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Local Civil Society Infrastructure research: key learning

NAVCA



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Local Civil Society Infrastructure research: key learning

1. Introduction

In 2025, the Department of Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) published the findings of research it had commissioned through its Local Civil Society Infrastructure R&D Programme.¹ This partly drew, among other sources, on an earlier report commissioned by NAVCA from Sheffield Hallam University, *Walking a Tightrope: Exploring the conditions for effective local voluntary and community sector infrastructure*², as well as carrying out new research through surveys, in-depth local case studies, and an analysis of other data.

A more detailed summary of the research, the questions it sought to address, and its main findings can be found in the NAVCA paper *'Local Civil Society Infrastructure: A summary of the research evidence.'*

The evidence presented suggests that geographical coverage is variable and funding of (core) LCSI organisations is declining. The need to make the case for LCSI to decision makers and funders in a time of political flux and public sector restructure has never been more urgent. The research findings make the case to strengthen local infrastructure and raise its profile, both locally and nationally.

This paper identifies some of the key learning for NAVCA members and suggest areas for future discussion and development.

2. How effective LCSI makes a difference: what the research tells us

The LCSI Theory of Change (TOC) articulated in the DCMS research offers a coherent evidence-based framework to demonstrate the role and impact of LCSI. The Theory of Change diagram in the research³ is detailed and complex, showing the interconnections and feedback loops between the different pathways. The table below is a simplified summary.

2. How effective LCSi makes a difference: what the research tells us

Outcome Pathway	activities related to LCSi functions	Mechanisms	lead to (short and medium term) outcomes	resulting in (long term) outcome	Impacts
1	facilitating funding, organisational development and convening	LCSi information and guidance is seen as credible, relevant and can be acted on. LCSi is trusted to provide independent, credible advice.	increased funding, improved financial management, better ways of working and increased connectivity	VCFSE sector meets local needs.	More capable VCFSE organisations
2	organisational development, convening and advocacy	VCFSE and decision makers feel supported, connected and aligned to peers across the local area.	better understanding of communities and effective VCSFE representation in local decision making	Improved policy making on local priorities	Stronger place-based systems
3	community participation and organisational development	Community members feel supported and motivated to learn new skills and participate in local activities. VCSFE organisations value and feel equipped to support their contribution.	increased sense of community responsibility, increased skills/wellbeing/confidence of participants, and better understanding of communities	Increased community trust, empowerment and belonging.	More thriving communities

3.Key learning

3.1 What does good look like?

For LCSi to have this beneficial impact, it needs to be strong and effective. Through interviews, workshops and in-depth case studies involving a range of stakeholders, the research explored the impact of strong and effective LCSi – as well as what happens when LCSi is absent, weak or ineffective (summarised in the tables below).

The NAVCA document ‘*What Does Good Look Like*’ should be read alongside this. It explores this aspect of the research in more detail, drawing out from the research findings on what effective LCSi looks like in relation to NAVCA’s Four Functions of Local Infrastructure and each of the LIQA outcomes. As the research itself describes, LCSi is often negotiating multiple, changing, and sometimes competing expectations and demands from different local stakeholders. In the midst of this, it can be hard for local infrastructure organisations to maintain a clear sense of purpose and direction. This evidence base is both a tool on how to gauge the effectiveness of LCSi in their area, and a narrative about the importance of having robust LCSi – and the impact of its absence. In the research case studies, weak LCSi was acknowledged by local stakeholders as a problem: *Tellingly, in areas where LCSi is absent, people were often trying hard to establish and develop it.*⁴

Outcome 1: Resources targeted to meet local needs

Strong LCSi	Weak LCSi
VCFSE organisations access relevant and trusted information, resources, guidance and training; have opportunities to build relationships and learn from each other. VCFSE organisations are aware of funding and opportunities, are funding ready, able to develop credible project plans, and collaborate to avoid duplication. This results in increased, and more effective investment which meets local needs.	VCSFE organisations (particularly smaller groups) lack knowledge about funding opportunities, skills and capacity to develop quality bids. Civil society is fragmented, dispersed and uncoordinated leading to duplication and competition. Funders report local cold spots with fewer successful or less ambitious bids. There is less effective investment locally.

