

CCN
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**Councils & Communities
in Partnership:**

**How counties can support a post-pandemic recovery
for the voluntary and community sector**

August 2021



Introduction

The past 18 months has presented a challenge for governance unprecedented in modern times with the pandemic placing enormous demands at both national and local level. County and unitary authorities have been at the forefront of supporting their communities through a range of means including:

- ensuring public health measures are in place locally;
- helping the most vulnerable to be able to shield at home safely;
- distributing emergency supplies such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to enable key local services such as schools or courts to continue operating; as well as
- fulfilling their role in providing vital social care support to individuals alongside the NHS's response to the acute health concerns from COVID-19.

However, now the continuing success of the vaccine programme and the gradual reopening of society means councils have increasingly started to look beyond the response phase of the emergency and ahead to the rapidly approaching recovery effort. It is already clear that given the severity of the pandemic and the impact it has had on every citizen's life and the way society operates that things will not just 'snap back' to normal. It is going to take months and years of strategic investment and gradual adjustment, all set against the backdrop of the need for a degree of restraint in public spending to help ensure the costs of fighting the pandemic are repaid sustainably.

Local authorities have a crucial role to play in this recovery process. In particular county and county unitary authorities contain large and often diverse geographies and will be best placed to strategically balance the differing needs of the towns and cities within their boundaries alongside those of the rural communities and remote coastal areas they also represent.

But local authorities do not act unilaterally, they reflect the communities they serve and act. Councils act as a hub to help support and focus the input of a wide range of local stakeholders, from business and industry to other key public sectors such as health and police. The most successful councils also work in partnership with local communities themselves – both to engage support for proposed changes, but also to harness and direct the energy and enthusiasm of residents on the ground who want to put back in.

This paper comes at a time where the trends of community action are at a crossroads. On the one hand the financial stability of the formal Voluntary and Community and Social Enterprise sector (VCSE) has been hard hit by the impact of COVID-19. Opportunities for many charities to fundraise have been drastically limited by lockdown at just the point where the pandemic has seen demand for VCSE services surge.^{1,2}

At the same point, though, there are encouraging signs that the pandemic has provided new impetus for

[1] Projections in summer 2020 from key representative bodies in the voluntary sector predicted a £12.4bn shortfall in income with this figure only likely to rise substantially now further lockdown measures have been implemented subsequently <https://fundraising.co.uk/2020/06/19/charities-face-12-4bn-shortfall-in-income-for-year/>

[2] According to a survey by Pro Bono Economics autumn three-quarters of charities are expecting increased demand across 2021. <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/the-charity-sector-through-covid>

many people to volunteer and 'give something back'. Communities have self-organised Mutual Aid Networks for a range of purposes, such as supporting the most vulnerable and those shielding during lockdown; home working for some people has freed up more time that was formerly spent commuting; and the experience of lockdown has led many people to take the opportunity to reflect on their lives and what activities they wish to engage in. If properly harnessed and supported, this public energy and commitment may represent a new sustained upturn in voluntary and community action through the recovery period and beyond.

County and unitary authorities are currently facing a dual challenge:

- (a) how to best help support and retain their local VCSE networks at a time community services face more demand than ever due to the impact of the pandemic; as well as
- (b) how to refresh and revitalise local VCSE networks during the recovery and post-pandemic phases about to come.

The first challenge has been mitigated for the time being – partly through the welcome injections of emergency COVID funding from central government and independent funders; and partly through sheer dedication and hard work from communities and local authorities pulling together during such a difficult period (including the aforementioned influx of volunteers). But the second is a more strategic issue, likely to take longer to achieve and likely to be an important component in ensuring the growth and recovery of local communities – particularly by helping them to help themselves.

The content of this short publication has emerged from consultation and case studies drawn from across the CCN member councils and representatives within the voluntary sector. It seeks to open a conversation about the role of local government in supporting the VCSE by unpacking and exploring the situation in county authorities as the country enters the recovery phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Why support for the VCSE is a priority for local authorities

From the outset it should be emphasised why it is important for local authorities to support and invest in their local networks of voluntary and community organisations and services.

The traditional dividing lines between the VCSE and the public sector have blurred substantially over recent decades. The fates of both sectors are more closely and complexly intertwined than in the past. An increasingly mixed economy of service provision, including a growth in outsourcing to private and third-sector suppliers, has meant that more public services are no longer delivered directly by the council but instead commissioned out to VCSE providers with local authority oversight. This trend has been further cemented by supportive legislation such as the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2013 which requires those commissioning public services to think about how they can also provide wider social, economic and environmental benefits.

