

Evaluation of the Tech for Good Build Programme

September 2022

Commissioned by:

**COMIC
RELIEF**

Paul Hamlyn
Foundation

Authorship and acknowledgements

This report has been written by Annie Caffyn, Matt Jackson and Eliza Buckley, based on interviews and desk research carried out by the authors with Keeva Rooney and Rebecca Moran.

With thanks to participating organisations for giving up their time to take part in this evaluation and for sharing their experiences of the Build programme so openly and honestly during interviews and workshops.

How to cite this report:

Buckley, E., Caffyn, A., Jackson, M.(2022) Evaluation of the Tech for Good Build Programme, London: Institute for Voluntary Action Research

Contents

Introduction	4
About Build	6
Learning Coordination and evaluation approach	6
Part One: Programme design and delivery	8
1. Application process	8
2. Structure and management of the programme	10
3. Pace of the programme	10
4. Programme content	11
Part Two: Outcomes of Build	16
1. Digital products and services	16
2. Organisational learning	16
3. Outcomes for service users	19
Part Three: Learning on future support for charities and social tech	21
Appendix One	25

Executive Summary

Tech for Good was a three-year partnership between Comic Relief and Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF). It provided £2.4million in funding and capacity building support to enable not-for-profits in the UK to use digital technologies to deliver more effective, sustainable and scalable services. IVAR worked as evaluator on Tech for Good programmes from 2019 to 2022.¹ This report shares findings from IVAR's work supporting learning and evaluation of the Build programme, which ran from June 2021–April/May 2022.

Findings summary

Programme design and delivery

The application process was largely seen as clear and straightforward, and funded partners were overwhelmingly positive about the structure and management of the programme. Overall, funded partners felt trusted, and appreciated the programme's balance between accountability and freedom to experiment. Feedback on the pace and content of the programme was mixed. Experiences of the programme content and support varied depending on an organisation's previous digital experience and the level of existing digital capabilities. But overall, funded partners shared positive experiences of the programme content.

Outcomes of Build

- 1. Digital products and services:** Funded partners successfully developed a range of products and service prototypes through the Build programme. For example: products responding to increased demand for services; improving service experience and outcomes; supporting future system change; and enhancing accessibility of services.
- 2. Organisational learning:** Build triggered broader organisational benefits, introducing funded partners to a '*completely new way of thinking and working*'. We found: positive shifts in confidence; participants gaining new skills and knowledge; a focus on sharing, reusing and collaborative design of social tech products.
- 3. Outcomes for service users:** Funded partners used Build to create digital solutions to organisational needs that centred on improving service user outcomes or service experience. Unsurprisingly, many of the outcomes for service users overlap with organisational outcomes. Developing products to enhance service accessibility through longer hours of support or increasing access to information were common themes.

¹ Previous IVAR reports: Tech for Good Evaluation (2019) and Explore Evaluation (2020).

The future of support for charities and social tech

Drawing on this evaluation and our previous evaluations of Tech for Good programmes, we suggest five good practice principles for supporting charities with social tech.

Five Principles for supporting charities with social tech

1. **Tailor support to digital maturity:** digital maturity needs to be factored into the design and promotion of digital funds. This could be done via: discrete funds targeted at specific levels of needs; tailoring support; or investing in organisations to develop their own digital capacity.
2. **Promote reuse and shared learning:** Funded partners were encouraged to explore existing tech options throughout Build and previous Tech for Good programmes. We heard calls to go further and to do this in a more deliberate way.
3. **Build a learning culture into programme design:** The model and pace of the Tech for Good programme enabled the funders and CAST to iterate and develop in real time. Multiple funding calls and pauses allowed the programme to respond to emerging needs in the sector and adapt support, structure and content accordingly. Carving out spaces for reflection and the commitment to using live data has supported the programme to adapt and evolve.
4. **Invest in sustainable tech:** Funded partners need funders to invest long term in their digital maturity and sustainability. We heard repeated references to the '*cliff edge*' that some funded partners experienced at the end of Tech for Good programmes. This challenge is not exclusive to funding social tech. However, social tech's current focus on funding 'products' risks exacerbating it, as funded partners need support to maintain the products.
5. **Use flexible and trusting funding:** The value of core funding or a digital pot of funding within core grants is clear. We raise the question of whether there are different ways to meet the aims of programmes like Tech for Good that are both less resource intensive and more trusting. In this final message, we ask whether – using the learning from Tech for Good – it may be timely to explore how to integrate support for social tech into wider funding programmes or unrestricted flexible funding.

