

Response to change

How small voluntary organisations are using tech

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In partnership with:



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Introduction

In June 2019, we published [Start Somewhere](#), based on an exploratory study about the experience and challenges of engaging with and using tech ('tech')¹ for small voluntary organisations (SVOs)² interested in making their services relevant, accessible and efficient.

Our four headline findings were:

- **Tech is imaginable for the SVOs in our study – but not as usable as it could be**
- **The barriers to use are practical, not psychological**
- **More stories about the lived experience of tech are needed to help inspire organisations and map out learning and adoption journeys**
- **Funders can play more of a role in supporting the introduction of tech into SVOs**

In early 2020, we began work on a follow up study to shed light on use: what does it look like in practice; and what helps and hinders it to happen (including the role and contribution of funders)? Over the course of the year, we spoke to 14 SVOs about their experiences with tech, held peer support workshops, and worked closely with a small group of funders.³ What began as a piece of research focused on 'the use of tech' evolved into a study about organisations responding to change as, in the context of coronavirus, small charities have had to embrace remote working, digital fundraising and online service delivery as never before.⁴

In this short report, we begin by presenting three key themes from our work with SVOs:

- **Covid-19 has forced many SVOs to respond to change using tech**
- **Everything now includes a digital/tech element – and many SVOs are leading the way**
- **We know digital is not always inclusive – how can we start to change that?**

We then discuss ways in which funders can support the adoption and use of tech by SVOs, before concluding with a summary of challenges facing both SVOs and funders.

¹ A detailed explanation of what is meant by 'tech' can be found in [Start Somewhere](#).

² For the purposes of this study, understood as organisations with an annual turnover of less than £500,000

³ Comic Relief, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales, Paul Hamlyn Foundation and The Tudor Trust

⁴ [Charity Digital Skills Report 2020](#)

Part One: Key Themes

1. Covid-19 has forced many SVOs to respond to change using tech

The way charities pivoted and adapted their work so quickly in such difficult circumstances is to be applauded.

The urgent necessity of the situation meant most had to move their existing services online, using remote tools like video calling and messaging software to continue to offer support, advice and workshops. While this has been successful for many, tech still offers more opportunity for small charities to use it to deliver services better.

All of the SVOs in our study have now 'started somewhere' – the potential of tech has been both appreciated and realised. This is consistent with related research: 80% of charities surveyed by the Charity Bank found new uses for tech; the 2020 Charity Digital Skills report estimates that two thirds are now delivering all work remotely as a result of Covid-19, while 61% will be offering more online services.⁵ These changes have been fuelled by the recognition that tech can improve accessibility to activities and services, extending reach at minimal additional cost, and can help to streamline internal processes, improve data management and enhance communication. Also critical to these changes is an awareness that tech and human contact are not mutually exclusive – instead, tech can sit alongside and complement face-to-face interactions. It is possible to blend online and face-to-face: *'Adopting new technology does not mean you have to change everything. Making change doesn't necessarily mean a major IT project'*.

It has been challenging, but people have come up with bold, creative and thoughtful ways to maintain contact with users and stakeholders digitally, ensuring they continue to deliver value. Most importantly, it's driven by understanding and responding to real needs and behaviours, not creating 'tech for tech's sake'. Responses have followed digital best practice in looking to reuse what's out there or making solutions reusable for others, as well as testing and tweaking as they go.

By responding in this way, SVOs have proved that digital is indeed possible and sometimes preferable for many audiences. Some are now asking: *'Was that what's meant by "digital transformation"? Suddenly COVID happened, we had to do it, and I honestly don't know what all the fuss was about!'*⁶ Tech is no longer a 'separate, scary thing on its own over there'. Rather, it is lived and breathed by

⁵ [Charity Digital Skills Report 2020](#)

⁶ Ben White and Sam Milsom on the [Tech for Good Live podcast, April 2021](#): *'For the past year [charities] have had to get on with it and realise they can [use digital] ...'; 'Charities can now fill that space because they've now taken that step up, embedding and getting comfortable with the basics, and now for some of these really difficult, interesting problems that charities face day in day out we can start to use digital as a more innovative way of tackling them, rather than constantly being held back by the infrastructure and the difficulty of adopting the basics. This is going to be a really great time to be working in social problems'*.

organisations. They are using video conferencing tools, digital media and chat apps to stay in touch with their communities, and analytics and internal databases to manage and track the impact it's having.

