The role of Local Infrastructure Organisations in the COVID 19 response

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Local infrastructure is arguably the forgotten aspect of the voluntary sector. The COVID-19 response has highlighted this marginalisation as public commentary focuses on new actors – emergent community groups at the local level, and state led systems at the national level.

It is unclear whether, and if so how, Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIOs) are able to influence these new actors. Yet, the need for local infrastructure support has never been greater, as many established voluntary organisations struggle to survive in the challenging post COVID-19 context.

Aim of the research

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- To formalise anecdotal knowledge

- Draw out insights from practice

- Contribute to academic understanding of:
  - The role of infrastructure
  - The contribution that infrastructure organisations make to place leadership
  - The ethical leadership dilemmas that arise in leadership practice (working with Dr Nik Winchester)

CVSL's approach to leadership builds on:

- Leadership as a practice (rather than person) (Raelin, 2011)

- Leadership as relational'/social interactions (rather than position) (Cunliffe and Eriksson, 2011)

- Place leadership as the product of interactions between multiple actors in a complex system (Collinge & Gibney, 2010)

- Leadership has no easy answers! (Heifetz, 1994)

Context

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- Infrastructure organisations have a long history.

- Organised across multiple geographical scales (Walton and Macmillan, 2014).

- 'Local' organisations – working within a boundary that stretches across multiple neighbourhoods and communities, but not across counties – i.e. not regional.

- Now hundreds of such organisations in the UK (Mohan, 2012; NAVCA, 2020)

- Recent history to March 2020:

- Austerity leading to reduced funding and closures, much like wider sector (Milbourne, 2013; Walton and Macmillan, 2014; Aiken and Harris, 2017).

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- Various definitions of infrastructure exist (Wolfenden, 1978; Osborne, 2000; Wells and Dayson, 2010; Mohan, 2012; Macmillan, 2016)

- Provide services, support, and advice to frontline voluntary sector organisations that enables them to deliver their mission more effectively:

- Physical spaces/facilities

- Structures e.g. community forums

- Systems e.g. funding, policy, impact evidence

- Relationships

- People

- Knowledge

- Skills

- Direct Services

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- The focus of LIOs is often on their members, the voluntary sector locally, and the communities they serve

- It can be difficult to pay attention to, and advocate for, internal organisational needs because of this; measuring LIO impact is difficult (Macmillan, 2016)

- Direct service delivery is contentious (Windrum, 2014), despite the fact it has historically been a part of the LIO offer (Wolfenden, 1978)

- LIOs typically have relationships with less than 30% of voluntary sector organisations in their area (Mohan, 2012)

- Risk of a "self-perpetuating elite" (Osborne et al., 2006) and lack of engagement with marginalised voices

- Community responses to crisis situations can present problems for formal organisations (Twigg and Mosel, 2017)

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- In theory, LIOs can overcome these challenges as infrastructure exists to build both horizontal and vertical capacity in communities in a 'catalytic' way (Osborne et al., 2006)

- **Horizontal capacity building:** growing skills to identity needs, apply for funding, build on assets, learn lessons for the future, etc.

- **Vertical capacity building:** the ability to take part in strategic levels of partnership/collaboration – addressing power imbalances.

- **'Catalytic' approach:** undertaking one piece of work also contributes to other objectives. E.g. helping an organisation with a funding bid builds that organisation's capacity to bid on their own in the future, bid with others, or to pass on that information and advice.

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- We know that infrastructure organisations have been doing a great deal in local areas

- #Heartofourcommunity (complimentary to #Nevermoreneeded)

- 'connecting', 'communicating', 'supporting', 'sharing'

- Coordinating responses – local hubs such as VAS in Sheffield (presented in session 2B)

- Links with non-sector organisations directly, particularly with volunteer coordination – pharmacies for example.

- Concerns about people 'falling through the net' prompting more focus on specific communities (place/identity/need)

- Sector surveys – needs and assets

- Voluntary sector infrastructure as part of strong community infrastructure? Volunteering versus the voluntary sector

- Who is 'leading'? Who is enacting leadership?

- Emphasis on the 'new'

" In some places there is loads of stuff happening – but they're not calling it 'Mutual Aid', they're just calling it neighbourliness or solidarity, <u>or calling it whatever they call the things that are already happening in those areas."</u>

(NLGN, 2020, p.14, emphasis added)

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- 12 month project from August 2020

- 3 – 5 local infrastructure organisations (LIOs)

- Plus national context

- Selected through our existing relationships (purposive)

- 3 primary data collection methods:

1) Publicly available materials – social medial, websites, newsletters etc.

2) Internal documents and communications (if available)

3) Interviews with key individuals identified through (1) and (2)

- Qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2008; Guest et al., 2012; Miles et al., 2014)

Thank You!
Any Questions?

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