published a compelling case for the VCFSE sector.

What local statutory partners can do

- Make relevant datasets available to help evidence the case for partnership with the VCFSE sector.
- Be clear about what they need from engagement with the VCFSE sector and how they want partnership to work.
- Invest in small and medium-sized VCFSE organisations and support them to reshape their work around new footprints.
- Resource the development of shared evidence and partnership offers, ideally in ways that support collaboration rather than competition.

What national partners (other national VCSE organisations, funders and central government) can do

- Amplify the critical function that LIOs play in enabling the conditions for collaboration between small and medium sized VCFSE organisations and statutory sector.
- Offer support to local change programmes as they develop.

2.2 Developing shadow engagement structures and terms of engagement

Participants recognised that the way they convene VCFSE networks will need to change. New structures are needed to enable transparent engagement with Mayoral Strategic Authorities, reformed ICS structures and new unitary authorities. Statutory partners need clear touch points for working with the VCFSE sector, while small and medium-sized VCFSE organisations need structures they can trust and through which they can exercise meaningful voice.

Participants also identified the need for solutions that enable learning, collaboration and cross-fertilisation across neighbourhoods. Many places already have guiding document(s) that describe the relationship between the VCFSE and statutory system. These documents sometimes act as the terms of reference to enable partners to hold each other to account. Some workshop participants see the development of Local Civil Society Covenants as providing the framework and impetus to renew these relationships and the documents that govern them.

In some cases, well-established overarching forums or other engagement structures already enable the VCFSE sector to develop shared influencing positions. Workshop participants saw value in learning from practice elsewhere and in tailoring engagement approaches to the needs and expectations of both the local VCFSE sector and statutory partners. In one workshop, participants suggested that a useful starting point might be to revisit their Compact and reshape it as a Covenant.

Neighbourhood policy is more complex and still developing. However, models such as the Leeds Community Anchor Network point to ways of creating strong, mutually reinforcing links between neighbourhood organisations and local infrastructure, while respecting the distinct strengths each brings.

The most important point is not to become fixed on any single model. Local partners should start from first principles: what the structure needs to achieve, who it needs to involve, how it will be trusted, and how it will enable the VCFSE sector to influence decisions.

What LIOs can do

- Work collaboratively across local infrastructure and the wider VCFSE sector to co-design engagement structures that meet the needs of communities, VCFSE organisations and system partners.
- Talk to new and forming authorities about how they want to engage with the VCFSE sector, and what would make that engagement useful for them. Offer an approach to engagement and partnership for the new authority to consider.
- Consider creating a single point of contact or clearing-house model that can connect partners, cascade information and support communication in both directions.
- Avoid defaulting to old local authority footprints or organisational self-interest; focus on what will best serve the VCFSE sector and communities.

What NAVCA and ACRE will do

- Continue to share examples of how other areas have designed, governed and sustained VCFSE engagement arrangements.

What local partners and stakeholders can do

- Recognise that accountability structures cannot be perfect, and that the idea of simple VCFSE “representation” is often problematic.
- Resource engagement structures properly so they are credible, inclusive and sustainable.

What national partners can do

- Promote good practice on VCFSE engagement in LGR, devolution and health system reform.
- Support local areas to develop engagement models that are proportionate, inclusive and properly resourced.

2.2 Developing shadow engagement structures and terms of engagement

Across LIOs, there are different views about the most effective way to co-design infrastructure that can work well with new unitary authorities, Mayoral Strategic Authorities and Integrated Care Systems.

Building a shared vision for change is complicated by differing organisational cultures, business models, competitive tendering environments and, in some places, difficult relationships between infrastructure leaders. Preparatory research also identified organisation's trustee boards as a potential barrier to change, particularly where executive leaders could see the need for change but trustees remained unconvinced. In addition, the likely new unitary footprints do not always align neatly with the current distribution of local infrastructure.

There are also different understandings of how best to deliver local infrastructure. Some organisations emphasise the value of a smaller footprint, rooted in granular knowledge of communities and the local VCFSE sector. Others emphasise the need to balance local knowledge with the strategic capacity, investment potential and influence that can come from working across a larger footprint. Several leaders reflected that there may be scope to recast relationships between larger and smaller footprint organisations in ways that build on each other's strengths.

These factors create barriers to reshaping the LIO network in areas affected by LGR. However, most workshop participants recognised the opportunity to rethink VCFSE infrastructure and were keen to engage with it. A small number did not appear to feel that there was a pressing need for change. Others acknowledged the need for change but appeared to prioritise change on their own terms, rather than a wider debate about the interests of the VCFSE sector. Among those participants who wanted to co-design future solutions, some favoured a 'big bang' approach: developing a redefined vision and spatial coverage strategy for an LGR or devolution area, and then working collectively towards it.

Other participants preferred a more incremental approach – of exploring opportunities together and coming together organically.

Whichever approach participants favoured, they commonly described three phases for reshaping infrastructure. In practice, these phases will not always happen sequentially: LIOs are already operating within a changing web of relationships, collaborations and statutory contacts. Even so, the phases provide a useful way of thinking about the journey.