Outcome 2: Policy making on local priorities

Strong LCSi	Weak LCSi
Well informed, well connected LCSi is trusted by both civil society and decision makers. LCSi is trusted to reflect the sector and diverse communities and provide credible, relevant information and advice that can be acted on. There are meaningful opportunities to connect, and people feel confident sharing their perspectives. Strong relationships of trust, shared understanding and information sharing are enabled within civil society and between sectors. Stronger civil society and community voice leads to more inclusive practice and better-informed policy making. <i>This increased [VCFSE] influence opened the door to improving public sector approaches to commissioning, as well as highlighting the need for public services to take a more preventative approach in areas such as health and poverty.⁵</i>	Lack of coordination or informed overview of the local VCFSE sector leading to a sense of disconnection, isolation, fragmentation. <i>it was specifically the lack of opportunities for participation and voice for newer, smaller and community-based groups that was noted. More established organisations would regularly come together, but it was felt that smaller organisations were largely left to fend for themselves.⁶</i> Relationships within VCFSE sector, and between sectors, are weak or mistrustful. Lack of collective voice or advocacy for the sector and communities; unequal relationships, a few voices dominate and some voices are not heard at all. As a result, there is less inclusive practice and poorer policy making.

Outcome 3: Community trust, empowerment and sense of belonging

Strong LCSi	Weak LCSi
Volunteering and community participation are promoted and facilitated; people are supported and motivated to get involved. Organisations appreciate community participation and engage diverse communities, and so better reflect the communities they serve. Increased participation and sense of community responsibility; skills and confidence of participants develops and there is better understanding of communities.	Fewer opportunities, lack of information or encouragement to participate; reduced and less diverse engagement and participation; individuals miss out on opportunities; lack of community engagement and opportunities for communities to have a voice. Missed opportunities to increase trust, empowerment and belonging within communities.

3.2 Theory of change and the local infrastructure brand

The Theory of Change provides a framework that NAVCA and its members could use to communicate clear messages about LCSi and the difference it makes.

Local infrastructure is not always well-understood by decision makers or the general public. This is an ongoing challenge in making the case for what it does, why it matters, what difference it makes, and why it merits investment. To put it another way, there is not a strong or well-recognised local infrastructure brand.

In part, this is because LCSi provision looks very different in different places. Local variation is not in itself a bad thing – effective LCSi needs to be flexible enough to respond effectively to local need and evolve over time as circumstances change. However, geographical variation in coverage and quality[i] is more of an issue. That LIOs are called different things in different areas (CVS, voluntary action, community action – along with many other unique local names) may be another complicating factor. Some other national networks of independent local charities do have a strong national brand and profile – for example, Citizens Advice or Age UK.

The published LCSi Theory of Change diagram is quite detailed and complex, however it is possible to draw from it some simple, clear, compelling messages about local infrastructure:

- This is what we do (the five functions of LCSi)
- This is the ultimate difference we make (the three long-term outcomes)
- This is how we measure the effectiveness of LCSi delivery locally (the intermediate short / medium term outcomes)
- This is what good looks like (the mechanisms by which effective LCSi delivery leads to positive outcomes).

This framework could be used to develop clarity of messaging both locally and nationally to tell a story which increases understanding of LCSi activities and impact, raises the profile of LCSi, and clearly articulates a local infrastructure brand.

Although the activity groupings (LCSI functions) described in the DCMS research do not exactly align with NAVCA’s four functions, the services and activities described are similar. Moreover, there is significant synergy between NAVCA’s four functions and LCSI outcome pathways:

NAVCA Function(s) and overarching LIQA outcomes		LCSI Outcome Pathway
1: Leadership and Advocacy and 2: Partnerships and Collaboration	align most closely to the outcomes of	2: Improved policy making on local priorities
3: Capacity building		1: A vibrant VCSE sector that meets local needs.
4: Volunteering (along with some of the convening aspects of 2: Partnerships and Collaboration)		3: Increased community trust, empowerment and belonging.

The research found stronger evidence of impact in relation to LCSI outcome pathways 1 and 2 than for outcome pathway 3 (where there tended to be evidence of activity rather than achieved outcomes). Explicitly addressing this evidence gap could further strengthen the case for LCSI.

3.3 Relationships and people matter

Effective LCSI is highly relational, so there needs to be investment in people who have the skills, qualities and knowledge – and capacity – for effective relationship building in a complex environment.

The research describes how relational the work of effective LCSI is. It involves building and negotiating relationships with many different stakeholders:

“The complexity of local places means that LCSI works in a highly relational operating environment...the strength of LCSI is heavily dependent on the breadth and quality of its relationships”⁸

To act as a trusted and legitimate advocate for and source of intelligence about the local VCFSE sector, it needs to gain the trust of organisations of different sizes, with diverse interests, priorities and communities. Knowledge of and connections with local VCFSE organisations are the cornerstones of local infrastructure, upon which credibility, legitimacy and effective service delivery are built:

“it is the connection with the VCSE sector that fundamentally anchors LIOs. The support for and from local VCSEs helps generate a mandate for the LIO, which contributes to its credibility and legitimacy both within the sector as a whole, but also in its relationships with statutory authorities.”⁹

It also needs to have positive relationships with, and demonstrate value to different public sector agencies, in order to have influence, at the same time retaining its independence and be willing to challenge where needed.

