


STRONG INDEPENDENT ROOTS

Supporting local voluntary action



Voluntary action and local
democracy

A living document
April 2010

This publication is a living document. It sets out NAVCA's current thinking about the future of local third sector representation, development and support. We would welcome the views of our members and stakeholders.

If you would like to comment on what you have read, please contact Neil Cleeveley, NAVCA's Director of Policy and Communications.

Tel **0114 289 3954**; email **neil.cleeveley@navca.org.uk**



Local support and development organisations

NAVCA is a membership body for local support and development organisations. Its members exist to champion and strengthen local charities, voluntary organisations and community groups. They:

- provide specialist expertise, information and support and develop the skills local people need to run successful organisations and groups
- spread good practice, prevent duplication of effort and support joint working
- help groups find funding and make effective use of resources
- promote equality and diversity by fostering a wider understanding of the needs of disadvantaged and under-represented groups
- make sure policy makers understand the needs of local voluntary organisations and community groups
- help public bodies engage effectively with local voluntary organisations and community groups
- provide a forum for local voluntary organisations and community groups
- encourage more people to volunteer and get involved in voluntary and community action.

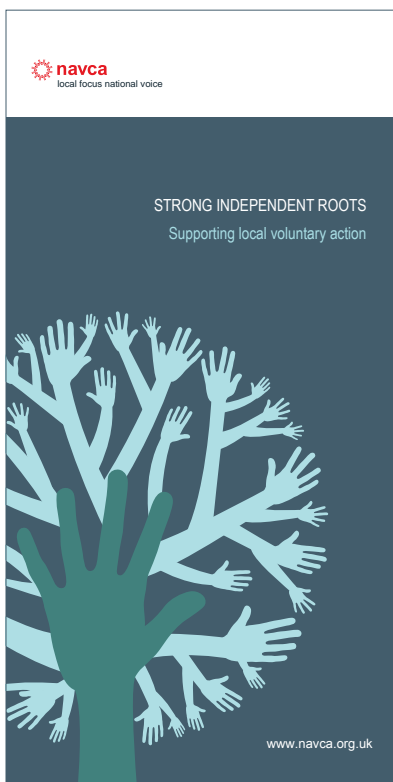


Voice and influence

Everyone has the right to be heard when it comes to making decisions about local services. Local voluntary action offers a voice to those who are seldom heard. Local support and development organisations work for social justice by making sure that local authorities and other public bodies hear those voices. They allow local voluntary groups to raise with public decision makers the issues affecting service users, constituents and members. Many local support and development organisations are forced to do this on a shoestring, leaving many people with little or no influence over local services.

- ***We call upon the Government to commit all local public bodies to fund local infrastructure to support and empower voluntary action so that all communities have a voice that can influence public decision making.***
- ***NAVCA commits its members to support and empower all sections of their local community to involve local people in the solution and ensure services address needs.***

Find out more about NAVCA's vision for the local third sector at www.navca.org.uk/publications/roots/



Voluntary action and local democracy

1. In a modern and mature democracy every citizen should have the chance to have their say about local services and the things that matter to them in their community. For their part local public bodies should have a duty to listen and respond.
2. All too often the views of the most excluded communities go unheard, sometimes because they are drowned out by a vocal, often well connected, minority, sometimes because decision makers are out of reach and sometimes because they lack an organised voice. Local voluntary and community action offers a voice for local people, especially the most disadvantaged. It can help local authorities fulfil their duty to consult and involve¹ their partners and service users in the design and delivery of services by broadening the opportunities for citizen engagement and participation.

1 Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007



Local support and development organisations contribute significantly, by supporting the representatives of local charities and community groups to bring the voices of the most marginalised communities to the local strategic partnership (LSP). The local support and development organisation's role in local governance of public services is crucial, but it requires the resources to help it build and develop the networks to increase social capital and enable the most marginalised voices to be heard.

A well resourced local support and development organisation, able to participate fully in the LSP, brings a wide range of benefits:

- The experience, knowledge, and skills to help design and deliver more effective services.
- Connection with communities and users that can help services find practical solutions to the most deep rooted and intractable problems.
- Stronger collaboration between all partners.
- Access to community networks that can broaden engagement.
- A better understanding of the needs of the most excluded groups.
- Improved co-ordination between service providers, bringing greater consistency and reducing duplication.
- Strong links to the external funding, assets, volunteers and other resources that voluntary action brings into the area.
- Improved community participation in, and engagement with, public services.

