Lambeth VCS Futures · Report 01

high trees

SETTING THE SCENE

what VCSE infrastructure support is, how it works elsewhere, and what Lambeth has to build on

A report by High Trees for the Lambeth VCS Futures project
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THE REPORT IN A MINUTE

Lambeth has a large and resourceful voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, but since the Lambeth Voluntary Action Council closed in 2013 it has not had a consistent, borough-wide infrastructure offer. In that time the sector has not stood still. Organisations have built their own partnerships, networks and peer-support models, from Building Young Brixton to the Lambeth Community Research Network, filling the gap and innovating along the way. At the same time, Lambeth Council has begun to recognise this model, moving to collaborative commissioning models of VCSE support from 2025. Nationally, infrastructure support is recognised as essential to a connected, stable and well-led sector, yet it has been under sustained financial pressure, and London now has “cold spots” where little or no support exists. At the same time, new health structures and a renewed government focus on civil society are opening up space for the sector to play a bigger role. This report (1 of 3) sets the scene for the Lambeth VCS Futures conversations. It starts with Lambeth as a place, its policy, health and funding landscape, and the infrastructure that already exists here. It then defines infrastructure support and its four core functions, shares ideas from 25 other urban areas, and outlines the national and London context.

THE CONTEXT AT A GLANCE

700+ active VCSE groups identified in Lambeth through mapping	2013 the year Lambeth Voluntary Action Council closed	10+ peer-led infrastructure initiatives built by the sector itself	42 forums and networks with VCSE involvement across the borough
4 core functions of good local infrastructure, as defined by NAVCA	25 urban areas reviewed for ideas that could inspire Lambeth	69% of London infrastructure organisations report chronic underfunding	3 local providers commissioned by Lambeth Council since October 2025

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01 ABOUT THIS REPORT

The London Borough of Lambeth has a vibrant VCSE sector, with an estimated 700 local groups and organisations working closely with, and for, different Lambeth communities.[1] These groups have operated without a consistent, borough-wide infrastructure offer since the closure of the Lambeth Voluntary Action Council in 2013. Local infrastructure support is recognised as essential to bringing connection, stability and leadership to local VCSE sectors,[2] and without it many organisations in Lambeth, particularly smaller and grassroots groups, have had limited visibility, less access to capacity-building support and fewer routes into local decision-making. The absence of a strong collective voice to champion the sector, its value and its ambitions, and a comprehensive support offer, has meant that its full potential within Lambeth's wider ecosystem has not yet been realised.[3]

In the absence of centralised support, however, VCSE organisations in Lambeth have taken the lead themselves, creating new partnerships and peer-led support models that have created jobs, supported the local economy and shown the sector's capacity for self-organisation and collaboration. The emergence of these initiatives over the last ten years points to the potential for a new infrastructure offer based on an equal partnership, where innovation comes from within the VCSE sector and the Council is engaged as a partner rather than the sole driver of infrastructure support.

Lambeth VCS Futures is a piece of work commissioned by Impact on Urban Health to explore the potential for a new, VCSE-led model of infrastructure support in Lambeth and how it could be achieved. High Trees Community Development Trust, The Brixton Project and Pierre Consulting were brought together to form a project working group, with Pierre Consulting leading consultation with the sector, Brixton Project leading mapping of the sector and High Trees leading the development of the strategy. Over the last 12 months, the project has drawn on national and local good practice, past and present conversations with the sector, and mapping of local assets and challenges.

This is the first of three reports written by High Trees for the Lambeth VCS Futures project. It sets the scene for discussions about a potential new model, starting with the Lambeth context, its local policy, health and funding landscape, and the infrastructure provision, both commissioned and peer-led, that exists today. It then defines VCSE infrastructure support and the core functions a vibrant sector needs, shares examples from elsewhere, and outlines the opportunities and challenges of a changing national policy context. Report 2 sets out the Lambeth evidence base, and Report 3 will explore what a future model could look like and how it could be delivered.

