Evaluation of the Explore Programme

Institute for Voluntary
Action Research

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Authorship and acknowledgements

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

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

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Executive Summary

In September 2019, IVAR was appointed as evaluator for the Tech for Good programme. Since then, we have been working with Comic Relief, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, CAST and funded partners to explore the value and contribution of Tech for Good. This report outlines findings from our evaluation of the Explore programme, drawing on data collected by the Explore team and the experiences of participating organisations. Tech for Good is an evolving programme. This evaluation therefore builds on learning already underway – the funders are already considering changes to the design of the Build programme that align with some of the findings from this evaluation.

The evaluation addresses the following questions:
1. How did organisations experience the 12-week structured design programme?
2. What has the process of exploration enabled?
3. What happens after taking part in Explore?
4. What role does Explore play in supporting organisations' social tech journeys, particularly in terms of the entry and exit pathways?

Throughout the evaluation, IVAR was mindful that this is the first year the funders and CAST have delivered Explore, coinciding with a time of heightened uncertainty and pressures on both the funders and funded partners due to Covid-19. The context surrounding organisations impacted on how funded partners engaged with the programme, their expectations and experiences.

Evaluation findings:

Motivations and drivers for applying to Explore

Starting points were wide-ranging – some organisations began Explore with a defined idea or product in mind, while others came with an open mind about what they might achieve. Drivers for applying include; advancing a specific digital product; organisational learning; and digital transformation. A frequent theme that emerged was how Explore can 'start well'. Organisations offered suggestions about how best to prepare organisations for the programme:

Motivators and drivers for applying: learning points
- **Manage expectations about the time commitment required.** Organisations earlier on in their journeys with digital and user testing found the time commitment required for Explore exceeded their expectations. Provide more realistic or tailored guidance on the time commitment before participants start Explore.
- **Provide pre-programme material.** Circulate material to participants in advance of Explore, outlining the upcoming structure and content. This may support participants to ease into the programme and help manage expectations.
- **Make the language accessible:** Conduct jargon-busting early on in the process to help participants feel less overwhelmed by the programme's content.

Structure – time frame and pacing

Overall, organisations were positive about their experiences of Explore. It supports learning and progression and organisations appreciate CAST's expertise and the cumulative nature of the programme, with each week building on previous learning. However, some small adaptations could improve the experience for participating organisations:

Structure: learning points
- **Allow greater flexibility for the time frame**, especially for smaller organisations. Organisations spoke about a possible differentiation in the structure of the programme to: accommodate organisations that felt left behind; enable more organisations to complete user testing; begin to explore how to embed this approach more widely.
- **Provide space for a 'pause' during the programme** to offer *'breathing space'* and a chance to reflect on learning so far, or to catch up on Explore material and support time-stretched colleagues with programme delivery.

Programme content and learning:

The evaluation highlights a number of learning points on three areas of the programme content:

Coaching offer:
- **Offer more frequent one-to-one coaching sessions and ensure continuity of coaches**. Some participants found the coaching calls incredibly valuable, but there is a sense that coaching could be more tailored to needs and experiences.

Peer learning and collaboration:
- **Continue CAST's connecting role.** Participants' experience of peer learning and forming connections was overwhelmingly positive.
- **Explore the idea of re-mixing peer groups mid-programme into specific fields or problem areas**. Ensuring there are more frequent similarities within peer groups could help create the conditions for new partnerships.
- **Create opportunities for engaging more than one team member from participating organisations** to help embed the learning from Explore.
- **Build in time to create the conditions for collaboration**. If collaboration between organisations is an ambition of Explore, dedicate time for this in the final stages of the programme to help organisations actively explore possible opportunities.

Discovery and user testing approaches:
- **Consider adding an early session for organisations to build on existing user testing approaches**. To help ensure learning is relevant to organisations' individual experiences, consider dedicating a workshop or a coaching call to helping identify their existing practices of listening and responding to user needs and areas that need refining. Using Explore to then build/adapt/refine their approaches may support more organisations to embed learning and to feel part of the programme.
- **Develop the framing of user testing to ensure it recognises and builds on existing good participative practice.** Broadening examples of user testing to include participative practice may support more organisations to see the relevancy of user testing approaches to their existing work.

Outcomes and benefits for organisations taking part in Explore

Our findings suggest that Explore achieved six possible outcomes for participating organisations: changes in how organisations approach service design; changes to organisational processes; strategic shifts; learning new skills; accessing a peer network; and accessing tools and techniques to reuse.

However, this was not the case for all organisations, specifically those with a particular aim/outcome they wanted to develop during Explore, and organisations with an ambition to build a more holistic approach to digital. Explore had no expectation for organisations to build a specific output but there was sometimes a mismatch between the Explore team's sense of success within Explore and what some organisations hoped to achieve.

Where are organisations now?
1. **Continuing user research**: The majority of organisations felt *'confident to continue prototyping and user testing'*.
2. **Applying for future funding**: Many organisations said they had applied for funds either to continue learning and discovery work, or to build a digital product.
3. **The *'in-between phase'***: we heard examples of organisations moving from Explore into what they described as the *'in-between stage'* or a *'pausing phase'* – trying to move forward but unsure where to take their research or how to apply it to other projects. In the report we outline five things that appear to contribute to this phase (for example, adjusting to a shift in momentum and working to fit digital work into wider strategy).

Outcomes and benefits: learning points

- **Manage expectations about realistic hopes for the programme.**
- **Connect the coaching support to organisational strategy**. The coaching calls could be an opportunity to meet 'higher level strategic' needs within some organisations. Consider whether there is the capacity to deliver more strategic support to blend digital work into organisations' existing programmatic work.

Ending well:

In this section, we outline organisations' experiences of how the programme ended. Organisations shared their support needs post-Explore, as well as suggestions about how to maintain momentum post-Explore.

Ending well: learning points

- **Maintain Playback sessions at the end of Explore.** This session supported organisations to reflect on their progress, and provided organisations with a tangible set of slides to then take to future funding applications.
- **More diverse signposting for post-Explore.** Support organisations to consider next steps beyond Build and Definition, and include more non-financial support as well as funding opportunities for exit pathways.
- **Create action learning sets to continue beyond Explore**. Organisations mentioned the value in reconvening with a group of participants a few months after the programme. Provide some reflection touchpoints post-Explore for organisations that show appetite for this.

Key Messages:

Explore is clearly a valuable programme that provides the opportunity for organisations to learn new approaches, test assumptions and pilot digital solutions while accessing CAST's expertise and guidance. Many organisations felt their time on Explore was a good investment for the future of their organisation. The majority of our messages are related to the language and clarity of purpose behind the programme, and communicating that throughout the programme so that expectations are aligned and remain realistic.

1. **Align expectations:** Organisations joined Explore with varied expectations about what they hoped to gain. Most of these expectations were met and for some exceeded. However, the fact that this wasn't always the case highlights a potential need to carefully manage expectations in terms of: time commitment; what 'success' might look like; and future funding/support options. Language was also a blocker for some organisations. Consider a shift in terminology and the framing of user testing to ensure it builds on existing work organisations are doing. For example, encourage organisations to look at their current approaches to understanding user needs. This could help minimise experiences of feeling overwhelmed.