Introduction

Tech for Good was a three-year partnership between Comic Relief and Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF). It provided £2.4million in funding and capacity building support to enable not-for-profits in the UK to use digital technologies to deliver more effective, sustainable and scalable services. Tech for Good was delivered through three iterative programmes: '2019 Tech for Good', 'Explore' and 'Build'.

In September 2019, IVAR was appointed as evaluator for the Tech for Good programme. Since then, we have worked with Comic Relief, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, CAST and funded partners to explore the value and impact of Tech for Good.²

This report presents findings from our final phase of work with Tech for Good, supporting learning and evaluation of the Build programme. Build launched in January 2021 as the last Tech for Good programme.

About Build

The Build programme supported 20 organisations³ through a nine-month programme to define, develop or repurpose digital tools, platforms and products that meet a social need and meaningfully improve service delivery.

Organisations received funding of up to £70,000 between June 2021 and April 2022. Supported by an intermediary delivery partner CAST ([Centre for Acceleration of Social Technology](#)), organisations participated in a digital design programme, gaining experience and understanding of user-led, test-driven approaches, and developing a prototype to test with their service users.

Build was aimed at charities looking to:

- Scope how a digital solution could improve outcomes for the people they support
- Build the skills to develop a user-led approach to digital service delivery

Learning Coordination and evaluation approach

IVAR was a Learning Coordinator for the Build programme, providing an evaluation alongside strategic and learning support for funded partners.⁴

Our evaluation approach built on learning from previous work with Tech for Good, allowing funded partners to engage with activity at multiple points across the programme for shorter sessions. We built peer support into the approach to ensure that participating organisations would benefit from the evaluation process.

² Previous IVAR reports: Tech for Good Evaluation (2019) and Explore Evaluation (2020).

³ Two funded partners had taken part in a previous Tech for Good programme within the last three years.

⁴ We use the term 'funded partner' to describe organisations that took part in Build.

All participating organisations were offered financial compensation or an hour of strategic support in recognition for the time they contributed to the evaluation.

In addition to evaluation activities, we ran three reflective practice and learning workshops: integrating digital; monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) and digital; sustaining digital. We also provided a small amount of one-to-one support for funded partners that wanted it.

The findings in this report are based on the following evaluation activities:

- Desk review of grant application data
- Monthly learning calls with CAST and Comic Relief
- Two sets of interviews with 12 funded partners
- Seven internal stakeholder interviews with three staff from CAST and four staff from Comic Relief and Paul Hamlyn Foundation
- Three reflective practice workshops with funded partners (of whom 12 attended)
- A roundtable with five social tech field experts and four funders exploring the future of social tech
- A learning workshop with Comic Relief and Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Anonymised quotations from interviews and workshops are used throughout the report to illustrate key points.

Part One: Programme design and delivery

In this section, we share learning about what worked and what didn't in terms of the programme design by looking at the funding process, capacity building support and delivery.

1. Application process

The application process was seen as straightforward and clear, comparing favourably to other funding application processes. Funded partners appreciated the opportunity to submit video applications and involve service users in the process. However, one funded partner commented on the level of information required at the first stage of the application, suggesting the importance of managing expectations: *'Considering how popular the fund was, with around 600 people on the webinar I attended, I felt that there was a lot of information required for Stage 1 when the odds were quite low.'*

For most funded partners, Build came at the *'right time'*, allowing them to take *'the next step'* with a tech product or idea. The programme was a *'good fit'* for existing organisational goals, as applicants weren't obliged to tailor project plans to fit the fund:

'Sometimes you get funding bids, and you try and find the project to fit into a funding bid, whereas we already had something to build upon ... It just seemed to be that the fund perfectly, perfectly fit our needs.' (Funded partner)

In light of this, most funded partners had strong internal support from senior leadership that was involved, excited, open to new ways of working and looking to embed digital into their work. The programme was also seen as a timely response to the voluntary sector operating context, as organisations explored what to hold onto in terms of the rapid *'digitalising'* of services during Covid-19:

'A lot of the drive [to apply] came from senior leadership – they were becoming frustrated that we couldn't get good data and evidence out, so they appreciated how important it was and this tool could be a solution ... They also see it as part of our future sustainability plans.' (Funded partner)

'We really need to keep our resources in those places where people really need it ... We know we're never going to meet the volume of need without some other way of reaching people. The [product] tries to replicate, to some extent, the service.' (Funded partner)

‘Organisations have had to rapidly upskill their teams and introduce digital ways of working due to covid ... Rather than a separate digital strategy – digital used to be the slightly unloved step sister of the strategy – whereas now it’s brought more into the holistic approach to how organisations are planning their activities and missions moving forward and seeing digital as playing a more central role.’
(CAST)

WellChild UK case study: What needs to be in place to make the most of a programme like Build?

