



Tech vs Abuse 2.0

Learning from COVID-19

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Glossary

Minimum viable product (MVP) development: A version of the product that with sufficient features to allow for basic functionality and enable the funded partners to receive user feedback to iterate and improve the product.

No cost extension (NCE): Extends the project period beyond the planned award end date. This means no additional funding will be provided, but funded partners are provided with additional time to spend down existing funds and ensure that all deliverables can be met.

Tech partner: A specialist digital agency which works closely with funded partners to implement and optimise their tech product.

Funded partner: An organisation that has been supported by the Tech Vs Abuse 2.0 programme.

Executive Summary

Tech vs Abuse 2.0 is designed to support organisations in the UK to develop creative digital solutions to improve the safety of people affected by abuse and improve service delivery. Organisations receiving the funding were about halfway through their grant period when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. This paper aims to explore the impacts the pandemic has had on funded partners, and the effectiveness of the support provided to them by the funding initiative. The research for this paper took place throughout July and September 2020.



What were some of the key findings?

The impact of the pandemic on funded partners: Adapting to remote working, shifting services online for groups with specific needs and lack of capacity to develop and deliver a new project were some of the key challenges experienced by funded partners during COVID-19. The opportunities include embracing new digital approaches; using digital platforms to increase access to support; increased infrastructure support; developing innovative digital methods to deliver services; and upskilling in teams and the sector when it comes to digital.

Additional support from the Fund: Throughout the funding period, the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 initiative has provided a digital support and advice package to funded partner organisations. This support offer has adapted and been shaped by the needs of the funded partner organisations. As a result of the pandemic the uptake of the support increased. Popular

areas of support requests include safeguarding, online user testing, funding, user acquisition, case studies, guidance on new service delivery, access to actors and time to design and test, social media and time in relation to deadlines and project extensions.

Funded partners' experience of the additional support: Generally, funded partners felt that the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 support has been proactive, flexible, accessible and understanding of organisational needs. However, some funded partners found the one-to-one support difficult to engage with due to a lack of capacity, and/or were confused about how to engage with the support offer. Some also felt disconnected to their peers during this period.

The role of the Fund on funded partners' technical capabilities: Opinions differed as to whether funded partners felt that their involvement with the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 initiative put them in a better position to respond to the pandemic. However, those that felt their involvement has **had a positive impact** on them highlighted the following:

- Having the opportunity to build and develop a digital tool to have non-face-to-face contact with their service users
- Increased time to hone tech skills and access to experts to facilitate this
- Knowledge and understanding of the development process acquired through the Fund.

1. Introduction

Background to Tech vs Abuse 2.0 and the evaluation

Tech vs Abuse is designed to support non-profits in the UK to develop creative digital solutions to improve the safety of people affected by abuse and improve service delivery.

In 2019, Comic Relief, in partnership with Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Clothworkers Foundation, launched a second round of Tech vs Abuse funding, with organisations receiving funding for a year from November 2019 to October 2020.

Funded partners with an early stage concept or idea were provided with £50k – £75k worth of discovery funding to develop a minimum viable product (MVP) over 12 months. Through the Tech vs Abuse initiative, they also accessed wrap-around digital technical support and expertise.

The digital support consortium is coordinated by the Centre for the Acceleration of Social Technology (CAST; referred to in this report as the digital support agency) and is made up of a diverse set of organisations with varied expertise. CAST are experienced in designing and delivering support to charities developing digital services. In addition to CAST, the team includes DOT PROJECT, who coach organisations to explore ways to use technology responsibly; Snook, experienced in research and service design; and Founders and Coders, who run peer-led training programmes in web development and digital services.

In October 2019 Renaisi, in partnership with mySociety, were commissioned to evaluate this round of funding. The evaluation uses a variety of methods including surveys, interviews, document reviews and case study visits to understand the extent to which Tech vs Abuse 2.0 has achieved its overall aims, and to make recommendations for future funding initiatives like Tech vs Abuse.

