The case for supporting London’s infrastructure

Through the pandemic and the current cost of living crisis, we’ve seen the critical role infrastructure organisations play. From convening and connecting, to supporting and strengthening civil society.

Most definitions of infrastructure organisations ‘tend to focus on functions and services’ according to Common Visions’ playbook: [Investing in infrastructure](https://commonvision.uk/report/futures-playbook-civil-society-infrastructure/). They say “this can lead to a very ‘technical’ view of what infrastructure is and does, whereas in reality it is fluid and takes different shapes and forms depending on the social cause, location and ‘user’ demographics of the civil society organisations who require support.”

They go on to say that the role of funders, through either commissioning support services and/or direct funding and investment models “demonstrate[s] the privileged role which funders play in choosing, endorsing and shaping what’s available to civil society organisations and who provides it. This has significant power, diversity and equity implications which are sometimes underacknowledged.”

They conclude that “Ultimately, infrastructure is about power – how power is built and shared, who defines and sustains its legacy, and who facilitates a common understanding and consensus. This means that funders must be intentional and purposeful about the infrastructure they fund.”

Yvonne Field, CEO of the Ubele Initiative is quoted in the playbook: “The profound changes of the last year have dramatically shifted the landscape of anti-racist action. We’ve seen how social movements have the power to fundamentally reshape public discourse and catalyse mass action. Past and current experiences may lead us to worry that these gains will be short-lived, undermined and co-opted. This is exactly why we feel it’s necessary to look at the role of infrastructure, as one of many inputs and support systems that underpin and sustain racial justice work… More people are engaging, new groups are being established and existing groups are elevating their ambitions. What are the underlying support systems that can meet the evolving scale, depth and complexity of racial justice work?” Yvonne Field, Ubele Initiative (2021)

The Law Family’s [Commission on Civil Society](https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=17ec83fd-ced2-477c-a97a-1c3f9efc0905) states the importance of infrastructure in relation to government policies such as levelling-up. “Decades of attempts to tackle the UK’s entrenched regional inequalities have shown that the charities, community groups and volunteers that are at civil society’s core can make the difference between successful, sustained local regeneration and flash in the pan spending with few long-term benefits.”

They go on to state that infrastructure organisations take on a huge role, “from providing unparalleled insights into community issues at the planning and design stage of schemes, through to their ability to maintain the trust and buy-in of residents”.

In their report from January 2023, they call for “strategic investment from funders, this government and the next, in the productivity of the social sector, the data available to and about it, and in the changes needed to unlock philanthropy. This must be accompanied by a dramatic acceleration in the partnership between civil society and business, and a reset of the relationship between civil society and government.”[[1]](#footnote-2) More directly to funders they state that “Overhauling the funding landscape that civil society operates in is essential to both these aims and more. A meaningful majority of grant-makers need to make more long-term, flexible financing available more simply to the sector.”

In April 2023, the London CVS Network published an [impact report](https://londonplus.org/news/cvs-network-impact-report) helping to show the importance of local infrastructure in connecting and strengthening our civil society. The report found that funding for local voluntary and community infrastructure “is a significant challenge, in the current context of constrained public finances and further compounded by increasing costs and increased demand for services and support”.

They go further to say that ‘adequate, core funding is key to sustaining the sector and ensuring its resilience, and for the sector to work effectively, investing in local infrastructure is crucial.’

The picture of London’s infrastructure and funding

In 2016 London Funders and partners published ‘The Way Ahead’ report delivering 12 proposals[[2]](#footnote-3) and how they are connected and shared across civil society. As a result of these proposals and the work that was carried out by this group chaired by London Funders, collaborative investment in infrastructure was taken forward by some of London’s key funders.