WellChild UK received funding and support from the Build programme to develop an interactive directory of services and advice for families with seriously ill children.

‘It has been incredibly useful for us over and above the product itself. It has changed the way we think about things and it has then in turn changed the way the whole organisation thinks about our programmes and how to measure the impact we have – even before you count this new digital product which could be a massive part of our offer to users in the future.’

This case study provides an example of how an organisation has been able to reap the rewards of the programme. Four things enabled WellChild to get the most out of Build:

- 1. Clear articulation of the problem they wanted to solve.** They conducted research into the availability of online information for the families they work with. This identified that the information on offer from local authorities wasn’t sufficient and that families tended to put more trust in information shared by peers. This research meant their new project was going to be based on thorough research and analysis.
- 2. They were already on an organisational journey to embrace digital and social tech.** Following a previous partnership on another Comic Relief and PHF funded social tech project, staff and senior leaders were excited about doing more. Some senior leaders and trustees had a digital background and a solid understanding of the importance of social tech: *‘It is something we were working on anyway – firstly to improve our digital and secondly to improve how we listen to people and do user testing ... so this programme arrived at the right time for us’*. The Build project *‘had a clear thread’* to their overall strategy – it was a logical way to deliver on their strategic aims to support children to live at home and be cared for there.
- 3. Resources allocated to support delivery:** One member of the team was largely responsible for holding the delivery of the project: *‘It was a key thing to focus on for me ... I would imagine if you were in a smaller org with less staff capacity it could have been a struggle’*.
- 4. Having a digital partner in place,** whom they *‘trusted and had worked with before so didn’t need to go through the process of finding an agency and seeing if they were the right fit’*.

2. Structure and management of the programme

Overall, funded partners were very positive about the structure and sequencing of the programme. Most individuals appreciated the milestones and pacing of the programmes, with the workshops, coaching and peer support groups *'keeping [participants] in the right direction'*. This was reflected in an interview with CAST that outlined the intention to create a programme with *'just enough format and structure, but not over engineering things'*.

However, a couple of the funded partners felt overwhelmed by the level of information at the start of the programme. One funded partner found the initial weeks *'terrifying'* and another felt *'lost in a sea of information'*:

'The ambition of it is good, but in such a short project, I think it was a bit too much ... the show and tell, and the workshops, it's good to know what others are doing, but it was just too much.' (Funded partner)

'I think us and [the digital partner] bit off more than we can chew ... it will be done in the budget and timeline but it will not be as polished as we would have liked.' (Funded partner)

Some partners reflected on the healthy balance between accountability, structure and freedom. Funded partners generally felt trusted, while being held lightly accountable through peer learning and coaching. Notably different from other funding programmes, some wondered if there was too little accountability:

'I wonder if the pendulum has swung a bit too far, I wonder if there is enough accountability now on how we spent the money and if we stick to the plan? There shouldn't be much specific accountability stuff, as it's an iterative process, but you want some of it ...' (Funded partner)⁵

One CAST interviewee reflected on the reporting element of the programme and the *'tension between traditional coaching models and being funded by Comic to do some of the reporting'*. One funded partner commented on the blurred distinction between reporting spaces and peer/mentoring spaces: *'... a bit of tension there – here I am reporting back to CAST so I'm not just using that time as just peers'*.

3. Pace of the programme

Build offered a relatively intense support process, with funded partners having access to seven coaching calls with CAST, an online space with the cohort of funded partners, seven workshops, and six peer support meetups between June 2021 and April 2022. Most funded partners were positive about the pacing, but for some it felt too short.

⁵ This quote referred to the role that accountability can usefully play in surfacing learning during a programme – learning that can be fed into future practice.

Their experiences depended on internal resourcing and capacity, previous digital experience, and whether or not a digital partner was already on board:

'I think if we hadn't had a digital partner in place before it would have been super hard ... Even with [their Digital partner] on board, we have gone over time and it has been really hard to do it all in time.' (Funded partner)

'Because we were already in the development phase, it worked really well for us that the pace was quick – it pushed us and kept us driving through. This worked well, but I can totally see that for others it was very intense if they were not as advanced as us.' (Funded partner)

'It helps that this is a major part of my job and so it was a key thing to focus on for me. I would imagine if you were in a smaller organisation with less capacity it could have been a struggle.' (Funded partner)

'I thought 9 months wasn't enough ... I think 12 months should be the minimum because this is the first digital project we've been part of so 9 months was not a long time at all.' (Funded partner)

Some funded partners found the numbers of resources and platforms (Notion and Slack) overwhelming at times, however they recognised this was partly a consequence of already being involved in platforms outside the programme:

'There is lots of support and lots of resources, but how to figure out how to use it and when felt a bit overwhelming ... Too many communication channels ... if we were talking a 3 year project, then you'd get into it, but not 9 months ... I suppose, if you were doing it alone, I see that all those additional features were worthwhile ... it would give you a go to ... but we are already plugged into a few digital things.' (Funded partner)

4. Programme content

The majority of funded partners hoped Build would enable them to develop a useful and valuable product by making services more accessible, customised, sustainable and better informed by service users:

'The main takeaway will be actually having a product at the end of it ... which has an impact, and we can actually say, we can help so many more people now because we've actually done this.' (Funded partner)

Funded partners were very clear about how the digital solution they developed through Build would support them to address a particular organisational issue or problem, or how it would contribute to improving service user outcomes and service experience.

Other hopes and expectations included wanting to:

- Understand how to manage partnerships and engage with digital partners
- Find new contacts, ideas, or services
- Better understand how to develop an app

The support package from CAST consisted of workshops and resources, coaching calls and peer learning groups, access and signposting to experts and online resources, and tools for managing milestones. Funded partners appreciated the variety of check-in points throughout the programme: *'it is the most organised CAST have ever been. It's been so well set-up'*. One funded partner said: *'if we had done this ourselves, even with the money, we would have struggled, so the wrap around support makes it possible'*.

4.1 Workshops and resources

Funded partners spoke highly of the workshops and resources, particularly the Notion platform and 'Humanising Digital' workshop. This was most useful for organisations early on in their digital development journey as it triggered new ideas and boosted confidence. Funded partners also appreciated the opportunity to connect with workshop trainers and being able to share workshop attendance and resources with other colleagues:

'The workshops were most crucial because the sense I got was that they were designed to ensure that you were doing all the essential things ... it almost gave you a framework so I think that was the core part of the support for me.' (Funded partner)

'As a CEO, the workshops were great as I could send a lot of my team members to it ... it gave them ideas for improvement.' (Funded partner)

'Without the support that we had with the workshops, we wouldn't have found a lot of the no code options, or the text to speech options. And lots of ways to vigorously test our [product] ... there were so many things that we wouldn't have known what they were unless we'd had interactions with a lot of the companies [CAST] work closely with.' (Funded partner)

The timings and sequencing of the workshops were also well received by funded partners:

'It's kind of almost been like magic. I don't quite know how they've done it, the timing of the workshop, because if it was any earlier I wouldn't have had a clue what they were talking about. If they'd been a week later, they'd be too late.' (Funded partner)

Previous evaluations surfaced challenges around the language and the accessibility of some terminology throughout the programme. One observation about the findings from Build is that there was a noticeable absence of this.

4.2 Coaching calls with CAST

The coaching element of the support package received mixed feedback. For some funded partners, the coaching was tailored, reassuring and a space to sense check ideas; they felt supported with resources and the coach factored in their starting point:

‘Just great guidance and reassurance about each of the different steps. I think, just because we didn't have a partner in place. I think at times before it felt like oh, we're a little bit behind. And it was just reassurance from [coach]’s point of view that, you know, we're heading in the right direction, we're doing the right things.’
(Funded partner)

But for others, the coaching felt more like an update or ‘retrospective’ that lacked structure. This mixed feedback was largely related to digital maturity and the level of existing skills and digital experiences:

‘It was good but I think it could have been more structured ... it felt like I was just giving someone a debrief of what I’d been doing every couple of weeks. Because technology is such a strong part of everything we do in this organisation, I think we were hitting the ground running. I can see that for others who were not so technological minded it would have been beneficial, but for us, I think it would have been good to do some problem solving in the support.’ (Funded partner)

‘Can they get the “matching” right for the mentors. Mentoring could be really helpful for us – so how about if we choose from a list of mentors so we can pick who we think can help us, as opposed to being ‘offered’ one. I worry we have outgrown what CAST can offer ... though I know for others they work well.’
(Funded partner)

4.3 Peer learning

Funded partners disagreed about the value of the peer groups; some learned a lot from them, others would have liked to mix with organisations outside their group.