Overview of this paper

Organisations receiving Tech vs Abuse 2.0 funding were about halfway (6 months) through their grants when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic raise some important questions for the Tech vs Abuse funding initiative, and the domestic abuse and social tech sectors more broadly.

It has had a wide-ranging impact on the delivery of funded partners supported through this initiative, presenting organisations with a variety of challenges as well as opportunities for innovation.

This paper aims to explore these impacts, as well as the effectiveness of support provided to funded partners during the pandemic and the extent to which the funding more generally put them in a better position to respond to the crisis. The research for this paper took place throughout July and September 2021.

It synthesizes information from a variety of sources, including a survey of funded partners, a review of programme documents and wider literature, a social media horizon scan and an interview with CAST, the lead partner of the consortium commissioned to provide expert digital advice and support to funded partners over the course of the Fund. We would like to thank all those who contributed to this rapid review despite difficult circumstances.

2. The wider context

The impact of COVID-19 on domestic abuse

Stay-at-home measures enforced by lockdown posed a particular risk for children and adults living with abuse, as perpetrators of abuse were more likely to be at home with the survivor(s)¹. Under normal circumstances, survivors of domestic abuse would be able to access face-to-face support. However, the COVID-19 pandemic restricted access to support services in the health, social care, police and justice sectors as resources for emergency services were diverted to respond to the pandemic². Indeed, the National Domestic Abuse helpline saw a 25 per cent increase in calls and online requests for help since the lockdown began in March 2020³.

The role of technology

In the context of the impact of COVID-19 on domestic abuse, technology can be a double-edged sword^{4 5}. Modern technology can be a valuable lifeline as measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 force domestic abuse victims to isolate with perpetrators. Technology has become a significant part of efforts to support victims of domestic abuse, especially as victims spend more time with their abusers and limit contact with others⁶. Conversely, technology can be used as tool to carry out abuse and can pose a serious threat⁷. This is known as technology-facilitated abuse, and can be defined as the “use of technology – typically electronic devices or platforms – to harass and control another person”⁸.

In the midst of the pandemic, several technology companies have recognised the need to offer innovative ways to support domestic violence victims who may be isolated with their abusers. For example, IBM recently published five design principles to prevent digital products being used to facilitate domestic abuse. Similarly, the United Nations Women offices around the world have been collaborating with the Big Five tech giants to provide information about helpline services for domestic abuse victims⁹.

Charity sector response to the pandemic

Charities, amongst other organisations, play a crucial role in supporting victims of domestic abuse and the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that digitally delivered responses are more important than ever. As remote working increases and organisations turn to online service delivery, a skills audit of the sector is necessary to ensure that service users receive the support required in a COVID-19 world. The 2020 Charity Digital Skills Report highlighted that 27 per cent have cancelled their services because their charity or users do not have the necessary skills or equipment, and 46 per cent want guidance on what works with digitizing face-to-face services¹⁰.

Given the potential risks that can be associated with the use of technology, some of which are outlined above, it is not surprising that charities in the domestic abuse sector are nervous to adopt new digital technology and processes. These range across the spectrum of digital from basic service continuity to having the confidence, time, and expertise to consider the development of digital tools.

There is a call for funders to include support for digital in all funding applications, fund essential tech and software and flex existing funding to adapt services, activities and outcomes. An immediate priority is to map out current digital solutions and assess issues with uptake, coverage and meaningful use¹¹.

3. The impact of COVID-19 for Tech vs Abuse

Key research questions:

- What has the effect of COVID-19 been upon funded partners and their funded projects?
- Are there any common challenges or opportunities that are being seized?

This section describes the effect of COVID-19 on Tech vs Abuse 2.0 funded partners and their funded projects. It also describes the common challenges or opportunities being seized by funded partners at this time.