Community engagement

4. Sometimes attempts to widen public involvement amount to no more than a public consultation exercise, leaving citizens feeling that decisions have already been taken and they are being asked to provide a 'rubber stamp' that will offer legitimacy. This provokes

The case for participation is well put by Geoff Mulgan, Director of the Young Foundation:

“Participation works best when people feel that they can make a difference, when they have the time to fully engage with the issues and when there is a healthy relationship of mutual respect with elected representatives. It works worst when it is rushed, ill-informed and vague about the links to formal decision-making, or when it allows the loudest voices to dominate”.

From *People & Participation: How to put citizens at the heart of decision-making*, Involve, London. (2005). Available at: www.involve.org.uk/assets/Uploads/People-and-Participation.pdf

cynicism about democracy and alienation from the political process, which undermine public faith in politics as a force for good. We want to see community engagement become a means to empower people through real and effective participation.

Trust between the state and its citizens is vital for effective community engagement. Initially it may require a leap of faith; in the long run, greater trust between local public bodies and citizens is essential to increasing social capital and widening civic participation. Effective engagement must encompass communities of identity, communities of interest and communities of place if it is to be fully inclusive and enable LSPs to tackle the most intractable problems.

Cohesion

5. Developing and supporting voluntary action in the most disadvantaged and excluded communities is a vital element of local support and development organisations’ work. They work with a wide range of small community-based organisations to help people improve the life chances of those in the most deprived neighbourhoods and communities, helping them understand their rights and responsibilities and building their confidence about their role and place in society; strengthening the community. Building a stronger, more confident community is good for its own sake, but it also encourages people to participate in wider social action and democratic activity, which improves community relations and, where there are strong community networks, enhances the capacity of public partnerships.
6. We consider the diversity of contemporary Britain to be a cause for celebration; the capacity to understand and respect difference is a mark of a civilised society and enhances the richness of all our life experiences. That is why we believe that all groups should be supported to build their skills, capacity and confidence to enable them to take more active roles in civil society and to engage more fully in democratic renewal.
7. The recent debate about the merits of single group funding – generally used to describe funding for organisations that support black and minority ethnic communities – has provoked strong views both for and against. NAVCA is very firmly in favour of single

'There is no dichotomy between funding specialist services and cohesion; equality is necessary for cohesion to be achieved.'

Lord Justice Moses in *Southall Black Sisters vs. London Borough of Ealing*, 2008

group funding because we believe it is vital for public funding to support organisations that work with people who experience disproportionate discrimination. This applies particularly to those groups and communities protected by legislation around the six equalities strands: gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief and age. We believe that, far from reinforcing segregation, single group funding helps organisations become effective advocates on behalf of their communities.

8. Whilst this is central to NAVCA's philosophy, we are concerned that many white working class communities feel that they have been left behind². Our views on support for minority communities are also relevant for those white working class communities that feel excluded from the mainstream. Local support and development organisations support voluntary action in these communities, just as they do in minority communities, and a failure to address their legitimate concerns will undermine cohesion just as surely as a failure to address the legitimate concerns of minority communities.
9. Indeed, it is the people of all backgrounds in the poorest communities, many of which have not recovered from previous recessions and industrial decline, that are experiencing the highest rises in unemployment³. This is one of the reasons for NAVCA's view that it would be imprudent to make significant reductions in public spending until the economy is growing and employment is rising.

Local democracy

10. The strong tradition of local government in England has been enfeebled in recent decades. This has resulted in a weakening of its capacity to represent and respond to the needs of local people. Whilst the focus on performance has done much to improve the responsiveness and quality of local government services, it has not been enough to reinvigorate citizens' respect for local government. Local government's apparent lack of relevance to local people has resulted in its failure to engage citizens fully in the determination of the ambition, purpose and priorities for the area. The falling turnouts in local elections suggest that most people do not see local democracy as relevant to their lives.

² 'Sources of resentment, and perceptions of ethnic minorities among poor white people in England', National Community Forum, January 2009. www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/sourcesresentment

³ See www.equalityhumanrights.com/media-centre/june-2009/new-research-reveals-groups-most-affected-by-recession/

Ipsos MORI's analysis on the 2008/09 Place Survey* shows that whilst people are generally happier with their area as a place to live they are dissatisfied with public services. The survey also draws a strong correlation between the degree of satisfaction and the affluence of an area; areas with the highest levels of multiple deprivation showing very low levels of satisfaction.

