CRESR
Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research

Sheffield Hallam University

A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the Benefits of Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure

Report for the Infrastructure National Partnership

August 2006

Dr Rob Macmillan

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research

Sheffield Hallam University

Acknowledgements

This Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) was commissioned by the **Infrastructure National Partnership** (INP), and managed on its behalf by **Elizabeth Ladimeji** of the **National Council for Voluntary Organisations** (NCVO). The project was funded through **ChangeUp**, the government's VCS infrastructure investment programme.

The REA was undertaken by **Dr Rob Macmillan** and **Rosalind Goudie** at the **Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research** (CRESR) at **Sheffield Hallam University**. Rob Macmillan designed the REA, carried out the assessment and is responsible for the contents of this report. Rosalind Goudie assisted with the project's design, and was primarily responsible for searching for and obtaining evidence for assessment.

Dr Jean Ellis from **Charities Evaluation Service** (CES) provided expert support on the REA's design, on the question of 'benefits' and impact of VCS infrastructure, and assisted in 'double reviewing' some of the evidence assessed.

Elizabeth Ladimeji and **Carol Osbourne** from NCVO organised the three expert seminars held during the project in Sheffield, Birmingham and London. We would like to thank all the participants (listed in Appendix 2) for their thoughts, comments and suggestions regarding the REA.

The project was supported by an **advisory group drawn from the INP**. The group provided advice and guidance on the project's design and emerging findings, as well as commenting on a draft of this report. We would like to thank **Kevin Curley** (NAVCA), **Colin Nee** (Charities Evaluation Services), **Isabel Sutcliffe** (Home Office) and **Karl Wilding** (NCVO) for their advice and contributions throughout the project, and for helpful comments on a draft of this report.

For further information, please contact:

About the project overall, and the INP

Elizabeth Ladimeji

National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)
Regent's Wharf
8 All Saints Street
London
N1 9RL

Tel: 020 7713 6161
Email: ElizabethLadimeji@ncvo-vol.org.uk

About the research

Dr. Rob Macmillan

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR)
Sheffield Hallam University
Unit 10, Science Park
City Campus
Sheffield
S1 1WB

Tel: 0114 225 4525
Email: r.macmillan@shu.ac.uk

Contents

Executive Summary

1. Introduction - setting the scene

This report assesses the nature of the current evidence base on **the benefits of Voluntary and Community Sector infrastructure,** following a four month 'rapid evidence assessment' (REA) designed to search for, obtain and assess relevant evidence.

Arguably voluntary and community sector infrastructure has come under unprecedented scrutiny in the last three to five years, following the government's express intention of creating a step change in the support provided to the sector. A tremendous amount of mapping activity has been undertaken in the last three years at local, sub-regional, regional and national levels, designed to outline and clarify exactly what is being provided, by whom and who for. This review considers a slightly different question by attempting to go beyond a description of infrastructure to ask about the *consequences of VCS infrastructure provision*; about its achievements and benefits, that is 'what difference does it make?'

A Rapid Evidence Assessment is a means of gaining as detailed and comprehensive a view of available evidence pertinent to a policy or research issue as possible within the constraints of a particular timetable. The evidence discussed in this report represents our current view of the evidence available on the issue of the benefits of VCS infrastructure. As such it is provisional, based on our view of the current state of knowledge as best we can ascertain given the nature of the review. Important distinctions need to be made between:

A. The benefits of VCS infrastructure (whatever they may be)
B. Evidence for the benefits of VCS infrastructure
C. Evidence for the benefits of VCS infrastructure found through this rapid evidence assessment.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to view this report as some sort of final definitive statement of the benefits of VCS infrastructure. There are lots of arguments in favour of infrastructure, and many claims about its benefits. But not all of this will necessarily be well supported by documented evidence. This does not necessarily mean that the suggested benefits are fictitious. It merely indicates that in such cases there does not appear (within the constraints of a rapid evidence assessment) to be much evidence to support the claims being made.

The evidence for the benefits of infrastructure presented in this report is organised under the broad terms of the recently developed PERFORM outcomes-based performance improvement framework for voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations. In turn we consider the role and benefits of VCS infrastructure in terms of:

1. those PERFORM functions seeking to effect **change within individual voluntary and community organisations**:
   - Sector support and development
   - Sector diversity and equality

2. those PERFORM functions seeking to effect **change between and beyond individual voluntary and community organisations**:
   - Sector collaboration and co-ordination
   - Sector influence and representation.

Overall, it is fair to say that the evidence base in relation to the benefits of VCS infrastructure is not particularly substantial. There is a growing base of material which focuses on, or has something to say about VCS infrastructure, but in the main this does not address the benefits of VCS infrastructure.

What there is of an evidence base is somewhat fragmented and disparate. The evidence that has been included in this assessment tends to derive from single project and programme evaluations of VCS interventions rather than more comprehensive studies of infrastructure as a whole. This also means that it is very difficult to bring evidence together in any cumulative sense to gain an impression of the overall or aggregate impact of VCS infrastructure. Instead the evidence tends to emphasise the benefits of particular approaches, projects or activities.

2. Change within individual voluntary and community organisations

Infrastructure interventions often operate directly with individual voluntary and community organisations. The evidence highlights the benefits of VCS infrastructure in a number of ways:

- the benefits arising at different levels: individual, organisational and sectoral
- the benefits of organisational development tools and systems
- infrastructure as expert advice
- building capacity to access resources
- infrastructure interventions offering a 'space for reflection'
- increasing confidence
- cascading learning
- unintended and less tangible effects.

Example: Infrastructure interventions offer 'space for reflection'

Based on direct feedback and reflections from voluntary organisations and community groups, several studies note how support provides 'space for reflection', for example via:

1. The adoption and use of quality systems:

"the chance to stand back from day-to-day concerns and reflect on changes required was felt by many to be useful: 'we have had a chance to reflect on performance, highlight areas where improvements were needed and work on them'" (Cairns et al 2004: 35)

2. Using consultants:

For some charities, the availability of the capacity building grant was seen as an opportunity to review the organisation's practices and to reflect on whether these were the most appropriate for service users. The hope was that the consultancy would enable various stakeholders within the charity to take time out to address problems that had surfaced over a period of time. One charity trustee commented:

"We thought for a while that we should review things that we do, and often they are the kinds of tasks that go on the backburner because of getting caught up in the day-to-day running of things. So I think we saw it as an opportunity to have some external help to get us to look at our practice and develop the service." (Reid and Gibb 2004: 7-8)

3. Tailored organisational support in a capacity building project

The Community Development Foundation's action research evaluation of Capacity Building project notes several changes reported by participating organisations, including changes in attitudes about the importance of monitoring and evaluation *('the training woke us up')*(CDF 2005: 12) and about future planning (*'we now think about future prospects and new services'; 'before we would just get on and do the work, now we take stock of how we are performing and how we need to develop'*) (ibid: 13).

3. Change between and beyond individual voluntary and community organisations

A second dimension of VCS infrastructure emphasises its roles in seeking to bring about change in relationships between and beyond individual voluntary and community organisations. This could be about either:

- horizontal relationships: between individual organisations (networking and collaboration) or
- vertical relationships: between individual organisations and/or the sector overall on the one hand and decision makers/public policy on the other (influence and representation).

The evidence suggests that VCS infrastructure plays a beneficial role in a number of ways:

- promoting community involvement in regeneration
- the role of 'civic infrastructure' in enabling public participation
- assessing longer term change in co-ordination at a local level
- a VCS voice at regional level
- the role of Community Empowerment Networks (CENs).

Example: Community Involvement in Regeneration

A comparative study of community involvement in rural regeneration partnerships (CIRRP) in localities in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland came to unequivocal conclusions about the beneficial role of VCS infrastructure in promoting and supporting CIRRP:

The overwhelming opinion in this study was that infrastructure was essential to the success of CIRRP. It facilitated the links between the different structural levels of regeneration partnerships, provided technical assistance and expertise, supported small scale funding schemes which built local expertise and confidence and which helped develop the capacity of individuals and groups to participate in regeneration (Osborne et al 2002: 24).

It is argued here that it was the effectiveness of these intermediary bodies which determined the success, or otherwise, of CIRRP in all three nations.

It is clear from this study that strong infrastructure is essential to the promotion, development and sustenance of CIRRP (Osborne et al 2002: 40)

For Osborne and colleagues, the significance of local VCS infrastructure is clear. Community involvement in regeneration relies upon effective and strong local VCS infrastructure. Unfortunately, the research does not make it clear what the characteristics or determinants of effective and strong local infrastructure are, although it does express the view that no single model would be preferred. However, in so far as public policy continues to prioritise community involvement, it would seem from

this research that local VCS infrastructure not only has a central role to play, but would seem to be a critical success factor.

4. Implications

In so far as our rapid evidence search and assessment has been comprehensive, it would appear that there has been no systematic study of the role, position and benefits of the range of VCS infrastructure interventions. The evidence reviewed has primarily focused on single interventions or projects; involved cross-sectional research approaches and involved qualitative methods, and particularly semi-structured interviews reporting the experiences, perceptions and understandings of participants.

Conversely, there have been very few longitudinal research designs, in which interventions and their (beneficial) effects can be studied over time; or comparative research or evaluation designs, for example where ostensibly similar interventions or the work of comparable agencies are undertaken in different settings or contexts; studies involving quantitative methods, or studies aiming to examine and quantify value for money or costs and benefits.

Despite this, we have been able to find and review some recent, pertinent evidence which can shed light on the issue of the benefits of VCS infrastructure. There have been some strong studies examining particular facets of VCS infrastructure (for example: on community involvement/participation, quality standards and evaluations of fundraising training).

The main **implications for the voluntary and community sector** include:

- the need to acknowledge that in so far as competing claims for policy attention and limited resources may be strengthened by an appeal to convincing evidence, VCS infrastructure is not in as strong a position as it could be.
- that outcome-based improvement frameworks such as PERFORM may present an opportunity for VCS infrastructure to concentrate on identifying the difference it makes, and begin to plan the routine collection of information which can demonstrate this. But in a strange twist, this may itself require infrastructure support around strengthening research, evaluation and outcomes thinking within the voluntary and community sector.

The main **implications for policy makers** include:

- the need to reflect on what questions about VCS infrastructure remain unanswered, and how should they be addressed. There may be a role for key policy makers in instigating or resourcing a more comprehensive inquiry into the role, position and benefits of VCS infrastructure.
- the utility of drawing more explicit comparisons between VCS infrastructure and the role of support and services in other sectors, particularly business support.

The main **implications for research** are that:

- there is a clearly a need for more research on the question of the benefits of VCS infrastructure. But there is also a need for better co-ordinated research, for research that fills gaps, or takes up unresolved puzzles, or takes off from where existing research stops.
- to aid this, dissemination amongst practitioners, policy makers and researchers of existing research on VCS infrastructure requires some considerable attention.
- there is perhaps a need for a continued research or ‘evidence-dialogue’ between those with an interest in commissioning, undertaking, reading or using research on the role and contribution of VCS infrastructure. This could focus strategic discussions on which evidence gaps appear to be priorities, and which research questions might be regarded as more fruitful lines of enquiry.

1. Introduction - setting the scene

1.1 This report assesses the nature of the current evidence base on **the benefits of Voluntary and Community Sector infrastructure.** It represents the outcome of a four month 'rapid evidence assessment' (REA) designed to search for, obtain and assess evidence about the benefits of voluntary and community sector infrastructure.

