Demystifying local VCS infrastructure

(What is local infrastructure 2.0)

Thank you to everyone who took part in our session on redefining local infrastructure (held on 21 July), or who contributed to the jamboards with your views. We have been sifting through your comments and notes, as well as doing more thinking.

The first thing to say is that there is clearly a need for this piece of work. Although one of you described what you do as "we go to boring meetings so you don't have to" we agree with your trustees that we need a better definition! We agreed with these general comments that you made:

- *HOW DO WE DESCRIBE INFRASTRUCTURE - we aren't roads!*
- *General comment: Infra. orgs are dismissed because people don't understand us. We need something that clearly explains what we do for statutory partners and stakeholders*
- *Helpful to be clear about what we are not, as well as what we are*

So, the title for this piece of work has been updated to reflect that, to **demystifying VCS local infrastructure**. Ahead of the recent session we had identified two ways to segment the work that you do into different categories, which we felt were a good starting point.

First, we separated the **what you do** from the **how you do it**.

Second, we split the **what you do** into four elements:

Leadership and advocacy * Volunteering * Partnership and collaboration * Practical support

We asked for your thoughts on whether these four elements covered your role, or if there was anything significant missing?

General themes

Some general comments around the language used emphasised that there are other terms alongside local infrastructure that could also benefit from a bit of demystifying: civic leadership, third sector assembly, place-shaping. We have put those to one side while we focus on local infrastructure. The point was extremely well made about the importance of language, especially not using paternalistic 'we do this for you' language, preferring inclusive: 'we do this with you'. Local infrastructure is a door opener, not a gatekeeper.

The distinction between sector voice and community voice was strong - advocacy was preferable to representation/the voice. Again, this relates to the power dynamic between local infrastructure and the other VCS organisations in your area. Acting as the voice of the sector without democratic engagement of the sector organisation generates a democratic deficit and undermines credibility. Acting as a voice is less problematic, but there are still questions about who is included in that voice, who is excluded, who decides. It also requires us to think, as 'the voice' or 'a voice,' we are a representative (free to make the decisions and recommendations we think are for the best) or a delegate (having accountability to those who give us that responsibility to act in their best interests).

And in relation to best interests, or to put forward the views of a sector which may include organisations which work in direct opposition to each other, this can be impossible.[1]

Four elements

There was some discussion about whether these four elements could be 'how' rather than 'what' you do, and suggestions for sub-categories . Overall, there was nothing added to the jamboards or raised during the conversation that suggested other elements needed to be added.

Action: we will develop our 'demystified' description o using the four 'what' elements above, noting that community development needs to be brought out strongly.

Leadership and advocacy

As leaders, sharing power and encouraging others adds to the impact, we want to avoid controlling, husbanding carefully and keeping power close to hand. 'Distributed leadership' was raised, leaders across the local VCS having autonomy and authority on the basis of their experience and knowledge. One comment recognised the position of local infrastructure as one organisation among many across the sector 'and therefore we cannot always be the leader'. This chimes with our view of NAVCA as one member of the local infrastructure network.

There was discussion of whether local infrastructure provided a single point of contact, or more inclusively acts as the front door to the VCS: this ties in with the element later on partnership and collaboration. It also reflects comments about not being seen as – or acting as – a gatekeeper.

You talked about 'speaking trust to power' and, as leaders, having a clear role in influencing. Trust was identified as an essential piece of leadership and advocacy: without having relationships of trust with the organisations you work with, across your own team, and with the people and organisation you wish to influence, being heard and listened to as a credible advocate will be less likely. One note was about your ambition for your own organisations: 'we need to be exemplars and lead by example; we can't give advice that we don't follow ourselves.'

One other issue touched on by some comments was around research, intelligence and insight: these are seen as crucial to being an advocate for the sector and the community. Someone described this information role as 'like a spider's web and we are the spider in the middle absorbing and sharing the information.' This also ties in with the other three 'whats.'

Volunteering

The comments you made on volunteering fell neatly (thank you!) into three strands:

1. **Strategic** – creating the conditions for volunteering, breaking down systemic barriers.
2. **Developmental** – supporting the development of good practice, whether with organisations which need volunteers, or employers, schools and colleges etc that want to support their people to take part in volunteering. This also covers supporting volunteer managers.

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[1] An example: does your local community include angling clubs, shooting clubs, hunting groups alongside animal welfare, vegetarian or vegan groups? These can all be examples of community action, with registered charities in all those categories, yet they can be directly opposed to each other. Wildlife conservation can include pro- and anti-hunting people. It's a challenge to be 'the voice' of all these at the same time, especially on issues that they are all interested in.

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3. **Operational** – delivering brokerage, connecting people and opportunities, supporting individuals to become involved in volunteering.