As SVOs now consider their next steps and seek to consolidate what they've done and what they've learned through the pandemic, many are exploring where to go next. This involves what they keep and what they discard – both in terms of activities and ways of working. Facing a period of prolonged uncertainty, small organisations are likely to be in a continuous state of transition and adaptation.

In this context, our report highlights a number of examples of how organisations have responded:

Developing new models of delivery, driven by service user needs

- **Launching an online tutoring scheme:** *'We found university students and matched them up with young people.'*
- **Adapting face-to-face workshops to be delivered online:** *'Service users are now school ambassadors and are delivering these workshops across the school.'*
- **Weekly pastoral calls with service users:** *'Covid made us realise how flexible we can be. If you've been doing something for a while, it's easy to think that's the only way of doing it. The urgency of the need, well we'll try it and see how it goes. Attendance was phenomenal. The [service users] really relied on [new services they developed].'*
- **Creating a fortnightly/monthly podcast:** *'The good thing about the podcast is that a lot of our members who aren't engaged with online activity have been engaged on the phone – we'd call them up and they'd play an instrument over the phone or tell a story. Then a musician would record them and edit them online for our radio show.'*
- **Sending a subscription box to service users:** *'Within the boxes, there's information about mental health awareness. This is an online business. We've been giving out 300 boxes – art materials, wellbeing material. We've linked those packs to our online activity – we have a watercolour group so a watercolour pack was sent out.'*
- **Extending hours and ways to engage with services:** One organisation introduced evening counselling to create more choice for service users, as well as developing email support.

Adapting and reusing existing digital tools

- **Embracing Zoom:** *'Zoom generally felt like the only way we could continue to support them, it kind of rocketed. It had an effect on the team seeing positive impact from engaging online'; 'Without online platforms and without tech we couldn't have done it ... we were running 19 creative projects a week on Zoom throughout the first lockdown.'*
- **Exploring how digital can complement existing work:** *'Digital is an extra avenue not a replacement'; 'Digital opens up spaces that don't otherwise exist'; 'Digital knits the whole thing together. It integrates all the various moving parts.'*

- **Repurposing tech:** *'Benefits of what we did have multiplied beyond our expectations. We built a system that worked first. It's flexible and operated well. That was what we did first – we got basics in place. So, have strong foundation then you can move ahead'; 'So if you do it right you open up more opportunities than you even imagined in the first place because the system is robust enough then it should be portable over to other types of activity'.*

Rape & Sexual Abuse Support Centre (RASASC) North Wales: **Embracing blended delivery**

RASASC is a support centre for victims of rape and sexual abuse. The charity offers specialist therapy, counselling and support to people who have experienced sexual abuse. The organisation has been running for over 35 years, with its main office based in Bangor and counselling outreach centres located across the whole of North Wales.

Before Covid-19, RASASC started piloting an online counselling service. North Wales is a large area with limited transport connectivity, so providing an online option helped RASASC reach more people. When Covid-19 restrictions were put in place, they continued developing their service, which included email support and online counselling. Although referral rates dropped at the beginning, it offered another access point for service users and limited possible *'disruptions to the therapeutic process'*. RASASC sourced additional training and supervision for staff members to ensure that services could continue safely online.

