

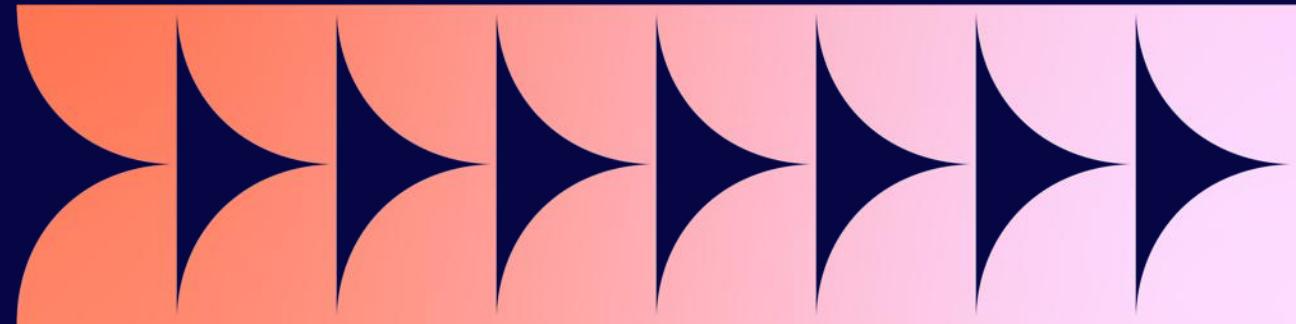
CVSL's Work with Local Infrastructure Organisations:

Findings and provocations

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CVSL's Work with Local Infrastructure Organisations - Agenda

Agenda

- Introduction
- Origins of CVSL
- Knowledge Exchange
- Collaboration
- COVID
- Ethics
- Democracy
- Transmission Belts
- The Future
- Questions and Comments

CVSL's Work with Local Infrastructure Organisations - Introduction

Who knows what an LIO is?

Who has worked with/for an LIO?

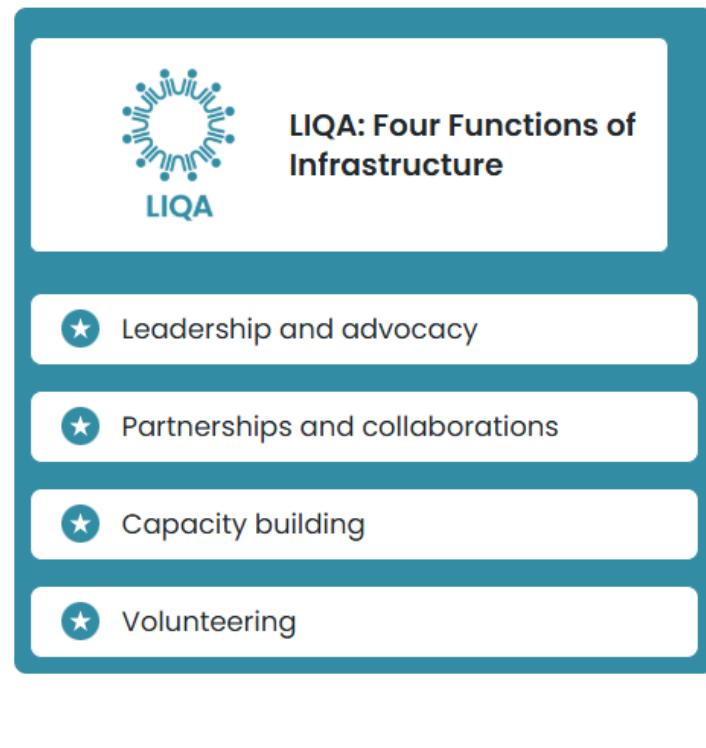
Functions of an LIO (Wolfenden, 1978):

- 1) Development
- 2) Services to other organisations
- 3) Liaison
- 4) Representation
- 5) Direct services to individuals

"These functions will vary greatly from one part of the country to another and in accordance with the local needs." (p.111)

LIQA (Local Infrastructure Quality Accreditation)

The LIQA is designed for local VCSE infrastructure provision, and assesses NAVCA members across the four functions of infrastructure.