In 2017 The Cornerstone Fund was developed by our members; City Bridge Trust, The National Lottery Community Fund, Trust for London, John Lyon’s Charity and the Greater London Authority with the aim to progress the ambitions of The Way Ahead report, creating “a thriving civil society that is adaptable, resilient, collaborative, sustainable and driven by communities, with a focus on tackling deep seated structural inequalities to improve outcomes for Londoners.” This fund is now in its second round and a series of learning reports can be found [here](https://www.citybridgetrust.org.uk/funding/funder-collaborations/the-cornerstone-fund). As their learning progresses, some of the challenges and questions which have been surfaced will continue to be explored through their peer to peer learning networks:

* Maintaining a focus on long term change when fighting short term crises
* Further centring grassroots groups and marginalised people in the work and deepening the conversations and practices for equity.
* Developing collaborative relationships outside of partnerships, particularly with decision-makers and power-holders that they want to influence
* Further exploring and articulating what the system is, where you sit in relation to the system, and the desired impact on system conditions you want to have.

Looking at more recent data, the London CVS network’s [impact report](https://londonplus.org/news/cvs-network-impact-report) shows that each year 10,700 groups actively engaged with London’s infrastructure bodies, 15,800 volunteers were placed into local volunteering roles, and £24.1m leveraged annually into the sector with CVS support – whilst recognising that its own funding foundations are not secure.

A recent [report](Although%20funding%20from%20non%20government%20grantmakers%20is%20only%20a%20small%20percentage%20of%20the%20total%20funding%20for%20infrastructure%2C%20thesegrants%20are%20an%20important%20part%20of%20the%20funding%20mix%20for%20some%20organisations%2C%20particularly%20for%20specialistorganisations%20supporting%20marginalised%20groups%20who%20are%20least%20able%20to%20pay%20for%20services%2C%20and%20where%20the%20capacity%20building%20support%20might%20not%20be%20available%20without%20this%20grant%20funding.%20%E2%97%8FVery%20few%20trusts%20and%20foundations%20fund%20the%20sector%20infrastructure%20organisations%20and%20it%20is%20a%20veryfragile%20ecosystem.%20Changes%20to%20funder%20strategiesexpose%20this%20vulnerability%20with%20some%20infrastructure%20bodies%20reporting%20that%20they%20have%20few%20funders%20that%20they%20are%20even%20eligible%20to%20apply%20to.This%20means%20change%20in%20the%20strategiesof%20one%20funder%20are%20likely%20to%20have%20an%20impact%20on%20the%20applications%20received%20by%20others.) from 360Giving gives a picture of national infrastructure showing that:

* There are estimated to be nearly 700 voluntary sector infrastructure bodies in the UK, spending over £500m a year
* The majority of these (519) are local or regionally based organisations and 180 have a national remit
* There have been significant mergers and closures of organisations, and while there have been new registrations, there has been a decline in the overall number of infrastructure organisations, during a period when the number of charities, Community Interest Companies and other voluntary community groups has continued to grow
* The 20 largest organisations in this cohort account for over a third (37.5%) of the spend, but the majority of organisations are relatively small with 29% having a turnover under £100k and 80% under £1m

The report goes on to highlight that “very few trusts and foundations fund the sector infrastructure organisations and it is a very fragile ecosystem. Changes to funder strategies expose this vulnerability with some infrastructure bodies reporting that they have few funders that they are even eligible to apply to. This means change in the strategies of one funder are likely to have an impact on the applications received by others.”

Further reading

The Way Ahead, London Funders - <https://londonfunders.org.uk/resources-publications/publications/way-ahead>

Learning Report, Cornerstone Fund - <http://wordpress.collaboratei.com/wp-content/uploads/The-Cornerstone-Fund-Learning-Report-Year-2-Executive-Summary-Feb-2021.pdf>

Anchor fund, City Bridge Trust - <https://www.citybridgetrust.org.uk/funding/the-anchor-programme>

Investing in Infrastructure, Common Vision - <http://commonvision.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Common-Vision-Futures-Playbook-Civil-Society-Infrastructure-FINAL-May2022.pdf>

Commission of civil society, The Law Family - <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=17ec83fd-ced2-477c-a97a-1c3f9efc0905>

London CVS Network - <https://londonplus.org/news/cvs-network-impact-report>

1. <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/unleashing-the-power-of-civil-society> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://londonfunders.org.uk/resources-publications/publications/way-ahead> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)