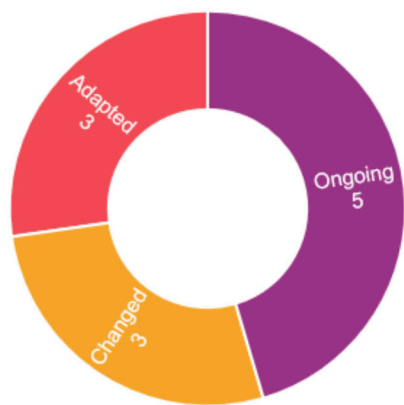
What has the effect of COVID-19 been upon funded partners and their funded projects?

In response to COVID-19, Comic Relief provided a flexible offer from April 2020 for all funded partners on Tech vs Abuse 2.0. This meant that they could re-purpose and divert their existing and agreed budgets away from developing a digital tool. This was directed to where they were most needed in line with the fulfilment of their charitable mission, such as towards core costs, or costs to help them respond, often on the frontline, to the rapidly rising demands and pressures for services among high risk and vulnerable people.

The effect of COVID-19 on Tech vs Abuse 2.0 projects has been wide-ranging and varied. Organisational responses can be broadly split into three categories:

- 1. Approximately half of the projects did not choose to change their product development plans or budget**, apart from shifting to remote delivery; these are labelled '*ongoing*' in the chart below.
- 2. Others retained the same overall aim of developing a digital tool**, but may have **experienced changes** to timelines or decreased deliverables due to delays, lower levels of budget re-purposing or project freezes caused by COVID-19; these are labelled '*adapted*'.
- 3. Projects labelled '*changed*' have experienced a more significant change to activity delivery**, timelines and/or budget due to COVID-19, and used the flexible funding offer to redirect funds to respond to the crisis. Common themes and uses were to cover core costs for salaries, respond to increased demand for the organisation's services and deliver an emergency response. Consequently,

there were impacts upon product development as scale of the delivery was reduced.



Are there any common challenges or opportunities that are being seized?

The following section explores the common challenges and opportunities that funded partners experienced due to the impact of COVID-19.

This includes challenges and opportunities experienced at an organisational level, and are not focused on their experience with their Tech vs Abuse project.

Challenges

In response to the survey in September 2020, funded partners highlighted the following challenges:

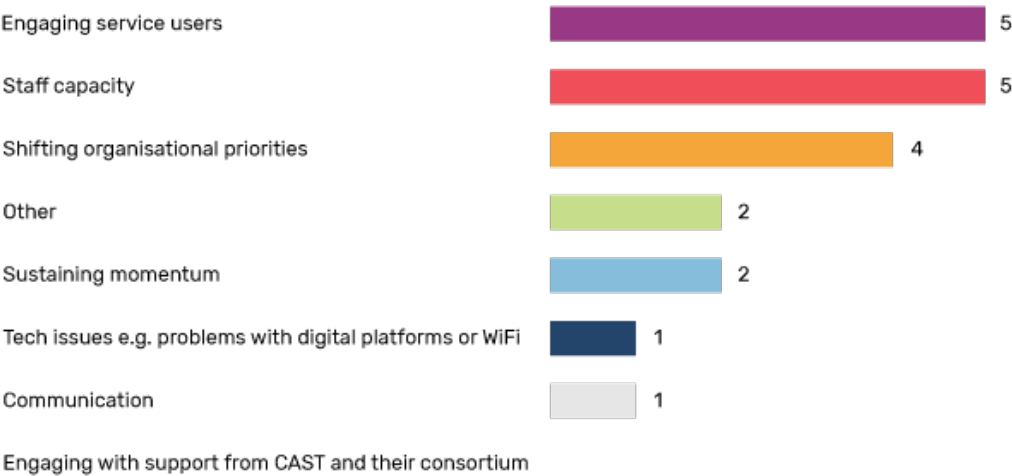


Figure 2 – As a result of the pandemic, have you found any of the following areas challenging with regards to your Tech vs. Abuse project? Please select all that apply

These challenges have been experienced by many charities, not just in the abuse sector. However, some more specific challenges experienced by organisations in this cohort were highlighted in our interviews that took place in August and September 2020.