2. **Consider tailoring support for organisations to integrate and embed digital across their organisation:** Participating individuals have learned new skills and approaches through Explore. However, it is less clear whether this learning is getting embedded in their organisations. Many organisations described successfully embedding user testing across their organisation and beginning to draw in team members. However, other organisations felt the support was too narrow at times for what they required; they wanted to *'digitally transform'* their organisations at a strategic level or to join up thinking in relation to other projects. This group of organisations would benefit from support that helps explore how and where a digital product could fit within a wider programme or organisational strategy, or within a systemic view of the problem they are trying to solve. To do this it may help to:
   - Ensure expectations are clear pre-Explore
   - Enhance and tailor coaching to incorporate more strategic thinking
   - Broaden signposting to other funds or networks
   - Develop a module to help organisations consider which digital products could be used more widely in their organisations.

3. **Create the conditions for connecting:** The peer support model was extremely beneficial for organisations. Participants valued sharing their progress with other organisations, and developed a community of organisations going through similar experiences. While it is perhaps too early for formal Collaborations (combining resources and expertise for a specific purpose i.e. to address a shared problem) to be solidified during the Explore programme, the value of connecting, reassuring and sharing shouldn't be underestimated. The funders could consider how best to create the conditions for potential partnerships[1] by continuing to support peer learning – for example, pairing organisations (within similar fields) throughout the programme and setting up action learning sets. Whilst it was clear that many organisations were aware they are in competition with each other for future funds, it was evident that Explore's added value is nurturing and holding space for these connections.

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[1] By 'partnership' here we mean the connection of organisations, informally pooling ideas, and sharing and refining learning.

1. Introduction

In September 2019, IVAR was appointed as evaluator for the Tech for Good programme. Since then, we have been working with Comic Relief, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, CAST and funded partners to explore the value and contribution of Tech for Good. This report outlines findings from our evaluation of the Explore programme (referred to as 'Explore' or 'the programme' in this report), drawing on data collected by the Explore team and the experiences of participating organisations. Tech for Good is an evolving programme and the funders were developing the Build programme at the same time as the Explore evaluation. We therefore recognise that the funders are already considering changes to the design of the Build programme that align with some of our evaluation findings.

1.1 About Explore

Tech for Good provides dedicated funding and capacity building support to enable not-for-profits in the UK to make the best use of digital technologies to deliver more effective, sustainable and scalable services. In June 2020, the programme launched a new strand of early stage digital funding – 'Explore'. Explore supports organisations and collaborations over a three-month period to explore the potential of a digital approach to improving service delivery and impact. The focus is on *'user research, testing assumptions, pivoting, doing light-touch prototyping to get feedback on the value of possible solutions'* (CAST). Explore is delivered by CAST (Centre for Acceleration of Social Technology) as an intermediary funding partner and provider of digital support to funded partners.[2]

Between July and November 2020, Explore supported 44 organisations across two cohorts. Individual organisations received grants of £5,000 and collaborations received £7,500.

The Explore team outlined the ambitions behind Explore:

- **Supporting organisations early on in their digital journey:** *'Explore gives charities that are really at a very early stage of discovery and digital service delivery a bit of a kick-start to start to test some really early stage solutions'*.
- **Helping funded partners learn more about their service user needs**: *'It gives them the opportunity to learn a lot more about discovery and understanding how to uncover user needs, how to do basic user interviews, how to begin to plan a digital support offering, especially if they are really new to doing this kind of work, it gives them a little bit of an introduction or a taster of what to expect and the different ways of working when you're doing agile development'*.
- **Building confidence and capacity within funded partner teams:** *'Helping them understand about digital practice and service design. They need confidence to use these techniques – we are aiming for them to pass these new skills back out to their wider team'; 'For me, the biggest win for a programme like this is really just building people's confidence in that ability to test new approaches without the worry of failing, because they've got a little bit of a safety net, they have [CAST] supporting them, they have a little bit of money to support this process'*.

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[2] We use the term funded partner to describe organisations that took part in Explore.

- **Supporting organisations to identify how to reuse tools and techniques beyond Explore:** *'Charities understanding the processes and having the right tools to continue doing this in house on their own'*; *'giving them the opportunity to see what can be done quite cheaply and with existing tools'.*
- **Providing clear next steps for organisations:** *'Organisations understanding how to take the insights forward'*; *'the intention was for it to be a clear pipeline through Explore to Build'.*

1.2 Evaluation approach

Evaluation questions:

1. How did organisations experience the 12-week structured design programme? (Did it meet expectations? Did they feel supported? What worked well and less well?)
2. What has the process of exploration enabled? (What did having time, space and support set aside for discovery mean for organisations? What were the benefits/challenges/opportunities of testing a user-led approach?)
3. What happens after taking part in Explore?
    a) How many organisations continue with developing a new digital product? What do they develop and why?
    b) How many organisations decide that digital is not the solution? What do they do instead and why?
    c) What role has Covid-19 played in organisations' priorities and approach to delivery services after Explore (including if/how a user-led approach has been carried on)?
    d) What kind of digital funding have organisations applied for or accessed since taking part in Explore (i.e. grant funds, other programmes, self-funded)?
    e) Have any collaborations formed between Explore organisations? If so, how have these been funded?
4. What role does Explore play in supporting organisations' social tech journeys, particularly in terms of the entry and exit pathways?

Our approach

The findings in this report are based on the following data collection activities:
- An inception meeting with the Explore programme team
- Desk-based review of data gathered by CAST
- Telephone interviews with three members of the CAST team
- Four online peer reflection sessions with 15 funded partners
- Interviews with seven funded partners from a mixture of the two cohorts

Anonymised quotations from interviews and peer sessions are used throughout the report to illustrate key points. A list of organisations that took part in the evaluation is in Appendix 1.

Context

We are mindful that this is the first year the funders and CAST have delivered Explore, coinciding with a time of heightened uncertainty and pressures on both the funders and funded partners due to Covid-19. This context understandably affected how organisations engaged with the programme, their expectations and experiences. For example, many felt a heightened pressure to achieve something tangible because of increased need created by Covid.

2. Evaluation findings

2.1 Motivations and drivers for applying to Explore

In this section, we outline the key motivations and drivers for organisations choosing to apply to Explore and their experiences of the early weeks of the programme. Some organisations began Explore with a defined idea or product in mind, while others came with an open mind about what they might achieve over the 12 weeks.

