

A lot of tiny community groups come to us writing their hands because they think they need a website. But for their needs and audience, often a Facebook page would suffice”



- **Basic access to hardware and infrastructure:** broadband, smartphones, laptops
- **Internal systems and processes to increase organisational efficiency:** accounting systems, document sharing
- **Flexible communication tools for service users and other stakeholders:** E-newsletters, social media, video conferencing, online design tools
- **Tech to support service delivery:** Databases, case management systems, web-based forms and surveys for data collection/analysis
- **Digital-first products and services:** mobile apps, virtual reality apps, medical devices

What does 'tech' mean to small voluntary organisations?



With funds and time tight, don't reinvent the wheel, use the experiments of other small charities and experts to guide decisions and involve service users in testing”

To read the full report visit:
www.ivar.org.uk/our-research/imaginable-usable-tech

- **Tech is imaginable – but not as usable as it could be.** Many people want to engage, but two significant barriers prevail – a lack of knowledge about where to access support and a lack of time to learn how to practically implement and use tech.
- **Barriers to use are practical, not psychological.** Challenges centred around the cost (in both time and money) of resourcing development and change, including new skills training for staff and capital costs associated with implementing and maintaining new tech, often in areas with problematic broadband access.
- **Guidance around use – more stories about the lived experience of tech are needed to help inspire organisations and map out learning and adoption journeys.** Support from colleagues and fellow charities was the most useful source of advice and information.
- **Funders can play more of a role in supporting the introduction of tech into small voluntary organisations –** by providing core funding to cover tech infrastructure and experimentation as organisations build a digital culture; building links between small voluntary organisations working on similar problems to encourage collaboration; and signposting to trusted support.

Key findings

About the research

Are you a small voluntary organisation interested in using technology to make your services more relevant, accessible and efficient? Or do you support or fund small voluntary organisations to use technology?

If the answer to either of these questions is yes, you may be interested in our study findings. We explored the extent to which small voluntary organisations (SVOs) are able or willing to consider how technology might have a positive role to play in their work. Our findings are based on:

- Scoping interviews with representatives from our five funding partners
- The synthesis and analysis of online survey responses from 72 SVOs with an annual income of under £500,000 who were primarily 'early adopters' of tech
- A design sprint process, including user testing a digital prototype with representatives from four small voluntary organisations

This study has been supported and advised by Comic Relief, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales and The Tudor Trust.

Start somewhere

Key findings from an exploratory study into making technology imaginable and usable for small voluntary organisations



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Five suggestions for small voluntary organisations

- 1. Start somewhere and don't be disheartened if it goes wrong.** Yes, you're right that this stuff IS important. Not only that, it's essential. Go for it. You don't have to be an expert and can start small. Getting things wrong is part of the process – that's OK and it's expected. Everyone's learning. Breaking down big projects into manageable, incremental steps will help you stay focused while minimising the resources required.
- 2. Focus on the problem that you're trying to solve.** Understand your context and the needs of whoever you're aiming to help first and foremost. Sure, get inspiration from elsewhere, but that's no substitute for really deeply understanding the specific behaviours and expectations that you need to respond to in order for any tech to be used and useful.
- 3. Time-bound tests.** Test a new piece of tech or a new digital approach for a time-bound period, e.g. two weeks, after which review usage as a team and make a decision about whether to continue or change direction. This can combat the paralysis that comes with putting off a big decision, and deal with internal scepticism of new ways of working.
- 4. Don't reinvent the wheel.** Speak to other small charities about what they've done to solve a particular problem, and what they learned from the process. Most importantly, speak to the end users of the service themselves (be it an internal or external service) about what tech they are using in their day-to-day. It might reveal some previously unknown or unexpected avenues for improvements that build on existing habits.
- 5. Learning lunches.** The pace of change is always increasing. Create a culture of learning to ensure your organisation stays up to date with new developments in technology and their applications/implications. Embed reflection into the day-to-day through bringing colleagues together over food (a great motivator!).



Seek advice from other organisations who are further down the road than you are”



Not everything lends itself to a technological solution”

Five pointers for support organisations aiming to help small voluntary organisations

- 1. Better alignment and signposting** – build SVOs' awareness of the range of existing support offers that can help them, and offer coaching to identify key needs so that they can confidently navigate the available support.
- 2. Advice/guidance given should be realistic and relevant** – take into account an organisation's current understanding, available resources and existing behaviours – including the digital access, habits and preferences of staff and beneficiaries.
- 3. Examples cited should be relatable** – an organisation should be able to see itself in the case study before them.
- 4. Strive for clearer, more consistent and accessible messaging** around the terms 'tech', 'digital', 'design' and other technical terminology within each of these fields.
- 5. Be more transparent about whether support is connected to commercial objectives**, and upfront about current and future costs if it is. Provide more tangible and honest examples of what knowledge or understanding is helpful to have in-house and what to recruit experts to do.



When we speak to people in small charities about tech, they aren't just asking about 'social media' and 'IT', they realise it's more than that. This is different to even two years ago”

Four things for funders to think about

If you want to be an effective funder of small organisations, you need to develop your digital literacy or partner with organisations that can provide this expertise.

Ensure assessment processes do not disadvantage the iterative nature of digital development, and work to ensure assessment structures and decisions reward recognised best practice (such as BetterDigital.Services and the Charity Digital Code). That means treating digital confidence and competence as a 'must have' rather than a 'nice to have'.

Become familiar and confident in processes that manage risk and minimise waste in digital projects. This confidence includes accepting learning and change as a necessary part of developing services in a digital context – build flexibility and support into your processes, systems and reporting. Failure as part of learning is a positive – as long as it is in pursuit of charitable goals.

Think seriously about how you might support the infrastructure and training costs associated with 'digital transformation' in small organisations, in order for them to be resilient and fully able to respond to the changing needs of their communities. Small organisations cannot be expected to take a leap forward without proper, flexible support.

In a follow-up study, we will be exploring how funders can play more of a role in supporting small voluntary organisations to introduce and embed technology.