Some of RASASC's service users were initially reluctant to go online: *'A lot of our clients deferred and wanted to wait for face-to-face again. Those who wanted to go online did, and data suggests that they still experienced the same therapeutic benefits as those who accessed therapy face-to-face. Clients also reported that they benefited therapeutically from our online therapeutic intervention. We then contacted those that had deferred after two months and most came back as they realised they wouldn't be able to continue with face-to-face for some time – they also reported the positive benefits of RASASC online therapeutic intervention'.*

At the same time, RASASC was aware of the limitations of online services. Not everyone in the region has the necessary computers and webcams at home, and some lack broadband and Wi-Fi access. There were also safeguarding issues to consider: *'We had to stop our children's work as it wasn't ethical to continue working online with young children. We had to source funding to reconfigure our centre so we could continue face-to-face services with children and high-risk clients in a safe manner'.*

RASASC plans to continue to offer both, with face-to-face delivery in the future: *'We'll be offering choice to clients moving forward, acknowledging the fact that both online and face-to-face delivery of services is of benefit for the organisation and, most importantly, our clients'.* They are also challenging themselves to improve their services further by exploring online group therapy. In addition, they are looking at how they can use social media and online services to reach the hard-to-reach and marginalised survivors, such as male, LGBT and disabled clients.

Overall, RASASC has realised that digital has to go hand-in-hand with face-to-face service delivery: *'They have to coexist together'.*

Key points for SVOs

- Take time out to understand the existing digital habits and preferences of the people your organisation supports, as well as those of your own team. What devices and tools do they have access to and use already? How do they use them? What might they be comfortable with trying, given a little support?
- Think about what assumptions you are making about how other people feel about tech, and how you can test these assumptions.
- Experiment with new tools and delivery models. Focus on the smallest, quickest or cheapest step you can take to test something new and see if it works for people. Take a look at what you already have that can be adapted. Follow [best practice digital service design principles](#).

2. Everything now includes a digital/tech element – and many SVOs are leading the way

A common factor among SVOs using tech successfully was their willingness to be bold and experiment. They were curious about opportunities; they wanted to improve and weren't afraid of trying out new approaches. In particular, forward-thinking SVOs considered how tech could: improve service delivery, user experience and user outcomes; address internal operational challenges; and improve stakeholder communications:

It's just the realisation that the world is changing and we need to catch up. From the Board to operation level, we realised it was becoming more and more difficult to carry on in the way we were going.

We're driven by service users' feedback. Ultimately their experiences direct our team. Meeting their needs is our biggest driving force.

Adopting tech was very natural and felt organic ... tech is everywhere in our work.

Many SVOs have been driving conversations, and exciting new explorations and practice, around what inclusive, accessible, human connection-focused, responsible and safe use of digital looks and feels like. And also, crucially, the limitations of tech, for example, when a tech-based end-user solution *isn't* the right option because it puts people at risk, disempowers them or increases a division or injustice. SVOs with a deep understanding of their users and context are often best placed to make these calls and to apply tech appropriately, following thorough research and testing. Small scale initiatives and pilot studies (including the use of apps with free trial periods or free entry-level subscription packages) provide opportunities to experiment, gain experience and build confidence:

Take your time, do the research and get the fundamentals right. Don't rush the implementation of technology. Test it, get feedback from users and adapt accordingly. And if it didn't work out, learn from that experience, build on it, and try something else.

SVOs have recognised that off-the-shelf tech, or at least reused or repurposed tech, is often good enough. It has usually undergone extensive testing already,

and tends to be more affordable, with training resources often readily available online:

Although off-the-shelf technology may mean that you must make a few compromises, that shouldn't be problematic if the technology still enables you to achieve what you want.

Recent growth in technological products has been phenomenal and so choices are expanding. There's a good chance that some form of technology that will meet your needs is already available.

Despite their serious engagement and appetite to experiment, many SVOs are facing ever-rising demand, as well as fatigue and anxiety about the future.⁷ In order to respond to challenging questions around the best use of tech, SVOs need support to ensure that they approach new developments with care and ingenuity. For many, that will involve access to peers and digital experts. Encouragingly, [many platforms and initiatives](#) have sprung up to facilitate these connections and conversations, building on research which has shown that SVOs make more progress with tech when they seek advice and share learning with other SVOs at a similar stage to them:⁸

We used learning from other charities to inform our work; and we used information from the network to persuade our colleagues that adopting technology was worthwhile.

It's good to know it's not just us struggling. I should go to more things like these [IVAR and CAST peer support sessions], I'm picking up loads of things from other people.

We are well aware of our limitations [on using tech] and are quite good at asking our networks and peers for advice and tips.