The main reasons organisations applied to Explore were to develop a specific idea (58%) or to embed digital across their organisation (26%) and, to a lesser extent, to start thinking about the benefits of social technology (11%)[3]:

- **Advancing a specific digital product**: some organisations applied to the programme to access support to design, refine and test out a specific concept: *'we wanted to develop a new digital service'; 'we wanted to move a* [manual programme] *to a digital platform to make it easier for facilitators to access the curriculum that we've developed … We wanted to get the programme looking like a professional being'.*
- **Organisational learning**: most organisations began Explore expecting to learn new ways of working and build their organisation's confidence with digital and user testing. Many organisations didn't have a pre-conceived problem area – they were *'open to changing course'* and scanning new avenues: *'we didn't have a set idea and we almost didn't know what was possible either. We were exploring the problem as well as the solutions'; 'using a digital intervention is quite new to us so we were drawn to CAST as a way of taking us on this journey into looking what the potential was'.*
- **Digital transformation:** some began the programme with the ambition to use the course as part of a wider *'digital transformation'* process. These organisations had buy-in from senior leaders to embed digital across their organisations and saw Explore as an opportunity to transform their service delivery: *'Explore came when digital was at the very forefront of our minds, and it was attractive for us to engage with that programme in order to get some support to develop digital services'.*

Unsurprisingly, these motivations were emphasised by Covid-19, with nearly all organisations having to quickly move their services online. Many described how the pandemic highlighted pre-existing issues with service users' engagement with technology. Explore provided an opportunity to receive training and to ringfence time for digital discovery work:

> [Our application] *was fuelled by Covid and a need to transform digitally quickly … our aim on joining the Explore programme was to be able to continue to support people through Covid, but also perhaps expand using digital to work with more people.* (funded partner)

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[3] Figures taken from IVAR's desk review, based on data already gathered by CAST (including start and end survey for funded partners, coaching and peer support notes, and Playback session presentations).

> [Service users] *found it difficult to take part in things virtually and remotely, and that was already quite apparent. But the pandemic made it a really big issue, because for lots of people, that was the only way that they were connecting with anyone, and they weren't able to do any in-person stuff.* (funded partner)

According to the desk review, organisations were keen to learn new skills through Explore, like user research or prototyping (83%), to make new connections (83%) and gain practical support from subject matter experts (83%).

A frequent theme that emerged was how Explore can 'start well'. Organisations offered practical suggestions about how best to prepare organisations for the content, time frame and commitment required during the Explore programme.

1. **Managing expectations about programme material and content:** There was a feeling shared by many organisations that they had been *'thrown in'* rather than gradually introduced to the programme material[4]. Organisations felt that it would have been helpful if CAST had spent longer introducing the course and setting expectations for the content before starting the programme:

   > *It would be great to have* [pre-course material] *before the start of the programme to help prime you for what to expect. Felt a bit like you just dropped into the course.* (funded partner)

2. **Managing expectations about upcoming time commitment and number of staff who would be involved:** Many felt that 1-1.5 days a week was an underestimation of how long it takes to truly engage with Explore, particularly since much of the user testing happened during Covid-19 restrictions. Others said that they needed to draw in other colleagues to the programme who were not expecting to be involved:

   > *They didn't really have enough time to get the programme fully nailed down before we were in the throes of delivering it. The beginning was pretty chaotic ... we thought 'what have we let ourselves in for here!!' The amount of time we were expected to invest wasn't really articulated either in the process of applying, or at the inception.* (funded partner)

   > *We ended up having to bring* [staff members] *off their summer holiday to come in to do some work.* (funded partner)

Language

For some organisations, the language used in Explore presented a barrier at the beginning of the programme. Organisations reflected on *'phrases that are a bit shorthand or techy'* and felt that some *'jargon-busting'* early on would have helped them feel less overwhelmed by the programme's content and make the content *'easier to engage with'*. While some recognised the value in learning new digital terminology, the importance of accessible language is a recurring theme in other areas of the evaluation findings.

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[4] The majority of these organisations were from the first out of the two Explore cohorts. At this stage in the programme's development, it was perhaps more challenging to estimate the upcoming time commitment for the new programme, especially in the context of Covid-19.

Language was mentioned during the interviews with members of CAST. One member of CAST described a *'lightbulb moment'* when organisations *'suddenly feel very connected and excited … the digital world is suddenly not some dark arts stuff and they have the skill set to do this stuff'.* However, for some organisations, language acted as a blocker during the early weeks of Explore before the lightbulb moment:

> *We were always playing catch-up around what things actually meant. So it's like 'you're going to have to do a playback in week eight'. If I'd known in week one that a playback is just a summary of your progress in the form of a slide deck, I would have felt more comfortable about that and what to expect.* (funded partner)

> *Just do some jargon-busting at the beginning and explain what these concepts are and I think then everyone can move forward with a better understanding of what things mean and will feel more comfortable using the language as well.* (funded partner)

> *Sometimes the specialised language became a barrier. Phrases like 'What's your user methodology'? – took me 4 weeks to understand what they were talking about. I felt like it was geared towards another organisation.* (funded partner)

Alongside *'jargon-busting'* and a *'glossary of terms'* (funded partners), practical examples of audio playbacks, sprints and open working would have helped illuminate the process for organisations starting Explore.

Motivators and drivers for applying: learning points

Our findings here build on learning from IVAR's previous Tech for Good evaluation – the wide-range of starting points for different organisations requires careful management of expectations. Below we identify potential ways the programme could support organisations joining the programme:

- **Manage expectations about the time commitment required.** Organisations that were earlier on in their journeys with digital and user testing found the time commitment required for Explore exceeded their expectations. Providing more realistic or tailored guidance on the time required for Explore before participants start the programme (especially for smaller organisations) could be a helpful adaptation to the programme. This is particularly important in the context of Covid-19 and existing capacity pressures. We recognise the challenge to estimate time commitments for new programmes, but a more realistic estimate would enable participants to manage their involvement.
- **Provide pre-programme material.** Circulate material to participants in advance of Explore, outlining the upcoming structure and content. This may support participants to ease into the programme and help manage expectations.
- **Make the language accessible:** Conduct jargon-busting early on in the process to help participants feel less overwhelmed by the programme's content. Try to use straightforward language rather than digital terminology whenever possible.

2.2 Structure – time frame and pacing

Overall, organisations were positive about their experiences of Explore. The programme is felt to have a flow and structure that supports learning and progression. Organisations appreciated CAST's expertise and the cumulative nature of the programme, recognising that each week built on previous learning: *'every week we felt like we were making progress and learning'* (funded partner). However, we also heard feedback about small adaptations that could improve the experience for participating organisations.

In general, the three-month time frame of the programme was thought to be proportionate to its ambition, with the tight structure and pacing helping to maintain momentum:

> *Yes it was a challenge with time to do it, but that was lessened by the fact it had a good structure ... if not I would have drowned in the fast pace of it.* (funded partner)

> *I think the pacing of it worked. It was enough to challenge you and keep you making progress without it getting cumbersome.* (funded partner)

Many organisations appreciated CAST's recognition of work commitments outside the programme: *'It was set at the right level which recognised that people have other commitments as well and other obligations so it was pitched quite nicely I would say in terms of the amount of time commitment and contact time'.* Participants commented on the way Explore *'took you through a journey'* and appreciated CAST mapping out upcoming content once they were on the programme: *'you could see how you would move through it. CAST team were exceptional at that'.*

However, some organisations were overwhelmed by the level and intensity of content covered during the 12 weeks. For these organisations, the programme exceeded the time commitment they had anticipated: *'I struggled to fit it into 2 days* [a week], *more like 3-4 days'.* Participants mentioned that longer sprints would have enabled them to engage their teams more fully in the process. Being clear up front about the likely time commitments was also crucial:

> *It was super exciting work but it was really demanding – we managed to do it but it felt like a very big task and bigger than we anticipated – I was lucky enough to have a flexible schedule but if you didn't I would have imagined it would be very hard.* (funded partner)

The time frame was a limitation for some organisations' user research. Participants mentioned that developing research approaches and effectively engaging service users in user testing took more time than Explore allowed. This was particularly the case for organisations working with vulnerable groups or digitally excluded individuals where it took longer to organise and engage them appropriately:

> *The timings were sometimes a bit tight, especially for us as sometimes* [organisation's service user group] *need longer, especially if they have to get someone to support them.* (funded partner)

> *I suppose it depends on the level of investment you are making on the technology – 'just go and talk to 5 people' doesn't work for me if I am spending £200k. There wasn't a sense of differentiation between size.* (funded partner)

Organisations who struggled to dedicate enough time described their experiences of falling behind and having difficulty catching up:

> *I didn't quite have as much capacity to keep up with it. If you're a week behind then it all starts piling up and gets harder.* (funded partner)

> *A lot of people were also struggling with the time and falling behind and getting really stressed about it. Reality was that it wasn't overtly made clear that if you are running behind then that is ok. Mental health was difficult over the summer due to the pandemic. You don't want people falling behind but they need to know it's ok.* (funded partner)

One idea to counter this challenge was to build in a mid-way pause point: *'If it were spread out a bit more I would have benefitted from a bit more breathing space to put it away and then come back to it. I felt I had to be on it all the time'* (funded partner).

Another theme that emerged in relation to the time frame and content of the programme was the *'mismatch between timeframe and my reality'; 'Explore has this beautiful, ideal template for working with a user group but the reality is that the messiness is messier than we even thought'* (funded partner). However, we heard from CAST that they *'make it clear that it's going to be uncomfortable, there's going to be times where you feel unsure but we're going to be there to hold your hand through this process'* (CAST). Some organisations felt they had this advance warning, but others felt more reminders throughout the programme would have been helpful.

In line with the range of starting points among programme participants, some felt that there wasn't enough content – or enough depth – in the programme. These organisations had expected the scope of the programme to be wider. They commented that rather than addressing one problem, with the risk of *'oversimplifying'* it, the programme should allow participants to delve into multiple problems and create an organisation-wide response or solution:

> *The focus was on developing one thing – but we are wanting to digitally transform the organisation so there are multiple things we could do. I tried to cram, instead of using this process across the board.* (funded partner)

> *It is a bit of a sheep dip exercise – it gives you enough to get going … is it a deep programme, no, but in the time you can't really expect that.* (funded partner)

Structure: learning points

- **Allow greater flexibility for the time frame**, especially for smaller organisations. Organisations spoke about a possible differentiation in the structure of the programme to accommodate organisations that felt left behind. This could enable more organisations to complete their user testing while on the programme, and begin to explore how to embed this approach more widely across their teams. Offering more time for organisations to do their user testing would provide more time to work with marginalised and non-tech-savvy communities.
- **Provide space for a 'pause' during the programme** – organisations described how this could offer *'breathing space'* and a chance to reflect on learning so far, or to catch up on Explore material and support time-stretched colleagues with programme delivery.

2.3 Programme content and learning

In this section, we share findings on experiences of the programme content and learning: the coaching offer; peer learning and collaboration; and discovery and user testing approaches.

2.3.1 The coaching offer

Some organisations found the one-to-one coaching reassuring and informative. They valued the expert guidance offered by the coaches and, for many, this acted as a motivator to keep progressing in the programme:

> *They're essential because so much of the Explore programme is about turning you into a digital developer … amazing but it's the first time going through that process. Having time to check my thinking, check my processes. Our user research script – I showed them the prototype plan.* (funded partner)

However, many felt that they needed more frequent sessions and would have benefited from seeing the same coach each time:

> *I didn't feel the coaching calls worked well at all – this was the biggest draw back. We had a different coach on each call. So on a 30 minute call we had to recap for 20 minutes so they knew about our work and then only got 10 minutes of actual coaching … I think continuity would have been better with one coach that we could build a relationship with, who would get to know our work in more detail and depth. We had conflicting advice from different coaches which is not great.* (funded partner)

After the first cohort, CAST redesigned the booking process for the coaching calls to ensure that organisations in the second cohort had the same coach each time.

> **Coaching offer: learning point**
>
> **Offer more frequent one-to-one coaching sessions and ensure continuity of coaches.** Some participants found the coaching calls incredibly valuable, but there is a sense that coaching could be more tailored to needs and experiences. Having the same coach through the programme would improve the effectiveness of the time spent together.

2.3.2 Peer learning and collaboration

Throughout the evaluation, we heard about multiple forms and levels of collaboration, from a formal collaboration at the application stage, through to light-touch collaboration, pooling resources and sharing learning with peers. In this section we explore observations from organisations and CAST about peer connections and the challenges and opportunities of fostering partnerships through Explore.

Participants found the peer networks particularly helpful. Peer support provided opportunities to share and refine ideas, to be inspired, and to be part of a network aware of sector specific issues and grappling with digital solutions. A peer network was particularly valuable to organisations during Covid-19 and helped participants feel *'less alone'* and *'part of a community'*:

> *The peer review sessions were really useful as we were in a familiar space with other charity people. It was great to hear from people and that they were also*

struggling and helpful to navigate the anxieties that this project gave us at some points. (funded partner)

The peer networks weren't actually advertised, and it would be a selling point and a draw, and it came as a bit of a surprise, but it was really good and really valuable. (funded partner)

On a few occasions, participants maintained the connections they developed in the peer network post-Explore:

In terms of an enduring benefit, the peer network is the top one. (funded partner)

We also set up, within our cohort, three of us that would meet every fortnight – just as a how are you getting on. We built our own peer support group. So handy, if we missed part of the session or if we were panicking, we can call on each other. We're all in similar disciplines. (funded partner)

While most organisations found the peer networks helpful and valued the mix of organisations in some of the groups, others felt that they would have benefited more if organisations in similar sectors or working on similar problems were grouped together.

Wider team involvement in Explore

Interviews with CAST highlighted their ambition to embed user testing approaches more broadly across organisations:

Providing a platform for them to bring their team onboard … team buy-in is such a big part of this process. Often a lot of digital service design happens in isolation in a corner of the office and maybe one or two people are scribbling away doing the work, and eventually it comes out but nobody else in the team knows anything about it, and that's often when projects sink or swim. (CAST)

This resonated with some Explore participants, who were able to draw members of their team into the process. Participants found the stakeholder event a useful way to bring teams together and encourage reflection on the organisation's purpose for engaging in digital. A couple of organisations mentioned the Dashboard platform as a positive way to engage their colleagues and share their progress.

However, some participants felt they were the only one in their organisation with digital capabilities and had no-one to support them during Explore:

Most times I would come away thinking have I done the right thing here? If there was someone from the organisation would they have taken a similar approach or developed something better and different. It was a lot of pressure on me to do the right thing, based on my own judgement. (funded partner)

Challenges collaborating with other organisations

The funders were interested in understanding whether any collaborations were formed between Explore organisations. We found that while participants enjoyed the peer networks, and in some cases continued these connections after the programme, there were no formal collaborations among Explore participants: *'in the peer group we made some nice acquaintances and had some nice chats, but we haven't walked out working together with anyone from it. There was a lot of charities and everyone was doing quite specific things'* (funded partner).

It may be that Explore is too early in their digital journey for organisations to identify and nurture formal partnerships: *'The Explore programme is perhaps too early to ask charities to collaborate – they still don't know if there is a shared solution emerging'* (CAST).

