
Change for good

**Report of the Independent Commission
on the future of local infrastructure**

January 2015

**Independent
Commission on the
Future of Local
Infrastructure**

About infrastructure

What is infrastructure support?

The purpose of local infrastructure bodies is to provide services, support and advice to, and promote, local charities, community groups and social enterprises that deliver social action. A good infrastructure body will offer the right mixture of support, challenge, leadership, resource, skills and knowledge. It will also help to foster relationships between the local voluntary sector, public bodies and local business. They also promote social action and make sure local communities have a voice.

Who provides local infrastructure?

Local and regional charities with a main remit of supporting the sector, such as:

- councils for voluntary service,
- rural community councils
- volunteer centres
- social enterprise networks
- community foundations
- local specialist bodies such as disability networks, BME forums and LGBT bodies
- specialist national bodies such as Clinks, the Women's Resource Centre, Voice4Change England, Children England and NCVYS.
- parent bodies / national HQ, such as Age UK
- other charities (including peer-support and specialist training providers).

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Foreword from the Chair of the Commission



Infrastructure matters in all the major areas of our lives and the social sector is no exception. Local social action plays an enormous part in the wellbeing of communities in this country and it needs to be recognised, nurtured and enabled. Over the past decade we have seen a great deal of money, from government and elsewhere, flow into the bodies which provide this support. While we may disagree about why, most of us agree that not all of it was put to best use.

The economic downturn, austerity, the welfare reform agenda and reductions to central government and local authority budgets are all impacting on social action adversely, with a heady cocktail of rising needs, reduced resources and a climate of anger and fear. Local infrastructure bodies are themselves experiencing loss of income; many are facing uncertainty and looking for new ways to serve their communities with less cash.

So our task, as we saw it, was to undertake an analysis of what the sector needs in the way of local infrastructure and to make proposals about what needs to change for those needs to be met. We were clear that a call for more money and a return to the previous status quo was out of the question. Things have changed, we're in a 'new normal' and proposals based on asking for things rather than offering a change agenda will fall on deaf ears.

We unpicked the various challenges being faced by infrastructure: the loss of income and consequences such as

rationing or targeting resources, the complexity of geographic boundaries in some areas, the difficulty in securing a voice on key local strategic bodies such as Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), rising inequality, and leaders who are so busy firefighting they neglect forward thinking.

We went out on the road and talked to people in various parts of England, mindful of the different challenges of the North and South, rural, urban and city settings. We took evidence from statutory sector commissioners as well as from the voluntary and community sector. We talked through all the issues emerging, with each member of the Commission injecting challenges from their own specialist perspective.

Everywhere we went, we found good things happening. Everyone we talked to had good examples of proactive change and some of these are included in the report. Every change we are recommending is happening in some places. There is every reason to be optimistic about the resilience of community action but no room for complacency about how best to support it.

The conclusions that we draw from what we found are elaborated in this report, together with our recommendations for key relevant audiences. The real punch line is that yes, infrastructure does deserve and need to be financed, but that it also has to undergo a redesign. It needs to be leaner, meaner and more technologically savvy. It needs to act

as a lever bringing in new resources to the sector, including social investment, crowd funding and pro bono support. It needs to be the enabler of voice and the advocate of community action. It needs to collaborate and share more cost effectively. It needs to promote and develop the 'time economy', co-production and good volunteering practices. Above all, it needs to help the sector with foresight and managing change, because the pace of change is not going to slow.

I want to pay tribute to NAVCA's Board for asking me to put together a Commission and then leaving us alone to get on with the job. A review like this is tricky territory for a membership body and in my view it was a bold and brave approach to take. Of course, I want to thank all the Commissioners for their time and careful consideration. Each person's contribution is evident in the final text and the rich blend of perspectives made for a lively, thought provoking and sometimes bumpy ride. We could not have done it without Helen Kara, who led the research, and Neil Cleeveley and his team from NAVCA. Thank you all.

We met regularly throughout 2014 and offer this report as a collective view. Most of us agree with most of it.

Sara Llewellyn
Chair, Commission

Foreword from the Chair of NAVCA

On behalf of NAVCA's trustee Board I would like to thank the Commission and in particular Sara Llewellyn, who chaired it, for taking on this important piece of work. It reaffirms the significance of local infrastructure and carries important messages for all of us who care about local voluntary action; first and foremost that it needs long-term support.

NAVCA's Board appreciates the value of the argument for strong and capable infrastructure bodies and we endorse the Commission's view that provision is currently patchy and quality is variable. If we have some reservations, they concern the extent of private sector support, which cannot replace public funding of the community development and place-shaping activities at the centre of our members' work.

We support the notion that infrastructure is there primarily to support voluntary and community action: to help local people come together in solidarity and mutual support; to make sure community voices are heard; and to help public partners understand the impact of their decisions on people's lives.

We are in no doubt that its future viability depends upon the willingness of local infrastructure organisations to redesign and rationalise their services and support. We want our members to be at the forefront of the debate about what this means for their

areas. But it requires more than talk; they need to create solutions that work for their communities. We know that many are working with other local infrastructure bodies, their local sector, funders and public and business partners to address the challenges posed by the Commission. However this is not universal.

NAVCA will support and promote the implementation of the Commission's findings. Specifically, we will:

1. Promote the findings of the Commission and monitor the progress in implementing its recommendations.
2. Publish a review of progress on implementation of the Commission's recommendations in early 2016.
3. Provide opportunities for local infrastructure bodies and their partners to learn from each other and offer mutual advice and support.
4. Host a series of round table events in partnership with NCVO for local, national and specialist infrastructure organisations to create a collaborative approach to shaping the future of local infrastructure.
5. Work with funders at all levels to develop creative and sustainable solutions to secure the future of infrastructure.



6. Ensure that NAVCA itself complies with and models the best qualities of an infrastructure body as described by the Commission, and continually challenge our members to do the same.

Caroline Schwaller
Chair, NAVCA

The Commission

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Executive Summary

Our research shows that infrastructure will be needed in some form as long as people come together to form voluntary organisations and community groups. The infrastructure of the future is likely to be a much leaner enabler, broker and catalyst, rather than necessarily a deliverer. New groups and existing ones will still need advice on legal forms, governance, compliance, fundraising and income generation, financial and organisational management and demonstrating their value. Many users of infrastructure operate on little or no income and are unlikely to be able to pay for it. They will also continue to look to infrastructure for information, advocacy and advice, for which it is very difficult to charge. All this leads us to conclude that one-off injections of finance, which have been tried in the past, will not address the sector's support needs.

It is generally understood that our physical infrastructure requires regular investment to help it cope with new and changing demands. We believe the case for investment in voluntary and community sector infrastructure is just as compelling, but that it has to be different to past attempts at delivering sustainability. Any future investment needs to deliver capacity, by unlocking social capital and leverage.

If the message to funders is to invest, the message to infrastructure has to be to change. This must be a 'something for something' deal.

Infrastructure must prove capable of 'redesigning' itself to meet changing demand. It will need to be both proactive and reactive – offering the local voluntary and community sector foresight and stewardship and helping shape how it responds to emerging needs and new demands. Infrastructure bodies must be relationship builders and brokers capable of leveraging resources. They must look for opportunities to collaborate with each other both within and across existing boundaries; maintaining strong links with their communities, whilst operating collectively and strategically to help their communities influence decision-makers.

We identified a number of key challenges for social action, which we address in our recommendations. In summary they are:

- Coping with the problems of today leaves no time for foresight.
- Many local organisations are hanging on for the 'good times' to return.

- Direct financial support is declining while demand is increasing.
- New forms of organising and advancing social causes are emerging.
- There are places where organised social action and infrastructure are fragile.
- Cashless and informal economies are growing but need more support.
- Lack of capacity is placing governance, leadership and succession planning under strain.
- Social media, on-line tools and technology are generally under-used.
- Poor inter-sector understanding is resulting in lost opportunities.
- Too few infrastructure bodies and local groups demonstrate impact.
- Understanding of new forms of finance is weak.