- **Shifting services online for groups with specific needs:** A common challenge has been the increased risk of technology-facilitated abuse during the pandemic and the need to ensure remote support is accessed safely. Some challenges are specific to certain groups, for example, some members of the deaf community have found it difficult to access remote support. It has also been challenging to provide support to perpetrators during this time, who benefit from access to in person group support.
- **Engaging with service users remotely:** In the initial months of the pandemic, funded partners were unable to have face-to-face contact with their service users who needed to access support. Under lockdown restrictions, it became increasingly apparent that organisations would be required to carry out user research and testing virtually. This led to funded partners experiencing a loss of time to their Tech vs Abuse 2.0 project due to the need to reformulate services and activities, whilst meeting increased demand.
- **Lack of capacity to develop and deliver a new product:** Some funded partners have been impacted by capacity issues to deliver the Tech vs Abuse funded project due to the furlough of key staff and an increase in demand for their other services, while others have been less affected.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges stated above, funded partners also cited the ways in which their teams had been pushed to adapt to remote working, and the opportunities presented by that.

- **Embracing new digital approaches:** During the pandemic, funded partners have moved their services online more rapidly than they would have done under normal circumstances. The digital support agency expressed that digitising services usually requires a culture change and this culture change tends to be the biggest apprehension amongst funded partners that join the programme. In their account, some funded partners have engaged more and taken advantage of opportunities to rapidly digitise their services, which has put them in a better position to respond.
- **Using digital platforms to increase access to support:** During the pandemic, all funded partners have focused on adapting their services to be more accessible remotely and increasing the level of support available for service users,

for example by increasing the capacity of Live Chat functions. They have also used online platforms to promote services and support available, for example through sharing content on social media. Our social media scan of funded partners showed that there is a strong focus evident across funded partners on promotion and enhancement of digital safety during the pandemic.

- **Infrastructure support:** Whilst frontline organisations have focused on adapting their services, second tier organisations have responded to the crisis by providing information, resources and training as well as inputting into relevant policy and campaigning for increased funds for the sector.
- **Developing innovative digital methods to deliver services:** There has been increased access to support by some service users and video content has also been effective. A recent report on the impact of the pandemic from a Tech vs Abuse 2.0 funded partner highlighted that video group work has been successful, particularly for service users who may not be able to attend group sessions¹².

“The pandemic has also forced us to confront the ways (beyond what we’ve delivered prior to lockdown) that we can use digital not just as an information tool, but as a service delivery tool.”

– Funded partner

- **Digital upskilling:** Increased focus on accessing remote and online services safely, has led to new organisational policies and practices. There is also evidence of upskilling in teams and the sector. For example, one organisation noted that their team had increased capacity to use Zoom, and one organisation delivered training for their members on how to set up a Live Chat function.

“As a team, we do not have much IT expertise but this pandemic forced all members of staff to upskill themselves with IT options to communicate. We have conducted all meetings online using various platforms and it is likely that we will continue with at least some of these thereby saving time and expenses eaten up with travel.”

– Funded partner

4. Additional support from the Fund

Key research questions:

- How have funded partners been supported by the Fund during this time?
- What has worked well or not so well about this support?

The next section explores how funded partners have been supported by the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 Fund during the pandemic and what has worked well and less well about this support.

Overview of support provided prior to COVID-19

Alongside funding, the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 initiative provides access to a consortium of partners offering digital support and advice for funded partners. We will explore the impact of this support on the funded partners’ tech capabilities in the following section.

The programme structure for digital support was designed to follow the phases described in the below.

Discover	Definition	Develop
November 2019 – January 2020	February 2020 – May 2020	June 2020 – October 2020
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Kick off meeting with funded partners – coach assigned■ All teams completed Roadmap■ Online peer learning sessions – Product Managers, Programme Governance■ User research support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Establishing partnership with digital partner (if required)■ Embedding Founders & Coders, who bring a specialism in prototyping, within the funded partners■ Development and testing of prototype■ Ongoing coaching and mentoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Development of a Minimal Viable Product (MVP)■ Launch of MVP■ Ongoing coaching and mentoring

Adapting the support offer

Prior to the pandemic, CAST developed a support menu, available through Fusebox, the product management platform funded partners have access to, to clarify what type of technical support was available to organisations. This was designed in response to feedback from funded partners that the roles of the different partners and the range of sup-

port on offer was difficult to understand and navigate.