There was also some reluctance to collaborate due to perceived competition for funding: *'Sharing and collaboration is great, and it is how we should be working in principle, but it needs to be beneficial for everyone … you don't want people to take your business'* (funded partner). One member of CAST observed organisations' growing appetite for lighter-touch collaborations – sharing what they'd learnt and what didn't go well, *'even if they can't see how they might collaborate in a big project'* (CAST).

Part of the reason given for the lack of formal collaborations is finding the time that collaboration and partnerships take in an already time-pressured programme:

> *I felt the encouragement for community was really great, but because we are a small organisation that's pretty stretched in terms of time, I feel that there was potential to make connections but the time was just harder to do that. There was potential there but nothing came from it which is a shame.* (funded partner)

Some organisations thought that CAST could play a more active role in developing partnerships, for example by pairing organisations for peer coaching. However, many felt that partnerships are usually organic – successful collaboration requires appetite and purpose, which individuals will act upon if the opportunity occurs:

> *Most collaborations were incidental. It would be good to be grouped by similar type of organisation or similar outputs or products. Good to hear from different people in peer support, but we needed similar collaborations or similar aims. We might get more from it if learnings could be shared.* (funded partner)

Peer learning and collaboration: learning points

- **Continue CAST's connecting role.** Participants' experience of peer learning and forming connections was overwhelmingly positive.
- **Explore the idea of re-mixing peer groups mid-programme into specific fields or problem areas.** Organisations valued connecting with similar organisations to pool resources and learn. However, not everyone experienced this. Ensuring there are more frequent similarities within peer groups could help create the conditions for new partnerships.
- **Create opportunities for engaging more than one team member from participating organisations.** In order to help embed the learning from Explore, consider inviting team members to sessions or coaching calls from the beginning of Explore. Often a participant was the only one in their organisation with digital capabilities, which hindered their experience leaving the programme.
- **Build in time to create the conditions for collaboration.** If collaboration between organisations is an ambition of Explore, dedicate time for this in the final stages of the programme to help organisations actively explore possible opportunities.

2.3.3 Discovery and user testing approaches

A key element of this evaluation was to gather learning about the benefit of Explore's central element – providing dedicated time for organisations to listen to and learn from the people they work with (what is often called the 'discovery' phase of a design process). In this section, we share findings on organisations' experiences of user testing, and outline what the process of exploration has enabled.

Experiences of user testing

Organisations valued having allocated time for discovery work: *'having the funding freed up resource to allow us to dedicate some time to really develop* [our idea]*, and the fact that we've been able to apply it in other areas since, showed us that it was time well spent'* (funded partner). Explore enabled organisations to step back from the day-to-day and dedicate time to talk to users and define the main problems they could develop a digital product to overcome:

> *Rather than going 'I know we can do it this way so let's do it', this was a bit more creative.* (funded partner)

> *You can get caught up in your day job so you need protected time to do this work.* (funded partner)

CAST's *'methodical'* approach to taking organisations through a user testing process was valued by many organisations. One participant compared the process to *'doing a chemistry experiment at school'* – they found the mindset *'useful for all aspects, not just digital'*. We frequently heard about assumptions being challenged during Explore: 22 out of 28 respondents (72%) had changed something about their original solution, indicating that the process triggered them to challenge assumptions they had coming into the programme:

> *We have realised some of the assumptions that we made were wrong and would have resulted in time and investment in areas that might not have made the most difference. We have now clearly identified two groups of individuals, with very differing digital access and competence which could take this project down very different avenues than we had originally projected.* (funded partner)

Organisations were keen to embed user-led approaches throughout a project, rather than on one-off occasions: *'there's also a tendency to do consultations at certain moments, rather than all the way through like we did with Explore'* (funded partner). However, they noted that this also means changes to their organisation's overall approach and capacity: *'It's a never-ending thing ... I've been working on it solidly since* [Explore ended]*. Made me realise how difficult it is and how long it takes. I felt under a lot of pressure'* (funded partner).

Some organisations had difficulty accessing users but were keen to reach those who were less likely to be engaged via digital methods: *'The people that come forward for these are the ones that are most keen about your organisation. They love what you do, they want to be involved. I needed the people that were going to challenge me'* (funded partner); *'these are groups with really different needs and it felt a little bit at times overwhelming when we were trying to solve too many problems at one time'* (funded partner).

The framing of user testing

Most organisations spoke positively about their experiences of learning or refining a user testing approach. However, sometimes framing it as *'new'* or *'a thing on its own'* was jarring for some participants whose organisations seemed to be user-led and/or regularly involve users and community members in the development of programmes. For many of those organisations, forms of user testing were not totally new concepts – some needed structures and processes for user research. Instead, framing it as adapting or building on existing practices around participation to work for a digital product may be more inclusive for the many organisations for whom user-centred approaches are part of their ethos – to listen and respond to user needs. For many it was a good reminder of its importance and the fact that their work will be better as result:

> *User testing felt very natural as I spend a lot of time talking to my users. I get to talk to them rapidly and readily. Going to users for testing is something I do in my everyday job. It was good to be reminded of this.* (funded partner)

In some of these cases, the programme's approach to user testing was seen as *'linear'* (i.e. *'find the problem, think, and build a possible solution, test it and solve the problem'* (funded partner), *'a thing on its own'* (funded partner), or *'a little prescriptive'* (funded partner), and did not fully equip them to continue the journey post-Explore:

> *But what if the problem doesn't get solved? What if there is no funding available to solve it or develop the solution? Now all we have is research on the problem, a possible solution but we can't solve the problem, so we are sitting with it.* (funded partner)

However, for many organisations, learning a structured approach to user testing and a design process was timey and what they felt they needed. Explore was a reminder for how to structure these processes and often reconnected organisations with how to approach this work.

Discovery and user testing approaches: learning points

- **Consider adding an early session for organisations around their existing user testing approaches.** We heard how some of the language used to describe user testing methodologies was alienating for some participants. In order to include organisations from the start of Explore and to ensure learning is relevant to their individual experiences, consider dedicating a workshop or a coaching call to identifying their own existing practices of listening and responding to user needs and areas that need refining. Using Explore to then build/adapt/refine their approaches may support more organisations to embed learning and to feel part of the programme.
- **Develop the framing of user testing to ensure it recognises and builds on existing good participative practice.** Broadening examples of user testing to include participative practice may support more organisations to see the relevancy of user testing approaches to their existing work, without developing a potential 'add-on' dimension to what they're learning.

2.4 Outcomes and benefits for organisations taking part in Explore

Most organisations felt they had achieved something through the programme, even if this was not tangible (i.e. a specific new product) or easy to articulate: *'I was surprised by what I got out of it, and how far I got'* and *'things fell into place after the course'* (funded partner).