According to New Philanthropy Capital in 2020 nearly two-thirds of charities holding public sector contracts claimed to be subsidising their contracts with fundraising income.³ This suggests that if the legacy of COVID-19 is of increasing numbers of charities experiencing financial difficulties it may also exacerbate existing pressure on public sector services, particularly in fields such as social care – especially as often local authorities refer those seeking care towards VCSE organisations in the first instance for lower-level needs. Equally local authorities are looking to make savings in their budget to redress the long-term financial challenge created by responding to the pandemic. But they are also aware that if contract values for commissioned work are reduced too soon in the recovery period then ultimately this may destabilise the role of the VCSE in both public *and* voluntary work across local communities.

Local authorities therefore have a symbiotic relationship with the VCSE – increasingly so over the past couple of decades as the VCSE has developed into a significant partner through delivering public service contracts as well as its traditional independent work with communities on the ground. Local authorities are increasingly aware of this dual impact - as one officer from a county council told CCN:

“The VCSE is not just a public sector delivery model [in the manner of of the private delivery partners it bids alongside]. At the same time it is also doing stuff in communities which is really important.”

When the two sectors work together their relationship can produce an impact far greater than the sum of its parts. The concern is that if some VCSE organisations may have to downsize or even close down in the wake of the pandemic, this may have a knock-on effect on wider work of the VCSE in local communities.

Larger voluntary organisations have obviously been hit dramatically by COVID-19 and need support, including that already offered by central government. But these national organisations are more likely to have large ongoing contracts with the state; extensive reserves; facility to take advantage of government support (such as the furlough scheme); and a reliable reputation with creditors. They have therefore been better placed to weather the storm than small or medium-sized charities, often run predominantly on a part-time or voluntary basis and heavily reliant on local fundraising initiatives and more susceptible to

[3] <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/stots2020/>

changes to local commissioning arrangements.

County and unitary authorities have been particularly concerned about the welfare of these smaller charities, which are often the lifeblood of local and community delivery and an important partner for statutory local authority services, such as adult social care. It is these small and medium-sized charities most likely to have looked to their local council for support and during the past year many of CCN's member authorities have stepped up to provide this.

This is of concern as smaller charities play a very important role in responding to 'hyper-local need' – as it is described in a recent report from the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) commissioned by East Sussex County Council.⁴ The report highlights how smaller organisations are particularly crucial in supporting the work of county authorities like East Sussex as:

"The dispersed geography of the region, plus a large elderly population and pockets where there is low social and economic mobility, means that there is a need for services that can go to these individuals and provide local tailored support."

This description can by extension apply to most of CCN's member authorities, which share a predominantly similar spread of small rural or coastal communities, ageing demographics, and mixed levels of social and economic deprivation.

CASE STUDY:

Supporting the VCSE during COVID-19

*During the pandemic the demand on the VCSE in Surrey was magnified, whilst at the same time many VCSE organisations themselves were in crisis. **Surrey County Council (SCC)** offered a robust package of support to ensure the sector remained as strong as possible and able to withstand these challenges created by the pandemic. SCC met regularly with VCS organisations to listen and respond in an agile way, working collaboratively to offer a package of support including:*

- *Immediate grants to support agility/operations;*
- *Hardship grants available to all VCSE organisations in immediate need (approximately £350,000 provided to over 40 organisations);*
- *Grants given to the Community Foundation for Surrey to grow the money available in their Coronavirus Response Fund (£300,000 which was match funded taking the total to over £2.1m for the VCSE);*
- *Rent payment holidays for any charity housed in an SCC building;*
- *Honouring any agreed funding and giving flexibilities in contractual obligations;*
- *A 10% increase to all VCSE organisations involved in delivering adult social care*
- *Linking the VCS to businesses/system partners to support with activity, e.g. food deliveries, material for PPE, use of buildings.*

These measures were partly funded by the emergency funding for local government provided in grants during 2020/21.

[4] <https://www.ivar.org.uk/research-report/east-sussex-vcse/>

Structural changes in the VCSE

The pandemic has caused specific issues for charities in their ability to fundraise and their ability to meet increased demand. However, longer term it potentially will also impact on the some of the existing structural shifts the sector was already undergoing before COVID-19 hit. Whether this impact will be positive or negative will partly depend on the response during the recovery period.