1.2 Arguably voluntary and community sector infrastructure has come under unprecedented scrutiny in the last three to five years, following the government's express intention of creating a step change in the support provided to the sector. Lots of searching questions are being asked of infrastructure, not least by the sector itself. Many of these questions concern what infrastructure services and activities are needed, what is provided and how it is organised and coordinated. A tremendous amount of mapping activity has been undertaken in the last three years at local, sub-regional, regional and national levels, designed to outline and clarify exactly what is being provided, by whom and who for.

1.3 Much of this has been extremely valuable, especially given the lack of knowledge in this area. But this review aims to consider a slightly different question. It attempts to go beyond a description of infrastructure services, activities and functions to ask about the *consequences of VCS infrastructure provision*; about its achievements and benefits. The review examines evidence that can potentially help us address the 'so what' question, that is 'what difference does it make?'

1.4 The findings of the review are presented in sections 2 and 3 of this report. In the remainder of this section, we outline aspects of the policy background to the review; a summary of the approach and the review question; definitions; some necessary words of caution and qualification; the cases made for VCS infrastructure, and finally a plan of the report.

A. Background to the review

1.5 Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure has received a great deal of policy attention in the UK in recent years. As part of the 2002 Spending Review, and following the Treasury's Cross cutting review into the role of the sector in public service delivery (Treasury 2002), new resources have been invested in the sector's infrastructure. The government's ten year strategy for capacity building and infrastructure, *'ChangeUp'*, was published in June 2004 (Home Office 2004), with the aim of achieving a step change in the nature and organisation of support provided for frontline voluntary organisations and community groups.

1.6 ChangeUp was accompanied by an investment programme of some £80m through to March 2006 designed to boost infrastructure. There has arguably never been such an intensive investment programme for voluntary and community sector infrastructure.

1.7 Subsequently a further two years resource commitment, totalling £70m, was made available by central government for the period April 2006 to March 2008, alongside proposals to establish a dedicated agency to oversee and implement the programme (Home Office 2005). The new agency, Capacitybuilders, was launched on 3rd April 2006 (Capacitybuilders 2006). At the same time the Big Lottery Fund has launched its own dedicated VCS infrastructure programme, BASIS - Building and Sustaining Infrastructure Support. A total of £155m is to be invested across three application rounds in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

By the end of the decade, upwards of £300m will have been invested in VCS infrastructure from the current ChangeUp and BASIS programmes alone.

Finally, as of Spring 2006, government departments are beginning to prepare for the next Spending Review. As such, resources to continue the ten year ChangeUp strategy will be competing with other demands on government expenditure, albeit within reconfigured departmental responsibilities for the sector following the May 2006 changes to the machinery of government.

1.8 Although it may be too early to provide a comprehensive judgement, it is perfectly reasonable to ask questions about the outcomes and impact of the increased resources available for VCS infrastructure in the last three years and the likely impact over the next few years. Government departments responsible for the sector are undertaking a 'temperature check' of ChangeUp at the time of writing. But this rapid evidence assessment has a broader canvas, as it aims to consider evidence about the benefits of infrastructure more generally, rather than evaluate a particular strategy and programme.

B. Summary of our approach to the review

1.9 The aim of the project was to undertake a 'rapid evidence assessment' (REA) examining **the benefits of VCS infrastructure**. This would enable a review of academic, grey and practitioner literature, including some evidence from overseas. Three expert seminars would be used to validate and supplement the review. Full details of how we designed and carried out the review are provided in appendix 1.

1.10 A rapid evidence assessment is defined by Butler et al (2005: 1) as:

"a new approach to harnessing robust research evidence for policy makers in a more focused and timely way than many other secondary research methods. [It] orders and filters research evidence in a similar way to a systematic review.

However, systematic reviews require considerable effort and time. REAs are more likely to meet the urgent timescales of decision makers"

An REA is a means of gaining as detailed and comprehensive a view of available evidence pertinent to a policy or research issue as possible within the constraints of a particular timetable. It attempts to mirror the transparency and critical approach to evidence assessment involved in systematic reviews, but it cannot be as thorough. Because of the compressed time scale implied in an REA, some concessions around the search strategy are made, involving less attention to exhaustive database searching and grey literature. As a result the REA should not be seen as a definitive statement; rather it is *always provisional*, and subject to revision if/when new evidence arises.

1.11 The evidence assessment is framed around the question: **What are the benefits of Voluntary and Community Sector infrastructure?** The main parameters of the review are summarised in the table below:

Review Question: What are the benefits of VCS infrastructure?	
Population	Beneficiaries of infrastructure: end users; 'frontline' voluntary organisations and community groups; and public agencies/government
Interventions	Infrastructure activities and functions encompassed by the *ChangeUp* definition of infrastructure, undertaken for the sector by any sector
Outcomes	Benefits (outcomes and impact); that is, any positive consequences or changes, arising from infrastructure interventions.
Study dimensions	• Studies from 1997 onwards • in UK, US, Canada, Australia and European Union

1.12 A deliberately broad approach was taken to the notions of both 'benefits' and 'VCS infrastructure'. Regarding **VCS infrastructure**, we have been guided by ChangeUp definition (Home Office 2004: 15), based around activities and functions:

"Infrastructure describes the physical facilities, structures, systems, relationships, people, knowledge and skills that exist to support, develop, co-ordinate, represent and promote front line organisations, helping them to deliver their missions more effectively.

Infrastructure organisations are those who provide support services on those areas. They are sometimes called umbrella organisations, second tier organisations or intermediary organisations."

1.13 The idea of the **benefits** of VCS infrastructure is arguably more problematic. Benefits might be envisaged as all positive consequences, for a range of different 'beneficiaries', which are attributable to infrastructure activities. It seems to cut

across the conventional descriptors used in discussions of impact assessment (i.e.: inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact), but arguably sits more readily towards the outcomes and impact end of the spectrum. The idea of benefits was used partly in recognition of the continuing and unresolved debate on the definitions of outcomes and impact. The aim was to use a more neutral term that would not lead to an arbitrary exclusion of some evidence that might be of interest. The focus of the REA has thus been on the *difference* VCS infrastructure makes.

1.14 The REA involves four steps:

- Search for potentially relevant material (using an evidence search strategy)
- Obtain potentially relevant material
- Assess for relevance (against criteria in an assessment protocol)
- Assess evidence (using an assessment pro-forma)

C. Four notes of caution

1.15 There are four important notes of caution to be made about this evidence assessment. These relate to:

- the methodology itself;
- the idea of evidence of benefits of VCS infrastructure;
- the idea of disbenefits and negative consequences; and lastly
- to issues around the organisation of infrastructure activities.

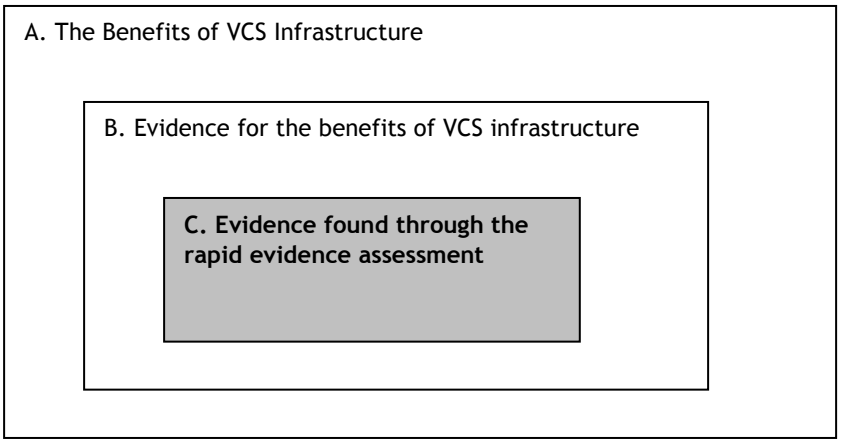
1.16 Firstly, as indicated in paragraph 1.10 above, some important qualifications need to be made about undertaking a Rapid Evidence Assessment. Of course compromises of one sort or another have to be made in all research endeavours. The aim of systematic reviews of literature is to assess *all* evidence of relevance to a particular question. In practice this is rarely possible. A Rapid Evidence Assessment makes explicit the compromise that has to be made in order to complete a review in a shorter time scale. Time and resource constraints mean that we cannot be as comprehensive in our evidence search activities as we might like. The evidence discussed in sections 2 and 3 of this report has to be taken in this context. It represents our current view of the evidence available pertinent to the issue of the benefits of VCS infrastructure. As such it is provisional, based on our view of the current state of knowledge as best we can ascertain given the nature of the review. However, by documenting how we have undertaken the review (see Appendix 1), we hope that others will be able to fill in gaps in due course or subsequently update what we have done.

1.17 This leads to the second qualification we must make. As shown in the figure below, important distinctions need to be made between:

A. The benefits of VCS infrastructure (whatever they may be)
B. Evidence for the benefits of VCS infrastructure

C. Evidence for the benefits of VCS infrastructure found through this rapid evidence assessment.

The title of this report is *"A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the Benefits of Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure"*. Sections 2 and 3 of the report examine only the shaded area of the figure.



It would be a mistake, therefore, to view this report as some sort of final definitive statement of the benefits of VCS infrastructure.

There are lots of arguments in favour of infrastructure, and many claims about its benefits (see paragraph 1.20 below). But not all of this will necessarily be well supported by documented evidence. This does not necessarily mean that the suggested benefits are fictitious. It merely indicates that in such cases there does not appear (within the constraints of a rapid evidence assessment) to be much evidence to support the claims being made. But it is important to note that this may say more about how limited the evidence base currently is, than about the credibility of the claims. And as we have indicated in paragraph 1.16, there may be other evidence available that we have yet to come across.

In addition, there is an important issue to raise about *what counts as evidence*. By its nature a rapid evidence assessment, as a secondary review of existing empirical material, tends to priviledge more formalised written accounts of research and evaluation. There may be other forms of primary evidence which tends to get overlooked, such as informal papers, anecdotal reflections, observations, monitoring data and internal performance reviews. In addition, there may be benefits of VCS infrastructure which are so intangible that it would be extremely hard to identify what evidence might support such a claim.

1.18 This relates to a third qualification. The assessment here is focused around the question of 'benefits' of VCS infrastructure. On the face of it this might seem a little

one-sided. As a result the assessment has also involved an investigation of the potential drawbacks and negative consequences of VCS infrastructure. Although the literature search was informed by a question involving benefits of VCS infrastructure, in practice the review considered any evidence about the consequences and outcomes of VCS infrastructure, whether positive or negative.

1.19 Finally, it is worth emphasising the fact that the review was not tasked with assessing how best to provide and organise infrastructure activities. It was focused on compiling and assessing evidence about the benefits of VCS infrastructure overall. Important debates have been underway in recent years about how infrastructure is best organised, coordinated and services provided. Amongst others, these debates have asked the following questions:

- What is the most appropriate scale for different infrastructure activities? What things should be provided locally, sub-regionally, regionally and nationally? How should different levels be co-ordinated?
- To what extent should infrastructure activities be organised through generic infrastructure bodies or through specialist agencies?
- To what extent should any existing plural array of provision be reconfigured or rationalised into fewer delivery agencies with less scope for competition and duplication?
- Should infrastructure services and support be delivered by the voluntary and community sector itself? What is the role for support provided through the public sector (e.g. local authorities) or via the private sector (e.g. through private companies, or freelance consultants)?
- How should infrastructure activities be resourced? Should finance come primarily in the form of grants and contracts to particular providers? What is the role for fees and charges for services, and to what extent can frontline users of infrastructure buy services and support from a range of providers?