Some example areas of technical support available for funded partners to draw on include how to undertake user research, digital safeguarding, prototyping, as well as marketing & SEO.

Unfortunately, the uptake of support from the funded partners has been low because the support menu was launched just before COVID-19 hit and engagement levels with the fund dropped.

Since then, CAST has evaluated the progress and status of projects, and adjusted the programme support model to better meet funded partners' needs. To allow for the disruption to projects caused by COVID-19, some funded partners have been given project extensions, going beyond the ending of the formal digital support on offer in October 2020. Funded partners will also be able to access limited coaching time as well as free CAST resources after October 2020.

As a result of the pandemic, there have been increased support requests in particular areas from funded partners. Popular areas of support requests include safeguarding, online user testing, funding, user acquisition, case studies, guidance on new service delivery, **access to actors** and time to design and test, social media and time in relation to deadlines and project extensions.



“One of the big things which [COVID-19] had brought to the fore is thinking about digital safeguarding, it’s a real priority...”

– CAST

Since the beginning of the pandemic, funded partners have been shifting their focus to respond to the changing needs of service users, maintaining organisational integrity, and addressing funding shortfalls. The digital support agency have been supporting funded partners with their changing needs and delivering sector-level support through Catalyst¹³. Organisations' regular coaching calls have been reduced to bi-monthly as the frequency of calls put additional pressure on funded partners, although this has made it more difficult to track progress regularly.

Funded partner perceptions of support by the Fund

As can be seen in the graph below, funded partners generally felt well supported by their Tech vs Abuse 2.0 support partners, **funder** and peers.

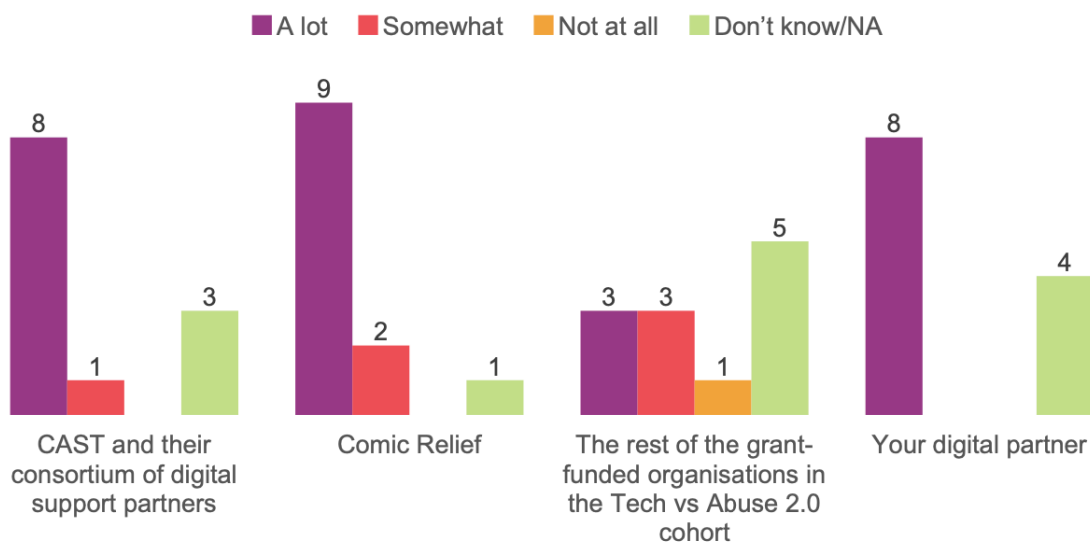


Figure 3 – To what extent have you felt supported by the following Tech vs. Abuse stakeholders in responding to the pandemic?