(i) Professionalisation and Regulatory Oversight

Over many years the VCSE has been undergoing a gradual process of greater professionalisation. This has meant that even smaller charities and community groups now operate within greater regulation and have adopted far more formalised practices than they might have done in the past.

For example, running a holiday club to care for children out of school term-time requires registration with Ofsted and strict adherence to staff:child ratios; DBS checks; food regulations etc., all of which needs extensive time and planning devoted to making it work. Such regulations have been put in place for a reason – and these reforms have been both effective and desirable in exponentially improving safety, wellbeing, and transparency. However, it has also meant that the role of ‘volunteering’ in this context – in this case to be on the board or committee organising a holiday club – is no longer as simple as hiring a church hall and collecting subs on arrival as it might have been in the 1970s.

(ii) Opening of the market

The opening up of public services to delivery by VCSE organisations has been enhanced the presence and profile of the VCSE in local areas. However, securing contracts to deliver public services also requires investment to participate in commissioning processes which favour larger VCSE organisations. Large national charities often have dedicated teams devoted to completing tenders and securing business, but smaller local charities may be overly reliant on how skilled one or two volunteers are at such a process to take advantage of the increase in opportunity.

Additionally even small grants or contracts often come attached with extensive reporting requirements to feedback data to funding bodies on how monies are being used and whether targets have been met. This can overwhelm small charities which often lack the necessary expertise, support, or scale to prevent these tasks becoming excessively onerous.

Professionalisation and marketisation have been necessary aspects of a modernisation process which the VCSE has needed to undergo to remain fit for purpose in the 21st century. But they also have presented greater challenges for smaller community based organisations which can deliver high-quality locally focussed services. These groups – particularly those starting from scratch – can struggle to overcome the barriers to entry created by additional resource investment which can favour big national charities over local community-led groups. Increasingly county authorities are looking at ways to help smaller groups to overcome these challenges so that they maintain a thriving local VCSE reflecting the importance of place.

CASE STUDY:

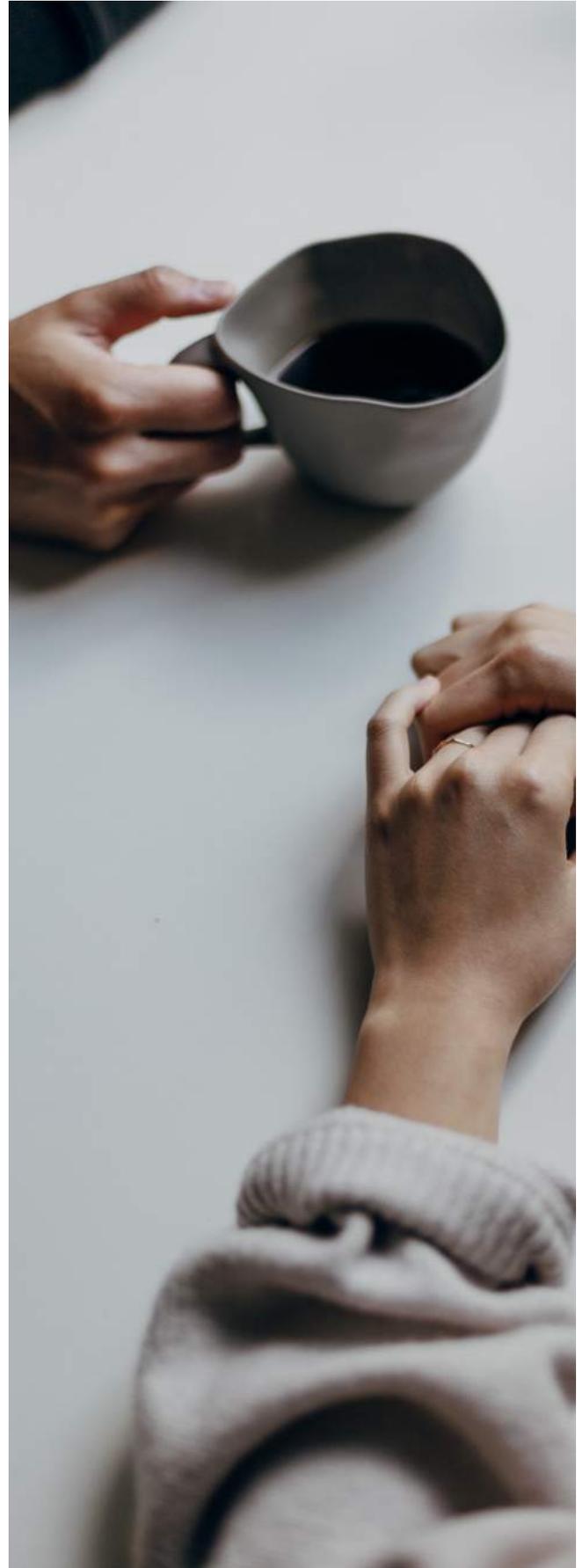
Addressing lost income for the VCSE during COVID-19