Recommendations

Our findings are based on the Commission's analysis of a large bank of evidence collected and analysed by our research team. We have one overarching recommendation, and further recommendations grouped for each of our four key audiences, which are:

1. Infrastructure bodies
2. Independent funders
3. Central and local government and local commissioning bodies
4. The business community.

It is not for us to say exactly how these recommendations should be implemented, as that all depends on the needs of each specific place and should be decided locally. But we have worked hard to make them implementable. If implemented, our recommendations will support social action and strengthen communities in places small and large, urban and rural, north and south, local, regional, and national.

Main recommendation

Local infrastructure needs to be redesigned and creatively resourced to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

Recommendations for local infrastructure

1. Make sure you have the necessary skills available to help you navigate change effectively, build strong relationships, enable good management, focus

scarce resources, demonstrate your value and support others in doing so.

2. Redesign your 'offer' to focus more on brokering relationships, especially in co-production, the 'time economy' and with potential corporate sector partners which can offer pro bono support through volunteering, mentoring, and board members.
3. Promote and support other socially active organisations and groups. Work together in solidarity across local and regional geographies, for best possible support and representation, to influence decision-makers at all levels.
4. Demonstrate your social value, economic contribution and communicate your impact: to funders, your local council and other public bodies, local business, and the general public.
5. Insist on your seat at the planning tables which affect your communities and use your influence on them effectively and accountably.

Recommendations for independent funders

6. Offer longer-term funding for infrastructure organisations or functions to support social action in local areas. Funding should not be focused solely or primarily on innovation.

7. Collaborate with other funders to maximise impact and to help infrastructure bodies make more effective use of new forms of organising social action and the changing world of social finance.

8. The Big Lottery Fund should use its influential position as a funder of social action to convene a round table, with funders and infrastructure bodies, to consider how to enable the redesign of infrastructure bodies.

9. Offer short-term funding to support the redesign of local infrastructure bodies.

10. The Big Lottery Fund should consider extending the BIG Assist initiative to enable more infrastructure organisations to access support.

Recommendations for central and local government and local commissioning bodies

11. Engage with the ideas in this report, and be ready to continue the dialogue it opens, offering your support in principle.

12. Act strategically to fund core infrastructure functions at the local level, to act as a multiplier, drawing in other resources and creating social capital.

13. Provide a VCS seat on key planning to ensure community input to local decision-making.

14. Collaborate with independent funders, infrastructure bodies, and others to invest in supporting social action and strengthening communities.
15. Listen to the stories the sector tells, and understand the value they demonstrate; share them widely, and respond to them appropriately.

Recommendations for the business community

16. Make sure your local representative bodies are connected to your local infrastructure bodies and able to help you get involved.
17. Work with your local infrastructure bodies to implement your corporate social responsibility strategy.
18. Deploy the skills of your workforce for the benefit of local charities and community groups. A finance assistant can help a community group organise its finances, for example.
19. Develop a volunteering policy for staff including incentives such as paid time to volunteer and a say in your company's corporate social responsibility strategy.

Why a Commission on local infrastructure?

The voluntary and community sector's infrastructure unlocks social capital and builds cohesion. Yet the traditional sources of funding for infrastructure support are diminishing while the demand continues to rise. Many NAVCA members are experiencing cuts to funding and are struggling to find new solutions.

NAVCA's board therefore invited an independent Commission to take a fresh look at the challenges facing its members, and infrastructure more widely, in the future. Its starting point was the major challenge of today: how to meet ever growing demand with shrinking resources. Its goal was to propose a way ahead to safeguard sustainable support for social actionⁱ in the future.

Why does this matter? Around one in three of us take part in social action, doing something to make a difference in our communities. Many of us join one of the 900,000 organisations that support social actionⁱⁱ. Most social action is self-sufficient, but from time to time individuals, organisations and communities need support. It takes a variety of forms; one-off or regular volunteering, helping a neighbour or community group, paid work for a charity, setting up or working in a social enterprise – all the kinds of activities that bind people and communities together. People involved in these and other forms of social action may at times require support: perhaps to start a new charity, or find new volunteers, or to promote their work, or solve a mission critical problem. It is worth

noting here, that volunteers are not a 'free' resource; they require support.

Good local infrastructure should help local voluntary organisations and community groups network and collaborate more effectively. Independent local infrastructure bodies working together across an area should:

- give local communities a voice;
- reduce inequality;
- promote the inclusion of the most disadvantaged communities and most vulnerable citizens.
- offer public bodies real local experiences of the impact of policy and practice;
- build social capital by bringing people together;
- create bonds between neighbourhoods and communities;
- contribute to the social, environmental and economic wellbeing of the community;
- help design services around the needs of people not providers;
- provide community leadership;
- support citizen engagement through volunteering; and
- link communities to local public bodies.

NAVCA's Board were concerned that many infrastructure bodies and those they support could get left behind by the quickening pace of social, political, economic and technological change. They asked a group of independent people to look at how infrastructure was coping with change and how it might need to change itself to meet the needs of local communities and the expectations of funders in the future.

The Commission's task was to consider the major challenges facing social action and the implications for the future of local infrastructure. Why is there such a variance in the quality and quantity of provision? Why is excellent support available in one area but not in another? Why do local funders in some areas decide not to support infrastructure and why do local charities have such a mixed story to tell about the services they received? Recognising that funding for local infrastructure is under strain, the Commission wanted, above all, to understand how infrastructure could make best use of existing scarce resources and generate new ways of working.

The Commission's approach

NAVCA's Board invited Sara Llewellyn to chair this independent Commission, which was constructed to include private, public and voluntary sector expertise and included rural, urban, city and regional perspectives. As can be seen from our membership we brought together a range of specialisms, knowledge and experience.

We met as a group throughout 2014, both to consider research evidence as it emerged and to develop our thinking about what would need to happen for good quality infrastructure to be delivered in the period ahead. We sought evidence from current infrastructure providers, local and national voluntary organisations, community groups, local and national public sector bodies, the private sector, academics and other interested parties.

We visited several localities to view current provision and hear from funders, providers and users of infrastructure. We held 14 workshops with local voluntary and community organisations, local infrastructure and national bodies. We collected views via an online survey and conducted in-depth telephone interviews with 15 sector experts. Altogether, we received over 250,000 words of evidence. We also drew on existing and emerging research including NAVCA's analysis of the Transforming Local Infrastructure programme and the scoping study for Big Lottery Fund's Building Capabilities programme.

Our review of existing and emerging research found that infrastructure support plays a significant role in the sustainable development of local groups and helps build relationships between local groups and with local public bodies and the business community. Our primary research backed this up, showing that infrastructure support is hugely valued by local voluntary organisations and community groups, and by many colleagues from the local public sector and business community.

We found the quality and availability of infrastructure support varies enormously across the country. Some infrastructure bodies are adapting well to change, yet too often the picture was of local infrastructure struggling to make sense of a new reality of rising demand and fewer resources. Having identified the value of, and need for, good quality infrastructure, our focus turned to new questions: how do we get the right infrastructure for the future needs of society and communities? And how can infrastructure help to shape the changes to come?

Infrastructure support for the future

Change is constant and old certainties are being tested. Public services are feeling the strain of an ageing population and the legacy of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures. If a 'new settlement' is emerging it is that uncertainty is here to stay. Social action is having to step in to help people where, until recently, they may have relied upon the state. That is not to say that social action should ever replace the key functions of the state. There remain significant areas of social welfare provision which, in our view, should remain the preserve of the state.