From: <https://www.navca.org.uk/quality-accreditation> (accessed 13th May 2025)

CVSL's Work with Local Infrastructure Organisations - Origins

CVSL was set up in 2016 to work with small and medium sized voluntary sector organisations

LIOs are not only themselves often small and medium sized but they also offer a route to engaging with other organisations of that type

Many people who work with CVSL have also worked in the voluntary sector – some in LIOs – and maintain an interest in, and links with, practitioners as a result. I worked in and with LIOs for several years and I'm also a trustee of an LIO

I carried out my PhD research with an LIO – looking at collaboration with the NHS (2016-2019), you can find that here: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/71438/>

CVSL continues to deliver workshops, presentations, research

CVSL's Work with Local Infrastructure Organisations – Knowledge Exchange

We've delivered workshops and presentations to LIOs on a variety of different subjects:

- Organisational leadership
- Collaboration in the voluntary sector: the good and not so good
- Leading through collaboration
- Developing trust and power
- New and emerging leaders
- Leadership tensions
- An introduction to voluntary sector collaboration

CVSL also continues to offer free leadership courses to anyone in the sector, through the OU 'OpenLearn' platform: <https://university.open.ac.uk/centres/voluntary-sector-leadership/learning>

CVSL's Work with Local Infrastructure Organisations - Collaboration

CVSL has been interested in collaboration since its founding

Informed by the work of Professor Siv Vangen and the Theory of Collaborative Advantage (Huxham and Vangen, 2005)

Collaboration is hard and often doesn't achieve what it sets out to

But it's now ubiquitous as a concept and part of everyday ways of working within and across sectors

Trust and power as entangled – personal versus system trust and power

Trust and distrust as separate aspects – working without trust and/or 'strategic mistrust' (Myers, 2025)

Control can depend on the convenor role – in addition to funding

Leadership – facilitative (collaborative) and directive (authoritative)

CVSL's Work with Local Infrastructure Organisations - COVID

During the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 CVSL staff maintained links with practitioners working in LIOs

We had various informal conversations with practitioners about the experiences they were having

We then decided to carry out formal research into the leadership of LIOs during this time

And also, a year later when the initial crisis had settled to some extent

We found a variety of tensions at play which did not have any easily resolvable answers

They link to ethical decision making (more on ethics shortly)

We also identified different responses based on existing delivery – remaking, rearranging, and reaffirming the work of LIOs

See the CVSL Blog for more on this work: <https://university.open.ac.uk/centres/voluntary-sector-leadership/blog>

CVSL's Work with Local Infrastructure Organisations - Ethics

Drawing on the work during COVID we wrote a paper on ethical leadership tensions with a focus on the concept of care: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/99939/>

Table 1 - Practice tensions

| Tension | Pole 1 | Pole 2 |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Inquiry | Expanding the possible range of care | Limiting focus and care identification |
| Boundary | Enacting care with all-identified | Nurturing prior relationships |
| Self/other | Caring for others | Caring for self |
| Action orientation | Action in concert with/listening to | Action on behalf of/pushing for |

Adapted from Winchester et al. (2024, p.7)

This is important because the voluntary sector is values-based - often focussed on doing 'good' – but exists in a context of rationality and objectivity.

In reality, there isn't one form of 'ethical leadership'; care flows through leadership practice.

CVSL's Work with Local Infrastructure Organisations – Transmission Belts

Only about 30% of organisations approach the 'ideal type' of transmission belt (Albareda, 2018)

LIOs are – understandably – only able to liaise with around 30% of registered charities in their area (Mohan, 2012)