Increasingly many organisations in the VCSE now engage in some form of enterprise on a not-for-profit basis to help boost income and support charitable work. A common example might be the shops operated by many well-known charities such as Cancer Research UK or Barnardo's. But other smaller local VCSE organisations have also increasingly generated income by offering paid-for services such as administrative functions or cleaning services.

***East Sussex County Council** has strengthened its partnership links with its local VCSE over recent years. Right from the early stages of lockdown in 2020, liaison with the East Sussex VCSE Alliance allowed the county to recognise very quickly that although the furlough scheme would help protect many VCSE organisations from collapsing altogether, the loss of earned income could seriously threaten the sector's ability to respond to the immediate challenges arising from the pandemic.*

As such the authority decided to direct some of its emergency COVID funding into a VCSE Emergency Grant Programme. Developed by the council's communities' team and given accelerated priority approval from senior managers, this programme offered grants of up to £50,000 to cover up to three months of loss of earned income for local VCSE organisations.

The programme has proved to be a vital bridge which allowed many VCSE organisations to be able to react to the initial shock of lockdown without it impacting on their important work with the local community. The programme lasted until June 2020, but has not been required to the same extent for subsequent lockdowns as the investment provided the space for organisations to restructure their service models to cope in the changed environment of COVID-19 restrictions.



Reigniting volunteering

The importance of place has been shown to be even more crucial during the pandemic where there has been an upsurge in communities organising to support themselves during lockdown. The prevailing narrative has been of a steep decline in community participation over the past half century from a high point in the 1950s and 60s continuing since the turn of the century.⁵ There are a number of hypotheses of the underlying cause of this trend from a different societal attitudes which began to emerge in the post-war generations; through a growing ideal of individualism manifesting in cultural participation; to the growing prevalence of television and then online media.⁶

The pandemic has shown though that there may be signs of this trend reversing and a greater shift towards community action. The public response to the pandemic suggests there may be an untapped resource of people who might be persuaded to offer some time to a community group or charity, but who do not wish to take on the more extensive additional responsibilities which can often be associated with a more regulated system. This was exemplified by the huge response to a call for volunteers to support the emergency response by local authorities and the NHS during the pandemic. 17% of charities reported responding to the pressures of the pandemic by recruiting more volunteers.⁷

A particularly good indicator of this trend has been the example of communities all over the country self-organising to respond to the challenges emerging from COVID-19. In many cases these 'Mutual Aid Networks' have often been able (initially, at least) to move more swiftly and effectively than public agencies in meeting local need – less burdened by bureaucracy and supported by digital communications which enable real time responses in a manner which formal routes would struggle to match.

The recovery period from COVID may offer additional opportunities to recruit volunteers. It is increasingly unlikely that people will return to the same working patterns after the pandemic. As more people work from home on a permanent, or at least partial, basis this is likely to free up a significant amount of time formerly spent commuting. This may make some people more able or amenable to the idea of using some of this time to volunteer.

As the branch of government most closely connected to local communities, local authorities are well placed to encourage and mobilise this trend. Any national strategies with the intention of supporting or growing the VCSE must involve local authorities at the very heart if they are to effectively meld to the highly diverse and varied nature of 'community' across different parts of the country. Nowhere is this more evident than in county and county unitary authorities which contain some of the most diverse geographies in England, embracing large and small urban towns or cities; coastal regions that are often remote or isolated; and large swathes of sporadically populated rural outposts.

[5] <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/volunteering-levels-fall-by-15-per-cent-in-a-decade-finds-office-for-national-statistics.html>

[6] A good starting place to examine some of these hypotheses is Robert D. Putnam's seminal study *Bowling Alone* (2000, recently updated for a 2020 edition) which was influential in identifying a similar trend in the US and kick-starting subsequent analysis of the similar context in the UK.

[7] <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/the-charity-sector-through-covid>

CASE STUDY:**Developing a pan-county VCSE approach after unitarisation**

Buckinghamshire Council came into being in April 2020 as a single county unitary authority replacing the previous two-tier system of a county council and four district councils. Preparation for unitarisation began in 2018 and the relationship with the local VCSE was identified as an important aspect for the transition before the process commenced.

