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Local Civil Society Infrastructure: a summary of the research evidence

NAVCA



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Key messages

- Local Civil Society Infrastructure has five functions (areas of activity): Facilitating funding; Organisational development; Convening; Advocacy and Community participation.
- Delivered effectively, these lead to 3 long term outcomes for local civil society and communities: (i) a vibrant VCSE sector that meets local needs; (ii) Improved policy making on local priorities; and (iii) Increased community trust, empowerment and belonging.
- LCSI is organised differently in each area, involving core providers and supplementary activity. Quality of delivery, being well-adapted to local need, and good local relationships and connections, matter more than how many organisations are involved or how LCSI is configured.
- The characteristics of strong and effective LCSI are good local knowledge and connections, being well-funded and having a good reputation with civil society and public sector partners. The work of LCSI is complex and highly relational, so having staff with the right skills also matters.
- LCSI is strengthened by local systems which offer sufficient, consistent and flexible funding, buy-in from, and strong relationships with, public sector partners, embedded in formal structures which facilitate regular engagement. These factors are interconnected; if any are lacking, a negative spiral can develop which further weakens and undermines the effectiveness LCSI. Strengthening LCSI likewise requires a whole-system approach.

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.

This research explores:

- What Local Civil Society Infrastructure is, what it does, and who provides it
- What difference it makes
- What strong and effective LCSi looks like – and what happens when it is weak or ineffective
- The factors and conditions which enable strong LCSi – and those which weaken it.

This summary is written and prepared by NAVCA.¹

2. What is 'Local Civil Society Infrastructure'?

"Every day across the country, charities, community groups and volunteers do incredible work to support their communities. But many of these groups are small, local, and often working on their own. To develop as organisations, connect with others and influence local decision-making, they often draw on external support, services and expertise. Collectively, this wider network of external help can be referred to as local civil society infrastructure, or LCSi."²

The research often refers to the organisations LCSi supports, collectively, as civil society, though in some places the terms VCSE (voluntary, community and social enterprise) or VCFSE (voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise) organisations/sector are used instead.

What LCSI does

The activities of LCSI can be grouped under broad headings – the Five Functions of LCSI.

1. **Facilitating funding** (*providing funding information, advice, developing fundraising skills, influencing or distributing funding programmes, coordinating bids*).
2. **Organisational development** (*providing support, resources, training, or bespoke work to help civil society organisations improve operational management or strategic development*).
3. **Convening** (*bringing civil society organisations together with each other, and with other sectors; building partnerships and collaboration; arranging community-led activities*).
4. **Advocacy** (*representing views of, and sharing intelligence on, civil society organisations; enabling civil society/community voice; contributing to cross-sector strategic meetings*).
5. **Community participation** (*advice or signposting, promoting or brokering community activities and volunteering; enabling people to volunteer for example by recruitment/brokerage of volunteers; capacity building around volunteering*).

Who provides LCSI?

The research distinguishes between LCSI as a system of support, and the LCSI (or local infrastructure) organisations which provide this support. In most areas, delivery of LCSI functions involves both:

- **Core LCSI:** At the heart of LCSI provision are organisations for whom this is their primary purpose or focus – this includes general LCSI organisations such as voluntary action or community action, community and voluntary services (CVS), volunteer centres, and specialists focusing on a particular community, geography, identity or issue, or providing a particular kind of service. Most local authorities have one to three core LCSI organisations active in their area – though not necessarily based there; some LCSI organisations work across multiple areas. However, this varies and some areas have none at all.
- **Supplementary:** A wider network of providers, who are not primarily LCSI focused, but whose activities contribute to LCSI delivery, such as informal support or signposting, public sector activities such as community development or forums and networks, and private sector activities such as pro bono support or training.