A recurrent theme in the funded partner survey was a sense amongst funded partners that the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 support has been proactive, flexible, accessible and understanding of organisational needs. There was an appreciation of the Fund’s openness to pausing projects, agreement to repurpose funds to allow funded partners to respond to the crisis and shift their focus to new demands and priorities. There were some suggestions that the regular check-ins were beneficial, and the extensions to deadlines were reassuring, even for those who could continue with no changes.

“There was immediate reassurance from Comic Relief that they understood COVID-19 could impact our project and that they were open to adjustments: a real boost at such an uncertain time.”

– Funded partner

Meanwhile, **concerns from funded partners** were focused around feeling disconnected from others. The variety of tech support partners meant funded partners had to interact with different representatives from each agency, which took time and caused some confusion. Similarly, from the digital support agency’s perspective, the one-to-one support

had been difficult for funded partners to engage with due to a lack of capacity. This raises interesting insights about organisational digital journeys and the initial time, energy and access to expertise it takes to develop intentional, user-centred social technology, especially when paired with sudden, pandemic-induced internal shifts in priorities. CAST have responded to this challenge by exploring different models to offer support, such as drop-in sessions.

5. The role of tech capabilities

Key research question:

Have improved tech capabilities (one of the intended outcomes of the funding) put funded partners in a better position to respond to the current crisis?

One of the intended outcomes of the funding is that staff within funded partners will improve their tech capabilities. It is important to note that this is a long-term organisational process. The following section seeks to explore whether involvement in the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 initiative has led to improved tech capabilities within the COVID-19 timeframe and whether funded partners were in a better position to respond to the crisis.

Impact of the Fund upon the funded partners' ability to respond to the COVID-19 crisis

Qualitative findings provide **some support for the ambition that involvement in the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 initiative has improved tech capabilities**. Our research prior to the COVID-19 crisis suggests that funded partners felt that it was too early to say whether participation in the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 initiative had enabled their teams to develop and embed digital skills. There was a sense, however, that as the programme continued they would be able to learn digital skills that they could use in the future. For instance, one funded partner expressed that they were aware of the dependency of charities on website designers and hoped that at the end of their participation on the Fund their team would have the skills to update their website independently.

“As an organisation, we have come a long way since our first Tech vs Abuse funding in 2017 and are far more confident in delivering digitally - in some ways this confidence is as important as practical skills.”

– Funded partner

However, as the graph below shows, **opinions differed as to whether funded partners felt that involvement with the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 initiative put them in a better position to respond to the pandemic**.

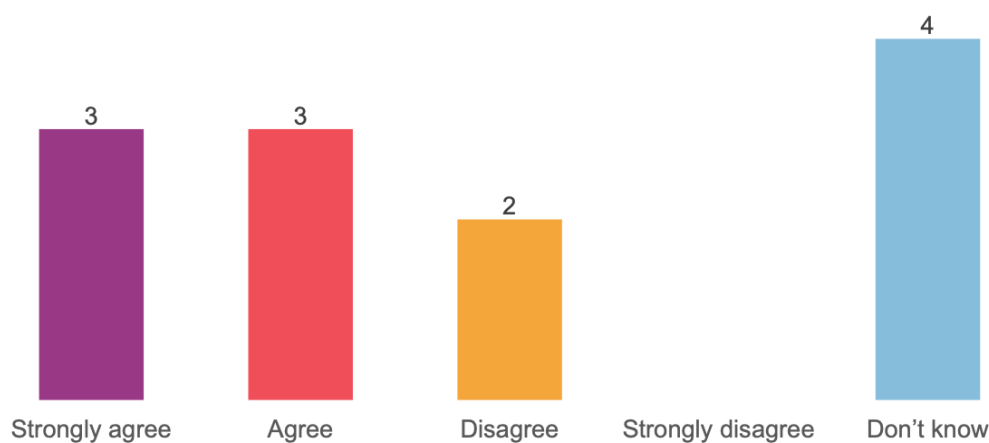


Figure 4 – To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Involvement in Tech vs Abuse has put my organisation in a better position in terms of our immediate response to the pandemic.