Previously the local authority relationship with the VCS in Buckinghamshire had been spread among many access points within services across the county and districts. This approach was not systematic and didn't operate on a pan-Buckinghamshire or inclusive basis. Therefore consolidation of these relationships and building new ones with the new council was prioritised within transition.

This process was led at top level by the Chief Executive who established a liaison group with five key local VCSE leaders which could help to reach out to the wider sector locally providing transparency and building trust. Additionally VCSE representation was sought to contribute to strategic planning and decision-making on a variety of boards and initiatives across Buckinghamshire, such as the Health and Wellbeing Board.

It was, however, recognised that it was important that in a large county such as Buckinghamshire partnership with the VCSE should still incorporate local community voices. As part of the unitary transition 19 Local Area Forums were replaced by 16 new 'Community Boards' at county level. These are managed by three area teams (North, Central, and South) which helps to provide co-ordination for strategic planning purposes and accessibility for key partners.

As part of the reorganisation process Buckinghamshire Council has inherited grant-funding relationships with a number of organisations which were previously funded at lower-tier level. It is undergoing a process of making contact and assessing all these contracts individually and ensuring that all work funded aligns to the priorities of the new unitary council. However, this process will take time so in order to ensure stability for the local VCSE it has continued to roll over grant allocations during this process of unravelling what previous funding arrangements were in place.

The actual transition to unitary status took place just as the onset of COVID-19 began which helped to speed up and sharpen many of the processes given the need to mobilise and engage with the VCSE became a major necessity. Further information about the innovative work conducted by Buckinghamshire Council can be found [here](#).

The local authority role in supporting the VCSE

The preferred policy solution over the past decade to the perceived decline in civic engagement has been to create more opportunities for communities themselves to take ownership of public assets – an approach which has been reinforced by measures such as those announced in the recent Budget.⁸

In his report for the government in 2020, *Levelling up our communities*, Danny Kruger MP highlighted that the conventional thinking over the past 40 years of driving economic and social progress through a reliance on government and business hasn't worked for many areas. Kruger posits that this is because institutions by themselves cannot second-guess or replace the important role of self-determination by communities themselves:

“What is missing in our current model is community power: the role of local people, acting together spontaneously or through enduring institutions, to design and deliver the kind of neighbourhood they want to be part of.”⁹

The pandemic has certainly reinforced this notion of community power and provided a model for self-organisation of local people. To some extent community ownership has been successful in parts of the country which are already organised and motivated to take such opportunities. But it cannot and should not be the sole solution. If the pandemic appears to have led to an upsurge in enthusiasm for engagement and volunteering within communities, in many parts of the country the infrastructure to facilitate and grow this engagement is patchy at best.

Its member authorities have indicated to CCN that in areas where existing community networks are weaker – often the most deprived or isolated communities – the impact of community ownership has been less tangible. Sometimes devolved assets are passed back to the local authority and successful transfers unravel for various reasons. Frameworks of community co-operation need to be established, nurtured, and sustained before any attempts to pass ownership and responsibility directly are likely to succeed.

This is where the local authority can and should be at the centre of strategies to reenergise the VCSE. Councils contain extensive expertise and resources which can be used to help community initiatives flourish and grow, eventually to the extent they can manage themselves. Additionally local authorities have knowledge and understanding of the bureaucracy and regulation involved in community endeavours which can be employed to help nurture smaller organisations and provide the infrastructure to encourage participation and volunteering.

But local authorities need to be resourced to be able to do this. A recent article in *Charity Finance* magazine highlighted that a flourishing local VCSE is in part dependent on a strong local authority backing it. If central government wishes to strengthen community activity it must also ensure that local authorities are able to nurture this activity:

[8] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-ownership-fund>

[9] Kruger, D *Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant* (2020)

"...even the strongest local community partnerships and place-based approaches are under threat from the crumbling financial architecture of councils themselves. Central government is failing to redistribute the nation's resources back out to councils and their communities at precisely the time when we should be investing everything we've got in the them to do whatever it takes to get people safely through this period and beyond."¹⁰

The recovery period may be an ideal time to invest in local authorities' ability to grow community activity. The pandemic has presented a new opportunity for county authorities to provide this expertise with the emergence of Mutual Aid Networks (MAN). MANs have sprung up organically in most parts of the country as a community response to the pandemic. As they are self-organised, there is no single definition or identity of a MAN and each has its own way of working.