Peer groups helped to build connections, share learning and give space for reflection away from day-to-day stresses:

‘Although it’s different groups and different users, I actually took loads and loads of notes from the last one from other people's things, thinking, “Well, I love that”, or “that's great, I need to do a screenshot of this”, or, “you know, what, I hadn't considered that”.’ (Funded partner)

‘Soft, empathetic spaces where we could really, genuinely reflect on the challenges that we had, and like, genuinely reflect ourselves on.’ (Funded partner)

Curating the groups in a more tailored way and having more structured sessions would have made them more useful:

'The groups they were bringing together were all too disparate on their needs, the groups were chosen on people availability, rather than level of knowledge ... they should have made it based on level of knowledge – having several levels for each area (basic, medium, advanced etc).' (Funded partner)

'It would have been useful to have been in a group where people are tackling the same problem ... There are a couple of other projects working on [issue] and so it would have made sense to have partnered us together.' (Funded partner)

'My hunch is that they might be better matches ... the ability to move around as things develop ... as your project iterates you might need something else ... can you do a speed dating thing to help better find pairs?' (Funded partner)

4.4 Learning points on programme design and delivery

Overall, we can identify three successful features of the programme:

- 1. Having the space and time to engage with an iterative development process:** Funded partners, regardless of size or digital maturity, valued having ring-fenced time and *'breathing space'*. They appreciated having time to focus on their digital product alongside exploring how it fitted with their wider digital transformation plan.
- 2. A focus on process, rather than 'success':** Funded partners felt this gave them *'legitimacy to learn and adapt'*. One funded partner said they *'haven't felt one iota of pressure, spoken or unspoken, to get anything right in this programme. I've been encouraged to get it wrong. Which is epic!'* This was supported by another funded partner who described the process as *'revolutionary'* when you *'start a project where you are told that your solution may not be the right solution and that's ok. You don't ever get to work like that'*.
- 3. An approachable and flexible funder:** Funded partners commented on the *'straightforward and supportive'* funding approach. A recurring example was flexibility around time delays and getting quick responses from the funders to agree shifted deadlines: *'I would say this is the best funding experience that I've ever had working with a funder and a partner'*.

However, in order for the above to be successful and well received, attention needs to be given to organisational starting points. The Build evaluation findings show a clear difference between funded partners' feedback depending on their stage of digital maturity. This was particularly striking in their experiences of workshops and coaching support.

5. Future support needs

Unsurprisingly, there was a significant call from funded partners for further support and funding, particularly around the sustainability and momentum of the product.

Four specific support needs were surfaced by funded partners:

1. **Ongoing funding opportunities to support the roll-out of products:** *'What is missing is a much clearer and tighter way to connect it to potential follow-on funding – it feels a bit like “we will take you this far ... ok thanks for that see you later” it feels very cliff edge’.*
2. **Investment in the ongoing maintenance and development of products:** *'I think they should do more maintenance grants, which are around “what happens once you’ve built things?” ... We can keep building new things but if we can’t maintain them we’re literally just drowning money and time and setting up the expectations of users around things that aren’t going to last’; ‘we need reassurance that we can keep running this’.*
3. **Ongoing access to advice and resources:** *'being connected up with either digital candle or there’s a website with Tech for Good agencies on it ... that sort of thing’.* Social tech field experts described the need for digital infrastructure and a *'stronger ecosystem of shared interests’*. For example, Tech for Good meetups, Charity Digital conference, Open Data Camp.
4. **The opportunity to explore developing a new hybrid way of delivering services:** using the best of online and digital services alongside face-to-face and open access services that include people excluded by digital.

These support needs were echoed by CAST – *'now more than ever, there’s a need for more focus on sustainability of support’*. Field experts also discussed the move away from *'digital duct tape'*⁶ towards sustainable social tech that is a core part of organisations' offers.

⁶ [The Glimmers report](#)

Part Two: Outcomes of Build

In this section we explore the outcomes of the Build programme, looking at the development of digital products and services, team and organisational learning, and outcomes for service users.

1. Digital products and services

Funded partners successfully developed a range of products and service prototypes through the Build programme.

Examples of products:

- **Products supporting increased demand for services and resources**, for example, freeing up caseworker time for the more complex cases or increasing access to advice. One funded partner developed a 24-hour helpline to respond to the increased number of calls about housing support.
- **Products improving service experience and outcomes**, for example, increasing access to advice, networks and information. One funded partner (an adoption agency in the voluntary sector) developed a website area for adopters to access resources and support and safely connect with other adopters.
- **Products supporting future system change**, for example, increasing access to data and intelligence regarding client need or increasing demand for support in particular areas which can be used to support influencing work. One funded partner built analytics into their online course for survivors of domestic violence and can now track and measure the success of different elements of the online course.
- **Products enhancing accessibility of services**. One funded partner, for example, focused on the accessibility and relatability of an app by broadening the pool of voices used on the platform to make it more relatable for different groups of young people.

2. Organisational learning

It is clear from our findings that the programme triggered broader organisational benefits. Funded partners said Build had demonstrated to them a *'completely new way of thinking and working'*.