Our findings suggest that Explore leads to six possible outcomes for participating organisations:

1. **Changes in how organisations approach service design:** Organisations described their increased confidence conducting user research and taking a more exploratory approach to involving service users in the design process. Learning more about user-led approaches has shaped thinking about what a digital product could be – or shouldn't be:

   Before Explore we were quick to say 'this is the problem, lets solve it' without going through the process and involving users. Now our organisation understands that user testing is important and it's not just for digital products. (funded partner)

   I knew some stuff about research already, but I think the actual formulas – certain knowledge boards and documents that you could use to track stuff – the actual process was really interesting … as an organisation we were quite 'come up with an idea and see if it works', whereas this is very much 'start with the user, go forward, don't come up with a solution' … it's given us the opportunity to think about how we might be able to work the other way round. (funded partner)

   We're now closer to users and understand what is going on in their life. (funded partner)

2. **Changes to organisational processes:** One organisation had experienced a ripple effect, with Explore helping them to adopt a new way of drawing in stakeholders from across the organisation:

   Explore exposed that we often work in small teams and never work cross-team. This programme helped bring teams together as they had to engage with stakeholders. We got someone from every team and it opened our eyes up to cross-working … Since then, we have done more development work cross-teams. Showed to managers and trustees the importance of this kind of working. It's a good way to develop relationships across the organisation and get people invested in the work that other teams are doing. (funded partner)

3. **Strategic shifts:** For multiple organisations, Explore either triggered or cemented strategic changes:

   The CEO took the playback to the board. They're thinking differently. It's been valuable learning. Tangible and long-lasting on how the organisation plans things in the future. It will leave a legacy and influence and inform thinking going ahead. (funded partner)

   I think Explore's motivated people and it's been a nice way to think differently. A lot of tech changes were happening anyway, but I think we're

not just thinking of it as a reaction to the pandemic now, but more of a long-term strategy. (funded partner)

It wasn't contained just to Explore – we've taken the methodology and tweaked and adapted it. It's given us a framework to use in a different department. Taken into organisation more broadly as a methodology rather than just about digital. (funded partner)

Digital wasn't on our strategy but it's now at the forefront. (funded partner)

4. **Learning new skills:** Participants developed new skills to share with their teams and/or apply for further funding (Build or Definition programmes):

    We got onto Definition programme, going in with three prototypes and are going to talk to them about making them. (funded partner)

    The team were really impressed with the data and results ... I attribute [that] *to the quality of the programme. The way I followed the Explore programme produced valuable data for the organisation.* (funded partner)

5. **Accessing a peer network:** This was an unexpected benefit for many of the organisations we spoke with: '[Explore] *met my expectations and, in some ways, it exceeded them in the sense that we got that peer network that we didn't necessarily expect* (funded partner).

6. **Accessing tools and techniques to reuse**: Since Explore, some organisations have been able to apply their research approaches to wider projects: *'tools and techniques really worked for us ... You can use them for anything you're looking at in the future'* (funded partner):

    We've been able to apply it in other areas since, showed us that it was time well spent as we've been able to replicate the work in other projects and to take similar concepts and work through them using the same learning. It was valuable and there's been a really good return of investment of that already in using it elsewhere. (funded partner)

However, some organisations felt that the programme didn't align with their initial expectations. Organisations in this bracket broadly fell into two categories – organisations that had a very specific aim and outcome they wanted to develop during Explore, and organisations that had an ambition to enhance a more holistic approach to digital:

    Explore only gets you half way there – it gives you a prototype to take to a digital developer ... Organisations need to be clear what they're getting from the process. You're not getting a product at the end – you're getting a prototype. I don't think that was clear to me going in. Maybe it could be clearer from the outset about what the final outcome of the programme could be. (funded partner)

    I feel like what we are trying to deliver is much bigger than they assume or than other organisations are trying to do ... [Explore] equipped us to do the research, but we didn't get good advice on trying to structure the digital into the wider vision of our work we are trying to build ... we want and need that higher level strategic support that is wider than just digital, it is about transformation, strategic thinking, and the role that digital plays within that. (funded partner)

During IVAR's scoping call with the Explore team and interviews with members of CAST, it was made clear that there was no expectation for organisations to build a specific output by the end of Explore:

> *There's no over emphasis on pre-conceived outcomes. That time is explicitly ringfenced for exploration rather than delivery.* (Explore team)

> *It would be a great outcome if people came away and said we don't know, we don't want to throw more money at this thing just yet, we need to do more testing and research – we don't want organisations to shove more money into a digital project that doesn't go anywhere.* (CAST)

There appears to be a slight mismatch here between the Explore team's sense of what success looks like for Explore and what some organisations hope to achieve.

2.4.1 Where are organisations now?

Organisations were 4–6 months on from the Explore programme when we spoke with them. Next steps after Explore include the following three areas:

Continuing user research: In CAST's end of programme survey, 89% (of 28 survey respondents) said they would be doing more user testing. The majority of organisations felt *'confident to continue prototyping and user testing'*. For example, one organisation began Explore with an idea for a game to engage young people. They used Explore to refine what they wanted the game to look like. Since Explore, this organisation has continued development – they have run focus groups and interviews, piloted their ideas and are now going back and revisiting user need statements. Most organisations said they are now more confident in doing user research: *'it feels less scary now than it does at the beginning'* (funded partner):

> *One of the problems was that the beneficiaries were hand-picked and not reflective of the community. This was skewed towards people that were already good with digital and didn't include those with no digital access. How to get the support workers to get more digitally excluded people to take part?* (funded partner)

> *Previously we were only concerned with digital access but recently discovered that access to information is a bigger issue for* [our users]. *Interested in how they can meet the needs of people whose first language isn't English. Looking for funding to meet this need.* (funded partner)

Applying for future funding: Many organisations said they had applied for funds either to continue learning and discovery work, or to build a digital product. In the end of programme survey, 82% of 28 respondents said they were going to 'apply for further funding with Comic Relief' and many had been successful in their Definition application. One participant said they applied to Build to *'develop a network – this is what attracted me to Build. Getting expert support again more than the financial funding'*. Build and Definition were the only funds that organisations talked about applying to or having been signposted to them. Organisations flagged that this may have created tensions when not everyone would have been able to secure funding from these funds: '[the] *big issue that is often overlooked –* [we are] *still in competition with each other for funding'*.

The *'in-between phase':* Throughout the evaluation, we heard examples of organisations moving from Explore into what they described as the *'in-between*

stage' or a *'pausing phase'* – trying to move forward but unsure where to take their research or how to apply it to other projects. Five things appear to contribute to this phase:

1. **Adjusting to a shift in momentum and milestones**: *'It's a lot easier to make progress and work fast when you've got that kind of wrap-around support and you've got peers that are supporting you and you've got that set date when you're meeting all the time and engaging with people. That momentum moves you forward. And so outside of that context you're very much reliant on self-motivation and self-study and the support of your team to keep you going and keep you moving'* (CAST).

2. **Organisational capacity**: This was a significant limiting factor on what organisations did next: '[Due to] *our capacity to implement something digital, it hasn't really been possible yet. We are excited about the potential for it but I think in some ways we weren't sure ... if the positives that will come out of it are high enough for the amount of time it would take to implement it and the upkeep of digital'* (funded partner). Organisations described making *'huge steps forward'* during the programme and many had successfully *'moved the pacing of delivery to match user needs'.* However, there was uncertainty about whether organisations will be able to sustain this approach: *'We're now reaching a huge number of people with what we're doing. Whether we have staff capacity to keep it up is another question'* (funded partner).