It seems to us self-evident that change will be a constant feature of the future. Infrastructure bodies need to adapt and help others to do so. Some are already adapting, but many are bogged down with the very real problems of today. In the circumstances it is unsurprising that our research found little evidence of foresight about future challenges. This is something our sector has started to tackle, but much more still needs to be done.

So, here we set out our vision for the future of local infrastructure, and start to explore how it could be brought about.

Our Vision

We see the future role of local infrastructure as a convener and broker, linking people and communities to resources, information and support. Bringing them together in solidarity and mutual support, helping them shape and control local services and offering them a voice. Working generatively and collaboratively within and across geographic boundaries and retaining strong links with the communities it serves.

To bring this about, infrastructure bodies will need to:

1. Forge productive relationships with local communities, public bodies, and local businesses to create a supportive environment for social action.
2. Have the skills, knowledge and capacity to seize new opportunities, take on new challenges and adjust to changing circumstances.
3. Focus scarce resources sensibly, based on evidence of need and greatest potential social impact, using principles appropriate to the local area.
4. Provide strong leadership that enables, empowers and develops social action.
5. Keep up-to-date with developments in relevant areas such as impact assessment techniques, technology and data sharing and social finance.
6. Monitor, assess, and reflect on the impact of its own work.
7. Involve people from all backgrounds, communities and skill levels, and help policy-makers and practitioners in different sectors to understand each other's roles better.
8. Convene a 'voice' for local communities to shape policy and influence decision-makers at all levels on behalf of local people.
9. Provide effective diagnosis of the capabilities and needs of local groups to promote high quality services driven by good governance and strategic change management.
10. Encourage resource sharing and the development of exchanges with little or no cash, such as peer-to-peer support, time banks, and local exchange trading schemes, and much greater use of online platforms and resources.

Findings

We found a compelling case for local infrastructure. The social sector needs effective infrastructure as do other sectors. Failure to invest in development and support is short sighted and wasteful. We want every community to have access to good quality infrastructure support. However, our research suggests that the picture is not so rosy everywhere and good quality infrastructure support is not universal. Further, as demand rises and resources decrease, even the best infrastructure bodies will need to find new and different ways of supporting social action.

The Office for Civil Society (OCS) identified that groups accessing infrastructure support had a “substantially higher likelihood of success in grant applications and bidding for contracts”ⁱⁱⁱ. Our research backs this up. Broadly speaking we found the more resources (financial and human) available in an area, the stronger the social action.

Paradoxically, the most under-resourced areas tend to be those with high social need: rural, where sparsely populated areas have more limited access to public services and low levels of connectivity; and deprived urban areas, with high levels of poverty, poor health and low educational attainment. It is in these areas that infrastructure support is particularly needed to strengthen communities and generate, as much as support, social action. Funders and commissioners

also benefit from strong infrastructure in the communities they most want to reach as it improves both their understanding of local need and the quality of bids and proposals, as OCS identified.

We found plenty of infrastructure bodies around the country responding in new and innovative ways to the changing environment and some of them are featured in this report. However, we identified a number of key challenges for social action:

- The sector, especially at the local level, is so busy coping with the problems of today that it often lacks the foresight to adapt to change effectively.
- A significant proportion of local organisations are hanging on for the ‘good times’ to return. Too few understand the scale of change still to come in relation to public sector cutbacks or the wider societal factors.

BUILDING CAPABILITIES

Research by the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham for the Big Lottery Fund identified a number of elements necessary to build the capabilities of social action organisations such as:

- Adopting a comprehensive and systematic approach (the ‘HOW’)...
- having a clear purpose agreed by everyone concerned (the ‘WHY’ & ‘WHO’)...
- being tailored to the organisation’s specific needs (the ‘WHO’)...
- following a thorough diagnostic process (the ‘WHAT’)...
- being delivered through highly capable and trusted providers (the ‘HOW’)...

- and including a range of different mechanisms which together involve everyone in the whole organisation (the ‘HOW’, ‘WHERE’ & ‘WHEN’).

They also found that unless organisations already have enough resources to give attention to their development, building capabilities alone is unlikely to lead to effective, sustainable outcomes. Further, the wider context in which an organisation operates, and its readiness to join in, is also important. Context and readiness must be taken into account in the diagnostic process if capability or capacity building is to be successful.

- As the need for infrastructure diversifies and grows, the direct finance available for it is very evidently reducing. Paradoxically, many people want more support, but also think front line services should be protected first.

- There are new forms of organising and advancing social causes which are more 'fleet of foot' than traditional community organisations and structure.

- As ever, there are deserts where organised social action and the infrastructure to generate it are fragile; the danger is of the 'strong getting stronger' and these places being and feeling left behind.

- Cashless and informal economies are growing but need more support, especially as they transition from previously funded services.

- Limited capacity is taking its toll on governance, leadership and succession planning, with those that 'do the most' feeling great strain as resources shrink and demand grows.

- That social media may potentially have important uses is broadly understood, but knowing how to engage with it is, at best, patchy. This is also true of on-line tools and IT solutions in general.

WE HAVE GROUPED OUR FINDINGS IN THE FOLLOWING SIX KEY AREAS, ALTHOUGH EACH HAS OVERLAP WITH OTHERS:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Enabling change | 4. Harnessing resources |
| 2. Shaping places | 5. Demonstrating value |
| 3. Stewardship of the sector's role | 6. Communications and storytelling |

- The statutory and community sector understanding of each other's roles and constraints is generally weak leading to frustration and lost opportunities. Work is needed to improve this.

- Too few infrastructure bodies and local groups are able to demonstrate impact in a proportionate way.

- There is limited understanding of social enterprise, social entrepreneurship and social investment.

Enabling change

Infrastructure faces a rapidly changing environment that is starting to make new demands upon it and the social action it supports. Localism and devolution are likely to require more decisions to be taken locally, whilst austerity and the state's withdrawal from a range of public services means communities are being asked to do more themselves: for example running libraries and local parks; gritting the roads; looking out for vulnerable neighbours. This is the emerging 'new settlement'.

Redesigning infrastructure

We see the role of infrastructure primarily as a broker of support, the convener of community resources and the steward of community action, rather than as a provider of services. Making this change is not necessarily easy and national bodies can do more to promote infrastructure bodies that are dealing with change effectively, support those struggling with change and constructively challenge those that are failing to deal with change.

The 'new settlement' will require more active and engaged communities, able to take control of their own destiny, with the capacity and capabilities to address needs and shape the future. Infrastructure's role is to lead change, identify new solutions, and continually refresh and renew support for, and approaches to, social action. It will require infrastructure to redesign

itself to become more flexible and responsive to the changing environment.

Equally, infrastructure bodies in an area (or, indeed, across several areas) will need to collaborate to give the local sector a strategic voice at all levels of policy-making. At the same time they will need to retain the flexibility to respond to further changes that may result from localism and devolution, such as how the fallout from the Scottish referendum will shape English devolution.

We have resisted the temptation to offer a template for redesign as every place is different and redesign will only work if it is locally determined. Whatever the outcome, infrastructure bodies will need to retain their reach into the communities they serve, or they risk becoming disconnected. We see a role for regional and national bodies, along with local and national funders, in helping their members collaborate within and across areas to bring this about.

Collaboration

All social sector bodies, including infrastructure bodies, need to constantly drive up standards and be vigilant in avoiding duplication. It is essential that charities shift from focusing on self-perpetuation, and focus instead on pursuing their social missions for the good of society, whatever that may mean for their own futures. Ultimately,

if a charity cannot find sufficient resources to pursue its mission or provide a suitable quality of service – or if it is duplicating the work of others – it will have to shrink, merge, form a partnership or close.