County authorities have needed to be mindful of this diversity – with some MANs wanting direct support

CASE STUDY:

Supporting the growth and development of Mutual Aid Networks

North Yorkshire County Council (NYCC) used existing links with the VCSE to help harness the swell of volunteers generated by Mutual Aid Networks (MAN) during the pandemic.

During the past decade the county had strengthened its engagement with the VCSE through its Stronger Communities Programme – working mainly in areas such as preventative approaches to social care; libraries; and community transport. When MANs started forming this new source community support was welcomed by the council. However, it was also recognised that connections solely generated online may also lead to risks – including safeguarding or simply exploitation of the service by those who don't actually need it.

Using connections made through its programme the council worked in co-production with communities to quickly develop 23 Community Support Organisations (CSO) providing complete coverage across the county. These community-led coalitions could then provide recognised hubs to help co-ordinate localised responses whilst ensuring there was a level of formalised support from the council. NYCC offered some resource from its emergency COVID funding for CSOs to use as they saw fit (such as to employ a member of staff to co-ordinate operations), as well as professional advice. One of these CSOs has now even registered as a charity given the success of the project during the past year.

Additionally the council provided a central interface to help support the work of CSOs, including using its customer service centre as a single phone number switchboard to provide simple and efficient access to enable CSOs to pick up both those who want to help and who need help. This has also meant that the council has been able to help ensure that CSOs are conducting the work they have been set up for – such as doing shopping or collecting prescriptions – rather than, for example, picking up previously unidentified formal adult social care needs which need a professional LA response.

[10] <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/finance/councils-are-our-most-important-relationship-with-government.html>

from their council, whilst others have been resistant to any formal state involvement in their operations. This picture was reinforced in New Local's report last summer on the growth of MANs which was very clear about the role of the council in engaging self-organised community activity and councils' need to tread a fine balance to hit the 'goldilocks' level of support which helps these groups to flourish:

*"The attitude of the local council has a clear impact on the success and sustainability of community groups. If determined to manage and control everything, a local authority will often suffocate the efforts of informal groups. Communities' efforts can also be made far more difficult if they are faced with indifference, disinterest, or micromanagement."*¹¹

However, local authorities must have the resources to support such groups. Alongside sufficient funding for councils to meet long-term spending needs, it also requires the ability to help offer more practical support in terms of advice, guidance or in-kind support with administrative tasks. If this support is not available from the council then there is more likelihood that the MAN will flounder and the potential of further community action to enable recovery is set back.



[11] Tiratelli, L & Kaye, S *Communities Vs Coronavirus: The rise of mutual aid* (New Local, 2020)

DEFINING LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE VCSE

The National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) describes local infrastructure through the five key aspects below:¹²

- **DEVELOPMENT**

Working with the local community to create and develop ways to meet the needs and aspirations of people in their area.

- **LIAISON**

Bringing people together from all kinds of voluntary and community groups, to make connections, share what they do and support each other.

- **SUPPORT**

Encouraging local voluntary organisations and community groups with tools, information, and practical expertise, so they can be the best they can be.

- **REPRESENTATION**

Making the case for, and speaking as the trusted voice of, the local voluntary community with local councils, NHS, government and others.

- **WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP**

Connecting with local initiatives and partners, and working together on local projects, to share knowledge and resources or the benefit of the local community, voluntary organisations and community groups.



[12] <https://navca.org.uk/heart-of-our-community>

CASE STUDY**Investing in CVS infrastructure**

During the pandemic **Staffordshire County Council** (STCC) has benefitted from its investment in CVS infrastructure. Like many authorities, the council has been through a process of fundamentally restructuring how it supports its local VCSE. Over the past decade, Staffordshire has shifted its model from supporting eight separate district-level CVS organisations to a single, countywide VCSE Strategic Capacity Building partnership contract.

This partnership was established in 2016 and includes two infrastructure organisations: [SCVYS](#) ([Staffordshire Council of Voluntary Youth Services](#)), and the 2020 NAVCA 'Heart of the Community Award' winning [Support Staffordshire](#). SCVYS were involved in Staffordshire's previous Youth Services transformation, and Support Staffordshire formed as a single organisation in 2014, bringing together regional CVS and building on their legacy of working with VCSE organisations locally.

The local authority provided £791,940 per annum for the first three-years of the contract to commission the new VCSE Strategic Capacity Building Partnership and support the VCSE. The partnership has enabled Staffordshire to work in a more strategic way with its local VCSE, despite a reduction in core funding in 2019. It has not only provided infrastructure and funding support to organisations across the county, but also helped to shape and deliver the Council's strategic priorities and help build capacity in local communities.