Phase 1: Build trust. Leaders need to:

- Come together to build personal relationships (and resolve any prior differences).
- Understand each other's drivers and red lines.
- Self-define and share their roles in a reshaped infrastructure system.
- Build understanding between themselves and the board around the strategic challenges the organisation faces and the range of options.
- Build board to board relationships across the peer group of infrastructure organisations.

Most places already have regular meetings of local infrastructure senior officers, either through formal contact points or more informal get-togethers. Several of these groupings have already begun this work. This work requires generous leadership: a willingness to look beyond organisational self-interest, share information openly, make space for others, and focus on what will best serve the VCFSE sector and communities. It also depends on transparent communication. This is not a quick process, and participants often acknowledged the value of a skilled external facilitator to help host and guide the conversation.

Phase 2: Explore collaboration

Once the underpinning trust relationships and shared understanding of goals have been established infrastructure is well positioned to begin to explore co-work that can generate efficiencies and / or improve support to the VCFSE sector.

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This collaborative delivery has the potential to bring staff teams closer together and to enable closer alignment of organisations.

Across the workshops, participants shared many examples of emerging collaborative programmes. In one area, two district-based organisations have developed a shared funding newsletter and are exploring other options that could provide more seamless support to the VCFSE sector. Neighbouring district-based organisations reflected that they could adopt similar approaches, and that their county-wide leaders' network provided a useful space for sharing and developing ideas.

In another area, organisations have identified a common challenge around volunteer support and brokerage and are collectively exploring bids to major funders.

Phase 3: Establish a shared vision

This was not a universally held view – but some participants were keen to use the opportunity of LGR to reshape infrastructure in their place starting from first principles.

"We have all the ingredients for success but they're not well enough coordinated." – Workshop participant

However, comprehensive re-visioning of local infrastructure feels like a distant goal to many participants. Participants reflected on the complex and rapidly shifting externalities, the differing views across infrastructure about how to perform the role and the lack of time and money to do the strategic thinking needed to develop the shared vision.

That said, most participants acknowledged that change is coming – and that they can either shape it themselves in order to ensure the best possible impact for the VCFSE or have it forced upon them through competition for investment.

"Even if the new unitary funds infrastructure, there is not going to be more than one contract." – Workshop participant

In one area, participants reflected that changes in the health system might create opportunities to secure funding for the necessary re-visioning work. However, the main barrier to following this up appeared to be that there was little time and, perhaps no nominated organisation, to follow up on behalf of the collective.

Many LIOs already collaborate 'tactically' (in response to shared need or in bidding for funding) so the starting point for this work needs to be in analysing (often with the wider VCFSE) areas where shared activity can release more resources to support the VCFSE or expand provision where it is most needed.

Key features of this work that participants reflected on were:

- Mapping the VCFSE sector's (and communities') support needs.
- Seeking to map the future shape of statutory partners (which is challenging given widespread institutional change).
- Articulating a shared vision.
- Identifying roles and overlaps across infrastructure.
- Drawing out and agree the ideal spatial and thematic coverage.
- Working towards rationalisation (or re-defined relationships).

What LIOs can do

- Engage collectively with the VCFSE and statutory partners about their needs from local infrastructure (seeking to leave organisational self-interest to one side).
- Work with peers to map roles and negotiate existing organisational functions and boundaries.
- Establish a road map for future rationalisation / re-shaped relationship where this is in the best interests of the VCFSE sector (and statutory partners).

What NAVCA and ACRE will do

- Continue to share learning from across the network about self-managed infrastructure reform.
- Provide or signpost facilitation support where this would help local partners work through change.

What local statutory partners can do

- Recommit to the value of local infrastructure and be a constructive critical friend to the network.
- Encourage change without using funding as a blunt instrument.
- Prioritise collaborative rather than competitive funding approaches.
- Give infrastructure organisations time to work through complex change.
- Invest in reshaping infrastructure, recognising that the process is unlikely to be linear.

What national partners can do

- Recognise that local infrastructure reform requires time, trust and investment, not simply pressure to rationalise.
- Support learning between areas so that local partners can draw on practical examples of collaboration, merger and network reform.

Conclusion

Local infrastructure occupies a distinctive role in local systems. It is not primarily a service deliverer; it provides the connective tissue that enables the VCFSE sector to organise, influence, collaborate and contribute. This role is vital, but it also makes LIOs especially exposed to institutional change across statutory partners. For LIOs, LGR is not simply about responding to a new contract or tender. It is about influencing and shaping the future of place, and the relationships that bind sectors together in pursuit of better outcomes for communities.

Most workshop participants recognised a clear and present need for change. They also recognised that it would be far better for infrastructure to co-design that change proactively – with each other, with the VCFSE sector and with statutory partners – than to have change imposed through commissioning decisions or competitive funding pressures.

However, the barriers are substantial. The most consistent challenges identified through the workshops were:

- The difficulty of planning in a fast-moving and uncertain environment.
- The lack of time and funding available to infrastructure organisations.
- The risk of protectionism and attachment to historic footprints.
- An incomplete shared understanding of the purpose of local infrastructure: to enable, convene and facilitate others.

Workshop participants were committed to meeting the challenge. The task now is to create the enabling environment that gives the space, confidence and practical support to work through the complexity. That will require generosity from local infrastructure leaders, constructive partnership from statutory bodies, and sustained support from national partners.