How LCSI is organised

LCSI has evolved locally over time, and varies from place to place. Sometimes it is consolidated (a single organisation is responsible for most LCSI delivery); in others it is more dispersed (responsibility is shared between a number of providers); each model has pros and cons. However, more important than the number of organisations or local configuration is quality of provision, relationships and connections, and how well it is adapted to meet local need. It's not just about how many organisations exist. It's also about the quality of support, how well they meet local needs, and whether they are trusted by and connected to local statutory and frontline organisations.³

It is also dynamic rather than static: *"Local VCSE infrastructure is always in motion over time, as different issues and circumstances come and go."*⁴

For these reasons, the research suggests it cannot be assumed that a model that works well in one area can simply be transplanted successfully to another with a different context and history: *"Approaches to strengthening LCSI need to work with the 'grain' of local contexts."*⁵

3. What difference does LCSI make?

The research investigated how LCSI makes a difference to civil society and local communities, presented as a Theory of Change. This shows how activities related to each of the Five LCSI functions, if delivered effectively, lead to short / medium term outcomes for civil society and other local stakeholders, resulting in three long-term beneficial outcomes and impacts for local communities. The Theory of Change diagram in the research is detailed and complex, showing the connections and feedback loops between the different pathways.

The table on the next page is a very simplified summary.

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

How does this compare with NAVCA's Four Functions of Local Infrastructure?

NAVCA's Local Infrastructure Quality Accreditation (LIQA) framework is based around four functions of local infrastructure: (1) Leadership and Advocacy, (2) Partnerships and Collaboration, (3) Capacity Building and (4) Volunteering, with indicators and expected outcomes relating to each.

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; and there is significant synergy in relation to the outcome pathways.

NAVCA Function(s) and overarching LIQA outcomes		LCSI Outcome Pathway
1: Leadership and Advocacy and 2: Partnerships and Collaboration		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.

4. What does strong LCSI look like? What happens when it is weak?

To have this beneficial impact, LCSI 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. Weak LCSI was often recognised by local stakeholders as a problem:

“Tellingly, in areas where LCSI is absent, people were often trying hard to establish and develop it.”⁶

	Strong and effective LCSi	Weak/ineffective LCSi
Pathway 1: VCSE meets local needs.	Civil society organisations access relevant and trusted information, resources, guidance and training; have opportunities to build relationships and learn from each other Aware of funding and opportunities, they 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.	Civil society organisations (particularly smaller groups) lack knowledge about funding opportunities, skills and capacity to develop quality bids Civil society is fragment, dispersed, uncoordinated leading to duplication and competition. Funders report local 'cold spots' with fewer, fewer successful or less ambitious bids. There is less / less effective investment locally.
Pathway 2: Improved policy making on local priorities	Well-informed, well-connected LCSi is trusted by both civil society and decision makers trust LCSi to reflect the sector and diverse communities and provide credible, relevant information and advice that they can act 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.	Lack of co-ordination or informed overview of the local VCFSE leading to a sense of disconnection, isolation, fragmentation. 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.
Pathway 3: Increased community trust, empowerment and belonging	Community participation is promoted and facilitated; people are supported and motivated to participate. 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; reducing 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.

5. Components of strong LCSi

The research explored what qualities and conditions were important in enabling strong LCSi:

- Local knowledge and being well-connected were seen as most important. To provide effective LCSi services, represent and advocate for civil society and act as a trusted source, LCSi organisations need robust intelligence arising from strong and extensive local connections.
- Being well-funded was also crucial. Although funding does not guarantee effectiveness, LCSi needs sufficient capacity to have a strong local presence, provide quality services, engage widely across the sector, and to learn and develop.
- Having a good reputation with both civil society and with policy makers, speaking on behalf of the sector and independence (from local authority/government) were the next most important. LCSi needs to be trusted by all stakeholders as an honest broker and advocate for all parts of the sector, sufficiently independent to challenge when necessary.
- Having a local presence for a long time and being well-established in the local area mattered.

Additionally, there are organisational factors⁷ which enable effective LCSi:

- The importance of people and relationships: in a complex, relational operating environment, being able to recruit and retain staff with the skills, qualities and knowledge to provide effective leadership, deliver quality services and build strong relationships.
- Having the skills and capacity to evaluate LCSi activities, evidence tangible outcomes, and communicate the difference they make, build reputation and credibility.