It needs to understand local dynamics and be able to negotiate the diverse, sometimes conflicting, priorities and expectations of different stakeholders.

“LCSI is fundamentally embedded in and related to the local context (and history) of the VCFSE sector, the communities in which it operates, and the relationships between LCSI, the VCFSE sector and statutory stakeholders. Its value is negotiated amongst multiple stakeholders and realised in each place specifically, in the legitimacy, trust and connections LCSI makes and facilitates. It is at its best when it meets the needs of a local place including forging relationships to build bridges across and between sectors, understanding and working through the power dynamics within the VCFSE sector and with statutory bodies and funders.”¹⁰

This is not a simple task, and requires staff with the skills and qualities to manage complex relationships effectively.

“In the absence of a consensus, negotiation, balancing interests, making trade-offs and concessions across multiple stakeholders become important features of decision-making and action. In this context, the nature and quality of relationships between the individuals and organisations in LCSi play a significant role in how successfully it operates”¹¹

It also requires staff to have the time and capacity to invest in relationship building. This is an aspect of LCSi delivery that is not necessarily visible or recognised as needing resource, particularly as core funding becomes rare and the approach to resourcing LCSi is more transactional (focused on the delivery of narrowly defined services or activities). The intangible work of establishing, maintaining and developing relationships also needs investment.

“the development of positive connections that can support strong LCSi rests on the hard work and skill of the individuals at the heart of those relationships. This relationship building should be prioritised and given space in organisational strategies and associated resource considerations.”¹²

3.4 The importance of a whole-system approach to strengthening LCSi

Where LCSi is weak, there are numerous interconnected issues that can lead to ‘negative spirals’ that further weaken it. Enabling strong, effective LCSi, and tackling weak or ineffective LCSi, is a whole-system issue. It cannot be addressed by local infrastructure organisations or NAVCA alone, and some issues may need to be tackled nationally.

The issue of the variable quality and coverage of LCSi is sometimes presented as if it were a problem that NAVCA, or individual local infrastructure organisations, could solve, by trying harder or doing better. However, LCSi exists within a wider local system, involving multiple agents, long histories and shifting relationships: “a highly complex local system of frontline organisations, LCSi providers and public sector and other funders”¹³ shaping the external environment that enables, or hinders, its effectiveness. Enabling strong, effective LCSi, and tackling weak or ineffective LCSi, therefore demands a whole-system approach.

The research does consider internal conditions which enable organisations to deliver effectively: a clear strategic vision and strategy, which is communicated effectively; strong leadership and a positive work culture; a workforce with the right knowledge, skills, qualities and capacity to deliver. However, organisations do not operate in a vacuum:

“In practice, the distinction between internal and external conditions collapses – an internal condition is always related to external factors, and vice versa.”¹⁴

For example, an LCSi organisation operating in an environment where public sector partners do not value LCSi or provide sufficient, stable funding, is less likely to be able to recruit and retain quality staff, and to deliver all its functions effectively.

As the DCMS research makes clear, the wider local context in which LCSi operates is crucial; there are systemic factors which support and enable strong, effective LCSi, as well as those which hinder and weaken it:

“context is an important consideration as the environment in which organisations operate plays a significant part in shaping, enabling and constraining actions and interventions.”¹⁵

The key factors identified in the DCMS research as strengthening LCSi were identified as:

- Sufficient, consistent and flexible funding, enabling effective delivery of all functions, long term planning and the retention of quality staff, and the ability to innovate and develop in response to changing local need
- Public sector buy-in, based on a good understanding of what LCSi does and the difference it makes
- Strong relationships with public sector ‘champions’ who have the interest and capacity to engage
- Building on good relationships and “futureproofing against personnel changes”¹⁶ by embedding them in formal structures which ensure regular and systematic cross-sector engagement.

Given the importance of the public sector, particularly local authority relationships and funding, local government reorganisation and changes in health structures – as well as political churn – may present challenges. Where existing local structures are disbanded and new systems with a different structure and geography are put in place, this is likely to involve significant disruption to existing relationships, informal and formal engagement structures and funding arrangements. All of these will need to be re-established and renegotiated, and a new set of relationships structures developed. There is a risk that, without a considerable investment of time and energy from LCSi, that among many other competing demands and funding pressures, the VCFSE sector is not a high priority. However, there is perhaps the also opportunity for a positive reboot – particularly in areas where the local system has not not supportive of LCSi and/or the local VCFSE sector.