STCC's investment in its VCSE Strategic Capacity Building Partnership also meant it was well placed to work alongside voluntary and community organisations to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Support Staffordshire and SCVYS were fundamental to galvanising community support and social action. This included co-ordinating a network of VCSE 'anchor organisations' locally, supporting emerging Mutual Aid Networks across the county to help distribute food and support those who were shielding, and working with local community groups to address social isolation for vulnerable members of the community.

The contract arrangements for the VCSE Strategic Capacity Building Partnership end in July 2022. STCC is currently exploring options for working with the VCS moving forward, building on the community response to Covid-19 and using the lessons learned from the past six years of working strategically with the sector.



**CASE STUDY:*****Reducing monitoring burdens on small VCSE organisations***

Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales is an independent grant maker awarding multi-year, core funding to small and local charities tackling complex social issues. The Foundation is an important funder of small local charities and community organisations in county councils across England and Wales. As a condition of their grant, charities complete an annual monitoring form covering their progress and learning as a charity and giving feedback to the Foundation on its processes and support.

In 2018 the Foundation reacted to this feedback and took the decision to radically reduce the amount of bespoke monitoring data required of grantees, in recognition that monitoring and evaluation of grants should be proportionate to the size of our investment and the capacity of the grantee.

As a signatory of the Principles of Better Impact Monitoring initiative¹³ the Foundation wanted their practice to better align to their organisational values. The new monitoring approach seeks to:

- be a meaningful opportunity for charities to reflect on progress, relating to grant objectives set and defined by the charities themselves.*
- minimise duplication and bureaucracy by drawing on management information already held and collected by the charity for their own internal monitoring, reporting to trustees or other funders.*
- generate learning for the Foundation, including informing wider campaign and advocacy on behalf of small charities.*

During the first months of the Coronavirus pandemic, the Foundation introduced even greater flexibility for charities, recognising the need for them to be able to fully focus on supporting their communities, volunteers and staff during the rapid onset of lockdown measures and the challenges that created, particularly in more remote areas. They are now piloting new ways of collecting data from charities – such as end of grant conversations to replace the former process requiring written submissions – and will continue to keep this new approach under review.

[13] <https://www.ivar.org.uk/aligning-grant-reporting/>

Managing VCSE infrastructure

An ideal way for local authorities to support smaller charities without taking over is via engagement with the local Council for Voluntary Services (CVS). CVSs were established a century ago and act as a central point of contact for local voluntary and community groups, providing key community infrastructure operating within council areas up and down the country. Not only do CVSs provide advice and support to local charities they have always been an important way of involving the VCSE within local strategic planning – such as by sitting on the Local Strategic Partnership or through establishing Community Empowerment Networks.

Unfortunately, though, the impact of austerity has taken its toll on how local authorities have been able to support CVSs with many having had to significantly reduce their investment over the past decade. This has meant CVSs have in many areas merged, declined in activity, or even disappeared altogether.

But now in the wake of the pandemic many local authorities are reconsidering the level of investment they make in local VCSE infrastructure with the knowledge that it is this infrastructure which can make the difference in community action. As the National Council for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) indicated to CCN during a seminar session with county authorities which fed into the development of this report:

“Every charity or voluntary group starts when someone thinks ‘What can I do about this situation?’ Local infrastructure helps them find like-minded people in their area, provides information about what already exists, advice on governance arrangements, training on everything from safeguarding and cybersecurity to keeping records and food hygiene. And through advocacy and representation, local infrastructure helps turn an idea about improving a community into a thriving project making a positive difference – whether that’s in a village or town, or with a specific group of people.”

What NAVCA emphasise is that for small voluntary organisations to become established, grow and thrive they need help. This has become particularly important in light of the increased levels of professionalisation and additional bureaucracy in the sector highlighted earlier in this paper, which can make the process of starting any new voluntary group seem even more daunting.

Where the local authority can use its expertise in partnership with that of the existing VCSE to create infrastructure it can make a real difference to nurturing new activity - whether it be through advising on many of the processes and regulations needed to operate effectively, or helping with the process of fulfilling complicated monitoring and evaluation exercises to achieve funding.