2.1 Professional development and confidence

Learning and development was one of the *'biggest takeaways'* for funded partners. Build increased confidence in staff teams: *'because a lot of people were involved in the project, that knowledge is not just in our heads but it's across the team'*.

This confidence led to some funded partners feeling more in control of content, testing and promotion, a more unexpected outcome of the programme: *'the relationship with the technical provider is one that we're driving now rather than the other way round ... I know what we need from them, whereas before I didn't'*.

One funded partner attributed this growth in confidence to the sense of solidarity that came with the programme: *'it emphasised to me that there are people out there to help ... that sense of not being alone'*:

'That was the most powerful professional development experience that I've done in the last 10 years.' (Funded partner)

Funded partners that were already exploring the role of social tech within their wider organisation used Build to enhance and refine their thinking and draw in more team members.

2.2 Gaining new skills and knowledge

As with previous iterations of the Tech for Good programme, a core outcome for funded partners was a change in their approach to service design and user research – skills that funded partners are hoping to take into future projects and other teams.

More than in previous phases of Tech for Good, Build funded partners shared plans to reuse the approaches, structures and exercises from the programme in future projects:

'We learnt a lot about the skeleton of how the project was run, so that's given us an opportunity to structure future projects in a similar way ... thinking about how much extra time I may need to give stuff, and how different teams work in the organisation.' (Funded partner)

'When we had our team retreats this year, I definitely used their board [Notion] as an inspiration to be like "ok, this is how I will organise this information, put all of this in one place, put it all up" ... the documentation aspect.' (Funded partner)

Partners also learned that you cannot design a tech product in isolation; it needs to be considered alongside organisational context and service user journeys:

*'It's much more about the interactions with each customer on their customer journey through whole service. The realisation is that **you can't design an isolated product**, it's all about their whole experience of using your service.'* (Funded partner)

Many funded partners saw their Build product as part of a wider journey with social tech and design: *'Build should be thought of as not only building the tech, but also building the service'*. One funded partner described tech as *'the easy bit'* and found that *'implementation and designing the service that the tech sits within is more challenging as it involves more stakeholders and thorough testing'*.

The emphasis on user research was also an *'eye opener'* for many, even those who had undertaken user research in the past.

Funded partners with existing experience of user research valued the reminder to reach beyond a core group of service users:

'We have learnt to go out to a wider and more diverse group of parents and families who do not normally interact with us – this has been such a valuable learning for this project and across the board for all our work.' (Funded partner)

'We'd done user research with clients, but what the partnership opened the door to was to speak to the intermediaries (i.e. the community groups) ... and this has been very influential in how this version was developed ... my personal experience is that you always learn something new.' (Funded partner)

Others valued the reminder to ringfence time for more consistent user research:⁷

'We've been so busy delivering projects that to be made to carve the time out to do it properly was so helpful.' (Funded partner)

One funded partner reflected on the value of testing assumptions and being part of an iterative process:

'We were already two steps ahead of where we need to be. If we're going to do this project right then we have to actually take a couple of steps back, because we are already proposing a solution to a problem that we actually haven't really worked through in any great detail.' (Funded partner)

2.3 Reusing existing tech

Funded partners valued the emphasis on using existing tools: *'There has been quite a focus on no-code solutions, and using existing tools more, and this has been quite liberating; there is a lot out there that they can do and achieve without huge budgets'*. One funded partner suggested that this could be taken even further:

'Shouldn't funders be supporting organisations to find the most appropriate stuff that already exists, and to adapt and develop these so they may work for them as opposed to new stuff? Or even fund the middle person to do the adaption or the people that own the original app?' (Funded partner)

The importance of replicating and reusing digital products and tools, an issue in the sector before Covid, may have been emphasised due to the pace with which charities had to develop a digital offering.⁸

⁷ The 2022 [Charity Digital Skills](#) report found that only 23% of charities 'often undertake user research' and that 41% of charities see themselves as poor at user research.

⁸ Moving existing services online using remote tools has been a successful way for charities to continue services but field experts flagged that this may lead to 'digital design' and 'social tech' being conflated.

Field experts described an increased focus across the sector on *'rights based social tech and participation, as opposed to shiny things'* and the need for sharing, reusing and collaborative design of social tech products.⁹

3. Outcomes for service users

Funded partners were clear that the digital solution created through Build would help them address an organisational issue/problem or contribute to improving service user outcomes or service experience. Unsurprisingly, many of the outcomes for service users overlap with organisational outcomes (see previous section). Below are a couple of additional examples of service users directly benefiting from Build:

Developing products to enhance service accessibility through longer hours of support or increasing access to information was a common theme:

'The aim is to make [service users] feel that someone is there that cares until office hours resume on Monday.' (Funded partner)

One funded partner discussed the value of user involvement in gaining support and ownership over the product: *'I think some of the Social Prescribers they really do feel quite an ownership of it [the product] ... the ongoing involvement will mean there's hopefully a lot more trust'*.