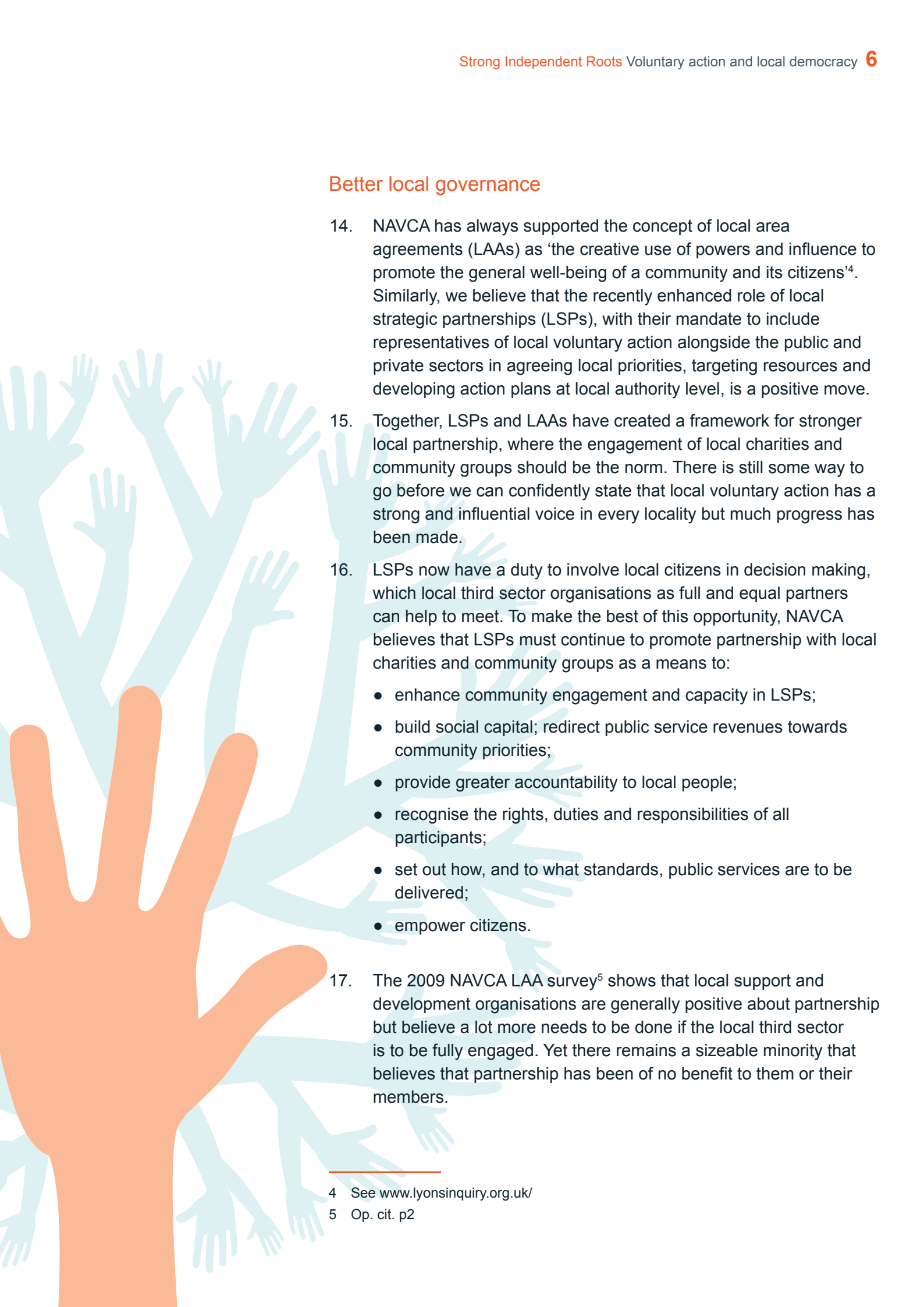
* See www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Events/sri-event-local-people-perceptions-place-ben-page-presentation.pdf

11. This is why NAVCA is a cautious supporter of localism; we welcome the debate about how best to revitalise public interest in local democracy. Our caution stems from a concern about how to ensure that vulnerable people living in a particular part of the country do not have access to services that those elsewhere might take for granted.
12. We believe that local voluntary action has an important part to play in reinvigorating local governance. Indeed, a healthy and thriving third sector, of which local charities and community groups are a key element is, in our view, an essential precondition to democratic renewal.
13. Voluntary action makes a significant contribution to the quality of life for local people through direct community-based action, filling the space between public and private providers and offering a voice for local people, especially the most disadvantaged. NAVCA believes that the sector's role in the governance of public services and the development of social capital are essential elements of a fair and just society where every citizen is able to participate in the democratic process.