As such the CVS model is one which could play a crucial role in consolidating community action and self-determination during the next few years of the recovery period. Resourcing local authorities to invest more in CVS arrangements should be a priority for central government which has already signalled its intent to devolve more autonomy to communities. Investing in CVS in this way should be seen as seed funding that be repaid in time through revitalising a VCSE sector which has been ravaged by the pandemic.

CASE STUDY:

Harnessing the upsurge in community action to build back better

Kent County Council (KCC) has launched the Crowdfund Kent initiative designed to help kick start recovery in communities across the county and support civic activity. Using the Spacehive platform communities are invited to submit potential crowdfunding projects to receive council backing across three key themes:

- (i) Supporting community action in Kent, particularly activities that are focused on supporting people who are facing financial difficulties or who are isolated as a result of COVID.*
- (ii) Supporting community assets and venues in Kent that contribute to our local communities and local connections, improving wellbeing.*
- (iii) Helping to maintain the volunteering offer/social action we have seen during the pandemic post COVID-19.*

Prospective projects are assessed through the platform by national community membership organisation Locality, who carry out due diligence and match to the Fund criteria set by the council, before successful initiatives are presented to KCC for potential pledges.

Based on what is raised by crowdfunding the local authority will match-fund up to 50% to a maximum £20k, using a specifically designated £500k pot. The intention has been to develop a locally-led recovery through supporting civic projects and organisations. The funding raised will be routed towards community grass-roots organisations across the county which are known to be important for community resilience.



[14] <https://www.surreyi.gov.uk/covid-impacts/>

Conclusion: Recommendations for Entering Recovery

The last year has seen unprecedented disruption to most aspects of life in the UK. But policymakers should recognise that it has had an especially destabilising impact on the VCSE. This includes extensive challenges in terms of reduced opportunities to obtain funding and increased demand for services, but also signs of a resurgence in enthusiasm for community engagement, participation and volunteering.

As England enters the recovery phase of the pandemic it is key that the VCSE is enabled to not only survive, but to take advantage of the potential changes in society which may see community renewal in line with the government's own ambitions reflected in the recent budget. This will only happen with all stakeholders working together – a voluntary and community sector partnered by central *and particularly* local government, which as the part of the state closest to communities is best placed to encourage growth.

This paper has been designed to open the conversation about how county and unitary authorities can best support their VCSE as we enter a post-COVID environment. The case studies included show that many members are already working hard to ensure their VCSE flourishes in the 'new normal'. The work done to inform this essay has already led to a wider network of county authorities within CCN coming together to take forward further work in terms of sharing best practice across CCN member councils.



CASE STUDY:

Building back together

Surrey County Council and the local VCSE have worked together to carry out a comprehensive 'Community Impact Assessment'¹⁴ developing a dynamic and live dataset to understand the impact of Covid-19 on Surrey's communities. This information is not only key for the VCSE, council, and partners to set priorities and direct energy and resource, but is critical to enable the recovery and rebuilding of Surrey.

The council and local stakeholders are continuing to work closely together to harness the community spirit that has been so evident throughout the pandemic, and use this alongside the strong VCSE and public sector partnership in the county to embed new ways of working to ensure no one is left behind in Surrey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are designed to help galvanise the learning emerging from this work and propel a co-ordinated local government approach to supporting the VCSE across recovery:

1. LET THE VCSE GROW ORGANICALLY

The most successful partnerships between the VCSE and government come where state support and expertise complements voluntary energy and endeavour. Local authorities need to be led by what their VCSE needs, not set down terms in which they must operate.

2. PUT IN PLACE LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The principal means by which local authorities can grow their VCSE is by ensuring there is effective local infrastructure in place to support voluntary initiatives. This should not just involve local authorities directly, but include robust CVS arrangements which can provide peer support and learning for small charities.

3. INCLUDE SUPPORT FOR VCSE WITHIN COVID RECOVERY FUNDING

When packages to support recovery from COVID are being put together it is vital that the needs of the VCSE are not forgotten and that resource is included to ensure that local authorities are able to properly support community growth and bounce-back.

4. REDUCE BUREAUCRACY AROUND MONITORING REQUIREMENTS

Small organisations can find it difficult to comply effectively with monitoring demands – often to the extent that it may put them off from applying for a grant in the first place. Equally funders, including local authorities, can waste resources chasing to obtain the right data. All funders should consider whether arrangements might be made to lessen this burden – for instance by offering a two-tier level of grant funding on a basis where an organisation might opt for reduced quantum of grant where a funder agrees to deploy its own skilled personnel to collect the monitoring data it needs on a periodic basis rather than the charity spending money to compile the data themselves.

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CCN

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