Chilli Studios: Being bold and experimenting

Chilli Studios aims to improve mental health through creativity. Based in Newcastle, they deliver services to people experiencing mental health difficulties and other forms of social exclusion: *'We're community focused ... Art is the central tool but it's about bringing people together and creating a strong community of support through creative activities ... people get to a better place and form better relationships and have hope'*.

Alongside developing a podcast and a wellbeing subscription inbox during Covid-19, Chilli has continued using tech to improve how they monitor and evaluate the influence of their services. At the outset, their objective was clear: *'We wanted to develop a sense of whether we're making a difference in people's lives, and to some extent prove it'*. Pre-Covid, they began to consider options for gathering data on how their users were experiencing their services and programmes.

⁷ The [Digitally Kind report](#) from Carnegie UK Trust highlights some of the digital challenges frontline staff are grappling with and how, although many respond with creativity, kindness and user-centredness, there is a flipside of increased stress and burnout.

⁸ Catalyst (2020) *Charity digital journeys*. <https://www.thecatalyst.org.uk/research/digital-journeys>.

Working with an IT specialist, they developed an app for service users to record their mental health and how they experience the service. This data is then fed into their existing Customer Relationship Management (CRM) database. *'We wanted to see how well people are progressing. For example, with creative writing [classes], are they showing improvements in their wellbeing? Not just saying it's good or bad, but to give us a sense of the benefits and its value. Then with that data, you can consider how to improve things and measure those improvements, and articulate that to funders'.*

Each service user enters data into the app which is linked to their individual membership data on the CRM database, making data collection easier. While a small number of service users may show resistance to using the app and others will take time becoming comfortable with it, they are sure the app will become part of their everyday life.

The app will make a big difference to Chilli, helping them to understand how their services make a difference in the lives of their service users. Chilli also feels more confident about the future as the app is *'making us ready for the future and the different kinds of needs we'll have'.*

What can other SVOs learn from Chilli Studios' experience? *'We have lots of big ideas ... We could be throwing money into something that is a waste of time. So, my advice would probably be understanding what the need really is and researching it first'; 'Collect in a simpler and often more powerful way'.*

Saving Lives: Repurposing existing tech

Savings Lives is a national charity based in Birmingham, with an income of less than £0.5m in 2019. The charity aims to provide easy testing for blood-borne viruses such as HIV and Hepatitis. They aim to reduce the stigma around these tests and ensure the testing process is as uncomplicated as possible: *'Tech is short circuiting the stigma and bringing accessibility'.*

Saving Lives developed a software and database system that enabled service users to request a blood test kit online which is then delivered by post. The system manages all incoming tests, processes test results and delivers the test outcome to the service user. The software provides efficient and effective end-to-end management of the testing process.

When Covid-19 emerged, Saving Lives quickly realised that their software and database system could be repurposed to manage Covid testing programmes. *'We had created a system for requesting postal tests and then delivering the results. The laboratory we worked with deals with public health issues. We repurposed the system to deliver their Covid screening programme. They needed something quick that they knew already worked with their lab systems. We flipped and moved quickly into that size of a thing ... So, we're a sexual health and blood-borne virus charity, but in the context of the pandemic, we switched to respiratory virus work in the context of Covid. It kept us busy but, at the same time, sexual health clinics have closed so some of our clients have increased their [online] tests 10 fold'.*

Saving Lives found that the system they had developed for their own needs could be adapted to become an off-the-shelf system for someone else, exceeding their expectations of the software's usefulness. *'Our experience demonstrates that if you build a system to do a specific thing, it's likely it will*

also be helpful for other things that are similar'. For the labs, the Saving Lives product was an established solution and was effective enough to run their Covid testing programmes: 'We didn't build a system that only did what we wanted it to do. We built a system that could do what other people might want it to do as well. It's not a Swiss army knife, but it can be built in a variety of shapes'.