It is possible that the evidence presented in sections 2 and 3 of this report may inform some of these debates. However, these questions were not the focus of the rapid evidence assessment itself.

D. The cases made for VCS infrastructure

1.20 There are a number of conventional arguments that tend to be made in support of and against the role of VCS infrastructure. As a way of framing the evidence that follows, we have listed the kinds of arguments often heard in the box below.

Some of these arguments are about what VCS infrastructure does, whilst others are more to do with its overall role and position within the VCS. Some may be evidence-based. Others less so. Some of the arguments conventionally used against VCS infrastructure tend to come from particular perspectives, and thus VCS infrastructure

often seems to be caught in the middle of criticisms coming from opposite directions. Arguably this ‘goes with the territory’ of taking an intermediary role.

But insofar as these perspectives do get expressed, the list highlights how the position of VCS infrastructure is not always uncontested; it remains subject to some question and debate.

Arguments conventionally used in a case for VCS infrastructure	Arguments conventionally used against VCS infrastructure
• Catalyst - makes a critical difference to frontline VCOs; identifying and meeting new needs; establishing and developing organisations. • Distance travelled - visible change in communities and groups • Successful track record of innovative/flexible service delivery • Extensive reach/in touch with the grassroots; able to take a bottom up approach • Inclusiveness • Ownership within/accountability to the sector • Independence • Professional • Provides strategic leadership for the sector • Provides alternative routes into participation • Access to information and local/national knowledge • Effective (and efficient) two way channel of information and voices between statutory sector and the VCS/communities • Authoritative voice of the sector, based on intelligence about the sector • Representative voice of membership • Assists the sector in becoming sustainable • Added value: able to help lever additional resources (e.g. funding, promoting volunteering) • Critical mass and scale economies	• Top-slicing - competitors for limited resources against frontline projects and delivery • Duplication and potential waste of resources • Challenge to (electoral) representation/no electoral mandate • Inconsistency and patchy quality of service • Limited reach • Remote to some aspects of the sector • Lack of inclusiveness • Unrepresentative • Not professional enough • Too professional • Independence sometimes compromised by co-option by statutory agendas and agencies • Oppositional • Not challenging enough • Dominates VCS agendas • Can be a gatekeeper

1.21 The evidence for the benefits of infrastructure presented in this report is organised under the broad terms of the PERFORM framework. PERFORM is a recently developed outcomes-based performance improvement framework for voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations (COGS 2006). It is designed as a strategic planning and assessment tool focused on the outcomes of infrastructure activities and services. PERFORM is structured around a broad vision and four high level outcomes for the voluntary and community sector, as outlined in the table below:

Vision: A strong, diverse and vibrant voluntary and community sector	
Functions	**High level outcomes**
1. Sector support and development	VCOs are skilled, knowledgeable and well run
2. Sector diversity and equality	VCOs reflect and promote diversity and equality
3. Sector collaboration and co-ordination	VCOs network and collaborate
4. Sector influence and representation	VCOs influence policies and programmes

Because it has a focus on the outcomes of infrastructure activity, it has some relevance to the question of infrastructure's 'benefits'. In this review we use it merely as a way of organising evidence. For convenience we have grouped the four functions into two:

1. those seeking to effect **change within individual voluntary and community organisations**:
    - Sector support and development
    - Sector diversity and equality

2. those seeking to effect **change between and beyond individual voluntary and community organisations**:
    - Sector collaboration and co-ordination
    - Sector influence and representation.

This distinction mirrors a conventional division of infrastructure roles in terms of *capacity building and organisational development* (including the promotion of volunteering and community development) on the one hand, and *networking, voice and representation* on the other.

1.22 Overall, it is fair to say that the evidence base in relation to the benefits of VCS infrastructure is not particularly substantial. There is a growing base of material which focuses on, or has something to say about VCS infrastructure, but in the main this does not address the benefits of VCS infrastructure.

In particular, in the last three years or so the knowledge base around VCS infrastructure at different levels has increased dramatically. This has been prompted by the increasing government focus on infrastructure and the associated ChangeUp programme. However, much of this work sought to outline in some detail provision of and need for VCS infrastructure at different levels, or supply and demand, in a context where neither was understood particularly well. It has been a useful exercise (for statutory authorities, for frontline organisations and groups, and not least for infrastructure providers themselves) to identify who does what for whom. However, the emphasis has been on mapping rather than assessing and evaluating provision. Accordingly, most mapping studies say very little about the benefits of VCS infrastructure. The rapid evidence assessment received but subsequently excluded a large number of evaluations and studies, and the most frequent reason for exclusion was that studies did not address the question of the (positive or negative) difference made by VCS infrastructure interventions.

1.23 The full list of studies included in the rapid evidence assessment is provided as a separate list in the Bibliography. What there is of an evidence base on the benefits of VCS infrastructure is somewhat fragmented and disparate. The evidence that has been included in this assessment tends to derive from single project and programme evaluations of VCS interventions rather than more comprehensive studies of infrastructure as a whole. This tends to restrict their focus to the processes, outputs

and outcomes of the specific interventions themselves, with little attention to the wider context or other evaluations and studies. This also means that it is very difficult to bring evidence together in any cumulative sense to gain an impression of the overall or aggregate impact of VCS infrastructure. Instead the evidence tends to emphasise the benefits of particular approaches, projects or activities.

1.24 There are very few academic studies, perhaps reflecting the fact that very few academics specialise in the field of VCS infrastructure. It is also important to note that the evidence base appears to be more substantial around some areas of VCS infrastructure activity compared to others. In terms of our four PERFORM functions, there is much more, for example, to say about 'Sector support and development' than there is about 'Sector diversity and equality'.

E. The plan of the report

1.25 Sections 2 and 3 of this report detail the findings of the rapid evidence assessment, using the PERFORM outcomes framework for VCS infrastructure as a device to organise the evidence obtained and reviewed.

Section 2 considers the evidence for the benefits of infrastructure in terms of effecting change within individual voluntary and community organisations. Section 3 considers evidence around effecting change between and beyond individual voluntary and community organisations.

Finally Section 4 of the report discusses the implications of the evidence assessment in three ways: for the voluntary and community sector itself, in terms of developing policy around the position of VCS infrastructure, and for research.

2. Change within individual voluntary and community organisations

PERFORM outcomes:
- Sector support and development *(VCOs are skilled, knowledgeable and well run)*
- Sector diversity and equality *(VCOs reflect and promote diversity and equality)*

2.1 The first two PERFORM outcomes for VCS infrastructure have a focus on the internal operation, composition and effectiveness of individual voluntary and community organisations. What (beneficial) role does VCS infrastructure play in realising these outcomes?

2.2 The following paragraphs highlight the benefits of VCS infrastructure in a number of ways:

- the benefits arising at different levels: individual, organisational and sectoral
- the benefits of organisational development tools and systems
- infrastructure as expert advice
- building capacity to access resources
- infrastructure interventions offering a 'space for reflection'
- increasing confidence
- cascading learning
- unintended and less tangible effects.

2.3 Many aspects of the role of intermediary or infrastructure interventions encompass what Stephen Osborne has described as a **'catalytic approach'** to supporting voluntary and community action (1999, 2000):

By undertaking one piece of work (such as helping a local group put together a successful funding bid) it contributes to another objective also (such as building the capacity of community groups to make such funding bids in their own right in the future) (Osborne et al 2002: 29).

This suggests that a single intervention or set of activities, with an express set of aims, may lead to positive consequences at a number of different levels, as illustrated below.

Infrastructure benefits arising at 'different levels'

An example of multiple benefits being realised at different levels from the same programme is provided by a fundraising training project in the BME voluntary and community sector in London. The final evaluation report (LDA 2005) looks at **'impacts'** at three levels: for training participants, for participating organisations, and for the sector as a whole.

1. Impact on participants, such as enhanced understanding of fundraising in context; increased confidence, improved access to networks and enhanced status

In the first place, the project did a great deal more than equip participants with knowledge and skills; it enabled them 'to look at fundraising in a new light'. They had gained a better understanding of the process of fundraising, of the environment in which it took place and of the relationship of fundraising activities to wider issues of organisational effectiveness. Secondly, there was a consensus that trainees had gained a great deal more confidence in their ability to undertake the fundraising role. These two key impacts had enabled them to develop a 'more strategic' approach to the role and one which was 'better organised' and 'more professional'. Other impacts mentioned by some participants were improved access to networks and enhanced professional status – they received 'more recognition' within their organisations and some felt that their career prospects had been enhanced. (LDA 2005: 26)

2. Impact on participating organisations, such as the extent to which it enabled participating organisations to access more funds from a wider range of sources (for which it was too early to judge) and the development of a more strategic approach to fundraising:

We also found, however, some evidence of organisations which had developed better ways of conducting research into sources of funding and had made applications to a broader range of funding bodies. More commonly, participating organisations had laid some of the foundations for a more effective approach to fundraising. More than half of those who responded to the survey had made progress in developing a fundraising strategy or a business plan – and sometimes both. Some participants had successfully involved trustees and other staff in subcommittees or working parties devoted to fundraising and had provided them with some basic training. In a number of cases, fundraising had become a higher priority for the organisation and been increasingly recognized as a core function. (LDA 2005: 26)

3. Wider impact on the BME voluntary and community sector:

As well as 'cascading' the knowledge and expertise provided by the training programme within the organisations participating in the project, the partners intended it to have a wider impact in the BME voluntary and community sector as a whole. While it is again very early in the life of the project to expect to find evidence of that kind of impact, it was clear from the case studies that participants had provided advice and support on fundraising and organisational development to a number of other organizations

In some cases, the mechanism for this was the existing involvement of the individual with other agencies as a trustee. In at least one other case, the participating organisation had a capacity building role within a sub sector of the BME sector and could incorporate the new knowledge in its ongoing work. Elsewhere, the project stimulated a specific set of responses; one of the participants who worked for a Tamil organisation in south London brought together people from other organisations in the area to disseminate what he had learned about the need to develop a strategy and take a longer term view of fundraising (LDA 2005: 27).

2.4 In the light of the ChangeUp definition (paragraph 1.12) of VCS infrastructure it is important to make the distinction between the *role of infrastructure organisations* in

supporting and promoting voluntary and community action and different *forms of infrastructure intervention* (such as tools, systems and approaches). The box below indicates the benefits that might arise from the development and incorporation of performance improvement systems.

'Infrastructure' is about systems as well as organisations

A study of the adoption and use of quality systems in the VCS (Cairns et al (2004/2005) focused on the 'everyday' organisational circumstances in which quality systems are incorporated and used.The study has relatively few references to the role of infrastructure organisations as such (though see below), but quality systems can still be counted as a form of infrastructure intervention, with important consequences:

"The introduction of a quality system has the potential to make an impact upon internal organisational structures and hence to improve efficiency. It also offers opportunities for organisational growth, increased effectiveness and staff development. In addition, the presence of a quality system is perceived as giving an organisation more legitimacy with external stakeholders" (Cairns et al 2004: 49).