02 LAMBETH AS A PLACE

A BOROUGH RICH IN CULTURE, HISTORY AND COMMUNITY

Lambeth is one of the most densely populated local authority areas in England, with a diverse population of 317,654 residents, 60% of whom are from a Minority Ethnic background.[4] 38.6% of residents were born outside the UK and 130 languages are spoken in the borough.[5]

Lambeth has a rich history of advocacy and community organising. It is home to the dynamic neighbourhoods of Brixton and the South Bank and a wealth of community and cultural assets, including world-class institutions such as the National Theatre. That cultural infrastructure extends across the borough, with Vauxhall known for its LGBT nightlife, Stockwell recognised as London's

Little Portugal, and Brixton, an area of extraordinary character, heritage and community, now home to the Black Cultural Archives.[6]

GROWTH THAT NOT EVERYONE YET SHARES IN

Whilst its rich history and present are part of what makes Lambeth the vibrant borough it is, it is also true that this does not reflect the context in which the majority of Lambeth's VCS organisations work. Significant investment is coming into the borough, with businesses and housing developers drawn by its diversity and culture. There is a real risk, however, that not everyone will benefit from that investment and that inequalities will widen as the borough continues to gentrify. The figures below show some of the inequalities that Lambeth communities continue to face.

39% of children live in poverty, and 23% of the population overall[7]	**50.9%** of median pay is taken up by median rent[8]	**32.21** households per 1,000 are in temporary accommodation	**62.5%** of pupils achieve grades 9–4 at GCSE[9]
103 crimes recorded per 1,000 people in 2026, against a London rate of 82[10]	**78.9** years life expectancy for men, and 83.8 years for women[11]	**4,000** people live with serious mental illness, three times the national average[12]	**39.5%** of 19-year-olds have no Level 3 qualification[9]

Behind these figures sit a number of connected pressures. Housing is increasingly unaffordable, nearly 500 people have been recorded as sleeping rough by outreach teams, Lambeth has one of the largest waiting lists for social housing in London,[13] and tenants in both social and private rented homes face damp, mould and structural problems.[14] Recorded crime is 25% higher than the London average, and research by the Lambeth Peer Action Collective found that many young people experience violence as an inevitable, routine and normal part of their lives.[15] Life expectancy is lower in Lambeth than for London as a whole, with both adults and children facing a number of significant health challenges including mental illness and obesity.

what this means for Lambeth: the VCSE sector plays a vital role in making sure the voices of communities most affected by these inequalities are heard, and that effective solutions are co-designed with the people they are meant to serve. Strong infrastructure helps the sector do that collectively rather than one organisation at a time.

03 THE POLICY LANDSCAPE IN LAMBETH

LAMBETH 2030

Since May 2026 there has been a change of leadership at Lambeth Council which is expected to result in changes to current approaches and policies that directly impact the VCS. Announcements around intended approaches to Community Wealth Building are expected to have direct consequences for the VCS and their relationship to the Council, but at the time of writing this report the current policy landscape is as follows.

Lambeth Council's strategic plan, Lambeth 2030: Our Future, Our Lambeth, responds to local challenges through four ambitions, and recognises the essential role of the voluntary and community sector and partnership working in achieving them.

Ambition	What it aims to achieve
A Borough of Equity and Justice	Reducing deprivation so that fewer children grow up in poverty; tackling the structural inequalities affecting Black, Asian and Multi-Ethnic residents as a borough of anti-racism; and working with LGBTQ+ communities and disabled residents on the biggest challenges they face.
Making Lambeth Neighbourhoods Fit for the Future	Becoming a Net Zero borough, improving healthy life expectancy for those with the poorest outcomes, and creating more accessible and active travel options.
Making Lambeth One of the Safest Boroughs in London	A significant reduction in serious violence affecting young people, support for those experiencing gender-based violence, and work to tackle the root causes of violence.
Making Lambeth A Place We Can All Call Home	A borough of opportunity where local people benefit from jobs in future growth industries, with more genuinely affordable and better-quality homes; a borough of sanctuary; and an Age and Child Friendly borough.

THE VCS STRATEGY AND VCS ASSETS STRATEGY

The Council sets out its approach to supporting the sector through two strategies. The most recent VCS Strategy, published in 2020 and drawing on research by Equinox Consulting,[16] has five strategic objectives, several of which closely echo what the sector is asking for today.[17] The new administration has indicated the VCS Strategy is expected to be re-written, but as yet with no firm timeline attached.