Positive and negative spirals

As the research shows, the existence and strength of LCSi is not consistent everywhere. However, the factors which enable or weaken LCSi do not exist and cannot be easily addressed in isolation; nor can they be addressed by LCSi organisations alone. They are interconnected, embedded in a wider local system of relationships, attitudes and resources that, taken as a whole, tend to enable or undermine LCSi. From this, positive and negative spirals, or virtuous and vicious cycles can develop, as the case studies in the research illustrate.

In areas where LCSi is not well-understood, and the difference it makes not recognised or valued, it is less likely to be seen as worth investing in. Under-resourced LCSi lacks capacity to engage, or to perform its functions effectively or impactfully, eroding credibility and reducing trust and confidence leading to reputational damage; as a result there is less likely to be buy-in and investment from public sector partners.

Conversely, in areas where LCSi is understood and valued by public sector partners and local VCSFE organisations, buy-in and investment are more likely, enabling LCSi capacity to plan and deliver effective support to, and engage meaningfully with, diverse local VCFSE organisations. This builds knowledge and trust of the VCFSE sector, giving credibility to engage and influence strategic partners.

“Relationships with frontline organisations were seen as critical... by providing legitimacy, insights and connections... This was seen as especially valuable for smaller VCFSE organisations that struggle to have their voice heard at an individual level. In building this trust, LCSi organisations become more important partners for public sector leaders.”¹⁷

Being able to show tangible impact, and acting as an effective advocate and partner, builds reputation and trust, which encourages further buy-in and investment.

Creating and sustaining strong LCSI, avoiding negative spirals, and tackling the root causes of weak or ineffective LCSI, are therefore system-wide issues, needing collective engagement and investment – from LCSI providers themselves, local VCSFE organisations, public sector partners and wider stakeholders.

“Sustainably strengthening LCSI in a way that addresses variance in coverage and quality requires a significant intervention in terms of addressing the root causes of the problem in the financial system, developing strategic relationships between the public sector and civil society locally and developing a more robust evidence base in relation to impact and effectiveness.”¹⁸

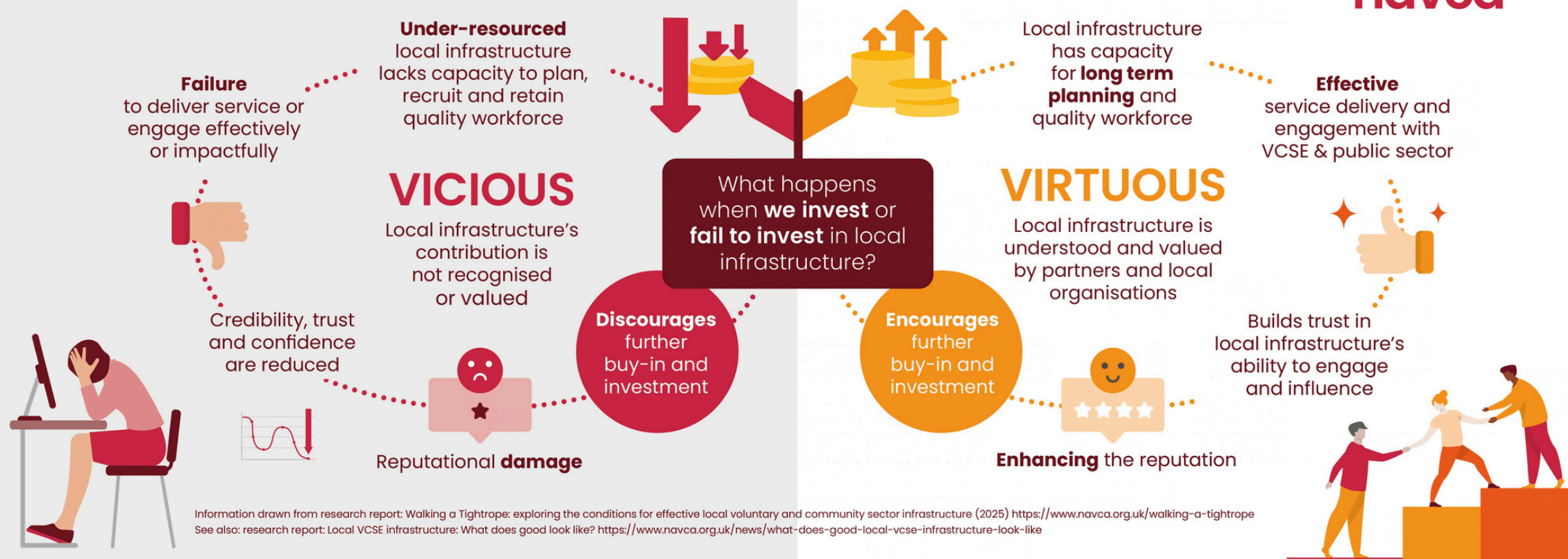
The research also notes that some of issues may need to be tackled nationally, not just by local systems.