"Quality systems can act as an organisational development tool and provide a common agenda for action, for example: action planning, continuous professional development, team building. Major benefits of having a quality system were seen as including: increased organisational legitimacy, improved reputation and credibility with external stakeholders. The introduction of a system provided the opportunity for an organisation to reflect upon and review their working processes and ways of doing things, this included reflecting upon service delivery arrangements" (Cairns et al 2004: 37).

2.5 Infrastructure interventions can often take the form of expert advice and guidance, especially given the complexities of the operating environment for 'ordinary' or 'frontline' voluntary organisations and community groups. Infrastructure agencies can be a resource for the sector as a whole, a repository of specialist knowledge and experience. Two examples from the evidence base illustrate this.

Infrastructure as expert advice

We have already seen how quality systems can be seen as a form of infrastructure intervention. The research study in this case also noted how infrastructure organisations might be well positioned to play a role in the selection, adoption and use of quality systems, especially given the profusion of different systems now available:

*External pressure may also come from national infrastructure/membership bodies, some of whom require adoption of their own quality systems as a condition of membership. **More usually however, the role of infrastructure bodies seems to be to influence, or encourage, members to use a tailor-made system, but without the element of compulsion**.* (Cairns et al 2004: 26, emphasis added).

"*Some* (participants) *had sought external help, though mainly with securing advice on aspects of the chosen system rather than with actual implementation. Many study participants had limited knowledge of available resources that might have helped them. This suggests that there is a need, not necessarily for more external resources, but for more information about what is available, and for more help, perhaps from infrastructure bodies, to enable VCOs to access available assistance.* ***Many infrastructure bodies are well placed – with their detailed knowledge of members' objectives and needs – to assist VCOs with selection and introduction of quality systems and, where appropriate, to point them in the direction of relevant external assistance"*** (Cairns et al 2004: 48, emphasis added).

A second example comes from a study of the use of dedicated consultancy as a capacity building intervention. Reid and Gibb (2004) undertook a detailed examination of a grant-making body's capacity building programme. The key research question concerned the extent to which there were sustainable changes to organisational capacity as a result of the input of consultants funded under the programme. The consultancy was often used as a form of expert advice, and as a way of setting priorities for support and intervention, especially where an organisational crisis was apparently looming or underway:

For one charity, lack of focus on their central mission had resulted in their taking on additional work in order to maintain financial security. This led to rapid growth without consideration of the charity's capacity to cope with additional staff, increased regulation and, importantly, their ability to remain financially sustainable at this level. The Chief Executive felt that the charity was:

"…expanding without any thought for the future – as opportunities arose we grabbed them. We have gone from an organisation that needed not £10,000 in the bank as reserves, but £200,000."

Often when this was the case, participants did not have clearly defined expectations for the consultancy. This resulted in hopes that were either too expansive, covering an array of practice and strategic issues, or objectives that did not reflect the real needs of the organisation at the time. ***In such cases consultants tended to play a greater role in helping the charities identify priorities for the consultancy, and to set the objectives for the work. Indeed, this agenda setting stage was frequently perceived as a benefit in itself as the participants learned about the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation.*** (Reid and Gibb 2004: 8, emphasis added).

2.6 More prosaically, infrastructure support can be much more directly focused on assisting voluntary organisations and community groups to obtain the resources they need in order to carry out their activities. For most of the sector, this is about support to access money (funding advice and information) and people (volunteers).

The effects of VCS infrastructure support in these areas is illustrated by the examples below.

Building capacity to access resources

Rosewarne's small evaluation (2003) for South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau (SYFAB) of a funding training programme delivered to groups in the coalfields areas of South Yorkshire concludes that:

The SRB funding for a period of three years [enabled SYFAB] *to provide an extensive training programme to a large number of voluntary and community groups in the South Yorkshire Coalfields area. The vast majority of groups benefiting from this training would not otherwise have been able to access such extensive, good quality training and of such variety. In turn over £4,000,000 has been brought into the area in the form of grants to groups who accessed the training. Whilst not claiming that this was all entirely due to the training it clearly played a substantial role in helping groups bring in this money* (Rosewarne 2003: 13).

The evidence for this comes from two sources. Firstly, feedback from training participants notes that 70 respondents (87%) had been involved in making funding applications since attending the course, of which 67 bids had been successful, raising a total of £1,437,720.

Secondly the evaluation involved a "*detailed search of grants awarded by four key funders* [Awards for All, Community Fund, Coalfields Regeneration Trust and Local Network Fund]….*show*[ing] *that 81 groups who had participated in the accredited training course had between them successfully raised £3,213,667* (Rosewarne 2003: 7).

2.7 VCS infrastructure interventions around 'sector support and development' also appear from the evidence base to offer less tangible benefits and opportunities. A regular theme in the evidence is that external support can offer voluntary organisations and community groups an opportunity to step back from the pressing demands of day-to-day concerns and activities. This has the benefit of enabling a more strategic and realistic focus to planning services, activities and new developments.

Infrastructure interventions offer 'space for reflection'

Based on direct feedback and reflections from voluntary organisations and community groups, several studies note how support provides 'space for reflection', for example via:

1. The adoption and use of quality systems

"the chance to stand back from day-to-day concerns and reflect on changes required was felt by many to be useful: 'we have had a chance to reflect on performance, highlight areas where improvements were needed and work on them'" (Cairns et al 2004: 35)

"The adoption and use of a quality system may act as a catalyst and - by providing the opportunity for reflection and by focusing on professional practice – offer a valuable framework for addressing service improvements" (Cairns et al 2004: 49).

2. Using consultants

In addition to transfer of skills and provision of information by consultants, the introduction of an external perspective as part of the process was viewed as useful in itself. The consultants input commonly reinforced existing attitudes and encouraged reflection on the effectiveness of the organisation's structure and procedures in relation to its central mission or goals. In some cases, the consultant's input served to legitimise change (Reid and Gibb 2004: 10)

For some charities, the availability of the capacity building grant was seen as an opportunity to review the organisation's practices and to reflect on whether these were the most appropriate for service users. The hope was that the consultancy would enable various stakeholders within the charity to take time out to address problems that had surfaced over a period of time. One charity trustee commented:

"We thought for a while that we should review things that we do, and often they are the kinds of tasks that go on the backburner because of getting caught up in the day-to-day running of things. So I think we saw it as an opportunity to have some external help to get us to look at our practice and develop the service." (Reid and Gibb 2004: 7-8)

Charities were able to use business plans when applying to funding bodies as evidence of their aims, objectives and practices. Strategic plans enabled charities to prioritise their goals and be realistic about what could be achieved within a certain time frame. This was thought to have great value as it enabled efforts to be targeted to areas of greatest perceived need (Reid and Gibb 2004: 10).

3. Tailored organisational support in a capacity building project

The Community Development Foundation are conducting action research alongside a Big Lottery Funded Capacity Building project run by Black Training and Enterprise Group (BTEG) in partnership with BASSAC. The year one evaluation report makes a number of references to the **'space to think more deeply'** by participants as a result of the project.

It also notes several changes reported by participating organisations, including changes in attitudes about the importance of monitoring and evaluation *('the training woke us up')*(CDF 2005: 12) and about future planning (*'we now think about future prospects and new services'; 'before we would just get on and do the work, now we take stock of how we are performing and how we need to develop'*) (ibid: 13).

2.8 In addition, a key element of accessing expert outside support appears to be the generation of increased confidence, reported in several studies under review, arising through training courses or more intense one to one support.

Increasing confidence

1. Training programmes

The evaluation of the fundraising training project in the BME voluntary and community sector in London makes the following overall comment on the impact of the programme:

The evidence is that the individuals who took part in the programme gained a variety of benefits from their involvement. This not only gave them ***enhanced skills and confidence*** *with which to tackle the challenge of fundraising but also enabled them to have an impact on way their own organisations and – to a lesser extent – other BME organizations went about their business.* (LDA 2005: 30, emphasis added)

This is echoed by Rosewarne's small evaluation of a funding training programme in South Yorkshire, where one participant commented that *"The course gave me confidence in tackling funding applications with very little supervision."* (Rosewarne 2003: 5).

2. One to one support

Reid and Gibb (2004) note how individual consultancy helped change the way organisations went about raising funds:

Change in approaches to fundraising was evident, although it was not possible to tell whether the techniques adopted were making a difference. Fundraising techniques that were being put into practice included use of a fundraising calendar which listed the submission dates of the most relevant grant-making bodies. Perhaps more importantly, interviewees felt they had more awareness of how to approach funders with realistic aims, and this resulted in increased confidence in their approach to fundraising. (Reid and Gibb 2004: 10)

2.9 Most infrastructure agencies work and intervene at an organisational level. The focus is on developing and improving voluntary organisations and community groups. But often the infrastructure service interaction is with an individual member of a group. In so far as this develops the capabilities of those individuals there is a risk that this learning and development is lost to the voluntary organisation if this individual moves on. If they move out of the sector altogether, there is a potential loss of capability for the sector as a whole. This issue puts a premium on the extent to which skills and capabilities developed from infrastructure interventions can be passed on, shared and cascaded elsewhere. To the extent that this occurs, it adds to the 'efficiency' of the infrastructure intervention and the sustainability of efforts to strengthen the sector. It also has implications for the extent to which initial infrastructure support may or may not lead to positive outcomes and impacts for frontline groups and their users,

members or clients. Several of the studies under review referred, albeit briefly, to the issue of cascading learning.

Cascading learning

Several studies and evaluations note how the learning from infrastructure interventions (through training or more intense external support) may be cascaded throughout an organisation.

Rosewarne's (2003) evaluation of the South Yorkshire coalfields funding training programme observes that the 208 individual participants who completed the programme represented 64 voluntary organisations and 127 community groups. The evaluation survey of participants (n=83) records that 100% of respondents considered that the course had enabled them to develop their fundraising skills to the benefit of their group and 87% had shared their learning with others in their group. One noted that the course *"helped our management committee be more aware of funding issues."* (Rosewarne 2003: 5). Cascading learning from seminars is also a reported outcome of the Big Lottery Fund BTEG-BASSAC capacity building project in London (CDF 2005: 15) and the evaluation of the BME fundraising training project (LDA 2005: 27).

However, the prospects for sharing and cascading learning depend on the form of intervention. Reid and Gibb's 2004 study of the use of consultants noted three different approaches, with different advantages and disadvantages:

(a) facilitation, which *"aimed to empower the organisation to achieve its own goals* [and] *tended to involve group strategies for brainstorming and reflection on current practice"*;

(b) mentoring, which *"centred around offering practical guidance to individuals, and supplying feedback on actions subsequently taken. This approach tended to involve key staff members, who often held much of the expertise and knowledge relevant to the area of consultancy already. This practice was successful in terms of the development of expertise for those individuals who worked closely with the consultants….However, there was little evidence of these key individuals disseminating what they had learnt throughout the organisation so that new knowledge/skills might be retained. There is a danger that this expertise may be lost to the organisation on the departure of these key individuals"* and

(c) training, which *"involved knowledge transfer which stopped short of providing practical assistance. This approach was more conducive to dissemination throughout the charity. An example of this was a training day organised for managers of branches of one charity, focusing on developing fundraising strategies. In this way, the consultant passed on information throughout the whole structure of the organisation, but the potential for depth of learning was not as great"* (Reid and Gibb 2004: 9)

2.10 Lastly, it is worthwhile highlighting the rare occasions when studies consider the unintended and less tangible effects of infrastructure interventions, such as credibility, status and reputation. Of course demonstrating and validating these benefits is far from straightforward, but where they have been documented it is useful to add them to any account of the benefits of VCS infrastructure.