Objective	What success looks like
Maximise funds and resources into the borough	Organisations benefit more from regional and national trusts, foundations and other external funding. A greater share of council and public sector spending goes to the sector, albeit within reduced budgets. The sector makes greater use of Corporate Social Responsibility from local businesses. Organisations have more diverse income streams and greater resilience. More Lambeth residents and workers receive the London Living Wage.
Build the organisational capacity of VCS organisations	Organisations can find well-skilled volunteers and trustees. Organisations can access information and support on good governance, policies, procedures and quality accreditation. Leaders and trustees have the finance, fundraising and marketing skills they need. There is more mutual support, with help and advice exchanged between people and organisations.
Create stronger networks, relationships and trust between VCS organisations	Organisations are better informed about what is happening and aware of opportunities for funding, collaboration, engagement and celebration. The sector is made up of multiple networks and forums that meet regularly face to face and solve challenges around shared themes. There are opportunities for sector-wide meetings and discussion. There is a greater sense of collaboration and partnership rather than competition.
Enable the VCS to represent local communities and be recognised as a partner	VCS organisations are involved in strategic partnerships. The public sector commits to involving the sector in developing, designing and delivering services. The sector has opportunities to represent its communities' views to the public sector. VCS representatives are chosen fairly and openly.
Make better use of the borough's community assets	There is a coordinated approach to affordable and available VCS property. Tenure is improved so that property supports sustainability. Clear information is available on accessing premises. There is better support, information and training on managing community spaces well.

The final objective has been taken forward through the Lambeth Council VCS Assets Strategy, introduced in October 2021, which aims to standardise rent and maintenance arrangements across a portfolio of 49 properties occupied by voluntary and community groups. It seeks to provide well-used, fit-for-purpose and affordable premises, with transparency about access and availability, consistent terms and conditions, and support for groups to manage their spaces well and deliver social value for residents. It estimated that around 7% of VCS groups in Lambeth occupy Council premises.

OTHER COUNCIL STRATEGIES

The sector's role is also recognised in other Council policies. The Inclusive Talent Strategy 2025–2030 aims to ensure that all residents, at every stage of education or career readiness, can access pathways into good work and build financial resilience. It commits the Council to being 'led by the voices of local communities and local organisations in developing our approach', targeting identified priority groups[18] and working at neighbourhood level with community-led and user-led organisations in the areas most disadvantaged in the labour market.[19]

04 HEALTH SYSTEMS

a growing role for the sector

The VCSE sector is increasingly recognised as an important partner for health and social care. Organisations improve health outcomes and tackle inequalities not only by delivering services, but by shaping their design to ensure they meet the needs of service users, patients and carers. VCSE and community input is essential to a vibrant local health economy. Successive legislation and strategy, including the Health and Social Care Act 2012, the Care Act, the Five Year Forward View 2014, its Next Steps, and the NHS Long Term Plan, have recognised and promoted this role[20].

THE NHS 10 YEAR PLAN

The 2025 plan, Fit for the Future, sets out three shifts in healthcare: from hospital to community, from analogue to digital, and from sickness to prevention.[21] Local VCSE organisations have long worked on upstream drivers of health such as poverty, food insecurity and social isolation. Although the plan does not explicitly name the sector's role in the shift to prevention, it is argued that local organisations are well placed to play a central part in ensuring this work meets the needs of all communities, and that this will require targeted investment, sustained partnership and meaningful recognition of the sector's contribution.[22] NAVCA is among those advocating for local VCSE organisations to be included in the new neighbourhood health centres, where appropriate, as providers of holistic, ongoing support.

HOW THE LOCAL HEALTH SYSTEM FITS TOGETHER

Lambeth's health landscape connects the sector at several levels, from South East London down to neighbourhood projects. The operational side of this is a fast-moving picture, with implementation of Neighbourhood Health in Lambeth and the structures surrounding it changing rapidly as the 10 Year Plan is implemented, but at the time of writing this report the bodies and their described roles are as follows:

Structure	Role
South East London (SEL) VCSE Strategic Alliance	Works alongside the South East London Integrated Care Board on behalf of the sector to ensure community capacity is recognised, resourced and embedded in new models of neighbourhood health. It recognises that neighbourhood health cannot be achieved without VCSE leadership and already works closely with other local infrastructure organisations, such as Bexley Voluntary Service Council.
Lambeth Together	Lambeth's Local Care Partnership within the South East London Integrated Care System, bringing together the voluntary and community sector, the NHS and Lambeth Council to improve health and wellbeing and reduce inequalities through an integrated health and care system.
Neighbourhood and Wellbeing Delivery Alliance	A collaboration between the local authority, health and social care organisations and the voluntary and community sector, running health and wellbeing projects focused on prevention, urgent and emergency care, and complex care, to support a shift towards integrated neighbourhood working. It is accountable to the Lambeth Together Care Partnership Board, which in turn reports to the South East London Integrated Care Board.

05 LOCAL FUNDERS

Lambeth benefits from three local strategic funders, each with a distinct focus. Each has a vested interest in a strong, well-connected local VCSE sector, as much of their investment reaches Lambeth's communities through local organisations, and each has an important part to play in how future infrastructure is supported.

