



Volunteering Doesn't Happen By Accident

A best practice guide to effective
volunteering infrastructure



Introduction

Volunteering doesn't happen by accident, and this guide is designed to help build understanding and strengthening of the foundations for local action by demonstrating best practice in three core areas:

- Promoting volunteering
- Reducing barriers
- Volunteering policy and practice

We've created this guide to enable conversations that identify where efforts are most needed, so that local communities are supported by strong volunteering infrastructure. This in turn helps to build resilience and the strengthen the resources communities need to tackle the issues that matter most to them through volunteering.

Each theme has been drawn from **LIQA (Local Infrastructure Quality Accreditation)** assessment criteria, the national **Vision for Volunteering** and recent research from **Department of Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS)** to create a simple structure to assess the health of volunteering systems and infrastructure in local areas across England. We've included case studies and data from NAVCA members to showcase best practice. There are also supporting resources to help build an action plan so that you can continue to build best practice in your area.



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About the guide

What the guide offers

Volunteering doesn't happen by accident. This guide is designed to help partners understand and strengthen the foundations for local action by demonstrating best practice in three core areas: *Promoting volunteering*, *Reducing barriers* and *Volunteering policy & practice*.

The guide enables you to:

- Assess the maturity of your local voluntary volunteering infrastructure.
- Identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities for collaboration.
- Facilitate shared conversations between VCSE, funders, and local authorities.
- Guide more equitable and effective investment decisions.

Who it's for

- NAVCA members and VCSE leaders: Evidence your role and advocate for engagement and investment.
- Funders: Direct investment where it multiplies local impact.
- Commissioners / LAs / ICS: Build integrated, place-based community systems.
- Government & policy makers: Shape scalable, data-led social infrastructure policy.

How to use it

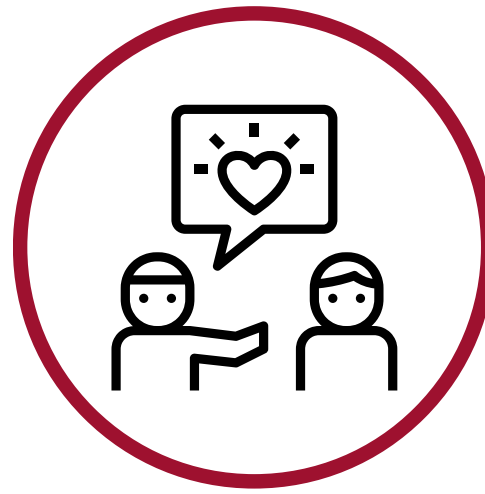
- Download the guide.
- Engage with local partners.
- Use the accompanying health check framework to understand your local system.
- Turn insights into shared strategy and investment.

The outcomes

Stronger connections. Better collaboration. Shared investment. Communities not just responding to change, but shaping their own futures.



1 – Promoting volunteering



A good system will:

- Celebrate volunteers individually and collectively. Examples include: awards and informal, ongoing recognition, celebratory events such as Volunteers Week.
- Celebrate volunteer-led groups.
- Have a range of partners, from service providers to local employers and businesses, committed to celebrate volunteering and the diversity of volunteers.
- Develop a wide range of volunteering opportunities and will ensure that people can engage and take part. As well as structured volunteering, forms of volunteering include:
 - Social action
 - Employee volunteering
 - Short term or one-off volunteer opportunities
- Network volunteer managers to encourage best practice, peer support and build a group of critical friends.

Case study:

Voluntary Action Rotherham

Engaging young people by celebrating the importance of volunteering

“In 2025, we launched a campaign “Take A Chance On Me” that was all about encouraging our member organisations to create volunteering roles for young people. A secondary aim of the campaign was to encourage young people to volunteer, recognising the positive impact it can have on their own lives and future careers.