Unintended and less tangible effects

The evaluation of the BME VCS fundraising training programme in London is rare in its consideration of the **unintended effects** of the intervention. It notes that the programme led to wider changes within participating organizations, including increasing their **credibility with others**:

In some cases, too, the efforts of the people who had undertaken the training to put what they had learned into practice had produced wider 'knock-on' effects on the governance and management of the agency. The acceptance, for example, that management committee members could and should play an active role in fundraising could change the way they saw their contribution to the agency as a whole. Similarly, serving alongside paid staff on fundraising working parties could change the relationship between trustees and employees. Some organisations had also experienced an impact on the status or profile of the organization and changes in its relationship to the outside world. A trustee of one of the case study agencies reported that the increase in confidence gained by the trainee had enhanced the credibility and legitimacy of the organisation: 'Since the training he has… established credibility among funding bodies especially public sector. It is a competitive environment. He has gained confidence because of his knowledge and insight. And … he is able to move easily with LDA, Business Link, GOL, Home Office, etc. That is quite something.' (LDA 2005: 26-27)

Similarly, the report notes wider but **less tangible benefits** of the intervention in terms of the BME VCS in London as a whole:

A number of respondents identified less tangible impacts of the project on the BME voluntary sector. In their view it has contributed to the health of the sector in three ways. In the first place, the training programme has made a significant contribution to the development of a 'more professional' sector. In turn, this has led to a higher level of self-confidence within the sector which is reflected in a 'higher profile'. In other words, the effect we noted at the organisational level – in which the enhanced confidence of the individual participant leads to greater credibility for the organisation – may also operate at sector level. Thirdly, the BME sector will be strengthened by the development of effective networks by the new generation of professionally trained fundraisers. (LDA 2005: 27)

3. Change between and beyond individual voluntary and community organisations

PERFORM outcomes:
- Sector collaboration and co-ordination *(VCOs network and collaborate)*
- Sector influence and representation *(VCOs influence policies and programmes)*

3.1 A second dimension of VCS infrastructure emphasises its roles in seeking to bring about change in relationships between and beyond individual voluntary and community organisations. This could be about either:

- horizontal relationships: between individual organisations (networking and collaboration) or
- vertical relationships: between individual organisations and/or the sector overall on the one hand and decision makers/public policy on the other (influence and representation).

3.2 Here we outline the benefits of VCS infrastructure in terms of:

- promoting community involvement in regeneration
- the role of 'civic infrastructure' in enabling public participation
- assessing longer term change in co-ordination at a local level
- a VCS voice at regional level
- the role of Community Empowerment Networks (CENs).

3.3 In recent years urban and rural regeneration activities involving the voluntary and community sector have grown considerably. Policy development in the last ten years has focused attention on the linked issues of partnership (across organisational, sectoral and issue boundaries) and participation (in community activities and at strategic decision making levels). But what role does VCS infrastructure play in this? One of the most systematic studies in the rapid evidence assessment, detailed below, provides a sense of the role and benefits of local VCS infrastructure in the landscape of partnerships.

Community Involvement in Regeneration

Between 2000 and 2002, Stephen Osborne and colleagues undertook a comparative study of community involvement in rural regeneration partnerships (CIRRP) in localities in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The study came to unequivocal conclusions about the beneficial role of local VCS infrastructure in promoting and supporting CIRRP:

The overwhelming opinion in this study was that infrastructure was essential to the success of CIRRP. It facilitated the links between the different structural levels of regeneration

partnerships, provided technical assistance and expertise, supported small scale funding schemes which built local expertise and confidence and which helped develop the capacity of individuals and groups to participate in regeneration (Osborne et al 2002: 24).

It is clear from this study that strong infrastructure is essential to the promotion, development and sustenance of CIRRP (Osborne et al 2002: 40)

Two overarching roles for VCS intermediary organisations are described, echoing to some extent our grouping of PERFORM functions:

- Horizontal capacity building: *building the capacity of communities across rural areas to develop and participate in projects and partnerships to regenerate their communities*
- Vertical capacity building: *building the capacity of communities and community activists to participate in the strategic level of partnerships* (Osborne et al 2002: 29)

More particularly, the study outlines the following contribution made by VCS infrastructure:

It is argued here that it was the effectiveness of these intermediary bodies which determined the success, or otherwise, of CIRRP in all three nations. The key tasks that they undertake include:

- *promoting communication, both with the community in an inclusive way and between the community and strategic levels of the partnership;*
- *procuring resources to fund small scale funding schemes that will work to encourage community involvement;*
- *ensuring the availability of trained facilitators to support community involvement – both the models of the professional development worker and the enthusiastic 'animateur' have their advantages, and neither should be seen to preclude the other;*
- *feeding key information both to communities about regeneration initiatives and to strategic agencies about needs;*
- *providing infrastructure resources to support communities, including technical assistance and professional advice;*
- *enabling training in skills for community members, both about regeneration and about the skills of partnership working, at both the community and strategic level* (Osborne et al 2002: 29-30)

3.4 For Osborne and colleagues, the significance of local VCS infrastructure is clear. It is not so much that it tends to do a good job in fulfilling its functions, or is well appreciated by its users and members, but rather that community involvement in regeneration relies upon effective and strong local VCS infrastructure. Unfortunately, the research does not make it clear what the characteristics or determinants of effective and strong local infrastructure are, although it does express the view that no single model would be preferred. However, in so far as public policy continues to prioritise community involvement, it would seem from this research that VCS infrastructure not only has a central role to play, but would seem to be a critical success factor.

3.5 The Community Involvement in Rural Regeneration Partnerships (CIRRP) study is interesting and informative because it examined partnership activity and the role of

VCS infrastructure in three different case study settings: Devon, County Antrim and Dumfries and Galloway. Importantly, it suggests that local VCS infrastructure played a vital role in CIRRP all three cases. But it also seems to qualify the judgement by referring to 'strong' VCS infrastructure and 'effective' intermediary bodies. Yet unfortunately the study cannot identify the different outcomes of areas with strong and weak VCS infrastructure, since all three on the face of it had what was regarded as strong infrastructure. Although it does not diminish the strength of the findings of the CIRRP study, it would be useful to contrast the experiences of areas with apparently strong and weak VCS infrastructure.

3.6 A more recent comparative study attempts in some way to do this, by highlighting the difference that strong and well co-ordinated VCS infrastructure might make in terms of overall levels and forms of community and political participation. The 'Locality Effect' study (Lowndes et al 2006) examined the reasons for variation in political participation at local level in England, as part of the ESRC's Democracy and Participation research programme. Eight contrasting locality case studies were selected to examine the range of reasons behind variation in public participation. The authors developed an overarching framework (and diagnostic tool) for examining the factors which tend to encourage participation at local level:

*According to the CLEAR framework, people participate when they **can**: when they have the resources necessary to make their argument. People participate when they feel part of something: they **like** to participate because it is central to their sense of identity. They participate when they are **enabled** to do so by an infrastructure of civic networks and organisations. People participate when they are directly **asked** for their opinion. Finally, people participate when they experience the system they are seeking to influence as **responsive*** (Lowndes et al 2006: 281, original emphasis).

The box below outlines the potential significance of this study for the assessment of the benefits of VCS infrastructure.

The role of 'civic infrastructure' in enabling public participation

Of the five factors in the CLEAR framework, being 'enabled to' participate emphasises in particular the role played by VCS infrastructure both as a 'point of access' for decision makers and as a means to enable groups within the sector to become 'participation platforms':

*Research shows the relevance of civic infrastructures to facilitating or inhibiting participation (Lowndes et al 2006 forthcoming and see below). Where the right range and variety of groups exist to organise participation, there tends to be more of it…..There is an important role for local authorities in developing compacts with the voluntary and community sectors to ensure they have routes into decision making, and are not seen only as potential service contractors. **Investing in the governance and capacity of 'umbrella' organisations is also important – councils of voluntary service, race equality councils, tenants' federations and civic societies. Such bodies can enable groups that have a quite different primary purpose (e.g. sporting or cultural) to act as participation platforms on issues of concern to their members, and to provide points of access for decision makers seeking community opinion.***

A willingness on the part of decision makers to open multiple umbrellas is vital: no one body can be representative of civil society as a whole. Support to specialist community networks that engage marginalised groups is of particular importance (Lowndes et al 2006: 288, emphasis added).

The forthcoming paper in the academic journal *Public Administration* (2006 forthcoming) expands on the research underpinning the argument:

We also observed the importance of civic infrastructure in shaping prospects of participation. We coined the term to refer to the formal and informal mechanisms that linked different local organisations and their activities, and provided channels for communication with local policy-makers. As we have observed elsewhere in relation to the mobilisation of social capital: 'The number of organisations may not be so crucial; rather the key is the relationship they are able to construct with each other and local authorities' (Smith, Maloney and Stoker 2004, p. 528). The case study areas varied significantly in relation to the degree of coordination (and consensus/conflict) within the voluntary and community sectors, and in respect of the structures and conventions that governed their interaction 'downwards' to citizens and 'upwards' to local government.

In some of the case study areas, coordinating bodies (like councils for voluntary service, chambers of commerce, civic societies or local faith networks) acted as important institutional conduits for participation (Wellingborough, Sutton, Middlesbrough). They were able, for instance, to facilitate access to local decision-makers, 'pool' and/or arbitrate between the diverse voices of citizens, and monitor the response of decision-makers to participation. In Hull and Rotherham, conflict and a lack of coordination were endemic within the voluntary sector. In the Vale and East Hants, parish and town councils were an important part of the civic infrastructure, mobilising people around sub-local authority identities. In Rotherham, Hull and Middlesbrough, new partnership bodies (at authority-wide or neighbourhood level) were taking on important roles, exploiting their hybrid status between the state and civil society. (Lowndes et al 2006 forthcoming: 20-21)

In particular, the research draws on the contrast between Hull and Middlesbrough: two ostensibly similar towns in terms of population, industrial history, deprivation and local politics. But the style of local politics, the role of the local authority, and importantly the nature of what the authors refer to as the 'civic infrastructure' is quite different:

The civic infrastructure in both areas is also very different. In some respects, there are similar organisations in existence in both areas. However, it is in their overall level of co-ordination, their approach to engagement and their relationship with the local authority, that substantial differences emerge. In Hull, few arrangements exist to enable the voluntary sector to come together successfully, although new structures are now emerging. More significantly, the Council's funding of voluntary and community organisations has been piecemeal, uncoordinated and incremental, reflecting once again the patronage style of Hull politics, whilst also producing entrenched patterns of advantage. Interviewees at the council of voluntary service explained that (until recently) there had not even existed a form through which organisations could seek grant aid from the council – everything was done on the basis of historic links between groups and individual councillors, making it very hard for new organisations, especially those involving ethnic minority residents, to access support. Relations between the local authority and the voluntary sector are often strained and confrontational, operating in an environment of mutual distrust. As a medium for public engagement with the formal levers of

power in Hull, therefore, the voluntary and community sectors provide only a limited framework.