Funder	Focus
Impact on Urban Health	Part of Guy's and St Thomas' Foundation, Impact on Urban Health works to tackle complex health issues that disproportionately affect people in urban areas and to make cities healthier places for everyone.[23] It takes a place-based approach in Lambeth and Southwark across four areas: improving children's health and food; building financial foundations for adult health; finding innovative solutions to the health effects of air pollution; and intervening early to protect children's mental health.[24]
Walcot Foundation	An independent foundation operating solely in Lambeth, providing grants to individuals and organisations towards its vision of 'a Lambeth in which all young people can thrive', primarily supporting young people, schools and community groups.[25]
Maudsley Charity	A grant-making charity rooted in south London, with a vision of 'a world where everyone who experiences mental illness, without exception, has access to the right care and support for them'.[26] In 2024/25 it awarded over £5 million in grants.[27]

06 VCSE INFRASTRUCTURE IN LAMBETH TODAY

FROM LVAC TO NOW

Since the Lambeth Voluntary Action Council closed in 2013, Lambeth Council has not funded a dedicated VCS infrastructure body. Short-term contracts have provided some support, but without a consistent offer many organisations, particularly smaller and grassroots groups, have had limited visibility, less access to capacity building and fewer routes into local decision-making. In response, the sector has organised itself, developing practical and innovative ways of filling these gaps through peer support, partnerships and collaboration.

2011	Lambeth Community Hubs Network founded, bringing together five community anchor charities to strengthen their reach and practice and support the wider sector.
2012	Lambeth Food Partnership launched to champion and support food work across the borough.
2012	Incredible Edible Lambeth established as a community interest company, connecting communities through food growing.
2013	Lambeth Voluntary Action Council closes, and the borough no longer has a dedicated, Council-funded infrastructure body.
2017	Building Young Brixton founded by organisations that had already been working together informally for several years.
2020	Lambeth Council publishes its Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy.
2021	VCS Assets Strategy introduced. IRMO launches Advice for All to build welfare support infrastructure across Lambeth.
2021	Ecosystem Coldharbour formed, bringing together community organisations in Coldharbour ward to address the root causes of violence affecting young people.
2023	Lambeth Community Research Network set up to facilitate community based research.
Oct 2025	A new commissioning model is launched, with support delivered by three local organisations and partnerships alongside the Council.
2025–26	Lambeth VCS Futures explores the potential for a new, VCSE-led model of infrastructure support.

COMMISSIONED PROVISION

VCSE infrastructure support is currently delivered partly by Lambeth Council itself and partly through support commissioned from three local organisations and partnerships. This model was launched in October 2025 following consultation with the sector, replacing a single-provider model, delivered by Integrate, which had mainly offered funding advice. Conversations with local groups found that having several local anchor organisations deliver support enabled a more diverse offer. That recognition, that a single-provider model may not be the best fit for Lambeth, is useful learning for Lambeth VCS Futures as it considers models that build on this more plural approach.

Provider	Function	What it offers
Lambeth Council	Direct support	A VCS newsletter with funding, events, training, Council updates, support and jobs. Free safeguarding training and access to the Open Data Platform. Volunteering support through the Team Lambeth volunteer opportunities database, volunteer fairs and a volunteer newsletter. Direct grants and funding. Premises leased to 49 organisations.
Brixton Project	Leadership and advocacy	Representation on decision-making boards, such as the Neighbourhood and Wellbeing Delivery Alliance and the ICB strategic panel. A VCS Leadership Circle, VCS Spotlight events and a leadership mentoring programme. A digital VCS directory.
Lambeth Community Hubs Network	Capacity building	One-to-one support and expert advice on strategy, finance, governance, HR, building management and impact. Training and workshops in project management, impact measurement, safeguarding and communications. Templates, guides, funding updates and sector information at lambethhubs.com.
Integrate Agency CIC	Funding and fundraising	Online one-to-one fundraising surgeries and training workshops. Borough-wide events such as Write Better Bids, Meet the Funder and Lambeth Climate Day.

INFRASTRUCTURE THE SECTOR HAS BUILT FOR ITSELF

Alongside commissioned provision, the last ten years have seen a range of peer-led initiatives emerge. None were commissioned by the Council; they grew out of organisations' own need to work more closely together, and they focus on more effective, coordinated delivery and on building the capacity of smaller groups. Together, these initiatives show that much of Lambeth's infrastructure already exists within the sector. The question is how it is connected, recognised and resourced.