YouthLink Scotland Case study:

Showcasing the value of user testing and co-production

YouthLink Scotland used the Build programme to develop a 'gamified app' that uses storytelling to give young people the language and tools to speak about their mental health. This built on their previous work with young people during Covid-19 lockdowns. The app has been co-designed with young people, putting them at the core of the digital journey.

YouthLink used the programme to broaden their skills in design and user-led approaches:

'Now, we not only have had that incredible amount of learning for ourselves, we have taken our community partner with us on that journey. So we can stand behind this approach and say, "this has been operationalized for us, it's been grounded for us".'

A core element of their learning from Build was around the relationship between user testing and equalities, diversity and inclusion.

⁹ For more details about issues facing social tech funders, see IVAR's *Social Tech Sector Trends* scoping report (shared with Comic Relief and PHF as part of the scoping stage of this evaluation).

User testing and co-designing the product meant that voices from under-represented communities were included in the app:

'I think what it has done is enhance where we are within the equalities, space, and maybe looking at designing digital that takes into account different kinds of equalities as well.'

This process will allow the user to relate to content *'in their own voice'* and widen the remit of YouthLink's work so that young people feel represented in the app:

'We know that it's really important that we see other young people who look like me, sound like me, who are talking culturally about issues that are relevant to me, that don't exist anywhere else.'

YouthLink shared their perspective of the power of using co-production to solve a problem:

'You see a problem and you want to fix it, you want to help, but actually, who are we to try and fix or solve other people's problems? When do we need to support them to be able to see the change and develop the change themselves as well, which is why youth participation, youth voice and having young people involved in design is crucial.'

Part Three: Learning on future support for charities and social tech

Since 2019, we have gathered a wealth of data from Tech for Good on what it takes to support charities with social tech. There have been five recurring themes across this work which we explore in this section as emerging principles for supporting charities with social tech. These principles mirror long-standing, perennial challenges in grant-making more generally, such as the importance of tailoring capacity building support, sustainability (of funding, projects, organisations) and the need for more unrestricted and trusting funding.

Five Principles for supporting charities with social tech:

1. **Tailor support to digital maturity**
2. **Promote reuse and shared learning**
3. **Build a learning culture into programme design**
4. **Invest in sustainable tech**
5. **Use flexible and trusting funding**

1. Tailor support to digital maturity

Digital maturity levels of funded partners strongly affected their experience of the programme. In previous evaluations, capacity to engage with the programme was a central factor in whether it was beneficial. However, in Build, usefulness of the programme was linked to funded partners' digital capability, experience and expertise. The organisations that benefited most from Build were those earlier on in their digital journey or with less infrastructure and digital support around them. Our findings indicate the need to tailor support more closely to organisational needs through a range of support tools and offers, for example, matching from the support menu once organisational needs are established. This need was particularly striking for more digitally mature organisations, where core funding that enabled them to invest in themselves or seek support would be greatly valued.

As CAST said, 'these are two streams and there are such big differences – managing an agency is so different to upskilling your team. Dividing groups like this and aiming the training at those groups would make it so much more targeted and useful'.

'Could the funders start to trust these organisations more and fund them anyway, without the need for a comfort blanket of CAST or training wrapped around them? Or can you have a two-track thing where we act as crisis coaches if needed but not offer the rest of the support? Surely this is much better value for money?' (CAST)

Some funded partners saw value in a fund for *'high digital maturity organisations'* that provided more core funding and tailored support:

'A fund that is unrestricted, but gives us some pace around process and motivation ... with expertise and mentoring aimed at our level.' (Funded partner)

Digital maturity needs to be more explicitly factored into the design and promotion of digital funds. This could be through discrete funds aimed to cater for specific levels of needs, tailoring support more closely, or investing in organisations to develop their own digital capacity.

2. Promote reuse and shared learning

Throughout Build, funded partners were encouraged to explore existing tech options. In comparison to previous iterations of Tech for Good, more funded partners said they were 'reusing' products, whether they had been designed internally or through their digital agency. It is encouraging to see this, but we also heard calls to go further and to do this in a more deliberate way.