A strong network of local charities and community groups can put in place some of the essential elements of a fair and just local democracy:

- Building social capital and civil renewal – to increase the confidence and ability of individuals and groups to get involved in activities that hold communities together.
- Effective community engagement – developing a voice for communities to enable them to participate more effectively and to increase the accountability of local public service providers.
- Improved service delivery – to ensure that local communities can properly influence and, where appropriate, deliver services on behalf of local government and other public bodies.

Better local governance

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14. NAVCA has always supported the concept of local area agreements (LAAs) as ‘the creative use of powers and influence to promote the general well-being of a community and its citizens’⁴. Similarly, we believe that the recently enhanced role of local strategic partnerships (LSPs), with their mandate to include representatives of local voluntary action alongside the public and private sectors in agreeing local priorities, targeting resources and developing action plans at local authority level, is a positive move.
15. Together, LSPs and LAAs have created a framework for stronger local partnership, where the engagement of local charities and community groups should be the norm. There is still some way to go before we can confidently state that local voluntary action has a strong and influential voice in every locality but much progress has been made.
16. LSPs now have a duty to involve local citizens in decision making, which local third sector organisations as full and equal partners can help to meet. To make the best of this opportunity, NAVCA believes that LSPs must continue to promote partnership with local charities and community groups as a means to:
- enhance community engagement and capacity in LSPs;
 - build social capital; redirect public service revenues towards community priorities;
 - provide greater accountability to local people;
 - recognise the rights, duties and responsibilities of all participants;
 - set out how, and to what standards, public services are to be delivered;
 - empower citizens.
17. The 2009 NAVCA LAA survey⁵ shows that local support and development organisations are generally positive about partnership but believe a lot more needs to be done if the local third sector is to be fully engaged. Yet there remains a sizeable minority that believes that partnership has been of no benefit to them or their members.

4 See www.lyonsinquiry.org.uk/

5 Op. cit. p2

Crucially, the survey found that local support and development organisations' work to widen involvement was rarely fully resourced and that some statutory bodies tend to centralise power and resources.

Many expressed concern that the LAA was dominated by the public sector, time consuming, overly bureaucratic and a source of confusion. Crucially, the survey found that local support and development organisations' work to widen involvement was rarely fully resourced and that some statutory bodies tend to centralise power and resources. Local authorities and other public bodies on LSPs display widely varying levels of enthusiasm for the involvement of charities and community groups. Nevertheless, one of the strongest messages was the sense that the LAA strengthened partnerships and led to "increased joint working across the sectors".

NAVCA would like to see local strategic partnerships adopt the following measures to improve local governance and delivery:

- Ensure that engagement is embedded into the 'DNA' of local public bodies.
- Make the partnerships more accessible to grassroots groups.
- Make resources available to support engagement.
- Implement inclusive governance arrangements that widen participation. A good starting point would be adoption of a framework such as the *Principles of Representation*¹.
- Build the capacity and skills of local charities and community groups to engage.
- Implement a comprehensive community engagement strategy² that engages local charities and community groups in meeting the *Duty to Involve*.
- Work with grassroots groups to secure the engagement of disadvantaged communities.
- Make sure that local commissioning frameworks support the growth of the local provider base and encourage the development of local delivery partnerships.
- Align the monitoring and reporting requirements of LSP partners.

¹ See <http://www.navca.org.uk/localvs/infobank/ilpunews/prinrep.htm>

² See <http://www.navca.org.uk/publications/cces/>



navca

local focus national voice

NAVCA is the national voice of local support and development organisations in England. We champion and strengthen voluntary and community action by supporting our members in their work with over 160,000 local charities and community groups. NAVCA believes that voluntary and community action is vital for vibrant and caring communities.

We provide our members with networking opportunities, specialist advice, support, policy information and training. NAVCA is a vital bridge between local groups and national government.

Our specialist teams take a lead on the issues that matter most to local support and development organisations. We influence national and local government policy to strengthen local voluntary and community action.

For more details about the full range of ways that NAVCA can help you please go to www.navca.org.uk or call us on 0114 278 6636.

NAVCA
The Tower
2 Furnival Square
Sheffield S1 4QL

Tel 0114 278 6636
Fax 0114 278 7004
Textphone 0114 278 7025
Email navca@navca.org.uk
www.navca.org.uk

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