Advice for All	Led by IRMO since 2021, developing welfare support infrastructure within VCSE organisations across Lambeth.
Building Young Brixton	Founded in 2017, offering capacity building to organisations working with young people through staff training and one-to-one support to improve practice in areas such as mentoring.
Ecosystem Coldharbour	A consortium of community organisations delivering a range of initiatives, including violence reduction. It offered capacity building to local organisations and has distributed over £90,000 in grants.
Lambeth Community Hubs Network	A partnership of five community anchor charities providing place-based provision, now commissioned by the Council to deliver capacity building and offering free templates through its resource library.
Lambeth Community Research Network	Set up in 2023 to facilitate community based research that leads to positive change, bringing together VCSE organisations, academics and research bodies through a research bank, grants programme, resources and events.
Lambeth Food Partnership	Launched in 2012 to help food work across the borough flourish. It runs the Lambeth Food Small Grants Programme and funds Food Five Ways, a partnership of grassroots organisations running pantries, supporting food growing, running community businesses and delivering food to people's doors.
Lambeth Peer Action Collective	A partnership of young people and youth organisations working together for better futures for young people in Lambeth, with young people leading on identifying, researching and acting on the issues that affect them.
Incredible Edible Lambeth	Established as a community interest company in 2012, a network supporting members to grow food locally and to advocate for access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food.

FORUMS AND NETWORKS

Beyond these initiatives, Lambeth has a considerable number of forums and networks with VCSE involvement, including the Lambeth Local Forum Network, volunteer-led networks across the borough that were previously supported by the Council to give local groups and residents a voice in borough-wide decisions. Until recently there was no single list of the borough's forums and networks. Brixton Project's mapping has now identified 42, from borough-wide networks such as the Lambeth VCS Leadership Circle, Lambeth Children & Families VCS Forum and Lambeth Larder Partner Network, to local partnerships such as Thriving Stockwell and Ecosystem Coldharbour, and clusters such as the Windmill Cluster. They can be explored, with the organisations that belong to them, on the Lambeth VCS Ecosystem map.[28]

Lambeth also has a group of health-focused networks, the Thriving partnerships. Thriving Fiveways is a health and wellbeing initiative in Loughborough Junction and Angell Town, with residents leading local events and activities; Thriving Norwood is co-facilitated by Norwood Forum and Lambeth Together to improve the health and wellbeing of those who live, work and study in Gipsy Hill and West Norwood; and Thriving Stockwell connects community groups, healthcare providers and organisations to reduce health inequalities and build a resilient, connected

community. These networks were originally set up with the Council and health partners but are now working as VCS partnerships and delivery vehicles in their own right.

07 DEFINING VCSE INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORT

THE FOUNDATIONS THAT HELP A SECTOR WORK WELL

VCSE infrastructure support describes the underlying systems, services, networks and structures that give the sector the foundations it needs to operate effectively. It has been described in different ways over time. Macmillan explains that 'the concept of 'infrastructure' is often used to refer to the cross-cutting systems of support, guidance and expertise available to ordinary civil society organisations, such as charities, voluntary organisations and community groups, faith groups, community business and social enterprise', noting that it became the favoured term during the Labour governments of 1997 to 2010, while other terms such as 'development agencies', 'intermediary bodies' and 'umbrella bodies' have come in and out of fashion.[29]

ORGANISATION-FIRST OR FUNCTION-FIRST

In July 2025, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published the findings of a 12-month research programme on local civil society infrastructure,[30] covering general local infrastructure organisations such as NAVCA members, volunteer centres, specialist providers and service providers such as community accountancy. It estimated that around 530 organisations were delivering local civil society infrastructure functions in 2023. The research found 'no agreed definition of the organisations and functions of infrastructure support', but identified two broad approaches: 'organisation-first', where a dedicated organisation serves a geographical area or community of interest, and 'function-first', where the purpose and functions of infrastructure are carried out by a range of organisations. There was, however, some consensus that the core functions include 'facilitating funding, organisational development, advocacy, volunteering and community participation, and convening'.

The distinction between organisation-first and function-first approaches matters for Lambeth, where infrastructure is already being delivered by a mix of commissioned providers and sector-led partnerships rather than a single body.

FOUR CORE FUNCTIONS

Drawing on the DCMS research and wider national learning, the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) report What does good local VCSE infrastructure look like?[31] identifies four core functions of local infrastructure support, which provide a useful framework for the Lambeth VCS Futures conversations and are used throughout all three reports as a foundation for thinking about what the future of support could look like in Lambeth – it has not been assumed that any model in Lambeth should replicate these like for like, but it is widely accepted that any comprehensive local offer must include and consider these core functions.