Once again, Middlesbrough sits in contrast. It has a much more active and engaged voluntary sector that, while preserving its autonomy, is well served by a strong umbrella organisation…. Many of its groups are highly politicised and, while relations are not always cosy, there is a sense of common purpose across voluntary and community organisations and the local authority. This common purpose is supported by a well structured local authority led funding programme for voluntary groups which seeks to take a holistic view of the funding available from various sources before allocating monies to particular groups. Consequently, Middlesbrough has been able to constructively support a diverse and active voluntary and community sector.

Hull and Middlesbrough differed radically in relation to the degree of co-ordination among civil society bodies, and their capacity to communicate effectively with local government decision-makers (Lowndes et al 2006 forthcoming: 29-31).

3.7 A conclusion which might be drawn here is that what matters in terms of the outcomes and benefits of VCS infrastructure in relation to promoting community participation is not just the presence of intermediary organisations, but also how infrastructure is organised, the degree of co-ordination between agencies and the extent of investment.

3.8 Very few studies involving or focusing on the role and benefits of VCS infrastructure adopt a longer term perspective. However, one that has draws some important conclusions about the factors which might promote greater co-ordination between infrastructure agencies and between the sector and statutory authorities. In this case the catalytic role of a dedicated grant funding programme makes a difference, and appears to have lasting effects.

Assessing longer term change in co-ordination at a local level

One study that has been able to assess longer term change is Pearson's (2003) follow up study of the Community Fund's one year 'Brass for Barnsley' initiative. The research was carried out some three years after the initiative had come to an end, and followed an interim evaluation focusing more on issues of implementation and initial impact. The key change noted over time was the degree of co-ordination found in the local voluntary and community sector, and the evaluation argues that this was attributable in part to the impetus in the original programme. The report argues that Brass for Barnsley was able to act not only as a dedicated area-based funding programme, but as a catalyst for change:

The baseline study carried out for the first BfB evaluation in 1999 identified a voluntary and community sector (VCS) in Barnsley that was characterised by fragmented infrastructural support, with limited partnership working and co-operation, either within the sector or between the voluntary and statutory sectors. Research carried out in 2003 found:

- *a greater degree of partnership working between voluntary sector infrastructure organisations (VSIOs) in Barnsley*
- *improved relationships between the VCS and Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council (BMBC)*
- *improved relationships between VSIOs and voluntary and community groups.* (Pearson 2003: 7)

The key lesson emerging from the long term evaluation of BfB is that there are enormous potential ***benefits to be gained from the*** **[Community Fund]** ***working in partnership with VSIOs, other funders and statutory organisations*** *in priority areas. In both Barnsley and Rotherham the CF has been central in the establishment of networks which have impacted substantially on the VCS. These networks have continued to provide the CF with opportunities for local engagement. Critical factors in the success of networks include bringing together all key agencies, and maintaining flexibility to reflect local circumstances.* (Pearson 2003: 21).

In particular, the initiative led to the establishment of a cross-sectoral network around funding issues for the VCS:

Respondents highlighted the work of the Creating Self Reliance (CSR) network as a critical factor in improved relations between and amongst VSIOs and the statutory sector. BfB contributed to a step change in the relationship between the VCS and Barnsley MBC. The benefits of bringing together the VCS, funders and the statutory sector to work together had been learned from the experience of BfB in Barnsley and have resulted in the development of the Rotherham Funding Group.

Key factors contributing to the success, and sustainability, of these networks included:

- *bringing together a range of VSIOs to work collaboratively*
- *the inclusion of funders - the CF and others*
- *developing, or building on, relationships between the VSC and the local authority*
- *identifying a small number of key individuals to 'champion' activities*
- *focusing on strategic issues for the sector, as well as on local development needs*
- *reflecting local circumstances* (Pearson 2003: ii-iii)

In particular, respondents in this study noted how the 'Creating Self-Reliance' network had led to a greater sense of strategic coordination locally in the VCS:

The CSR network is now the focus for all key VCS events in the Borough….Impacts of the CSR have included: improved communication at all levels of the sector; better dissemination of information to voluntary and community groups; and a clearer strategic vision for the voluntary and community sector. The strategy developed through the future visioning event has been developed and embedded into the Borough's Community Plan and is now the community development strategy for Barnsley.

One interviewee addressed its impact on voluntary sector infrastructure:

'well, I certainly think its got them (VCS) talking better than they used to before, I think its managed to garner individual partners and organisations into one voice, and I think I'm being right in saying that it effectively speaks with a single voice now ..... It has managed to pull all the strands of the voluntary sector together under one banner'. (Pearson 2003: 7-9)

3.9 There has been a concerted effort over the last five to ten years to establish and encourage new network organisations to represent and feed VCS perspectives into emerging partnership structures at regional and local level. New VCS regional network agencies were established throughout England in 2000, alongside regional BME VCS networks, in order to enhance the input of the VCS into strategic regional discussions. One study has attempted to chart the early progress by one regional network in the West Midlands, based on research carried out in 2001.

A VCS voice at regional level

A team of researchers at the Centre for Voluntary Action Research at Aston University studied the establishment and early impact of Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM), one of the newly established regional voluntary sector networks. The study findings provide some evidence of the benefits of VCS infrastructure in terms of influence and representation, but also some ambiguity around how the organisation is perceived, and how representation in the VCS works in practice.

The role of the regional network:

The majority of interviewees felt that they were clear about RAWM's role, and went on to describe it in different ways as an enabler, or advocate, for the voluntary and community sector at the regional level. Descriptions such as "tries to ensure that the voices of voluntary and community sector organisations reach the appropriate regional agency" or "an advocate for the voluntary and community sector and, as a network of networks, an enabler" were typical. There were, however, differences of perception about RAWM's advocacy and representational role, for example whether it is RAWM's role to take on a representational role itself, or whether its role is more to do with facilitating representation by, rather than on behalf of, the voluntary and community sector.

Others (generally those that had less direct involvement with RAWM) saw RAWM's role more, or at least equally, as information providing, capacity building, or opening up access to funding for the voluntary and community sector in the region. Liaison with statutory bodies and helping to develop cross-sectoral partnerships or networks was mentioned by some people as a further dimension of the role.

A small number of interviewees, however, from different types of organisation, commented that they did not really understand the role of RAWM: "How does RAWM fit into the wider picture?" and "they are dealing with too many issues and situations; their role is not yet clear" (CVAR 2001: 35-6)

Performance of the regional network:

Positive comments were made about RAWM's developing role in providing a strong regional voice for the voluntary and community sector and in offering a forum for local CVSs and others to share experiences.

Those most closely involved with RAWM generally felt that they could, either now or in the future, influence the regional agenda through RAWM (though bodies with a regional focus pointed out that they also had their own channels of influence which might be more

appropriate). Views expressed included "can use RAWM as a platform for getting a collective voice together" and "RAWM is making its presence known … larger players in regional government like the Employment Service and business sector are recognising what the voluntary and community sector is capable of". (CVAR 2001: 36)

The majority of interviewees assumed that RAWM sought to represent the views of the voluntary and community sector, but questioned how effective it was at representing it given the sector's diversity. The local government interviewees, in particular, questioned whether RAWM represented the sector, or just its members. Others suggested that, whilst some VCOs might have an interest in influencing public policy and resource allocation priorities, the majority would be content to "leave the influencing to RAWM". (CVAR 2001: 38-9)

All the interviewees believed that the voice of the voluntary and community sector, including black and minority ethnic organisations was now "being heard". However, the view was also expressed that despite the support it was receiving (e.g. from RAWM), the voluntary and community sector still did not carry the same political clout and influence as other sectors. There was general recognition that RAWM was making the principal contribution to connecting the voluntary and community sector to the regional agenda (CVAR 2001: 24).

3.10 At local level, the government requirement to establish Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in the 88 most deprived local authority areas was accompanied by resources to establish 'Community Empowerment Networks' (CENs) in each area in order to facilitate and encourage the voluntary and community sector to play an active role in LSP discussions. After the first three years funding came to end in 2004, there has been some subsequent institutional and programme change regarding CENs. However, studies have attempted to 'take stock' of the role and benefits of the networks.

The role of Community Empowerment Networks (CENs)

The National Audit Office undertook a detailed review of the role and impact of the Single Community Programme in 2004, in particular focusing on the role of Community Empowerment Networks and small grants schemes in neighbourhood renewal. Whilst not uncritical of CENs and the programme overall, the report highlights several beneficial aspects of the development of networks:

The overall picture is that community groups are having some success in influencing local public service providers' decisions and getting services that people want (NAO 2004: 35)

CENs enable influence in a variety of ways:

Community Empowerment Networks are enabling community groups to work directly with public sector service providers outside the main boards of Local Strategic Partnerships. These interactions help community groups to gain confidence and to influence neighbourhood renewal. Some public sector organisations have taken involvement a step further by asking Community Empowerment Networks to help examine the quality of public services. Direct involvement by Community Empowerment Networks takes many forms (NAO 2004: 38)

The role of small grants in the Single Community Programme attracted particular interest for their ability to engage the smallest groups, a point which echoes similar findings by Osborne et al (2002):

The single Community Programme funds go to local voluntary sector organisations to administer for the benefit of the wider community. Community groups ***value the independence they gain*** *by having access to money that does not come through local public sector organisations:* ***it enables them to express views more robustly in the knowledge that doing so will not compromise their funding****.* (NAO 2004: 27).

Finally, the review highlighted the different ways in which VCS infrastructure plays a co-ordinating role by:

- Acting as a bridge between different parts of the VCS and accommodating the differences and potential tensions between the voluntary sector and the community sector:

Community groups become disillusioned if they feel dominated by a professional voluntary sector in Community Empowerment Networks. ODPM's evaluation of Local Strategic Partnerships noted "tensions between the organised voluntary sector and the less well-developed and more grass roots community sector". Community Empowerment Networks are more likely to succeed where the voluntary sector sees its role as supporting community groups. For example, the County Durham Foundation administers single Community Programme grants but members of the East Durham Community Network decide who will get them (NAO 2004: 33)

- Developing more accessible channels for influence and representation, such as neighbourhood-based sub-groups:

Community Empowerment Networks in all our case study areas are developing neighbourhood-based sub-networks….Focusing on smaller areas helps to bridge the gap between debate in Local Strategic Partnerships, which can seem remote, and the action that community groups want to see in return for their involvement. Priority-setting events that focus and identify what activities should receive support in particular areas can also strengthen the link between Community Empowerment Networks and the single Community Programme grants. (NAO 2004: 38)

3.11 We have drawn together and discussed the main forms of evidence for the benefits of VCS infrastructure obtained and reviewed under the rapid evidence assessment. The final section of this report looks at the implications of this for the sector, for policy makers and for research.

4. Implications

4.1 There are some important implications for the voluntary and community sector, for policy makers and for research, which arise as a result of this rapid evidence assessment.

4.2 The evidence reviewed has primarily:

- focused on single interventions or projects,
- involved cross-sectional research approaches, that is, undertaken at a single point in time
- involved qualitative methods, and particularly semi-structured interviews reporting the experiences, perceptions and understandings of participants.

4.3 Conversely, there have been very few:

- longitudinal research designs, in which interventions and their (beneficial) effects can be studied over time
- comparative research or evaluation designs, for example where ostensibly similar interventions or the work of comparable agencies are undertaken in different settings or contexts
- studies involving quantitative methods,
- studies aiming to examine and quantify value for money or costs and benefits.