Key points for SVOs

- Make it your mission to be bold and experiment with new tech. Don't wait for a global pandemic to try new things!
- Set a clear objective for your tech project and then research the technologies that may help you achieve it.
- Work out what you want to achieve and survey the marketplace to see whether a tech product that will meet your needs is already available. Unless you are doing something unusual, off-the-shelf will often give you what you need at a reasonable price. There are countless [free off-the-shelf tools](#) you can reuse, many of which require [no coding knowledge at all](#), and also [other charities' services](#) you could repurpose.
- Test, trial and pilot new tech before you implement it fully.
- Reach out to other SVOs to seek advice and share learning about tech.

3. We know digital is not always inclusive – how can we start to change that?

The pandemic has highlighted the pre-existing (and now magnified) social inequality of the digital divide.⁹ For example, children from low income families who were less able to access education as it moved online; people who lacked the skills to engage digitally, even with equipment and connectivity; and individuals with disabilities who faced particular challenges with, or were unable to use, software and apps designed without accessibility considerations.

In this context, organisations have been trying to find ways of resourcing blended service models that offer choice and cater for a wide spectrum of users' digital access and confidence levels. Alternatively, they make difficult, conscious decisions about who/how/why they exclude certain audiences. This is particularly challenging for small organisations with limited resources, for whom running two different versions of a service in parallel to cater for different needs will not be sustainable over the long term. While concerns over digital exclusion have led to some hesitancy over the use of tech, SVOs understand that addressing digital inclusion can unlock people's access to a vast array of services and resources.¹⁰ One creative route out of this significant challenge may be collaboration and sector-wide infrastructure from which multiple organisations can benefit:

Where we can find similarities and common needs? Where are the opportunities to reduce the cost (money, resource, headspace) by creating

⁹ [How to overcome digital exclusion](#), Joe Lepper, April 2021, Charity Digital

¹⁰ A report published by the Lloyds Bank Foundation in February 2021, [The Value of Small in a Big Crisis](#), shows the important role of small charities to tackle digital exclusion, combining digital and face-to-face support.

digital tools, components and platforms that are open and shared, and which many of us can draw on? Or finding alternative ways of working together so that vital support is still provided through others even if we can't do it ourselves?

We heard about a variety of ways SVOs have been grappling with digital exclusion:

- **Intentionally creating non-digital services** to sustain their engagement with more digitally excluded individuals: *'Trying to achieve the same level of equality and inclusion that we would normally have – obviously people's different levels of technical ability can raise issues'; 'For some people, online is not suitable, we've continued with phone calls and deliveries and doorstep meets'.*
- **Experimenting with blended service models:** *'I know it's making us ready for the future and the different kinds of needs we'll have'; 'We will continue using Zoom as this means the workshops are more accessible to those who can't come to the centre. There will now be the option of both: to join remotely or join the workshop in person'; 'I think it's been a brilliant thing, digitally transforming the organisation. But we still have to deliver for those that haven't got online facilities and equipment. Face to face is also hard because if you don't drive a car you can't access face-to-face support with us. They have to coexist together'.*
- **Exploring partnership approaches:** *'I've identified four organisations that have a similar ethos and delivery aspect to us – so we set up a partnership to build a shared platform. If we buddy up with other organisations, then we all have to contribute a small amount for a bigger offer. It's early stage but I'm feeling positive about what we're doing'; 'Tech plays a huge role in opening access ... with tech you can share it and reach a wider audience and use language that's familiar to the audience we're trying to reach'.*

Integrate UK: Working towards digital inclusion

Integrate is a youth-led charity based in Bristol. They aim to empower young people to actively transform the society they live in and to take an equal role in a cohesive and representative society. Topics the young people work on include racism, forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), sexual harassment, extremism and homophobia. Tech is embedded into their work at Integrate; *'Tech plays a huge role in opening access ... It's using all these tools to discuss sensitive, deeply engrained topics and empowering young people'.*

Lockdown exacerbated inequalities: *'Children we work with are faced with multiple socio-economic challenges as well as other challenges'.* Some of the young people they work with didn't have access to IT equipment: *'We managed to secure a grant for 17 digital kits so that those young people who didn't have equipment were able to engage'.* Not only did the equipment help young people with their school education, but it also opened up access to an array of resources and services that they wouldn't have access to otherwise.