Leadership and advocacy	Partnerships and collaboration	Practical support (capacity building)	Volunteering
Acting as a voice for the sector and ensuring influence with key decision-makers and funders.	Fostering collaboration to strengthen the local community.	Direct support to help smaller organisations grow and become more sustainable.	Supporting the recruitment, development and management of volunteers.

Leadership and advocacy	Partnerships and collaboration	Practical support (capacity building)	Volunteering
Representing the sector: championing its interests and building a shared vision. Strategic partnerships: facilitating relationships with local authorities, health systems (such as Integrated Care Boards and Integrated Care Systems), local funders and other stakeholders. Influencing policy: shaping local strategies and ensuring the sector is involved in decision-making.	Building connections: linking VCSE organisations to each other and with public bodies. Fostering trust: developing collaborative relationships that support shared goals. Cross-sector working: engaging with local businesses and public sector partners.	Organisational development: advice, training and resources on governance, financial sustainability and management. Specialist advice: guidance on legal matters, funding and impact reporting. Direct support: access to workspace and direct funding.	Volunteer pathways: opportunities for individuals to contribute to their community and for organisations to find volunteers. Good practice: promoting best practice in volunteer management and supporting organisations to retain and support volunteers.
The sector has a strong voice and influence on key decisions and policy. The sector is informed and supported to take part in local policy development and decision-making. Local partners are better informed about the sector and communities. Infrastructure is recognised for credible leadership and its ability to make links across the sector.	There is effective communication, collaboration and partnership within the sector, between sectors, and with communities and people. Organisations influence and deliver services more effectively by working through networks, formal partnerships and consortia.	The strengths and needs of the local sector are identified, and solutions to maximise potential and strengthen capacity are developed. Organisations access high-quality support that extends their knowledge, skills and sustainability. Organisations understand local needs and priorities, including those of seldom-heard groups, and adapt their services in response.	Volunteering is valued and volunteer activity is flourishing. Partners understand volunteering, best practice and the impact of changes in policy and practice.

Table 1: NAVCA functions of VCSE infrastructure support. The rows show the purpose of each function, its key activities, and the outcomes it seeks to achieve.

08 IDEAS FROM ELSEWHERE

infrastructure support across the UK

WHAT INFRASTRUCTURE ORGANISATIONS DO

There is no single national source describing what every infrastructure organisation in the UK delivers, but NAVCA's 2022 survey of its members gives a useful indication of the scale of different activities.[32] Almost all members provide information and advice (99%) and represent and advocate for their local sector (96%), and the large majority host networks or VCSE assemblies (94%), support individual groups (91%) and provide training (91%). Most also broker and support volunteering (78%) and carry out research on the sector or local issues (70%), while just over half undertake policy work or campaigning (59%).

To understand provision in other urban centres in more depth, a desktop review was carried out of 25 urban areas in England, mapping existing provision and picking out distinctive activities that could inspire a future Lambeth model. The highlights are grouped below by the four core functions, alongside what NAVCA suggests each function needs to do well.

LEADERSHIP AND ADVOCACY

This function provides a voice for all local VCSE organisations and ensures representation in local decision-making. NAVCA suggests that to do this well, an infrastructure offer should reach widely across diverse organisations and communities, regularly review who is being engaged and proactively build engagement with those who are underrepresented, co-create a vision, strategy and delivery plan with the local sector with clear ways to report and share learning, and build effective two-way communication between statutory partners and the sector.[33]

Manchester	Proactive work is increasing VCS provision in North Manchester, an area with less provision than others. Manchester Community Central is working with the Greater Manchester Violence Reduction Unit, 10GM and the local sector to support a community-led violence reduction programme.
Leeds	Thematic networks such as Young Lives Leeds and Women's Lives Leeds give a strategic focus and voice to organisations working with these communities, while Third Sector Leeds works closely with Leeds City Council and the Leeds Health and Care Partnership to involve the sector in city-wide challenges and solutions.
North East	Vonne represents more than 1,500 member organisations through regional and national networks, influencing policy, directing financial support and developing programmes to strengthen the sector.
Liverpool	VS6, a partnership of infrastructure organisations with an independent chair established in 2015, provides a voice, platform and action model for VCSE participation. It has created a shared manifesto, engages collectively with public and private partners, and runs events on shared responses to issues such as homelessness, child poverty, digital inclusion and sustainable food.
Birmingham	A dedicated research unit, BVSC Research, aims to ensure policies and practices are informed by those who deeply understand the issues facing Birmingham's communities.