In some places infrastructure support has never been well-funded. Those in areas that are better resourced have a responsibility to extend the hand of solidarity. Some infrastructure bodies will have to close or merge; all will have to collaborate and share resources more effectively. For example, Community Works Brighton and Hove formed by the merger of four infrastructure bodies, redesigned infrastructure in the City to create a more sustainable organisation and save £150,000. Infrastructure bodies in Wirral formed an alliance with a shared referral system to offer a more seamless service to local groups. Specialist and general infrastructure bodies came together to offer an 'equality-proofed' referral service, led by specialist bodies across Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland. As this last example illustrates, it is likely that in the future, generalist and specialist organisations will achieve more together than they can individually.

The message for all infrastructure bodies is that they have a responsibility to collaborate, in whatever way is most appropriate, for the benefit of their communities.

Promoting equalities

Social action promotes social justice, cohesion and equality and helps communities establish a sense of belonging and identity, enabling them to develop the strength and confidence to reach out to other communities. Yet inequalities are increasing: between rich and poor, rural and urban, disabled and able-bodied, north and south, sick and healthy.

Infrastructure bodies have a key role to play, particularly in under-resourced areas, in helping local communities to address need and tackle inequalities. However, as the Third Sector Research Centre suggests the level of engagement is generally lower in more deprived areas^{iv}. Where this is the case, infrastructure bodies will need to maintain, and in some cases develop, their community development activity to help communities tackle growing inequalities caused by the economic downturn and the loss of public services.

Whilst it does not necessarily require a separate organisation, specialist and tailored support will still be required. The important point is to ensure that appropriate specialist support is available and the needs of the most marginalised communities are addressed.

Digital solutions

We found digital support to be on the increase, whether online, email, Skype, SMS and more, although it was made

SPECIALIST SUPPORT

Some support is open to all, while other support is specialist. The specialism can be around specific types of support (such as volunteering support or community accountancy), supporting particular communities (such as minority ethnic communities, LGBT groups or people with disabilities) or supporting particular types of organisations (such as faith based organisations, rural groups or sports clubs).

Specialist support brings specialist knowledge and expertise and can support action in a culturally appropriate way by addressing issues specific to the group concerned. It can reach out to communities that are hard to reach and may be excluded from other support.

ACCESSING SKILLS ONLINE

A local charity was connected with a volunteer web designer through Media Trust's free online matching service. The web designer lives in New Zealand - and 4 years on has still not met the charity 'in the flesh', but volunteers regularly with them online. The charity leaves requests for the designer at the end of their UK day; the volunteer designer wakes up as they go home, checks out his instructions from the charity, makes the changes, and sends a note re what he has done, and as he in turn goes to bed the charity staff come into the office to find the work done while they've been sleeping.

Maybe one day they'll meet!

clear to us that face-to-face support is essential in many cases. Digital opportunities are even making it possible for local people to get support from organisations in other countries.

Some infrastructure bodies have started to explore the potential for technological solutions: ONE Lancashire offers an online organisational health check; NOVA in Wakefield and VA Sheffield provide online diagnostic facilities; and some are starting to experiment with online assemblies and forums, which may have the potential to strengthen the voice of rural communities. Much of this is at an early stage, but it is an important strand that national bodies should help promote.

Local infrastructure can and should tap into and make available a wide range of online skills and resources whether local, national or global, including volunteer skills sharing. It is important to remember, though, that access to technology is not universal, particularly in rural and coastal communities and among older or poorer people.

Resourcing change

The research has left us in no doubt that social action will always require support. Sustaining infrastructure support can be a cost-effective way of supporting the voluntary sector as a whole. Increasing the managerial capacity of individual organisations and groups is

VOLUNTEERING FOR CHANGE

With Nesta funding Volunteer Centre Leeds set up and supported a volunteer centre inside a prison, staffed by prisoners. The initiative arose out of concern that ex-offenders who wanted to volunteer in order to develop their skills were unable to do so because local groups were reluctant or unwilling to take ex-offenders. The aim was to increase prisoners' employability skills, self-esteem and self-confidence, and reduce reoffending.

The project created micro-volunteering opportunities in the prison and worked with local community groups to develop suitable volunteering opportunities. It also helped prisoners match their skills and expertise with groups looking for volunteers and produced resources and toolkits for future skills sharing.

The project successfully embedded the Volunteer Centre's services in a new and challenging environment and built relationships between local groups and the prison. In fact many local groups were keen to use ex-offenders as volunteers once they had had the necessary support and training. By effectively demonstrating the wide-ranging value of the project, Volunteer Centre Leeds was able to secure Big Lottery Funding from Reaching Communities to continue working with the prison.

neither feasible nor affordable. Infrastructure bodies already create economies of scale for the sector, but can undoubtedly do more to lever in additional resources or to make existing resources go further.

However, for this to work, infrastructure bodies need resources of their own: not to support the status quo, or to ensure there is a dedicated support organisation in every area, but to enable infrastructure bodies to model and support change and development in

local areas. Our research found that at present, many staff members of infrastructure bodies are spending much of their time chasing funding, which is a waste of existing funding for scarce human/skill resources that are needed to support social action.

Resources for infrastructure bodies need to come from a range of sources:

- Central and local government funding and other resources. While we recognise that these are scarce at present, focusing some of them on infrastructure bodies is a cost-effective way to strengthen communities around the country.
- Independent funders, in particular, the Big Lottery Fund and some large charitable trusts could work together with local Community Foundations to sustain organisations which provide support, particularly those providing specialist support, in this time of transition
- Business sector contributions can be given in a variety of ways including pro bono access to premises, legal, accounting and human resources support and mentoring.

In summary, to effectively enable change means anticipating and responding to it, helping people to understand its implications and working with them to find local solutions that help to maintain and develop the effectiveness of our sector.

Shaping places

Local infrastructure bodies make a significant contribution to place-shaping by supporting local charities and community groups to bring the voices of the most marginalised communities to the table. They help connect local people to public services and bring the experience, knowledge, and skills to help design and deliver more effective services. This can help find practical solutions to the most deep-rooted and intractable problems. They also foster stronger collaboration between all partners and help improve co-ordination between service providers, bringing greater consistency and reducing duplication. They bring strong links to the external funding, assets, volunteers and other resources that social action brings into the area and improve community participation in, and engagement with, public services.

Linking communities to 'places'

Many infrastructure bodies engage in community development to build solidarity, generate social action and cultivate community voices. All contribute to the community's capacity to shape their 'place'. In the past this mostly centred upon a local authority area, but new layers of policy and decision-making (clinical commissioning groups and police and crime commissioners, for example) have made place shaping more complicated, so that it is becoming much more about shaping multiple places. The challenge is to maintain the strong

SHAPING THE LOCAL ECONOMY

In Manchester the infrastructure body Macc is involved in encouraging collective place leadership. As part of its contribution Macc produced Manchester's first "State of the Sector" report looking at the size, scope and contribution of the voluntary, community and faith sector to the city. Macc sees the sector playing a key role linking communities of disadvantage to economic opportunity.

- Judging economic success on the experiences of people and communities
- Creating an economy which works for all the people in it
- Strong communities and social inclusion as inputs to and outcomes of economic and business success

For more information see:
www.manchestercommunitycentral.org/civileconomy

Its Civil Economy approach is founded on three key principles:

connections to local communities that give infrastructure bodies their legitimacy, whilst being able to operate and build relationships at all the levels of local decision making.

The complex local relationships that arise from localism and devolution underline how important it is for infrastructure bodies to collaborate in the redesign of support for social action. We are already seeing the establishment of combined authorities for many of the major city regions in England and it is essential that infrastructure is able to link local communities to them. This will be vital if the most disadvantaged communities are to benefit from economic growth. Manchester's 'collective place leadership' demonstrates an innovative approach.

Supporting communities

Infrastructure bodies can do more to help their communities seize the opportunities created by localism. For instance, many local authorities are looking to transfer buildings into community use and infrastructure can help local community organisations distinguish assets from liabilities. Infrastructure should be looking at how it can help community groups to recognise the inherent risks and ensure that asset transfer helps to create sustainable income streams; some local authorities are funding infrastructure bodies to do this because they see it creating value for the local community.