Knowing that young people had internet access, Integrate then offered a range of online activities. For example, weekly pastoral calls, online music recordings, adapting their school workshops to be delivered online, and online creative workshops. Integrate also launched a tutoring scheme: *'We*

found university students and matched them up with young people'. One participant went from a 4 to a 9 (D to a high A) and another went up two sets.*

Integrate is seeing significant benefits from greater digital inclusion. Delivering their services online has enabled them to continue bringing young people together from different backgrounds: *'Relationships form between the young people – from opposite ends of town, different races and backgrounds – all meeting on zoom as if they were old friends'.*

Knowing that they can overcome digital exclusion, Integrate plans to sustain the use of tech: *'We will continue using Zoom as this means the workshops are more accessible to those who can't come to the centre. There will now be the option of both – to join remotely or join the workshop in person. We've become more familiar and accustomed to using online platforms – that will never disappear'.*

Key points for SVOs

- SVOs have a vital role to play in tackling digital exclusion.
- Understand the particular barriers to tech access and adoption faced by your community.
- When designing activities and services that use tech, incorporate a digital inclusion objective. There are [lots of resources and specialist organisations](#) that can help.
- Advocate for public policies that overcome digital exclusion, such as [#FixTheDigitalDivide](#) and [#ClickZero](#).

Part Two: How funders can support SVOs' tech

Three things stand out from our conversations with SVOs over the last year about how funders have both helped and hindered the adoption and use of tech.

1. Provide unrestricted funding

Our findings have confirmed that SVOs are both embracing and experimenting with tech. While we can expect this appetite to increase, meaningful engagement will continue to require proper investment – to support both service improvements and organisational efficiencies. Ideally, this should be through unrestricted funding, enabling SVOs to cover the costs of equipment and basic tech infrastructure, training and mentoring, introduction, use and adaptation. This kind of flexible investment respects and supports the need for SVOs to respond to and resource change, in order to remain relevant and accessible to their beneficiaries. And it recognises that digital is no longer an add-on or the preserve of special or one-off funds: *'Digital is now in everything'*.

2. Support SVOs to adopt and adapt tech

There can be a tendency for some funders to be more drawn to innovative services that hold the promise of developing and implementing brand new tech. However, for most SVOs, innovation is about adopting and adapting existing tech to improve their services and how they operate. Therefore, focusing on the simple and having realistic expectations about how most SVOs use tech is vital: *'Funders focus digital funding too much on innovative services. Sometimes innovation is simply smaller groups staying in contact with their beneficiaries digitally and enabling communication to continue. These are the important things'*. Supporting SVOs to adopt and adapt existing tech saves funds and reduces risk. It also allows them to focus on exploring how best to humanise tech and make sure it works for everyone. Once the fundamentals are in place, SVOs can focus on building a body of knowledge and practice around how to use digital in a way that ensures safety and accessibility, maximises connection and agency, and balances user needs with staff mental health. Where new tech is developed, it's vital this is created in an [open, reusable way](#) (e.g. using open source and creative commons licences – which can still allow for commercialisation – and [open documentation](#)) to reduce unnecessary duplication and allow others to pick up and learn from it.

3. Talk about tech and share knowledge

Through their relationships with multiple SVOs, funders can develop and share knowledge about tech and its use and, where appropriate, help to stimulate them to experiment more. Conversations about tech can also help funders themselves understand more about the process of adoption and the potential positive and negative consequences, thus creating a virtuous circle between SVO and funder practice. Linked to this, talking about specific examples of use and their impact is

central to broadening the horizons of what's possible and appropriate in different contexts. Facilitating (through resourcing and convening) spaces for these conversations enables both SVOs and funders to learn and develop together, and tackle longer-term challenges together, including the question of digital inclusion: *'Everything good that happens in life involves a person improving and supporting you to do something that you couldn't just do otherwise'*.

Key points for funders

- Support SVOs to adopt and adapt existing technologies.
- Talk to SVOs and understand how they use tech. Share knowledge of effective practice with other SVOs.
- Provide unrestricted funding to SVOs so that they have the flexible resources to invest in tech based on changing needs, and to manage it effectively.
- Incorporate digital inclusion objectives into grant-making policy and advocacy work.