“The funding challenges that exist across the country need to be tackled in a way that transcends localised workarounds. That means being clear about where responsibility for funding LCSI needs to sit, establishing clear incentives or obligations for prioritising long-term funding of a sufficient level, and providing the resources necessary for the development of good-quality evidence on effectiveness.”¹⁹

That the Government commissioned this research is a positive step, and other developments such as the Civil Society Covenant suggest a renewed interest in the Government’s relationship with the VCSFE sector. As always, the challenge for NAVCA and its members, at a time when there are so many other priorities, will be whether this can be translated into actual policy or resources.

The conditions needed for infrastructure to succeed

The **virtuous** and **vicious** cycle of local infrastructure



The conditions needed for infrastructure to succeed, NAVCA, 2026

3.5 Configuration of LCSl

LCSl is a system of support involving a core of LCSl-focused organisations and a wider network of supplementary provision. Exactly how this is configured locally matters less than how well it is adapted to meet local need, and the quality of relationships.

The research distinguishes between LCSl as a system of support, and those organisations which deliver it. In most areas, delivery of LCSl functions involves both core LCSl (organisations for whom LCSl is their main focus) and supplementary LCSl (a wider circle of organisations and agencies who contribute to delivery of some LCSl functions, though this is not their main purpose). The question of effective LCSl goes beyond any one provider: is it (collectively) delivering LCSl functions effectively and achieving positive outcomes?

The research does highlight the importance of a strong and cohesive core to give leadership and focus to LCSl: As the case studies in the LCSl research describe, in areas where core LCSl organisations are weak, absent or relationships between providers are poor, then LCSl struggles to be effective.

How LCSl is configured varies locally – what matters is how well-adapted it is to local context, and the quality of local relationships: *“Approaches to strengthening and improving LCSl need to work with the grain of local contexts.”*²⁰ What works in one area may not work in a different one. Effective LCSl is also dynamic, evolving in response to changing local need and circumstances.

This potentially changes the narrative for public sector partners and funders, from a preoccupation with form (assumption that fewer providers will necessarily lead to better LCSl, preoccupation with merger and consolidation) to a more nuanced approach, that acknowledges the positives and negatives of different models, the importance of local context and relationships, and focuses on effective delivery of LCSl functions and, more importantly, outcomes and impact.

There are also lessons for local infrastructure organisations too: that LCSl delivery may be by one organisation in a local authority area or be a collaboration e.g. with specialist providers; that it is most effective where one of more LCSl organisations co-operate rather than compete. To be effective LCSl should be cohesive, have a clear and coherent strategy, build strong relationships, and clear have lines of responsibility and accountability.

Notes

¹ DCMS 2025

² CRESR 2025

³ DCMS 2025a pp30–47 (Impact, Costs and Benefits) The TOC diagram is on p30 and individual outcome pathways on pp36–47.

⁴ PBE 2025

⁵ DCMS 2025a p43 (Outcome Pathways: Pathway 2)

⁶ DCMS p2025a p39 (Outcome Pathways: Pathway 1)

⁷ DCMS p2025, p21 (Conclusions)

⁸ DCMS 2025b p13 (What factors and methods are effective in strengthening LCSI?)

⁹ CRESR 2025 p14

¹⁰ DCMS 2025a p56 (Conclusions)

¹¹ DCMS 2025a p49 (Strengthening and Improving LCSI)

¹² DCMS 2025a p52 (Strengthening and Improving LCSI)

¹³ DCMS 2025a p49 (Strengthening and Improving LCSI)

¹⁴ CRSESR p2

¹⁵ DCMS 2025a p48 (Strengthening and Improving LCSI)

¹⁶ DCMS 2025a p52 (Strengthening and Improving LCSI)

¹⁷ DCMS 2025a p28 (Sufficiency and Coverage)

¹⁸ DCMS 2025 pp21–22 (Conclusions)

¹⁹ DCMS 2025ap51 (Strengthening and Improving LCSI)

²⁰ DCMS 2025a p55 (Conclusions)

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