In fact, in so far as our rapid evidence search and assessment has been comprehensive, it would appear that there has been no systematic study of the role, position and benefits of the range of VCS infrastructure interventions.

4.4 Despite this, we have been able to find and review some recent, pertinent evidence which can shed light on the issue of the benefits of VCS infrastructure. Some of the claimed benefits made as part of the conventional case for VCS infrastructure (see paragraph 1.20) can be justified by recourse to evidence. There have been some strong studies examining particular facets of VCS infrastructure (for example: on community involvement/participation, quality standards and evaluations of fundraising training).

4.5 However, there are a number of gaps. For example, there appears to be no direct evidence which demonstrates the benefits of VCS infrastructure in promoting greater diversity and equality in the sector. As we have said before, **this does not imply that there are no such benefits or no such contribution.** It purely means that the evidence base does not appear to cover it. It is possible that the paucity of evidence regarding some issues is primarily a consequence of a widespread belief that VCS infrastructure is beneficial. If it is conventionally seen as self-evidently the case, then there would be no perceived need to demonstrate its benefits.

In addition, there appears to be very little covering the role and contribution of national infrastructure. The potential linking role played by VCS infrastructure – for example between policy makers and the VCS as a whole – also appears to have been overlooked.

4.6 Finally, even those studies and evaluations which do have something to say on the benefits of infrastructure by and large do not tend to consider the range of more challenging evaluative questions, such as:

- How sustainable are the consequences of VCS infrastructure?
- Are there any intangible consequences?
- Are there any unintended consequences?
- To what and how extent has any 'distance travelled' been identified or demonstrated?
- To what extent are interventions for targeted beneficiaries or for others?
- Who gains, and is this at the expense of others? (To what extent are the gains from VCS infrastructure 'zero-sum'?)
- To what extent are other infrastructure organisations/interventions involved in producing consequences?
- How have other external factors and 'context' affected the consequences?
- What are the costs of VCS infastructure interventions?
- Does VCS infrastructure provide value for money?
- Might the benefits of VCS infrastructure have happened anyway?
- Are there any negative consequences of infrastructure activities?

Such questions would need to be addressed if a rounded sense of the benefits of VCS infrastructure is to be gained.

A. Implications for the voluntary and community sector

4.7 It is worth asking to what extent the voluntary and community sector might be exercised by the apparent gaps in the evidence base regarding the benefits of VCS infrastructure. It might make some people anxious that the case for VCS infrastructure may not look as compelling as it could or should.

Again, however, it is important to reiterate that although there are evident gaps in our knowledge of the impact of VCS infrastructure interventions, this does not necessarily imply that there is no impact, or that there is no case for investing in VCS infrastructure. It suggests either that many impacts simply have not been researched (or researched well), or that at least some of the benefits of VCS infrastructure may be too elusive to be captured as 'evidence'. Once again this perhaps says more about the need for evidence in an 'evidence informed' policy environment than it does about the credibility of any claims made about VCS infrastructure.

4.8 It is perhaps this point that is likely to be of most concern to those wishing to make the case for VCS infrastructure. It is worth acknowledging openly that discussions (and evaluations) around 'evidence' and 'benefits of infrastructure' take place in a competitive resource environment in which infrastructure agencies (and others) have an important interest in demonstrating the value and benefits of VCS infrastructure. But in so far as competing claims for policy attention and limited resources may be strengthened by an appeal to convincing evidence, VCS infrastructure is not in as strong a position as it could be.

4.9 Given this, it perhaps to be welcomed that performance improvement frameworks such as PERFORM and the new NAVCA performance standards for local infrastructure organisations are explicitly organised around outcomes of infrastructure. In so far as these frameworks begin to percolate through the sector, there is an opportunity for VCS infrastructure to concentrate on identifying the difference it makes, and begin to plan the routine collection of information which can demonstrate this.

4.10 However, this is unlikely to happen very quickly unless support and guidance is available for organisations in how to think about identifying and demonstrating the difference they might make, how to design and carry out research and evaluation, and how to use the new outcome frameworks. In a strange twist, this may signal a need for some form of infrastructure intervention around strengthening research, evaluation and outcomes thinking within the voluntary and community sector. This will need to ensure that the voices of users and potential users remain uppermost in future research, and where possible as co-instigators and designers of research, rather than just as respondents.

B. Implications for policy makers

4.11 Policy makers may need to reflect on whether the current cases being made to support or invest in VCS infrastructure are firstly clear, and secondly compelling. Does the evidence discussed here provide backing to these arguments? What questions for policy makers about VCS infrastructure remain unanswered, and how should they be addressed? Given the expressed importance placed by government through ChangeUp on the role of VCS infrastructure, there may be a role for key policy makers in instigating or resourcing a more comprehensive inquiry into the benefits of VCS infrastructure.

4.12 It is also worth drawing more explicit comparisons between VCS infrastructure and the role of support and services in other sectors, particularly business support. What can policy makers (and VCS infrastructure itself) learn about the configuration of and differences made by business support mechanisms? What approaches are taken to assessing evidence for the benefits of business support?

4.13 Finally, some policy makers may be tempted to take a stronger position in relation to the apparently patchy evidence around the benefits of VCS infrastructure revealed in

the rapid evidence assessment. Despite the important qualifications made here about how the results of the REA should be interpreted, a lack of evidence for benefits might be regarded simply as a lack of benefits. But even if this position was taken it remains unclear how this might translate into policy attention. Is it a justification either for reduced or for enhanced policy attention and investment? The question of whether public policy should aim to invest in apparent success or support activities in need of development remains unresolved.

C. Implications for research

4.14 There are also a number of implications for research on the role, contribution and differences made by VCS infrastructure. We have noted that the increased policy interest in infrastructure has led to a great deal of basic mapping of the territory. Although a potentially useful service has been done in charting and describing infrastructure, it is not clear from the results of this REA whether it has really taken our understanding of VCS infrastructure much further.

This is partly because, like much mapping of the voluntary sector generally, it has proceeded on the basis of relatively localised examinations of 'who does what?' As a result it has been hard to gain a comprehensive and cumulative sense of how VCS infrastructure is organised across the country, and the extent to which an 'integrated infrastructure service' across local, sub-regional regional and national levels really operates. But in addition, this kind of work has not moved beyond description into a deeper analysis of what VCS infrastructure achieves and what difference it makes. The consequence is that this kind of question – the *benefits* of infrastructure - has mainly been addressed by piecemeal project and programme evaluations of the kind we have assessed here. Although there are some interesting examples and valuable insights from this work, we are left with a sense of disappointment that relatively little work on the benefits of VCS infrastructure was forthcoming.

4.15 This leaves open the question of whether and how research in this area can be advanced. Clearly there are significant gaps in the evidence base, as identified in paragraphs 4.3 – 4.6. If the question which provided the focus of this rapid evidence assessment remains important, there is a clearly a need for more research. But there is also a need for better co-ordinated research, for research that fills gaps, or takes up unresolved puzzles, or takes off from where existing research stops. Ongoing research and evaluation in this area should build on the existing evidence base, rather than being conceived and undertaken in isolation.

4.16 This suggests two developments. Firstly, that dissemination amongst practitioners, policy makers and researchers of existing research on VCS infrastructure requires some considerable attention. But secondly, given the gaps in the evidence base noted here, there is perhaps a need for a continued research or 'evidence-dialogue' between those with an interest in commissioning, undertaking, reading or using research on the role and contribution of VCS infrastructure. This could focus strategic discussions on which

evidence gaps appear to be priorities, and which research questions might be regarded as more fruitful lines of enquiry.

Bibliography

A. Studies included in the Rapid Evidence Assessment

1. Cairns, Ben, Hutchison, Romayne and Schofield, Jill (2004) *The Adoption and Use of Quality Systems in the Voluntary Sector: Research Report* (London, NCVO), March 2004

   Cairns, Ben, Harris, Margaret, Hutchison, Romayne and Tricker, Mike (2005) 'Improving Performance? The Adoption and Implementation of Quality Systems in UK Nonprofits' *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 16 (2), 135-151

2. Centre for Voluntary Action Research (2004) *Regional Strategic and Policy Engagement Study: Final Report for Regional Action West Midlands* (Birmingham, CVAR), Dec 2001

   Harris, Margaret, Cairns, Ben and Hutchison, Romayne and Tricker, Mike (2004) ''So Many Tiers, So Many Agendas, So Many Pots of Money' The Challenge of English Regionalization for Voluntary and Community Organizations' *Social Policy and Administration* 38 (5), 525-540

3. Community Development Foundation (2005) *Big Lottery Capacity Building Project - Year 1 Evaluation Report on the BTEG Project*

4. Flynn, Noshin (2004) *Voluntary Action Stoke-on-Trent Community Organisations Support Team: An evaluation of the perceived impact of capacity building for the Voluntary and Community Sector. Evaluation Report*. April 2004

5. Garry, Karen, Goodwin, Polly, McCabe, Angus (2005) *Working for Change - A Review of Tamworth Volunteer Centre 2003-2005*. Tamworth Volunteer Centre, October 2005

6. Gaskin, Katharine (2003) *Joining forces: The Black and Minority Ethnic Twinning Initiative: Evaluation and good practice. Home Office Research Study* 256 (London, Home Office) February 2003

7. Institute for Volunteering Research (2002) *UK-Wide Evaluation of the Millennium Volunteers Programme* Research Report No. 357 (London, DfES), July 2002

8. Kendall, Jeremy (2005) *The third sector and the policy process in the UK: ingredients in a hyper-active horizontal policy environment*. Third Sector European Policy Working Papers, Number 5, June 2005 (London, CCS, LSE)

9. London Development Agency (2005) *Partners in Training: An evaluation of the Black and Minority Ethnic Fundraising Training Initiative* (London, London Development Agency), Full report, October 2005

10. Lowndes, Vivien, Pratchett, Lawrence and Stoker, Gerry (2006) 'Diagnosing and Remedying the Failings of Official Participation Schemes: The CLEAR Framework' *Social Policy and Society* 5 (2), 281-291

    Lowndes, Vivien, Pratchett, Lawrence and Stoker, Gerry (2002) *The Locality Effect: Local Government and Citizen Participation* ESRC Final Report of Award, December 2002

    Lowndes, Vivien, Pratchett, Lawrence and Stoker, Gerry (2006) *Locality Matters: Making Participation Count in Local Politics* (London, IPPR) May 2006

    Lowndes, Vivien, Pratchett, Lawrence and Stoker, Gerry (2006, forthcoming) 'Local political participation: the impact of rules-in-use' *Public Administration* 84 (3)

11. Masterton, Ailsa (2003) *Evaluation Report of the Capacity Building Team at Voluntary Action Westminster* Voluntary Action Westminster. July 2003

12. Pearson, Sarah and Morgan, Gareth (2001) *The Role of Councils for Voluntary Service in the Social Inclusion Agenda* (Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University)

13. Northmore, Simon, Pearson, Sarah, Morgan, Gareth and Taylor, Marilyn (2003) *An Evaluation of Community Fund Grant Making to Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Organisations*, Final Report January 2003 (Sheffield Hallam University - Centre for Voluntary Sector Research & University of Brighton - Health & Social Policy Research Centre)

Morgan, Gareth G and Taylor, Marilyn (2004) *Funding for Voluntary Sector Infrastructure: A case study analysis* ISTR Sixth International Conference, Toronto, Canada. July 11-14, 2004.