Similarly, infrastructure can help communities shape their area through initiatives such as

participatory budgeting and neighbourhood planning, which can give communities a greater say about their neighbourhoods. They could tap into the resources of organisations like Planning for Real, which “help communities design and run programmes of community engagement so that their voice can be heard on topics such as neighbourhood planning, new housing and regeneration projects and the provision of services”.

Relationships matter

Relationships are two-way, so public bodies also need to give some thought to how they might foster collaboration. Public bodies such as local councils, health and wellbeing boards, clinical commissioning groups, and police and crime commissioners have an interest in seeing strong and well-networked infrastructure bodies, so they ought to be equally committed to building strong relationships.

Local infrastructure helps them gain a thorough understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of social action in their area and can help them deliver their priorities. It can also help by ensuring accountable community representation on all local decision making bodies such as health and wellbeing boards and local enterprise partnerships. Our research indicates that the sector’s capacity to engage with local public bodies appears to be related to the quality and level of resources available for local infrastructure.

CREATING NEW SOLUTIONS

The city of Enschede in the Netherlands worked with three local housing associations to shift the focus of policy away from top-down investment in physical and social changes, such as renovating housing estates or funding neighbourhood facilities, towards bottom-up investment in improving the life chances of individual people. Their theory was that improvements for individual people would result in a better quality social environment. They did this by training local people as ‘neighbourhood coaches’, who worked on behalf of 25 local organisations, in a holistic way, with individuals facing multiple or complex problems. The programme was long-term, beginning in 2009, with an interim evaluation in 2012. The results of the interim evaluation were so promising that Enschede began working towards city-wide implementation.

A strong relationship with local infrastructure can also help public bodies deal with difficult situations, such as budget discussions. For example, when Thurrock Council was considering significant cuts to the voluntary sector budget in 2014, Thurrock Council for Voluntary Services led the development of an alternative budget for the sector, which was endorsed by the council. This helped avert a dispute between the council and the voluntary sector and helped to maintain relations in trying circumstances for all concerned.

Building partnerships

An important element of place-shaping is brokering relationships across all sectors in order to bring

resources into the community. The challenge for infrastructure is to marshal resources in areas where the capacity for social action is likely to be weakest so that all communities are able to influence decisions and maintain services, not simply the best connected and most affluent. One example of radical local action that enabled people to create new solutions to challenging problems was in Enschede.

This kind of local collaborative working releases energy from communities and businesses, enabling localities to ‘do more with more’^{iv} by harnessing community, business and public resources for the good of the place. Infrastructure bodies have a key role to play in

helping to model and facilitate these new ways of working by developing the relationships that can foster such approaches.

Strong place-based partnership made it possible to stretch resources further 'by working to co-create new solutions to problems of social exclusion through collaborative working that releases the community and business energies of the locality'^{vi}. Through 'building new relationships' it was possible to expand the resources available in an area, even when public spending was being cut. Infrastructure bodies have a key role to play in helping local people collaborate more effectively. They should also help the public and business sectors to better understand each other, so that they can work together more effectively to help local communities shape their own destiny.

How this is done will be different in different areas, but one element should always be a clear route for community voices to be part of local decision-making. This needs to include the voices of dissent and the voices of the under-served.

The Community Hive in Blackburn has created a cashless exchange programme which is helping to strengthen the local community. It also enables local people and businesses to come together to shape their community.

PLACE-SHAPING THROUGH RECIPROCITY

The Community Hive was set up by the Volunteer Centre in Blackburn with Darwen to encourage people starting up in business or setting up a social enterprise to give to the community. Many small and medium-sized enterprises in Blackburn and Darwen are struggling to survive and are not in a position to give money. The Community Hive has reversed the concept of business giving by asking skilled volunteers, including local employees and students, to offer short-term practical help to local people trying to establish their organisations. This might include a range of small tasks to help kick-start business in the local community, such as help with market research, social media, or a one-off task like moving offices. Once established, an organisation that received help from a volunteer will return the giving pledge, perhaps with the offer of support for an unemployed volunteer, training, a donation, and lending equipment to a community group, or helping another new SME to start up. By encouraging these kinds of reciprocal relationships, the Community Hive aims to develop a local culture of giving and mutual support to build a prosperous and resilient community.

Stewardship of the sector's role

Whilst infrastructure bodies offer one to one support to local groups, it is not their sole function. Indeed, some would contend that it is merely part of a wider purpose which is the leadership and stewardship of the local voluntary and community sector, its relationship with key local partners in the public and private sector and relationships between local groups. In effect, what we have identified as infrastructure's role as the convener of social action.

Promoting the sector and protecting its values

Many of the issues the Commission discussed related to infrastructure's stewardship of the sector. Whilst, on the one hand organisations may use infrastructure services, which, it could be argued, may be delivered by disparate providers, there are a whole range of activities that infrastructure undertakes on behalf of the wider sector and its partners such as:

- promoting partnership working between stakeholders
- promoting equalities and influencing behaviour
- anticipating needs
- facilitating exchange and co-operation
- strengthening community empowerment and participation
- fostering collaboration through informal alliances

- balancing the independence of social action with the interdependence of groups, sectors and communities
- encouraging co-operation, whilst ensuring accountability

Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation sets it out well in its strategic plan: "GMCVO offers 'collaborative' leadership, based on dialogue, respect, consensus and distributed power. This enables people to work together effectively to achieve shared goals, benefiting from a pool of skills, knowledge and resources and building trust through action."^{vii} Voluntary Action Rotherham has done precisely this through its social prescribing programme where it acts as the focal point for a referral service to a number of local groups providing non-clinical support to patients of a local GP surgery.

Infrastructure bodies need to steward their resources carefully. We are certain that there is no longer room for infrastructure bodies to offer open-access to that support; there has to be some assessment or understanding of the likely value of an intervention. The Building Capabilities research identified the importance of diagnostic tools in helping organisations to provide the right support and so focus scarce resources effectively; infrastructure bodies in Sheffield, Leicester, Middlesbrough and Chester have already developed diagnostic tools.

Charities (including infrastructure bodies) that can demonstrate their worth, to communities, the economy, or the environment, are much more likely to be able to access support and funding.

Allocating resources

With demand increasing and funding in decline, infrastructure bodies need to give careful consideration to how they target support to best effect. Allocation of scarce infrastructure resources, what some might call rationing, should be based on a set of principles. This would avoid resources being allocated by habit or to those who are best at lobbying, and instead, focus on areas of greatest need where they are likely to have the most impact. Local infrastructure should prioritise support for groups most willing and able to collaborate with each other for the benefit of the local community. The principles used should be agreed by a representative group of local people to suit the local context. Here are five possible approaches:

1. Strategic – based on evidence, where local gaps in services are identified and resources provided to help fill those gaps
2. Needs-led – based on evidence gained by working out who is in most need, then providing support services only to those people, to redress inequalities
3. Growth and development – support services are provided only

to organisations that are succeeding in social action, because this is a more effective use of resources than supporting failing organisations

4. Membership – support services provided only to an organisation’s members

5. Market – support services provided only to those who can pay for them

They are not mutually exclusive. For example, a support organisation might choose a market approach for its training courses, a membership approach for sharing information, and a strategic approach to encourage young people to volunteer. The point is for local infrastructure bodies to think through with their partners how best to allocate scarce resources to achieve the best results for the local community.

Promoting good governance

Trustees make a huge contribution to the stewardship of the sector. Being a trustee is a big responsibility, as trustees are responsible for what a charity does, for its strategic management, and for its leadership. This stewardship is in itself a form of social action. Our research shows that trustees’ roles can be onerous, and trustees find it hard to develop a strategic and far-sighted response to change while balancing increasing demand with reducing resources. Trustees’ support needs should be a high priority for infrastructure bodies.