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION

This function brings VCSE and cross-sector partners together for the benefit of the local community. NAVCA suggests that effective infrastructure gathers, analyses and shares up-to-date intelligence on the local sector and evidences the difference it makes; engages and consults with organisations, including smaller communities who are often left out of decision-making, and shares that intelligence with decision-makers; brings diverse organisations together in different ways; and convenes people across sectors so that trust develops, honest and sometimes difficult conversations can take place, and new partnerships form to respond to tenders or develop VCSE-led programmes.[34]

Sheffield	Infrastructure organisations have proactively commissioned research exploring the value and contribution of the local sector.
Nottingham	A Practice Development Unit brings together professionals from all sectors who work with people facing severe and multiple disadvantage, to connect and share good practice and expertise.
Southwark	The Race Equality and Cultural Heritage (REACH) network gives voice to organisations working with and for Minority Ethnic communities, and a grassroots network provides tailored support to groups.

PRACTICAL SUPPORT

This function provides direct support to help mainly smaller organisations grow and become more sustainable, but also larger organisations increase capacity or depth of work. NAVCA identifies the features of a high-quality offer as services co-designed with organisations and communities so that they respond to local needs and overcome barriers to taking part; a clearly communicated offer with measures in place to understand its impact; support for organisations to assess their own strengths and areas for development; encouragement to share skills, strengths and assets with each other; and practical support that helps organisations sustain, expand, improve or adapt, from

information on funding and new routes to income generation, to becoming funding-ready and preparing credible proposals, to securing and managing funds that benefit the local sector.[35]

Birmingham	An Accelerator programme supports groups to develop their business development approach and generate income through competitive bidding for contracts and grants.
Manchester	Support is offered in different formats, including bite-sized videos and facilitated peer-learning spaces such as Trustee Connect.
Leeds	Support services include a structured research and evaluation offer for local organisations.
Portsmouth	Two HIVE hubs offer co-working, hot-desking, desk rental and charity incubation, giving groups the chance to share facilities, reduce costs and collaborate.
Durham	A structured training offer is organised by stage of development, for organisations starting up and those seeking to grow, alongside specialist resources such as a guide to property ownership and leases for community buildings.

VOLUNTEERING

This function promotes volunteering and encourages people to be active in their communities in ways that are meaningful to them. NAVCA suggests that local infrastructure should understand the local volunteering landscape; support diverse and developing forms of volunteering and involve volunteers in creating new opportunities and organising community activity; identify and share good practice; equip organisations with the knowledge, skills, connections and tools to recruit, manage, support and celebrate volunteers; make volunteering welcoming and accessible to people from every part of the community, listening to understand barriers and acting to overcome them; and support different ways for people to contribute according to their lives, needs, motivations and passions.[36]

Leeds	The Doing Good Leeds Volunteering Quality Mark enables organisations to show that they meet a high standard of volunteer management.
Coventry	A bespoke volunteering course for young people not in education, employment or training gives them a chance to try volunteering and build confidence and wellbeing.
Durham	A Volunteer Passport scheme creates shared values, goals and standards for recruiting and deploying volunteers, so that volunteers can move between organisations with flexibility and consistency.
Bradford	Organisations can access courses on what an organisation needs to know about volunteering, supporting and supervising volunteers, and involving young volunteers, alongside a support package to achieve a volunteering quality standard.

what this means for Lambeth: there is no single blueprint. Places with strong infrastructure combine a clear collective voice, well-used networks and practical support with distinctive local ideas, and several of the most interesting examples, such as VS6 in Liverpool, are partnerships rather than single organisations.

09 THE NATIONAL AND LONDON PICTURE

opportunities and pressures

TWENTY YEARS OF SHIFTING INVESTMENT

The last 20 years have seen considerable shifts in national interest and investment in local VCSE infrastructure. Initiatives such as the ChangeUp programme and the 'Big Society' placed early emphasis on investing in infrastructure support, but years of austerity and cuts to local government have led to a decline in investment in many areas.[37] PBE (formerly Pro Bono Economics)

summarises that while ‘Covid, the previous government’s levelling up agenda, and health system redesign, have brought with them renewed interest in LCSI and some limited investment ... the fortunes of the sector remain in long-term decline’.[38]

NEW OPENINGS FOR THE SECTOR

In the last two years, the relationship between government and the sector has received renewed focus through the Civil Society Covenant and a new Civil Society Council, which aim to bring leading voices from the VCSE into the heart of government decision-making on the basis that stronger partnership is the only way to deliver better outcomes for communities. So far, however, this engagement has largely been with large national charities rather than local place-based organisations. In health, the VCSE Health and Wellbeing Programme, established in April 2017, enables health providers and VCSE organisations to work together to transform health and care systems, address local health inequalities and help people, families and communities to achieve and maintain wellbeing,[39] and national initiatives such as the Neighbourhood Health Framework and neighbourhood test beds are creating space for new models of partnership and infrastructure support.