14. National Audit Office (2004) *Getting Citizens Involved: Community Participation in Neighbourhood Renewal* Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General HC1070 Session 2003-2004 (London, TSO), 25th October 2004

15. O'Hagan, S (2003) 'The Development of indicators for impact assessment' in Collis, B., Lacey, M., O'Hagan, S., Shah, R., Wainwright, S., and Wilding, K. (2003) *Measuring Impact: Case Studies of Small and Medium-Sized Voluntary Organisations* (London, NCVO)

16. Orton, Andrew (not dated) *Community Involvement and Development Work in Easington District: Civil Renewal in Practice?* (Durham, University of Durham), M.A. Dissertation

17. Osborne, Stephen P. (1999) *Promoting local voluntary and community action: The role of local development agencies* (York, York Publishing Services)

Osborne, Stephen P. (2000) 'Reformulating Wolfenden? The Roles and Impact of Local Development Agencies in Supporting Voluntary and Community Action in the UK' *Local Government Studies* 26(4) 23-48

18. Osborne, Stephen P., Beattie, Rona S. and Williamson, Arthur P. (2002) *Community involvement in rural regeneration partnerships in the UK: Evidence from England, Northern Ireland and Scotland* (Bristol, Policy Press)

Osborne, Stephen P., Beattie, Rona S. and Williamson, Arthur P. (2002) Community involvement in rural regeneration partnerships in the UK: Key issues from a three nation study. *Regional Studies* 36(9), 1083-1092

Osborne, Stephen P., Beattie, Rona S. and Williamson, Arthur P. (2004) Community involvement in rural regeneration partnerships: exploring the rural dimension *Local Government Studies* 30 (2) Summer 2004

Williamson, Arthur P., Beattie, Rona S. and Osborne, Stephen P (2004) 'Addressing fragmentation and social exclusion through community involvement in rural regeneration partnerships: evidence from the Northern Ireland experience' *Policy and Politics,* 32(3), 351-369.

19. Pearson, Sarah (2003) *Evaluation of the Long Term Impact of the Community Fund's 'Brass for Barnsley' Initiative*, (London, Community Fund) Final Report, October 2003

20. Reid, Maggie and Gibb, Kenneth (2004) *''Capacity Building' in the third sector and the use of independent consultants: evidence from Scotland'* A paper presented at the ISTR 6th International Conference, Toronto, July 11th-14th 2004

21. Rosewarne, Annie (2003) *South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau: Evaluation of the Bureau's SRB funded Training Programme, September 2000 to September 2003* (Sheffield, SYFAB), December 2003

22. Taylor, Marilyn et al (2005) *Making Connections: An evaluation of the Community Participation Programmes* Research Report 15 (London, ODPM) March 2005

Taylor, Marilyn (2006) 'Communities in Partnership: Developing a Strategic Voice' *Social Policy and Society* 5(2), 269-279

23. Twigg, John (2001) *Capacity Building and its challenges - A review of the Baring Foundation's International Grants Programme 1997-1999* December 2001.

24. Webster, Steve and Tinklin, Teresa (2005) *South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau, Impact Assessment 2005. South Yorkshire Coalfields*. (Sheffield, SYFAB) April 2005

25. Woodall, Phil (2004) *LASA Circuit Rider Project Evaluation*, August 2004

26. Yates, Holly and Jochum, Véronique (2003) *It's who you know that counts: The Role of the Voluntary Sector in the Development of Social Capital in Rural Areas* (London, NCVO) June 2003.

B. Other references

Butler, G, Deaton, S, Hodgkinson, J, Holmes, E and Marshall, S (2005) *Quick but Not Dirty: Rapid Evidence Assessments as a Decision Support Tool in Social Policy*, APSAC Advisor 17(2) Sept 2005

Capacitybuilders (2006) *Fit for Growth: Building sustainable voluntary and community organisations. Capacitybuilders' Strategy 2006* Birmingham, Capacitybuilders, May 2006

COGS (2006) *PERFORM: An Outcomes Approach for Infrastructure Organisations* (Sheffield, Communities and Organisations: Growth and Support (COGS)). For more information, see www.cogs.uk.net and www.changeup.org.uk/resources/perform.asp.

HM Treasury (2002) *The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in Service Delivery: A Cross Cutting Review* (London, HM Treasury), September 2002

Home Office (2004) *ChangeUp: Capacity Building and Infrastructure Framework* (London, Home Office), June 2004

Home Office (2005) *Developing Capacity: Next steps for ChangeUp*, London, Home Office Active Communities Directorate, March 2005

Pawson, R (2004) *Assessing the quality of evidence in evidence-based policy: why, how and when?* ESRC Research Methods Programme Working Paper 1, Available at: http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/publications/Pawson.pdf

Appendix 1 - Methodology

The project aimed to produce a 'rapid evidence assessment' (REA) examining the benefits of VCS infrastructure, involving a review of academic, grey and practitioner literature, including some evidence from overseas. The project had five inter-linked elements:

A. Design and conceptual clarification
B. Evidence search and gathering
C. Evidence assessment (for relevance, and then full assessment)
D. Validation and discussion amongst experts at three focused seminars
E. Preparation of interim and final reports.

As part of the REA, in order to enhance the review's transparency, a number of documents were designed and used to guide the process, namely:

- a search strategy,
- an assessment protocol (a design statement outlining the key criteria for judgements being made in the review), and
- an assessment pro-forma.

A **search strategy** was drawn up and used to guide the search for evidence. This focused primarily on three main approaches:

- accessing research in the public domain using web-based search tools and databases (including Google), informed by a range and combination of search terms
- pursuit of particular sources suggested by colleagues on the project's advisory panel
- requests for and pursuit of 'grey literature', that is, unpublished or less widely circulated reports and papers.

The search strategy document identified the range of search approaches, terms and resources which were used. The search generated a long-list of potentially relevant sources. From this, the researchers sought to obtain those sources thought, on the information available, to be relevant to the questions at hand.

The **assessment protocol** serves as a design statement for the review, containing all the key judgements which are to be made, including whether or not to include evidence in the review. A full assessment of relevance could only take place once reports and articles had been obtained. The key question is **whether the particular research clearly addresses the review questions**. Does it have anything to say about the benefits of infrastructure? Relevance was thus tested against the inclusion and exclusion criteria set out in the table below, derived directly from the review questions, and framed in terms of 'populations', 'interventions', 'outcomes' and 'dimensions of studies'

Whilst the 'population' dimension is relatively encompassing, the other three dimensions offered more scope for selecting items of relevance. Although the range of infrastructure interventions and outcomes is quite wide, this still may not generate much in the way of empirical material for review.

Review Question: What are the benefits of VCS infrastructure?		
Dimension	**Inclusion criteria**	**Exclusion criteria**
Population	The beneficiaries of infrastructure are one or more of: end users; 'frontline' voluntary organisations and community groups; and public agencies/government	Any other people, organisations or stakeholders
Interventions	Infrastructure activities and functions encompassed by the *ChangeUp* definition of infrastructure, undertaken for the sector by any sector	Any other activities
Outcomes	Benefits (outcomes and impact); that is, any positive consequences or changes, arising from infrastructure interventions.	Descriptions of inputs and activities Descriptions of outputs
Study dimensions	• Studies from 1997 onwards • in UK, US, Canada, Australia and European Union	Pre-1997 studies[1] Studies based elsewhere

[1] Exceptions can be made to the cut off date. For example, it has been suggested that we look at infrastructure work prior to 1997, particularly in relation to the Wolfenden Report

Some approaches to review seek to use some assessment of research quality as a screening filter (see for example the two rapid evidence assessments described by Butler et al (2005)). Invariably this involves identifying some form of inclusion/exclusion threshold. If the research meets or exceeds the threshold, it can be included; if it fails to meet the threshold, it is excluded. Clearly the quality of evidence included in the review is an important consideration. However, notions of quality in research are deeply contested, and frameworks for assessing quality, particularly in relation to qualitative research, are only just being developed and discussed. The use of scoring techniques for assessing the quality of research can be somewhat narrow and based on particular epistemological assumptions about the status of knowledge. Accordingly, following Pawson (2004), judgements about the quality of the research formed part of the evidence assessment itself, rather than used as an earlier criterion for inclusion/exclusion.

Once selected for the review, an **assessment pro-forma** was used as a template to interrogate the literature, including consideration of the quality of the evidence. The template is reproduced below.

The Benefits of Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure – a rapid evidence assessment

Assessment pro-forma

Assessor …….

Date assessed …….

Title
Author(s)
Date produced/published
Commissioned/funded by
Geographical area
PERFORM outcomes
Infrastructure functions/activities
Dates research undertaken
Summary description of what the research was about (aims, objectives, research questions)

1. **Headline findings**
2. **What research methods were used?**
3. **What infrastructure activities are involved in this research?**
4. **Who are the 'beneficiaries' identified by the research?**
5. **In what ways and to what extent have they benefited?**
6. **How (e.g. by what processes and mechanisms) have positive consequences arisen?**
7. **What are the short term consequences?**
8. **What are the longer term consequences?**
9. **To what extent are these consequences intended or unintended?**
10. **Are there any intangible consequences?**
11. **To what and how extent has any 'distance travelled' been identified/demonstrated?**
12. **Are there any negative consequences of infrastructure activities?**
13. **What does the research tell us about the *outcomes* of infrastructure activities?**
14. **What does the research tell us about the *impact* of infrastructure activities?**
15. **What are the strengths of the research?**
16. **What are the weaknesses of the research?**
17. **What gaps in knowledge does the research identify?**
18. **Are there any other gaps arising from this study?**
19. **Other comments**

Appendix 2 – Seminar participants

The rapid evidence assessment was discussed at three half-day seminars: in Sheffield (5th April), Birmingham (6th April) and London (7th April). The aim of these was to consider emerging findings from the assessment amongst expert participants, including academics and researchers, policy makers and funders, and representatives from infrastructure agencies.

Sheffield

Mary Cornwell	Humber and the Wolds Rural Community Council
Lena Dahlberg	Sheffield Hallam University
Chris Elton	Sheffield Hallam University
Ted Elwes	Gloucestershire Rural Community Council
Richard Hindley	South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau
Clive La Court	Milburn Trinnaman and La Court consultants
Warren Libby	National Association for Voluntary and Community Action
Jeremy Prescott	Rural Community Council (Leicestershire and Rutland)
Anne Shirling	South Yorkshire Open Forum
Nick Warren	Voluntary Action Sheffield
Mandy Wilson	COGS – Communities and Organisations: Growth and Support

Birmingham

Peter Alcock	University of Birmingham
Sarah Coombes	Institute for Volunteering Research
Vandna Gohil	Futurebuilders England
Jurgen Grotz	Roehampton University
Duncan Scott	University of Manchester
Lesley Symes	ARVAC: Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector

London

Sarah Bishton	Community Matters
Sylvia Brown	ACRE: Action with Communities in Rural England
Rosie Chapman	Charity Commission for England and Wales
Sioned Churchill	City Parochial Foundation
Alison Harker	Freelance researcher
Chris Heard	Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation
John Marshall	Capacitybuilders
Richard Piper	Performance Hub
Pat Samuels	HM Treasury
Isabel Sutcliffe	Home Office
Karl Wilding	National Council for Voluntary Organisations