Funded partners who reported that involvement in **Tech vs Abuse 2.0 put their organisation in a better position to respond to the pandemic**, referred to a number of different reasons as to why they believed this had taken place, including:

- Having the **opportunity to build and develop a digital tool** to have non-face-to-face contact with their service users
- **Increased time to hone tech skills** and access to experts to facilitate this
- **Knowledge and understanding of the development process acquired through the fund.**

One funded partner noted that the research undertaken for the project has advanced their knowledge of digital technology, perpetrators and behaviour change. They claim that in the current context advancing and implementing this knowledge is more important than ever. Another funded partner delivered training to their members in partnership with their digital partner on user-centred design and setting up a Live Chat. This suggests that they have been able to share some of their knowledge and expertise developed through the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 project to date.

The pandemic has also highlighted the need for safe digital approaches to working with perpetrators and that this work is more critical than ever. Looking to the future, one funded partner intends to use the research undertaken for the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 project, both on tech facilitated abuse, and how perpetrators can be helped through tech, to advance knowledge in the area of digital tech, perpetrators and behaviour change and to inform the development of online work with perpetrators.

“We have a much better understanding of digital tech and designing digital tools to support perpetrators to manage their behaviours and prevent harm to their partners/ex-partner/family. This learning from the project has been invaluable.”

– Funded partner

The above graph focuses on immediate response to the pandemic, but promisingly, seven funded partners agreed or strongly agreed that the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 grant strengthened their organisation’s ability to deliver programmes in a future post-lockdown context. However, five funded partners responded with ‘too early to say/don’t know’.

Overall, these findings suggest that whilst funded partners may have improved their tech capabilities through Tech vs Abuse 2.0, they feel it is too early to know what the impact of these improvements have been. It is important to note here that the pandemic hit relatively early into the Fund, as such this could influence the extent to which funded partners were able to identify whether tech capabilities were improved through the initiative.

6. Conclusions

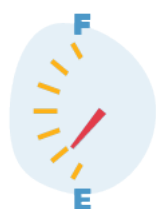
This paper has explored the impact of COVID-19 upon Tech vs Abuse 2.0 funded partners, as well as the effectiveness of support provided to funded partners during the pandemic and the extent to which the funding more generally put them in a better position to respond to the crisis.

In summary, its key findings are as follows:



- The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that digitally delivered responses to domestic abuse are **more important than ever**, but there is a continuing **digital skills gap** in the sector which funders should aim to mitigate via future investment and a flexible approach to funding that has already been allocated.

- **Tech-facilitated abuse** is a major concern in the sector, which has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. At the same time, Tech vs Abuse 2.0 funded partners have requested **more support from the digital support agency around safeguarding**, to help them understand the potential risks around the use of technology and ensure the product they develop mitigates rather than replicates patterns of abuse.



- A key challenge for Tech vs Abuse 2.0 funded partners at this time has been **stretched capacity, due to staff being furloughed and increased demand for services** in some cases. On the other hand, funded partners reported that the pandemic had also pushed their teams to adapt and experiment with new ways of working.

- Tech vs Abuse 2.0 support has been **proactive, flexible, accessible and understanding of organisational needs**. In particular funded partners appreciated the ability to **repurpose grants**. However, it has sometimes been challenging for funded partners to engage with the variety of support on offer from the digital support agency, primarily due to their lack of capacity.





- **Opinion was split** as to whether funded partners believed the Fund has put them in a **better position to respond to the pandemic** in the short and long term. Those that responded positively cited the opportunity to develop tech skills, such as product development and design, marketing and how to be safe and legal online; design a product for non- face to face contact with service users; and understand the tech development process. However, it is too early to say what the longer-term impacts of the funding will be.

It is important to note that these conclusions are preliminary. Renaisi and mySociety are commissioned to continue the evaluation until February 2021, so will continue to explore some of the longer-term impacts of the pandemic upon funded partner delivery over the course of the remaining research activities.

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