For national initiatives to translate into strong delivery partnerships at a local level, grassroots organisations need to be supported and connected. NAVCA’s 2025 research highlights the role of local infrastructure organisations in bringing ‘connection, stability and leadership to their local VCSE sectors’ and in helping local organisations respond to feelings of disconnection and isolation in their communities.[40]

PRESSURE ON LOCAL FUNDING

Historically, many infrastructure providers have been funded by their local authority through grants or commissioned support services, but this funding has reduced as councils have faced financial difficulty. In NAVCA’s 2024 member survey, organisations described the likely impact of proposed or actual cuts as the loss of services to the sector, using reserves to cover shortfalls, and redundancies.[41]

A funding analysis by 360Giving in 2023 estimated that the UK had around 700 voluntary sector infrastructure bodies, with combined annual spending of over £500 million. Most (519) were local or regional and relatively small, with 29% having a turnover under £100,000 and 80% under £1 million. Despite growth in the sector as a whole, infrastructure has not grown in real terms in the last ten years and saw large falls in the decades before. Around a quarter of its income came from government grants and contracts and 8% from other grant-makers, with the rest from membership fees and income from services, including contracts with local health bodies, and very few trusts and foundations were found to fund infrastructure support.[42] The DCMS research is clear that a high-quality offer needs stable and flexible funding that allows providers to deliver a range of functions, including less tangible activities such as relationship building.[43]

“COLD SPOTS” ACROSS THE CAPITAL

In London, the picture is particularly stretched. London Plus’s report on the state of London’s voluntary sector infrastructure describes rising need from communities, declining local authority funding and limited alternative sources of income, which together have created “cold spots” across the capital where there is little or no infrastructure support.[44] A further London Plus report in July 2026, based on responses from 35 local infrastructure organisations, found that funding insecurity has become the norm, with 69% reporting chronic underfunding and 69% saying they are repeatedly at risk.[45]

That report links this landscape to pressure on council finances, as funding for the sector has been withdrawn or reduced so that statutory services can be prioritised. The loss of long-term core

funding has pushed infrastructure organisations towards short-term, project-based funding, reducing both the consistency of the support they offer and their strategic and leadership functions. This is happening just as infrastructure organisations are increasingly asked to coordinate or lead VCSE responses to complex and growing needs around health inequalities, prevention, and integration, without matching long-term investment.

London Plus recommends that central and local government, the NHS and charitable funders work together to create a more coherent, coordinated and predictable funding environment for local infrastructure organisations.

London Plus also recommends that public bodies work with infrastructure organisations so that London's diverse VCSE sector, including small, grassroots and hyper-local organisations, can meaningfully influence the decisions that shape their communities, particularly those facing the greatest inequalities. It stresses that 'to maximise this impact, Local Infrastructure Organisations must also be embedded as essential partners within borough and regional-level strategies, ensuring their insight and coordination role informs decision-making at every level'.[46]

what this means for Lambeth: the national direction of travel creates real opportunities, particularly in neighbourhood health, but these depend on local organisations being connected and supported. Stable, flexible and collaborative funding, rather than a single short-term contract, is what the evidence points to.

10 LOOKING AHEAD

Emerging direction of travel

Communities in Lambeth continue to face interconnected challenges around poverty, health, education, employment and housing. The voluntary and community sector has always supported and given voice to communities on these issues, but it has not always had the underlying infrastructure to respond to them collectively. Nationally, there is renewed focus on working with the sector to meet community needs, and new health policies and structures, including neighbourhood health, place VCSE organisations at the heart of responding to health inequalities.

Lambeth VCS Futures is exploring whether traditional models of supporting the sector through a single commissioning arrangement are still the most feasible or appropriate way to support the sector in Lambeth, giving it the best opportunity to deliver national priorities locally and meet the needs of local communities. With a vibrant sector of more than 700 organisations and dozens of local forums and networks, Lambeth has considerable assets to draw on, and local groups have already begun to build peer-led forms of support and partnerships that improve the coordination and quality of local provision.

> The question is how best to respond to these challenges and opportunities. Report 2 begins to answer it by setting out what the sector in Lambeth has said it needs, and what that reveals about the strengths and gaps in current infrastructure provision. Report 3 will explore what a new model could look like for Lambeth and how it could be resourced and delivered.

11 NOTES AND REFERENCES

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