3. **Translating research *'into the real world'*:** For others, the experience of taking their research into the real world and finding someone to help build it was challenging. Some felt there was limited signposting of what to do next, other than securing funding: *'what would have been useful was to have a clearer view of what the journey is we might go on ... what might lie ahead for us and we can aim towards'; 'there was less signposting to how you carry on without further funding'.* This contributed to comments about feeling *'flat'* and *'deflated'* post-Explore:

   > *I made this dream prototype that was all singing all dancing and then the rubber hit the road and we had to find a developer to make it for us. It wasn't a bespoke solution it was customising an existing solution. I'm not leading phase two, but I can see that there is no out of the box solution that does everything my prototype can do. Now there's a painful prioritisation process that we're going through.* (funded partner)

4. **Fitting digital work into wider strategy**: For some, there was a need to place the digital products they might develop into their wider organisational strategy and alongside a wider portfolio of programmes. Organisations were considering how their learning from Explore will complement and build on non-digital programmes:

   > *Taking this learning back to higher level stakeholders and staff was hard. Their* [higher level colleagues] *focus is usually on the broad but the thinking evolving in the project was to keep it narrow. This hindered going for funding for the future of the idea development as well. I felt like I was trying to battle for my case.* (funded partner)

5. **Limited signposting for future funding (outside of Build):** Although there was clear signposting for funding, some noted that outside of these key funding opportunities there was limited signposting to other funding or to

non-financial support: *'I wonder if we hadn't been successful for* [Definition]*, I'm not sure we would know where to go with our research'* (funded partner). Of Explore survey respondents, 82% applied for signposted opportunities at Comic Relief, and 39% said they would apply to other funding streams:

> *We had to halt all things as we're so small as don't have funding or staffing capacity – can't explore digital more unless there is funding to back it. Funding bid in at the moment, but unless it's approved we can't move forward.* (funded partner)

For some participants, there seemed to be a large time gap between Explore and the follow-on Tech for Good funding:

> *It felt like it was miles away … It really wasn't clear whether we had to apply with the same project or whether it needed to be a new project. And I'm still not all that clear about that, so we've submitted an application with a new project but I don't know if that will count against us or not, we'll just have to wait and see.* (funded partner)

Outcomes and benefits: learning points

- **Continue to manage expectations throughout Explore about realistic hopes for the programme**. There was often a mismatch between organisations' expectations of Explore and what they had achieved by week 12.
- **Connect the coaching support to organisational strategy**. The coaching calls could be an opportunity to meet 'higher level strategic' needs within some organisations. Consider whether there is the capacity to deliver more strategic support to blend digital work into organisations' existing programmatic work. This role could extend beyond the life of the programme, and potentially broaden out to CAST alumni.

2.5 Ending well

There were mixed views on how the programme ended – in many cases this was linked to the expectations organisations had of what they were hoping to have developed by the end of the programme.

Members of CAST outlined the focus of the final couple of weeks of Explore: *'online there's a whole section around next steps – which is about creating a roadmap to go forward. The focus of those last two weeks is very much doing the final touches on their prototyping, trying to squeeze in final testing and doing sessions with their stakeholders and then playback to peers'* (CAST). The Roadmap was mentioned by a couple of funded partners as a helpful tool.

The Playback session was a clear highlight and gave many organisations a *'proper conclusion'* and *'something tangible to take away'* (funded partner) to share back with their organisation and trustees. The presentation slides provided content to reuse and apply for future funding opportunities, in particular the Build and Definition programmes. The session with funders where the Build and Definition programmes were signposted as potential follow-on funding was also well received and gave organisations time to prepare for their application. This session linked to the work they had done for the playback session and left many feeling confident in bidding for these funds.

However, for some the programme ended too soon: '[the] *official programme ended before I'd finished all the work'.*

2.5.1 Support needs post-Explore

Support for senior buy-in: for some participants, challenges taking the work back into their organisations contributed to a lull in momentum post-Explore:

> *How do we take our staff on this journey? Staff want to do it, but will need support to go there. Covid has shown that it can be done, but some might want to snap back.* (funded partner)

This builds on IVAR's previous evaluation's message about sustaining digital. During this evaluation of Explore, we heard about the desire of organisations to make their *'ambitions realistic and manageable and matching this to resources'.* Core funding was raised as a solution to this: *'core funding is what we really need'* (funded partner). Another organisation noted, *'what we need is funding for our work more holistically, funding and support on our programmatic offer, that has a digital part of it, as opposed to seeing digital as a thing on its own'.*

Future blended working and support for wider digital strategy: Many commented on planning for digital to coexist alongside face-to-face work in future delivery. Some feared that support and funding structures would not support this but instead maintain and perhaps embed a binary way of working:

> *We are developing a prototype that supports our face to face work – this is a blended product – so it supports our face to face work (rather than offering a binary face to face or digital content) – so for all our people it gives them all a wider blended proposition.* (funded partner)

Several organisations raised this as a key area for support moving forward, to *'redesign our way of working to blended digital and face-to-face'.* Many speculated on who in the sector might be best placed with the right mix of skills and experience to do this: *'The biggest challenge for us is integration, how does the face to face and digital stuff sit together, from a programme perspective, outcome perspective, digital perspective, from a data experience, and from a* [field] *perspective... This is not something a 'digital' person can help us with, it is a higher level, strategic, programme question'* (funded partner). This is clearly an emerging need for organisations as more and more develop digital services alongside trying to consolidate new digital services they have developed quickly as a result of Covid-19.

2.5.2 Sustaining momentum beyond Explore

Suggestions from funded partners about how to maintain momentum post-Explore include:
- **Action Learning sets**: A recurring suggestion was to have a peer learning session six weeks after the programme ends, or to create formal action learning sets that continue beyond the programme as *'this might be a good way to avoid dropping off the edge of the cliff'.* The idea here would be to create action learning sets that meet a specific number of times during Explore, but which – beyond that time frame – participants can choose whether or not to continue with and self-organise. One organisation mentioned how being part of one of the evaluation peer sessions was helpful in reconnecting.
- **Providing a coaching call after the programme finishes**: A trouble-shooting post-programme call could help *'keep the momentum going and manage the*

gap in funding for the next step'. As one organisation noted, *'coaching sessions were really important – having a regular touch base communication – this was really good and when it was gone I noticed it.'*

- **Peer coaching from CAST alumni**: coaching or mentoring from other organisations who had been on CAST's programmes and were further along in their journey: *'talking about an idea that has worked for an organisation similar to ours would make all the difference'; '[mentoring]* would help us gain perspective along with making us feel less alone as they might have similar experiences and frustrations we've had in our journey'.*
- **Buddying during the programme**: *'having one person who would provide peer support is more appealing, because in a cohort it is up to the individual to approach someone and carry the relationship forward. Making it more formalised with pairs would help with getting together to discuss ideas and questions and language'.* Organisations felt they would be able to sustain this relationship beyond the programme.

Ending well: learning points

- **Maintain Playback sessions at the end of Explore.** This session supported organisations to reflect on their progress, and provided organisations with a tangible set of slides to then take to future funding applications.
- **More diverse signposting for post-Explore.** Support organisations to consider next steps beyond Build and Definition, and include more non-financial support as well as funding opportunities for exit pathways.
- **Consider creating action learning sets to continue beyond Explore**. Organisations mentioned the value in reconvening with a group of participants a few months after the programme. Provide some reflection touchpoints post-Explore for organisations that show appetite for this.