After conversations with Rotherham’s Children, Young People and Families Consortium, we launched an initial campaign to gather stories from people who had volunteered when they were younger, and how that had helped them get to where they were today. We thought that this would best demonstrate how volunteering can have a positive impact on your life, and provide a bedrock for your future.

We created and launched “*A Letter to Volunteering*”, which provided a basic online template for anyone to fill in, and laid out a series of 3 questions we wanted people to answer. This was shared across our communications channels, including our internal newsletter. We got three responses to this initial campaign, and alongside this we gathered a case study from one of our member organisations who had a strong success of recruiting young volunteers. The example they chose was a young person who had started as a volunteer at the organisation, and ended up with a paid role.

We brought all this content together and created a video which we hoped would inspire and spark conversations with a wider audience. We shared this video across our communication channels, through our network lists and via stakeholder engagement meetings. It was shared at various local events and also appeared on one of the four key sections the front page of our website.



We selected a catchy title which mirrored what we felt young people needed – “a chance”- and nodded to the famous song by ABBA. To match the song, we ran with a disco theme with the visuals and music in the video. We wanted it to be fun and engaging.

Overall, the video had 76 video plays on our YouTube channel and was featured in the local press, as well as in local newsletters.”

Promoting volunteering: data snapshot

A recent survey* of NAVCA members showed that:

- 52 members placed over 14,000 volunteers in the past 12 months. Across all 187 NAVCA members, this equates to over 50,000 volunteers placed in the last 12 months.
- 8,606 local volunteering roles were being advertised by 52 members at the time of the survey.
- The 52 survey respondents were supporting 8,311 local VCSE organisations to recruit volunteers – and around 30,000 organisations across the network as a whole.
- 48 out of 52 respondents advertised for or supported the recruitment of volunteer roles for local branches of large national volunteer involving organisations working in the local area. The 52 respondents had advertised or supported the recruitment of 962 of these roles for in the last year.
- 52 members had advertised or supported the recruitment of 962 roles for national charities in the last year.

Many NAVCA members also enable employer supported volunteering. Examples included Voluntary Support North Surrey, who placed more than 1,000 employer supported volunteers over 12 months. CVS Bedfordshire have developed a partnership with their local Age Concern, which is helping to recruit to up to 3,000 telephone befriending opportunities.



*Volunteering Support Survey, NAVCA, 2025

2 – Reducing barriers

A good system will:

- Listen to communities about volunteering, their aspirations for change and the things that hold them back.
- Re-shape volunteering opportunities to better meet the aspirations of community members and take action to reduce inequality in access.
- Provide additional support, building confidence and skills with the people who wish to volunteer to reduce barriers to access.

In any local area where there is strong support by the local authority or other funders for volunteer centres and where you have that volunteer centre really dedicated to equity, diversity and inclusion, you'll have a stronger kind of more robust offering from the organisations in that area in EDI and how they involve local people."

Stakeholder, Promoting equity, diversity and inclusion in volunteering report, Department of Culture, Media & Sport, 2024.



Case study: Hastings Voluntary Action

Providing infrastructure support to a local dementia charity, helping them to recruit more volunteers

“Hastings & St Leonards Dementia Action Alliance (HSLDAA) is an organisation that brings together services that support people affected by dementia in the local area. It enables people to share information and coordinate activities and build Dementia Friendly Communities. It is entirely run by volunteers and has no paid staff of its own. We were contacted by them in late 2021 to help to recruit more volunteers to help run the organisation.

We looked at different aspects including their meeting structures and their social media presence, and gave various pieces of advice, but there were two main strands of activity: to help them reach out to relevant partner organisations to find people to attend the regular meetings, and encourage those partners to connect back into the organisation; and secondly we produced a press release to raise awareness of the work of the organisation, and to seek new volunteers.

We supported HSLDAA intensively for several months over which time they saw a considerable increase in attendance at the group’s meetings. They now have a core committee, plus regular attendance from partner organisations, and input from guest speakers. They are connected to HVA’s Age Friendly Hastings project.