Part Three: Final thoughts

In this report, we have shown how SVOs are increasingly using tech to both complement and enhance what they do and how they do it. In order to capitalise and build on these advances, SVOs and their funders will need to pay attention to three key issues as they move through 2021.

1. Extend the horizons of what's possible

The pace of adoption has accelerated dramatically over the course of the coronavirus pandemic and the benefits of tech are becoming real and concrete for SVOs. However, concerns remain that, for many, 'digital' or 'social tech' may be now seen just through a narrow prism of moving services online. Agencies and consultants that have provided support to SVOs may also focus on this, both following demand and, as they themselves develop expertise, seeking to promote it to charities. It will be important for SVOs to find and be offered opportunities to think more broadly about tech and its potential contribution to their work, hard-wiring it into their planning and design processes. [Recent research](#) shows volunteer-run ['tech for good' communities](#) play a key role in providing 'expansion of possibility', and there is a need for more dedicated spaces and programmes that allow charities and partners to connect and explore.

2. Engage with the digital divide

'There are hundreds of thousands of people across the UK who continue to struggle with a digital exclusion that may have been an issue pre-pandemic, but is now a disaster. They are being shut out of our digital society'.¹¹ By moving services online out of necessity, the challenge for the coming year is how small organisations can ensure that their recent offers – which were developed so they can keep including people during lockdown – do not in fact compound this digital exclusion.

Signs are worrying. The 2020 Charity Digital Skills Report found that 38% of charities who are still new to digital¹² had to cancel services because their users lack the tech or skills to make use of them online. So, as charities shifted online, not only were some people unable to access services, but some charities simply stopped their work too.

Online services might work more efficiently and cost less, but many may be excluding key populations that charities are trying to reach. This is about access to devices, digital literacy, and the phenomenon of data poverty: *'When your mobile phone is your only means of accessing the internet – and for many it is – hitting that data limit means being shut out of digital society until they can afford to top up'.¹³*

¹¹ [We must make Covid-19 the catalyst for ending digital poverty](#), Chris Ashworth, Nominet

¹² Defined as being at the 'paper based' or 'curious stage'

¹³ [We must make Covid-19 the catalyst for ending digital poverty](#), Chris Ashworth, Nominet

The opportunity moving forward for SVOs will be to explore the development of a new hybrid way of delivering services, utilising the best of online and digital services, alongside face-to-face services that include those on the wrong side of the digital divide¹⁴. This is the approach most likely to flourish through 2021 and beyond. And it will need to be reflected in a switch by funders from separate 'tech' funds to funding work that includes both digital and tech, alongside more traditional 'offline' delivery, as a standard.

3. Embrace the power and value of iteration

SVOs had to move at pace to set up new digital services. This has raised concerns about quality: *'Freely available bits of tech are being lashed together to solve problems on the fly. Sticking together a video-calling platform with a cloud-based CRM, a network of WhatsApp groups and an inbox filled to breaking point might be a brilliant stopgap but it's not the basis of an ongoing model for transformation'*.¹⁵ And it is acknowledged that a key hurdle to doing digital well is rushing it: *'Going digital quickly was fraught and it was common to regret going down a certain path'*.¹⁶

There is a huge opportunity for SVOs to embrace iteration as part of their practice, starting with taking stock of things that were hastily pulled together during the pandemic and understanding how they might be improved. Taking time to get feedback from users; iterating and developing the service; then getting more feedback; then iterating again – this needs to become the norm to fix any 'rushed' digital services and to help build better ones moving forward. Funders, too, will need to embrace this in the way they fund, ensuring that they are open to giving the space and flexibility needed to iterate well.

¹⁴ [How to make the right decisions about hybrid working](#), Zoe Amar, Founder and Director, Zoe Amar Digital

¹⁵ [Glimmers Report. A vision for community-powered tech](#)

¹⁶ [Charity Digital Journeys 2020, Catalyst, Think Social Tech, Impact Works Associates](#)