5. The challenges for LCSi

Diminishing funding / coverage

Looking at the data, the research found that:

- Overall funding to LCSi organisations has been falling since 2011 – a period when local and national public sector budgets have been under particular pressure. A temporary uplift during the Covid pandemic was subsequently reversed.
- The number of local authority areas without an active (core) LCSi organisation in their area has risen, from 6% in 2001 to 20% in 2023.

Expectations

LCSi works across different geographies and communities, public sector structures, and with a civil society made up of organisations of diverse sizes, priorities and needs; negotiating complex relationships, alliances, tensions and sometimes conflicting priorities of different stakeholders.

“LIOs find themselves in highly complex and demanding positions, nested within dense networks of relationships within and beyond the local VCSE sector. They often have to balance limited capacity against multiple expectations for support from different parts of a diverse and contested local VCSE sector and the agendas pursued by different statutory stakeholders. Such a balancing act is based on ... the complex navigation of different issues, priorities and dilemmas”⁸

LCSi has been described as “the ‘hidden wiring’ of the VCSE sector”⁹– this highlights the importance of its enabling and connecting role, but also that its contribution is not always obvious, visible or well-understood.

6. What strengthens LCSi? What weakens it?

The DCMS research identified three key factors: funding, having ‘buy-in’ from local public sector partners, and strong relationships:

	What strengthens LCSI	Without which...
Funding	Funding is sufficient to enable all LCSI functions to be delivered effectively	Only some LCSI functions are resourced; the others are weak or absent
	Consistent funding to enable long term planning and the recruitment and retention of suitably skilled and experienced staff; quality services and effective engagement are enabled	Short-term or unreliable funding hinders long term planning and staff recruitment and retention; services are piecemeal, unstable or lack capacity to be effective
	Flexible enough to enable innovation, development and response to local needs	Rigid funding arrangements that hinder development or change
Public sector buy-in	Clear and robust evidence of LCSI's outcomes and impact is understood by all stakeholders.	Lack of or weak evidence, and/or ability to communicate this; it is unclear what difference LCSI makes.
	Public sector partners understand and value civil society and the contribution it can make	Lack of interest in or poor understanding of civil society; lack of meaningful engagement
	LCSI is respected as a strategic partner; its contribution is valued and there is clarity about who is responsible for funding it.	LCSI is not recognised or its contribution valued; 'free-loading' – stakeholders benefit from LCSI without resourcing it.
Strong relationships	Civil society and LCSI 'Champions' in the public sector (especially local authorities) at all levels – strategic and operational – with capacity to build relationships and understanding across sectors	Lack of strong relationships; public sector partners lack interest or capacity to engage with civil society or with LCSI.
	Good relationships are embedded in formal structures which ensure regular opportunities to engage, develop mutual understanding and learn from each other	Relationships are ad-hoc and circumstantial and vulnerable to changes of personnel. Lack of formal structures that ensure regular and systematic engagement

Virtuous and vicious cycles: a whole system approach

As the research shows, the existence and strength of LCSi is not consistent everywhere. However the factors which enable or weaken LCSi are interconnected, embedded in a wider local system of relationships, attitudes and resources that, taken as a whole, tend to either 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 understood and valued by public sector partners and local VCFSE organisations, there is buy-in and investment, 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.”¹⁰

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.

Conversely, in areas where the benefits of LCSi are not so well 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.

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.

Notes

- ¹ This summary was prepared by Kerrie Fletcher, an independent consultant with extensive working experience within local infrastructure.
- ² PBE 2025
- ³ PBE 2025
- ⁴ 'Walking a Tightrope' p30
- ⁵ DCMS 2025 Final Research Report p55 (Conclusions)
- ⁶ PBE 2025
- ⁷ 'Walking a Tightrope'
- ⁸ 'Walking a Tightrope' p29
- ⁹ 'Walking a Tightrope' p6
- ¹⁰ DCMS 2025 Final Research Report p28 (Sufficiency and Coverage)

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