CONVENING POWER OF INFRASTRUCTURE

Hackney CVS is a good example of an infrastructure organisation using its convening power to make the most of the sector’s adaptability. It has brought local charities and community groups together to deliver work funded by the local authority, the CCG, the Big Lottery Fund, local businesses and charitable foundations. They have helped local charities and community groups win funding and helped funders meet their strategic aims.

- Hackney CVS set up a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV), City & Hackney Together, which has helped Hackney charities win contracts worth millions. Hackney CVS manages the contracts but local charities deliver all the work.
- Sixteen community groups are able to provide financial advice to over 50s in Hackney thanks to the Take Care of the Pennies project, funded

by Lloyds TSB Foundation. Hackney CVS created and manage this partnership, which demonstrates that consortia are not just for larger charities delivering public services.

- Boys aged 10 to 16 are mentored to improve school engagement, educational attainment and support them to build plans for the future thanks to Hackney CVS’s Brighter Futures Mentoring Programme.
- One Hackney, a CCG funded programme to reduce hospital overstay and the inappropriate use of A&E, is the latest partnership programme run by Hackney CVS.
- Working with the East London Business Alliance they match local businesses looking to provide pro bono support with suitable local organisations needing support.

Convening the sector

A business or social enterprise facing a fall in income may look to new markets to earn income. However, the unique role of infrastructure bodies means that, in our view, it is preferable that they avoid competing with other local charities for contracts to deliver services, unless it is central to their social mission. It may, however, be

appropriate in some areas for infrastructure bodies to collaborate with other local charities to deliver services directly. Hackney CVS has developed a number of activities that complement and support the work of local groups, whilst generating income.

Harnessing resources

Whilst demand has probably always outstripped supply, our research suggests that the disparity is becoming more acute and is likely to remain so. At the same time, funding for local social action is under pressure and infrastructure bodies are feeling the squeeze. There is, in our view, more that can be done to supplement funded support. This requires infrastructure bodies to shift attention solely from finding new funding to support social action, and towards finding new ideas which will work with their budgets to meet local needs.

Grants and contracts

In recent years considerable effort has been expended on developing local markets for contracting at the expense of grants. We are in no doubt that there is a role for infrastructure in supporting the development of these local markets and social enterprise, however it is mostly, but not entirely the preserve of larger charities. Whilst infrastructure bodies can and should support market development, it should not be at the expense of enabling broader social action, although, as the Hackney case study shows, the two are not incompatible. Indeed, it could be argued that such support should itself be offered on a commercial basis.

Like all funding, grant funding has declined in recent years, but it is an essential catalyst for social action. As the Calderdale example illustrates, many funders understand the

power of grants. In the past grant funding has often been short-term and targeted at new initiatives, but the Calderdale example shows how a well-constructed grant programme can help a funder realise its objectives through its support of social action. We certainly see grants as part of the future funding mix, but in the future funders will need to pay much more attention to the community benefit of what they fund and the sustainability of those they fund. In summary, support for social action will always require grant funding and it would be a false economy to ignore this fact.

BIG Assist

BIG Assist is a pilot programme working to support infrastructure organisations to be more effective, sustainable and better able to adapt

to change. Through over 150 visits to date BIG Assist has supported a wide range of learning opportunities to explore new ideas, evaluate risk and potentially save precious time and money.

We believe there is scope for more collaboration between funders, national bodies and local infrastructure to share learning from programmes such as BIG Assist and Transforming Local Infrastructure.

Over 500 local and specialist infrastructure organisations have already benefited from the BIG Assist initiative to understand their support needs, choose expert support and participate in peer to peer support visits. An independent evaluation has shown how infrastructure has been benefiting from this kind of

GRANTS FOR GOOD

Calderdale CCG has invested heavily in its local voluntary sector since April 2013. It is grant funding Voluntary Action Calderdale (VAC) to run a 3 year programme of support specifically designed to improve the quality, safety and patient experience offered by frontline groups. Areas of work include equalities, safeguarding and wider system impacts. As part of the programme development VAC developed a quality assured engagement system for the CCG. This engagement system has increased investment in local communities and has improved and strengthened local relationships between VCS Groups and residents.

WOW SKILLS EXCHANGE

Rother Voluntary Action & 3VA teamed up with Business in the Community to create the WOW Exchange, which brings business and the voluntary and community sector (VCS) together for mutual benefit. WOW Ambassadors from local businesses have successfully involved more than 100, mostly small, businesses and 100 VCS organisations.

The idea is to empower businesses and charities to self-serve using the WOW (Wish-Offer-Win) Exchange website. It enables local groups to tap in to business expertise to help identify and meet some of the challenges they face. Limited administration resources mean the website needs to be as self-managing as possible.

Offers of assistance and Wishes for help are posted on the WOW Exchange website and members from each sector match themselves to Offers and Wishes. At WOW Exchange events voluntary organisations can express their Wishes in person, and the businesses can express their Offers of help in person too.

The WOW website www.wowexchange.org classifies Offers & Wishes into subcategories of Training, Time, Spaces, Resources, Marketing, Business Services and general. The skills are a mix of professional services such as accountancy, insurance, charity law, marketing, and also giving time such as being a volunteer or helping at an event, or becoming a trustee.

support to enable it to plan for the future and develop new business models. The benefits can be seen in the example of the Mansfield CVS visit to Hackney CVS to explore its Special Purpose Vehicle.

We would like to see the BIG Assist initiative extended to enable more infrastructure organisations to access support. Through it, national bodies such as NAVCA and NCVO might work together to help spread the good practice of infrastructure bodies that are already leading the way in

re-designing infrastructure.

New forms of Finance

Income generation has always mattered to local social organisations and traditional grant support is still very important. However, we know grant support is reducing and so it is wise also to look elsewhere. Whilst only larger charities and social enterprises have so far used new models of finance, such as social investment and loan finance, it is an area of rapid growth. The government is committed to growing the social

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

Mansfield CVS recently visited Hackney CVS: *“Excellent, informative visit which was critical to the future business plans of Mansfield CVS. The visit provided us with a lot of information on how to form ‘Special Purpose Vehicles’ in order to engage successfully with the CCG and Local Authorities. The next step is to talk to key partners regarding how we are going to take this forward and to form a partnership of local organisations who will deliver services in the future.”*

investment marketplace for the delivery of public services in particular but social finance also offers many other possibilities.

Of course, not all forms of finance are suitable for all activities and it is important for support bodies to understand the different forms of

finance and which purposes they each best suit. Social investments, whether through loans, equity investment or social impact bonds all need repaying and are only suitable for organisations which can generate surpluses. Not all activities can do this and it should be remembered that our sector is based on providing for people failed by traditional 'markets'. Charging people for services they cannot afford is simply not an option in many places and would defeat the purpose for which many organisations were set up in the first place.

Having said that, pure grant finance is a precious and limited resource that should only be used where other forms of finance will not work. Loan finance from a social lender can help provide financing for buildings or working capital, for example, where there are strong income streams in place, either from trading with the public or from statutory sector contracts for services. Social enterprise takes many forms and encouraging a more entrepreneurial approach to bringing in money for community action could be better explored. Local initiatives can benefit from community share issues or the fast developing trends for crowd funding and on-line fundraising. Support organisations should gear themselves up to help communities raise money from these new developments.

Social impact bonds are more specialised and are useful for a narrower range of activities – mainly in re-engineering public services. They can help move money 'upstream' for earlier interventions and they have the added advantage that the risk is borne by the investors, not by the social organisation delivering the work.

Over the past decade, there has been a slow but certain development of investment readiness support for emerging social enterprise. This support is not unlike generic development support and yet, with

some notable exceptions, most existing support organisations have steered clear of this space. In the Commission's view, this is a missed opportunity.