You highlighted different needs across the community, whether developing innovative approaches to bring young people into volunteering, providing supported/inclusive volunteering or running a trustee network to recognise the value and specific needs of board level volunteering.

Above all else, we all have a responsibility to keep people safe. Thank you to the person who added that note. A quick bit of promotion here for the #AreTheySafe work being done across the network.

Action: Many of you have already come forward to join the collaboration on Vision for Volunteering (VFV). We will use our learning from the VFV project and also the 'What is local infrastructure' work to develop our thinking here, which we will share with you and ask for your input.

Partnership and collaboration

You talked about the creation of synergies - the combined power of working together that is greater than the total power achieved by each working separately. You also talked about purpose: is a clear, immediate/short term purpose necessary? One comment: 'Purpose may not be apparent yet. Response to Covid-19 couldn't have been done without the partnerships we already had in place. It's a precondition for everything else.'

One issue which we could have explained better in our initial discussion document and at the workshop session was the level at which we envisaged local infrastructure partnerships and collaborations. Across the whole VCSE there are numerous partnerships and collaborations between organisations – so what makes local infrastructure special? We have been thinking about local infrastructure as a strategic or systems level partner and collaborator, there to influence in system design and improvement. Work during Covid-19, which exemplified this, include partnerships with local authorities, NHS and local resilience forums.

Action: This is an area where we want to do more thinking and have more conversations with you.

Practical support

Ahead of the workshop session, at NAVCA we thought we had a pretty clear idea of the things you would include in this section, but knew there would be others. You talked about governance and operational support:
- Governance, registered office address, Charity Commission registration
- Accountancy, payroll, HR, design services
- Facilities/building management and/or provision of office space

You also talked about community and organisation development:
- Training
- Capacity building
- Development of vision, mission, strategy, business plans
- Facilitation and mediation

There was also a category which could be considered as 'psychological' support:
- Mentoring and coaching
- Peer support groups

- Trustee networks
- Support in times of crisis
- Brokerage of partnerships between organisations

One area which needs more development is tdevelopment. Some people were focused on organisational development whereas others emphasised community development - empowering communities to bring about social change and improve the quality of life in their local area.

This has highlighted the importance of being able to articulate the meaning of 'development' particularly when we are speaking to people who don't work in, or have a clear understanding of, local infrastructure and/or the wider VCS.

Action: we recommend being clear about which type of development we mean, referring to 'organisational development for the VCS' and 'community development for [the area]'.

What about the 'how'?

In our early research for this piece of work, we were pointed to a project carried out ten years ago by NCVO – the Value of Infrastructure Project (VIP). The VIP identified local infrastructure as working, broadly, in three ways: to connect, develop and influence. We asked for your thoughts about the 'how' words that describe the ways you work:

This certainly reflects the breadth of the ways you work, and almost every word could apply to each of our four elements of local infrastructure.

The common threads through all the verbs, though, show that local infrastructure is a place where the work done in ways that are:

- Value-based
- Inclusive, accessible, caring and engaging
- Empowering and collaborative – doing with not doing to or doing for
- Developmental (in many senses) – creative, innovative, evolving, flexible
- Celebratory – showcasing the impact and achievements across your networks to demonstrate the value of the VCS

Two words that stood out: vulnerability and resilience. It's not clear that these are 'how' words but they encapsulate the context in which local infrastructure operates. The VCS is a precarious sector, where funding comes with myriad conditions attached; where despite their impact the longevity of organisations is not guaranteed; where policy changes, political changes, pandemics and natural disasters can mean we need to change direction at short notice.

The VCS is also a resilient sector: we rise to the challenges we see in our communities and our country; we do more with less; we speak truth to power and stand up to injustice. That very resilience can be a cause of precariousness, because it seems we just keep going. It's said that after a nuclear holocaust the cockroaches would still be here, carrying on as usual and sometimes it seems as if that is what people expect of the VCS – whatever is chucked at us, whatever pressure we are under, we carry on. We know that's not the case. We are all seeing the effects of austerity, Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and rising waves of need in your communities, along with the tired faces of our teams.

So, what next?

First, we hope that this piece of work is of interest and relevance to you. We welcome input from as many of our member organisation CEOs – and others in your teams – as we continue to develop this thinking.

Second, if you have any comments on the work done so far, please do send them to us. You can email them to Lucy Straker and Clare Mills (please copy to us both as we have leave coming up!).

One of NAVCA's strategic objectives is to 'make the case' for local infrastructure and we want this work to lead to a clear and concise articulation of local infrastructure that we – and you – can use with all our stakeholders. We'll be sharing our next iteration of 'local infrastructure' with you by the end of August 2021 and we hope it will be close to something we can all agree is of practical use.

We will work this up further to develop a short, visually impactful document in the early autumn we will use for NAVCA's work (for example to provide the framework for the quality award work, our research etc) and will share so you can use and adapt it locally.