We continue to support HSLDAA with a soft touch, occasionally attending their meetings to help steer them. We direct volunteers and organisations to their group and give HSLDAA a presence at our networking events and community marketplaces to continue to raise their profile.”



Reducing barriers: data snapshot

94% of survey respondents work to reduce barriers by:

- working with communities to create meaningful roles and opportunities
- developing volunteer passport schemes
- advocating and providing a platform for people with lived experience
- providing tailored and one-to-one training and support
- running outreach sessions and bespoke workshops
- holding round table discussions with community organisations
- co-producing resources

For more ideas and guidance download our Inclusive Volunteering Guide from the Member Hub at navca.org.uk

**Volunteering Support Survey, NAVCA, 2025*

Communities reported in the survey as supported by our members include:

- people with a disability;
- people excluded through ethnicity or racial inequalities
- young people
- older people
- economically disadvantaged people
- women and girls
- faith communities
- LGBTQ+ community
- migration communities
- educationally disadvantaged people
- people in contact with or leaving the criminal justice system
- people out of work or not in education/training
- people in insecure housing

Reducing barriers: data snapshot

Examples of NAVCA members' work to develop best practice

"...We have recently held a round table discussion with equalities led volunteer involving organisations and as a result of this are soon to launch a co-produced resource about the topic of EDI within volunteering. There is a hope to then develop a partnership of organisations offering training to each other/EDI specific 'training swaps' - e.g Deaf awareness delivered by our local Deaf led organisation."

Voscur, Bristol

"We have a volunteer buddy scheme where we provide extra 1-2-1 support for people experiencing barriers to volunteering. This includes support with finding a role, filling in application forms, liaising with the volunteer involving organisation and attending induction/ training and first volunteering sessions. We also run a welcome to volunteering course approx. 3 times per year to help people who have no reference and/or new to volunteering. We partner with specific groups supporting people and help them access volunteering."

Third Sector Leaders Kirklees

"Our Power of 10 project works with young people from primary school age upwards & with schools & community organisations to develop 'young person friendly' meaningful roles, taster/ after school/ with friends/ family/ fun sessions etc & offers awards & rewards & volunteering passports, to make it easy to record hours in different roles. Our Help Out & Community Fit projects are helping working age adults (underrepresented locally) to volunteer with flexible, one-off, varied and fun weekend & evening roles."

HADCA (Harrogate & District Community Action)

3 – Volunteering policy & practice

A good system will:

- Have a strategy that all stakeholders are committed to. The strategy will have been co-designed, starting from the aspirations and needs of communities, volunteers and those who want to volunteer.
- Put more power to decide in the hands of volunteers.
- Drive up standards in volunteering involving organisations through networking and connections, developing and sharing best practice, resources and providing supportive challenge.
- Understand the progress made through evaluation and impact measurement.



Case study: Birmingham Voluntary Service Council

Developing a local Vision for Volunteering

Birmingham Voluntary Service Council (BVSC) has shown how a clear, shared Vision for Volunteering can reshape a city's volunteering landscape. Developed through local conversations and co-production in 2022, Birmingham's Vision for Volunteering responds to post-COVID shifts: rising demand to volunteer alongside growing fatigue, and the pressures of the cost-of-living crisis in some of the city's most deprived communities. Volunteers remain vital in supporting local services, yet Birmingham previously lacked both a shared vision and a central hub for support.

Co-production events highlighted the need to revitalise volunteering, with a strong emphasis on valuing volunteers, improving accessibility, and strengthening social cohesion. The resulting vision is built on three principles aimed at empowering volunteers across the city through inclusive and equitable practice:

- celebrating difference
- collaboration
- awareness and appreciation

BVSC has embedded this vision through strategic partnerships, sector-wide workshops, and practical resources. A multi-stakeholder strategic group and targeted engagement with Volunteer Managers have helped align local needs with best practice, including the development of a new volunteering brokerage platform. This approach has also strengthened funding bids, securing investment from NHS England for health volunteering and the National Lottery Climate Action Fund for community projects tackling poor air quality.