Infrastructure bodies will need to support and equip local groups to make informed decisions. There are a growing number of new forms of finance and it can be difficult for charities to identify which model would best suit them and in which circumstances. There is a role for infrastructure leadership to work closely with Big Society Capital whose remit it is to lead and shape the social investment marketplace.

UNLOCKING LOCAL RESOURCES

Islington Giving is a community brokerage and funding alliance, in Islington, London, set up by the Cripplegate Foundation. Over four years a cross-sector collaboration has developed that is capable of unlocking underused resources and building a sense of identity and place across the borough of Islington.

Islington Giving's success illustrates the benefit of long-term investment by funders such as the Cripplegate Foundation. Several other London boroughs have been impressed by the impact of this approach and are now exploring it.

The Community Foundation model creates routes for local giving, especially from local business. **Tyne & Wear Community Foundation** is widely acknowledged as one of the UK's strongest, integrating community development, community advocacy, 'funder plus' and philanthropy support. Most English areas have a Community Foundation and they have a vital contribution to make to social action alongside other infrastructure bodies.

Social enterprise and public service contracting are not for everyone, but are certainly options for those with the capacity and capability to negotiate its complexities. As the Hackney example demonstrates, there may also be some scope for a supported service delivery partnership. We know this poses particular problems at the small scale, often local, end of the market, but we think there is scope for the Hackney approach to be adopted elsewhere.

Social entrepreneurship overlaps with, but is not the same as, social enterprise. Development support for social entrepreneurship is resource intensive as it is largely focused on individuals. Existing providers such as UnLtd and the School for Social Entrepreneurs have proven successful models; infrastructure bodies need to learn from these models and selectively integrate some of their features and develop more brokerage links with them.

Crowdfunding

Crowdfunding is a way of raising small amounts of money from a large number of people, normally through social media and online platforms. This relatively recent innovation has considerable potential for social action and can help raise a groups profile at the same time as it raises money.

CROWDFUNDING

This partnership between Nesta, Buzzbnk and the Community Development Foundation shows how crowdfunding can be a viable option for community groups, particularly when donations are matched with additional funding.

It helped the Friends of Rockingham Road Pleasure Park to use crowdfunding to raise enough money to install a creative, natural and imaginative play area in their park in Kettering. This new play zone caters for the needs of very young children, who currently don't have anywhere safe to play in the park. The project received £300 worth of match funding to complement the £4,105 that they raised during the crowdfunding campaign and, although they fell a few hundred pounds short of their overall target of £4,800, raised more through crowdfunding than any of the other groups in the Crowdmatch Challenge programme.

**For more information see:
Community Development Foundation's
and other similar organisations'
websites.**

Business skills

The Office for Civil Society has been working with Business in the Community (BITC) to encourage more businesses to share skills with local community organisations. They have led an open policy-making process, involving research, stakeholder engagement and a series of events with cross sector representatives (including NAVCA, NCVO, FSI, Cranfield Trust, Do-it Trust, Media Trust and several large national businesses) to establish a series of workable solutions.

The success of the project hinges on effective cross-sector working, embedding skills-sharing volunteering across partner activities and defining the areas where organisations can make the greatest contribution. Over the first quarter of 2015, BITC and the Media Trust will work with partners to develop a full strategy in preparation for activating nationally. It builds upon successful work already undertaken such as that at Cheshire West.

CHESHIRE WEST'S SKILLSHARE PROGRAMME

The Cheshire West's Skillshare programme offered local businesses a structured way to support to local groups and demonstrate a genuine commitment to corporate social responsibility and the local community. Chester Voluntary Action employed a Skillshare Coordinator to broker relationships between business professionals and voluntary and community organisations in need of free support. This included business mentoring, business planning, marketing, social media, IT

equipment, software and training, and architecture and planning. It was funded by the government's Transforming Local Infrastructure programme and in an 18 month period:

- 87 voluntary and community organisations received support through Skillshare
- 55 businesses provided pro-bono support
- 108 successful relationships have been brokered.

Demonstrating value

We are in no doubt that good quality infrastructure adds value for funders, communities, local organisations, and individual people. We found evidence that in areas where the value of infrastructure bodies is understood, relationships between charities, local communities, and local public bodies are stronger and more productive. However, it is no longer enough for the sector to claim to add value, it must be able to demonstrate its value if it wants support.

We believe that infrastructure bodies should lead by example by demonstrating their own value, and to help local organisations and groups to demonstrate their value too. This can lever resources into an area, drive continuous improvement, and identify and support good performance.

The impact of infrastructure

For some time, a 'Holy Grail' of impact assessment has been to demonstrate the value to individuals who benefit from the social action that infrastructure bodies support. But the attribution chains are too long and complex for such impact to be demonstrated within available resources. Indeed, the Third Sector Research Centre doubts "that a single grand research or evaluation design will address the range and complexity of questions involved in capability building"^{viii}. However, more bite-sized areas worthy of consideration include:

- The value of infrastructure bodies in enabling locally driven change
- Infrastructure bodies' ability to improve practice within local groups
- Levels of influence of infrastructure bodies
- The amount of funding a support organisation has helped to bring into a local area in a given period, and its impact
- Number of volunteers placed and the benefits of their volunteering after a period of time
- The extent and quality of local relationships around social action
- The level of inclusion of different voices
- The cost and impact of infrastructure bodies in different types of location (urban, rural, high deprivation, etc)
- The impact of a support organisation's intervention on charities' structural change or delivery redesign
- Successful brokerage of social action services
- The economic contribution of a support organisation to its local area.

THE VALUE OF INFRASTRUCTURE IN HALTON & ST. HELENS

Halton and St. Helens Voluntary and Community Action (VCA) evaluated its Lottery-funded Nuts and Bolts project in partnership with the University of Liverpool (2011). The evaluation compared experiences of those organisations that it had provided with intensive support, with those who had had some contact, and those who had had very little interaction. It found that those that had received support through Nuts and Bolts had improved their processes relating to governance, financial management, business planning, workforce development and partnership working, as well as improving their confidence and self-esteem. The report considers 'critical success factors', and suggests that input from Halton and St. Helen's VCA was the most significant factor for the sustainable development of local groups.

Clearly no infrastructure body will be able to address all of these at once – and in some cases it may be difficult even to address one. However, working with partners can help, as (for example) local authorities, clinical commissioning groups, or universities may already collect relevant data that they would be willing to share in return for access to findings. There are many tools available to help with gathering and interpreting evidence and support comparison, experiment, learning and change.

Demonstrating value itself requires resources, and these should be proportionate. Infrastructure bodies should share best practice in, and effective tools for, impact assessment. Over time, infrastructure bodies should consider whether it is viable to offer support to those that are unable to demonstrate their benefit to the local community in some form.

The value of social action

Funders and individual donors expect the organisations they fund to demonstrate the value and impact of social action. Public bodies, in particular, will want to understand how the social action they support contributes to their strategic priorities and helps to reduce public spending on expensive acute and remedial services. Evidence that an organisation's activity produces cashable savings, for example by improving people's general health and well-being or reducing

THE VALUE OF INFRASTRUCTURE IN EAST SUSSEX

3VA in East Sussex conducted a social impact review of its work in order to better understand its impact, plan services and share lessons learnt. It has produced 'dashboards' for each of its areas of operation, including data on amount and type of support provided, value of funding levered into the local sector and showcasing particular areas of work and pieces of training. This is coupled with 'light touch' quarterly monitoring against specific outputs, outcomes and case studies against NAVCA Quality Award performance standards.

THE VALUE OF INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE SOUTH WEST

The South West Forum has encouraged the identification of 'impact leaders' across all sectors to champion better impact assessment and share good practice. It has conducted research and development work with local infrastructure organisations and local charities and community groups in the region to develop impact measurement systems for the voluntary sector and for infrastructure itself.