3. Key messages

The Explore programme has played an important role in the digital and user-testing journeys of many organisations. It has lifted funded partners' confidence to experiment with new user research approaches and, for many, sparked a process of digital transformation. In this final section of the report, we outline key messages from the evaluation

1. Align expectations:

Organisations joined Explore with varied expectations about what they hoped to gain. Most of these expectations – i.e. to learn new skills and approaches to user design – were met and for some exceeded. However, the fact that this wasn't always the case highlights a need to manage expectations in the following areas:

- **Pre-Explore**: While we recognise challenges estimating time commitments for a new programme during Covid-19, more clarity about the upcoming time commitment that participants will need to dedicate to Explore will help organisations plan accordingly and ensure other elements of their service delivery don't suffer as a consequence. Providing information on

the content in advance could enable organisations to start the first week with a sense of the journey ahead and decide which team member is most suited to take part.

- **Early stages of Explore**: Spend more time setting the tone and ambition of the programme. Ensure that participants are aware that Explore is not driven by product outcome and that 'going back to the drawing board' could be a positive outcome. While most organisations were aware that the 12 weeks were explicitly ringfenced for exploration rather than delivery, there was still a sense of pressure to produce a tangible product and personal disappointment if this didn't happen. This was particularly the case due to the added pressures of Covid-19 at the time of programme participation.
- **Broaden expectations about next steps**: The ambition of producing a clear pipeline fund into Build seems to have been achieved. However, with this success comes the risk of organisations being over reliant on Build and Definition as their next step, given there are limited places on both funding streams. Have clear signposts to financial and strategic support, with specific support for organisations who aren't ready to go through Build, but who still have an ambition to take their Explore learning forward.
- **Use accessible language to support inclusion:** Language was a blocker for some organisations, especially in the early stages of the programme. We heard of organisations feeling overwhelmed and panicked by some of the digital terminology. Consider the framing of user testing to include organisations from the beginning and to align the purpose of the programme with how it looks and feels for participants. Many of these organisations seemed to have existing user-centred approaches – they needed structures and formal processes for user research and to be reminded of its importance. Consider possible shifts to terminology that engages these organisations so they are more able to relate to the course material earlier in the process. Encourage organisations to look at their existing approaches to responding to user needs. Building on existing approaches, rather than alienating some organisations by using tech-savvy terminology, may minimise experiences of feeling overwhelmed.

However, the circumstances surrounding organisations may have altered their hopes and expectations for Explore. The outbreak of Covid 19 and organisations' transitions to remote delivery meant digital was not a 'new' delivery mode but their core service delivery. How to make digital part of a wider offer was front of mind for many organisations. While organisations were aware that this wasn't the focus of the programme, it seemed like a prime opportunity to explore it. Additionally, some organisations felt internal pressure to make the very most of their already limited time.

2. Consider tailoring support for organisations to integrate and embed digital across their organisation

Participating individuals have learned new skills and approaches through Explore. However, it is less clear whether this learning is getting embedded in their organisations. Many organisations described successfully embedding user testing across their organisation and beginning to draw in team members. However, other organisations felt the support was too narrow at times for what they required; they wanted to *'digitally transform'* their organisations at a strategic level or to join up thinking in relation to other projects. As discussed in the previous message, for some organisations it is no longer enough to develop a digital service without seeing how it blends in and works as part of a wider

service offer – or wider strategy – to solve a social problem. This group of organisations would benefit from support that helps explore how and where a digital product could fit within a wider programme or organisational strategy, or within a systemic view of the problem they are trying to solve. To do this it may help to:

- **Make sure expectations are clear pre-Explore** about what the course content will and will not cover to ensure that the expectations of more organisations are realistic.
- **Enhance and tailor coaching** to incorporate more strategic thinking. We heard about the post-Explore support needs of some organisations who are grappling with how to integrate the learning from Explore into the lived reality of their organisation. Consider tailoring the coaching calls where appropriate to probe how organisations' current plans might fit into wider digital strategy to ensure that their experiences of prototyping on Explore do not become an isolated add-on, but embedded into their organisational culture.
- **Broaden signposting** to other funds or networks to accommodate this appetite among funded partners that are seeking more holistic/strategic support.
- **Develop a module to help organisations consider which digital products could be used more widely in their organisations.** Giving people time during the programme to explore and discuss this could be hugely beneficial.

Organisation-wide digital transformation is not the intended outcome of the Explore programme. However, there are clearly organisations that thought it would include looking at how to incorporate the digital design process into their wider vision of work and support thinking about how it fits alongside existing user-led approaches and projects. As digital services and social tech becomes more and more commonplace, so too will the need for it not to be developed in silos, but as part and parcel of good practice programme development.

3. Create the conditions for connecting

The peer support model was extremely beneficial for organisations. Participants valued sharing their progress with other organisations, and developed a community of organisations going through similar experiences. While it is perhaps too early for formal Collaborations (combining resources and expertise for a specific purpose i.e. to address a shared problem) to be solidified during the Explore programme, the value of connecting, reassuring and sharing shouldn't be underestimated. If there is a desire to support partnership[5] working, the funders might think about how to create the conditions for this by continuing to support peer learning – for example, pairing organisations (within similar fields) throughout the programme, re-mixing peer groups mid programme into specific problem areas, and setting up action learning sets. Whilst it was clear that many organisations were aware they are in competition with each other for future funds, it was evident that Explore's added value is nurturing and holding space for these connections. Proactively working to connect organisations that are aligned in their projects may be an avenue to explore.

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[5] By 'partnership' here we mean the connection of organisations, informally pooling ideas, and sharing and refining learning.

4. Conclusion

Explore is clearly a valuable programme that provides the opportunity for organisations to learn new approaches, test assumptions and pilot digital solutions while accessing CAST's expertise and guidance. Many organisations felt their time on Explore was a good investment for the future of their organisation. We recognise this was the first year running the programme, and, from conversations throughout the evaluation, it is clear that some of these messages chime with the Explore team's existing learning that is already underway. The majority of our messages are related to the language and clarity of purpose behind the programme, and communicating that throughout the programme so that expectations are aligned and remain realistic. These are not fundamental shifts, but instead messages about clarity so that organisations can see how and where Explore fits with their journey and their needs. Explore was a timely iteration of the Tech for Good programme given the context of unprecedented change and uncertainty during Covid-19. Evaluation findings about organisational outcomes from the programme show the role of Explore in organisations' progress with digital and user testing. Explore has sparked an appetite amongst organisations for further learning, connecting and digital peer support.

Appendices

Appendix 1. List of participating organisations

1625 Independent People
Age UK Oxfordshire
Brathay Trust
British Tinnitus Association
CARAS (Community Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers)
CAST (Centre for the Acceleration of Social Technology)
Chiltern Music Therapy
Comic Relief
Creative Futures (UK) Limited
Deaf Action
Down's Syndrome Association
Early Childhood Partnership
Equation
Golden-Oldies Charity
Group 64 Theatre for young people
Headway
Health for All (Leeds)
Hear Women Foundation
Kazzum
Moving on Durham
Open Door Charity
OpenStoryTellers
Paul Hamlyn Foundation
SoCo Music Project
The Key
The Pace Centre

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