This echoes findings from the 2019 Tech for Good evaluation which highlighted the need to: *'champion digital reuse and signpost to existing tech'* and the important role funders could play in promoting and legitimising this. Our recent findings suggest this is increasingly important in the current landscape to avoid already time-pressured organisations duplicating development work that others have done before:

'There is no integrated system where people can go and find out info on potential social tech things they could use or adapt – no central repository of ideas or pieces of tech ... We build things that work for an organisation, rather than for the wider sector.' (Comic Relief)

Developing joint pieces of tech *'would mean smaller and tech averse organisations might be more likely to take tech on and get involved as the risk is shared'* (Comic Relief).

The findings also showed that funded partners would value peer support groupings more if they were based around shared themes and with similar levels of digital capabilities. Given the range of digital maturity across the sector, bringing together organisations working in the same field or on the same solution may foster reuse and avoid replication. It may also help for funding programmes to model this principle by focusing on reuse as opposed to building a 'new' piece of social tech.

3. Build a learning culture into programme design

The model and pace of the Tech for Good funding programme has enabled the funders and CAST to iterate and develop the funds over time. Having multiple funding calls with pauses between has allowed the programme to stay responsive to the needs of the sector and to test out different approaches to applications, support, funding flexibly and other areas.

This model has allowed the programme to stay responsive to the needs of the sector. In the early stages of the Tech for Good programme, digital was fairly new for many organisations and Tech for Good helped demystify the process of digital design and make it more accessible. More recently, as organisations have had to rapidly upskill and introduce digital ways of working in response to the pandemic, the programme adapted to support funded partners to embed tech and consider sustainability.

One thing that has enabled this responsive approach is the programme's approach to learning. Carving out spaces for reflection as a Tech for Good team (with delivery partners amongst funded partners) and a commitment to using live data from the evaluation has supported the programme to adapt and evolve.

Tech for Good, Explore and Build were programmes led by learning. Placing an emphasis on wraparound support and coaching, alongside product outcomes for funded partners, created a programme in which learning itself was a key deliverable.

4. Invest in sustainable tech

Over the last three evaluations, we've heard about the need for funders to invest long term in the digital maturity and sustainability of organisations. We've also heard frequent reference by funded partners of the '*cliff edge*' they experience at the end of the programme. This is a wider challenge faced by many funders and not exclusive to social tech; however social tech's current focus on funding 'products' risks exacerbating it.

In order to develop sustainable tech products and services, funded partners need support to maintain the product. Could the solution be to make social tech part of longer-term funding (see 5 below) or to develop 'post-programme' toolkits and resources?

One suggestion we heard was to provide training specifically for fundraising teams on how to include and integrate social tech into funding proposals and how to use it as a story in public fundraising. Another might be to form partnerships with organisations that can provide a pathway (either via funding or support) to help sustain social tech products when they have gone to market, particularly when exploring partnerships with social investors or other funders.

The 2019 evaluation highlighted the importance of 'closing well' and equipping organisations with pathways and connections for future support. This message, described by funded partners in 2019 as '*setting us on course*', remains a core message from funded partners in 2022.

5. Use flexible and trusting funding

Throughout IVAR's evaluations of the Tech for Good programme, the features of funding and support that enhance digital development included: trusting and integrated funding that focuses on learning, not on success or failure. As the sector as a whole develops and matures in its uses of social tech there is an opportunity to explore how to fund social tech as a core part of a charity's work, as opposed to funding it discretely.

Both funded partners and social tech field experts stressed the value of core digital funding or a digital pot of funding within core grants.

The 2022 Charity Digital Skills Report found that 95% of charities would value having scope to include core digital costs in all funding applications.¹⁰ Unrestricted funding enables organisations to develop infrastructure, invest in the staff/resourcing needed,¹¹ and would align well with the unpredictability of a digital product design process. Unrestricted funding lends itself perfectly to an iterative design process – social tech funders embracing unrestricted models could provide the kickstart that strategic and integrated social tech needs across the whole sector.

¹⁰ [Charity Digital Skills Report, 2022](#)

¹¹ Cairns, B., Firth, L. and Hopgood, R. (2021) The holy grail of funding: Why and how foundations give unrestricted funding, London: Institute for Voluntary Action Research.

Appendix One: Participating organisations

Funded Partners:

- Access Social Care
- Adoption Focus
- Chayn
- Family Society
- Future Living Hertford
- Law Centres Network
- On Our Radar
- Shelter Cymru
- South West Grid for Learning
- Standing Together
- Unseen UK
- WellChild
- YouthLink Scotland

Funders and wider evaluation participants:

- BongoHive
- CAST (Centre for the Acceleration of Social Technology)
- Comic Relief
- Data Poverty Lab
- Nominet
- Paul Hamlyn Foundation
- RnR Organisation
- Think Social Tech