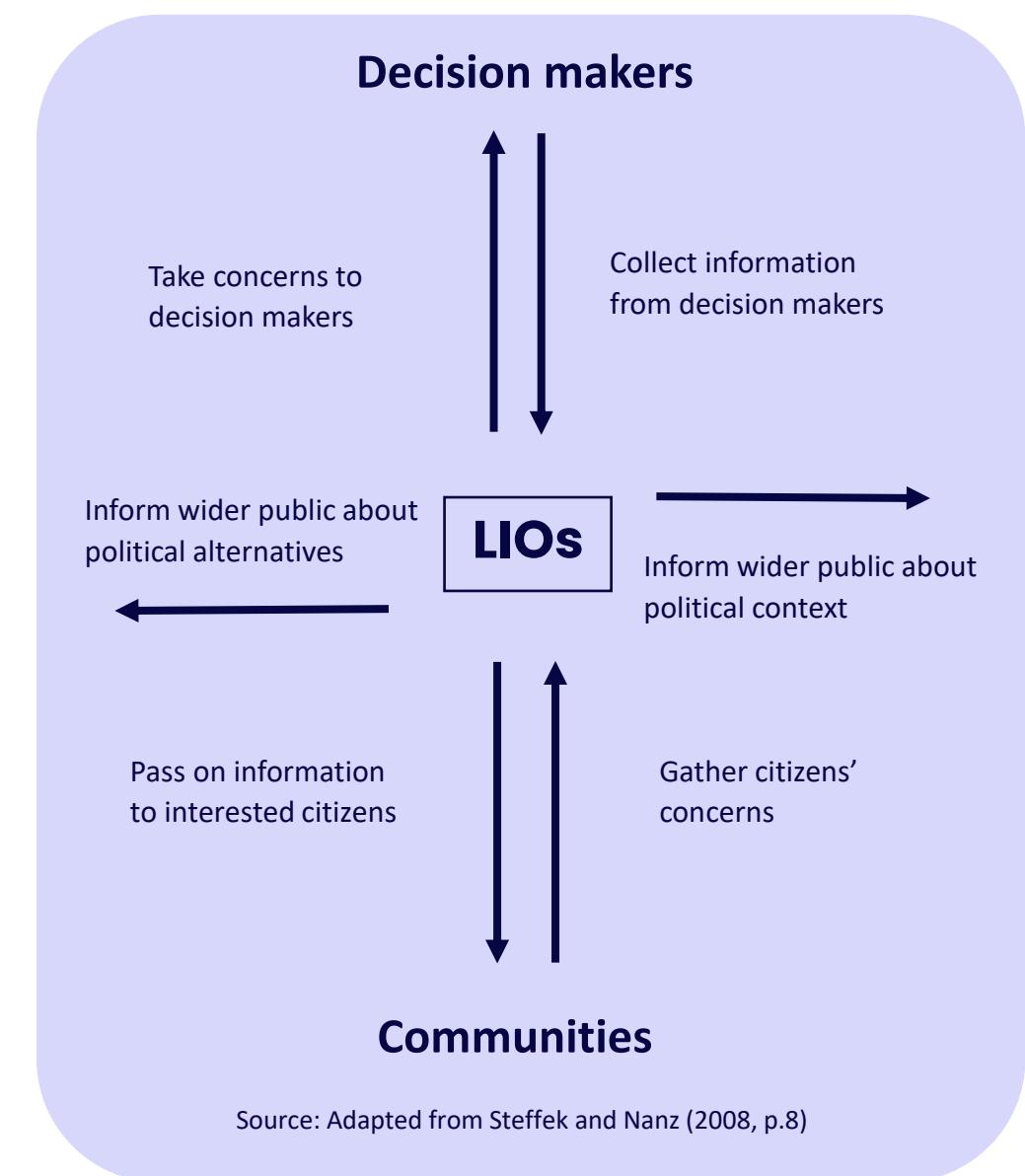
There is an assumption in policy circles that voluntary sector organisations are the route into communities and the voice that can represent them

Making up for the democratic deficit in public institutions

Coproduction/cocreation – and collaboration

Incentive to agree – funding

Various tensions inherent in this, not least re: representation – who gets to represent?



CVSL's Work with Local Infrastructure Organisations - Democracy

Questions about representation lead into questions about democracy, and other forms such as deliberative and participative aspects. Democracy in this sense isn't just about politics and voting in elections

This applies to both internal structures of LIOs and the way these organisations contribute externally to wider society

Exploring democracy in the voluntary sector is part of the OU 'Open Societal Challenges' programme:
<https://societal-challenges.open.ac.uk/challenges/exploring-democracy-in-the-voluntary-sector/473>

We carried out a pilot workshop with Voluntary Action Leicestershire in 2024, the report is here:
<https://university.open.ac.uk/centres/voluntary-sector-leadership/blog/exploring-democracy-english-voluntary-sector>

The findings suggest it's a topic of interest to practitioners, that they feel they contribute to democracy in all ways, that there are tensions between ideals and reality, and that - in the face of limits on capacity and funding – deliberative democracy may be the most important aspect, even though representation was seen as the key role overall.

CVSL's Work with Local Infrastructure Organisations – The Future

The work on democracy in the voluntary sector will continue – next steps are likely to be exploring in more detail with individual organisations and perhaps piloting a ‘democracy audit’ (for a paper on that idea, click here: <https://oro.open.ac.uk/103642/>)

A small project is currently underway looking at LIO communications through public email newsletters – we hope to report initial findings on that in the summer

Ongoing work on the ‘transmission belt’ role

More workshops and events with practitioners – if you’re interested get in touch!

Anything else you think we should be looking at?

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Question and comments

Thank you

References

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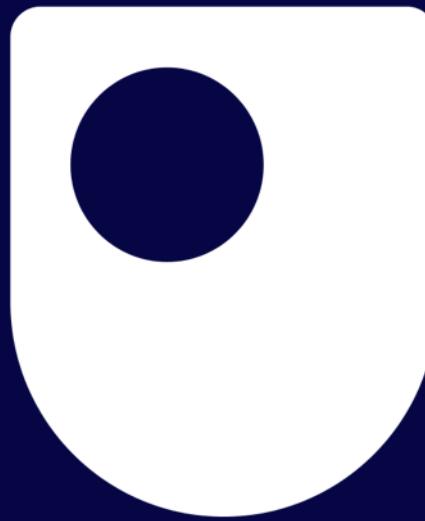
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