The Vision for Volunteering is an important resource for communities to develop a more diverse, ambitious and inclusive future for volunteering. Find out more at www.visionforvolunteering.org.uk



Policy and practice: data snapshot

Examples of NAVCA members' work to develop best practice



"Safeguarding training for groups recruiting volunteers, and volunteers themselves; deliver a programme specifically for people who experience barriers to volunteering; support community anchor organisations with more localised support for groups; deliver a package of support around Volunteer week; quarterly network for Volunteer Managers and leads"

Voluntary and Community Calderdale

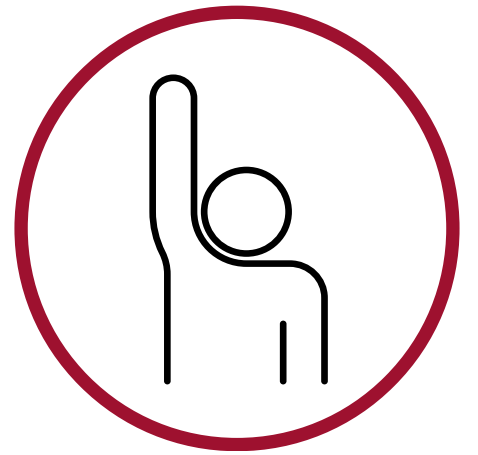
"NCVS hosts and facilitates the Leaders of Volunteers Network (LoVN) – a peer support network for leaders of volunteers, meeting 4 to 6 times a year – mostly online, occasionally in-person."

Nottingham Community and Voluntary Service (NCVS)

"Offer a quality award to organisations after reviewing their volunteer offer, policies etc. Host forums for volunteer coordinators to learn and network"

Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency

Creating an action plan



Next steps to ensure best practice

1. Identify what is working well in your area, and where any gaps may be as outlined by the 'a good system will...' best practice model.
2. Create an action plan with your partners and stakeholders that everyone is committed to.
3. Re-visit the action plan regularly to track progress.

Action plan template

Need help creating an action plan? We've created a *Volunteering Doesn't Happen By Accident Toolkit* for you to use that includes:

- a strengths/weaknesses assessment for each criteria
- an action prioritising exercise
- a simple workshop exercise to get people thinking about different aspects of 'system health'

Download the toolkit from the NAVCA Member Hub at www.navca.org.uk

Insights and resources

1. Local Civil Society Infrastructure Research Programme (2025) reports are available at:
www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-civil-society-infrastructure-lcsi-rd-programme-final-reports
2. DCMS research shows critical role of local infrastructure www.navca.org.uk/news/dcms-research-shows-critical-role-of-local-infrastructure
3. Vision for Volunteering: www.visionforvolunteering.org.uk
4. Working with local infrastructure organisations to engage smaller VCFSE organisations: Good practice guide:
www.local.gov.uk/publications/working-local-infrastructure-organisations-engage-smaller-vcfse-organisations-good
5. Connecting communities, enabling common ground: the role of local infrastructure report:
www.navca.org.uk/news/connecting-communities-enabling-common-ground-the-role-of-local-infrastructure
6. NAVCA EEDI work and resources, www.navca.org.uk/eedi-at-navca
7. NAVCA Quality Accreditation: www.navca.org.uk/quality-accreditation
8. Walking a tightrope: Exploring the conditions for effective local voluntary and community sector infrastructure,
www.navca.org.uk/walking-a-tightrope
9. How to build good relationships with the voluntary sector – a guide for councils, www.navca.org.uk/news/new-councils-guide



navca
local focus national voice

About

NAVCA is the national membership body for local infrastructure organisations, with members covering more than 80% of local authorities in England, supporting around 165,000 VCSE organisations. Find out more at www.navca.org.uk

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