An example is Voscur's (Bristol's generalist infrastructure body) work with the University of Bristol to demonstrate its social and economic value. This was a complex process, so the researchers were cautious, but they were able to say that for every £1 invested in Voscur's work, £11.82 of social value was created. They also identified the positive effects of Voscur's input on improvement in member organisations' performance and impact.

reoffending, is likely to become even more attractive in the future. Big Society Capital's Outcomes Matrix offers a useful indication of the headline outcomes that public bodies are after and enables organisations to see if the outcomes align to their own objectives^{ix}.

Equally, infrastructure bodies will want to target their support where it is likely to have the greatest social impact. This requires the capability for economic analysis and impact assessment that most local organisations are unlikely to be able to develop. Whilst there is a clear role for infrastructure bodies to assist with this, many may not have the capacity themselves. Where this is the case, online resources such as Social Value Hub^x and Social Value Global^{xi} are starting to pool and publish accepted proxy values that may help simplify impact measurement.

This report will go some way towards demonstrating the value of infrastructure support for social action. As a Commission, we have considered the issue in great depth through our research and discussions, and have found clear evidence of its value. In particular, local support for local social action makes a uniquely valuable contribution that cannot be replaced by national support.

THE VALUE OF SOCIAL ACTION

The West Berkshire TLI partnership employed a 'bespoke Quality Assurance programme' to help local voluntary and community organisations demonstrate their quality to funders. It was developed in partnership with the local authority and NHS Berkshire West, and was adopted by the Council's children's services as a relevant quality assurance framework in its last grants round.

North East Lincolnshire's Supporting Volunteers Award features two levels of award, and is supported by a dedicated online platform. The website states that this is tailored towards smaller organisations with more limited resources, and that this can be a stand-alone quality assurance award, or it can be used as a springboard to higher level, national awards.

Salford CVS produced a toolkit, training and one-to-one support to help local groups measure and demonstrate their equalities practice. It was developed in partnership with several groups with experience in the area following comments by Salford City Council that equalities practice was an area of weakness in funding applications.

Communications and storytelling

One of the strongest messages from our research was the expressed (and sometimes unexpressed) need for help with telling stories, building the narrative of what social action is and why it matters, for a wide range of audiences both local and national.

At a time of austerity, with huge pressure just to survive, local groups need to be able to reach out to their audiences: services users and clients, volunteers, donors and funders, and commissioners, to campaign and influence change.

The story of social action

Our research found that people engaged in social action are crying out for strong clear messages about the nature and value of its work. This would help to reduce the widespread misconceptions and misunderstandings about social action in general, and infrastructure bodies in particular, and the profound impact these misconceptions and misunderstandings have on the sector's work.

Local groups want a stronger collective voice to help argue for social action to be included in the new economic and social ecology, and to help lobby for positive social change. Infrastructure bodies, as leaders, representatives and champions, need to be able to communicate effectively and cost-effectively with a wide mix of audiences. The ability to tell the story of social action, and its value, would help the staff and volunteers of infrastructure bodies to communicate

more effectively with local and central government, public bodies and particularly commissioners, private companies, the general public, and the media – and, as importantly, with local social action organisations and groups, in all their diversity.

A common language

The communications 'gap' we found between the business community, public bodies and socially active organisations and groups was greater than we expected. Specifically, help is needed to understand the different roles, responsibilities and resources of public bodies in particular. But as local businesses increasingly become a resource and a partner for infrastructure bodies, the challenge of 'speaking their language' will grow too. Increasing inequality will also be a challenge, as different media are accessed, different networks used, and communities separate and become more isolated.

The terminology around social action doesn't help. People have difficulty with widely used terms such as 'infrastructure', 'volunteering', and 'governance'. Even the names used to collectively describe social action organisations (voluntary sector, third sector, civil society, etc.) are meaningless to many, yet these are much discussed, which is impossible without a name or names. The gulf between charities, community groups and social enterprises can sometimes seem enormous, as a different language has evolved in each of these sub-sectors.

Language creates and conveys meaning. Talking about 'customers' is likely to convey a different meaning to talking about 'beneficiaries', so infrastructure bodies need to find the appropriate language and use it with precision and consistency. Involving service users and volunteers in developing messages could help to enable a grassroots common language, but this needs to be shared beyond the grassroots among everyone who does – or could – take social action. The media will seldom use the complex jargon used by many social action professionals, providing yet another barrier to the understanding and visibility of the work of infrastructure bodies.

Infrastructure bodies need to explore opportunities to simplify their language, to find common language for the wide and diverse populations they serve. Telling the story of the impact of social action, and of individual organisations, including infrastructure bodies, is becoming increasingly important. This leads to more complex communications needs, alongside exciting new opportunities to share the voices and stories of communities, service users, and beneficiaries.

New forms of communication

Many of the challenges and opportunities discussed in this report are poorly understood even by social activists. People in local organisations and groups often don't understand where they fit into the bigger picture. Leaders need to communicate well to

be effective, and infrastructure bodies have a key role in helping make this happen.

Infrastructure bodies have a crucial role to play in providing practical support with communications to local organisations and groups. There is still an important need to use conventional media – local papers, radio and television play a key role in local areas for the vast majority of small organisations and groups. However, the growing and exciting opportunities lie in digital and social media, including in providing content for the online and mobile platforms of local media, and this is where infrastructure bodies have a vital role. This includes arranging communications training, finding mentors and volunteers to support their members, acting as a hub to share best practice, and facilitating sharing, conversations and exchange between everyone they can reach. It also includes knowing, and informing others, about existing tools, such as the online platforms which allow organisations to share experiences and learning, and tell stories peer-to-peer, such as Big Assist's Sharespace and NCVO's KnowHowNonProfit.

Infrastructure bodies have a duty to improve their work in digital media, to become much more visible to everyone in their area, to represent their wider constituencies, and to tell great stories.

The complexity of this overall communications task cannot be

MULTI-MEDIA CAMPAIGN FOR CHANGE

Women's Aid, the support organisation for women's domestic abuse charities, identified through its membership that refuges were closing due to local authority cuts to funding. Women's Aid started the SOS Save Refuges Save Lives campaign setting out the importance of keeping refuge provision. They pulled together the national statistics and policy position, and found local providers to add their stories. An on-line petition and Twobby (Twitter Lobby) was run through their press office (a facility local providers do not have) and a vigil was held at Downing Street as the petition was handed in. The vigil created press interest across radio, television, print and online media. Four days later the Department for Communities and Local Government announced a £10m fund to support refuges. Importantly, this fund is to augment local authority funding and not to replace it. Local authorities cutting their funding for refuges cannot apply to this fund.

underestimated, and would prove daunting to the average small private company! The challenge for paid staff, trustees and other volunteers to learn new skills, find professional support on the ground, find the time, and develop the technology is enormous.

However, the opportunities to tap into professional communications support provided by national infrastructure bodies, by local professional volunteers, and by digital 'natives', could be transformational for local infrastructure bodies and the organisations and groups they support. Local media are hungry for more stories and diverse voices, and can be encouraged to provide

training sessions and volunteers to infrastructure bodies.

There is also a widespread network, in both urban and rural communities, of small businesses and freelancers who are keen to volunteer their communications skills in PR, marketing, digital and film production. Young people have grown up with skills in social media and story-telling, using smartphones to create content that brings alive the stories and messages that support and these are skills that other organisations should be sharing. They can provide a fantastic resource to the smallest organisation or group, helping others to grow in confidence and skills.

References

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- ^{vi} Ibid..
- ^{vii} See <http://www.gmcvo.org.uk/strategic-plan-2014-16>
- ^{viii} See <http://www.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/building-capabilities-voluntary-sector.pdf> p93
- ^{ix} See <http://www.bigsocietycapital.com/outcomes-matrix>
- ^x See <http://socialvaluehub.org.uk/>
- ^{xi} See <http://www.globalvaluexchange.org/>

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