Tech vs Abuse Evaluation Summary

Background

In 2017, Comic Relief in collaboration with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS), and The National Lottery Community Fund (formerly Big Lottery Fund) made ten grants under the Tech vs Abuse (TvA) programme. The 12-month grants were awarded to support organisations to develop digital products or services to improve the lives of women and girls affected by domestic abuse.

The primary outcomes for the programme were not only focused at the individual grantee-level, but were also intended to drive sector-wide impact by building the digital capacity of domestic abuse organisations to support them to reach their beneficiaries in an increasingly digital world.

The programme was framed by a 6 month research-led planning phase in which existing gaps were identified in the sector that a digital approach could potentially address. This provided a framework of five 'design challenges' to which applicants proposed innovative solutions. The programme also facilitated organisations' digital product development through the provision of digital support and expertise via commissioning a support partner, the Centre for Acceleration of Social Technology (CAST).

Evaluation

Comic Relief commissioned Ecorys to conduct the programme evaluation with the following objectives:

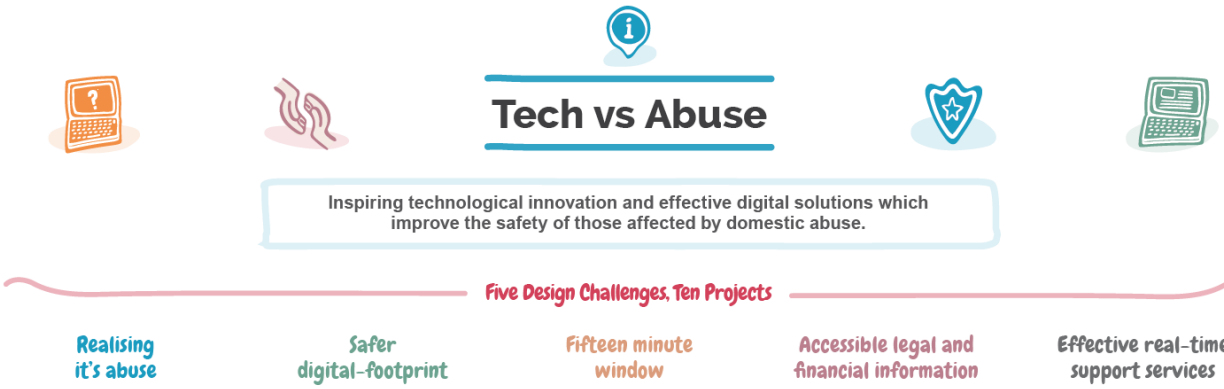
- to examine the support provided by Comic Relief and CAST to the funded-partners;
- to observe programme outcomes through the range of digital products and services developed; and
- to contribute to stakeholder learning and development, during and after the evaluation through the dissemination of learning.

The evaluation used an Outcome Harvesting approach which 'looks backwards' at what has been achieved to determine to what extent and how the programme has contributed to change. Outcome Harvesting is a useful approach when there are no pre-defined outcomes at the beginning of a programme or project. It was therefore seen as appropriate to this evaluation because the funded-partners' projects employed an adaptive and agile approach to product development, allowing their products to be relevant to user needs and iterative, and so had no clearly defined outcomes.

This evaluation summary focuses on learnings from the project outcomes from funded partners' digital product journeys, along with learnings from the wider influence of the Tech vs Abuse programme.

Key learnings from project outcomes

The ten funded projects focused on different design challenges, with some addressing more than one through their digital solutions. The products were all at different stages of development at the start of funding: for example, some had a pre-existing concept that they needed support to implement, while others were at the 'discovery phase' and still needed to develop and validate the concept of their product/service. While there was some overlap, organisations carried out varying activities through the course of their product journeys. Not all projects launched a fully developed product at the end of the grant period, but the vast majority went on to launch their product afterwards.



The evaluation laid out three product outcomes for funded partners' product development:

i) **User-led**: they are informed by user-research/testing, ensuring user voice is at the centre of the product or services functionality.

ii) **Methodology**: The funded partners adopt characteristics of digital product design, meaning they can develop products that have the potential to address outcomes that are not yet tried and tested.

iii) **Expertise**: Sector expertise is at the heart of the purpose and origin of the products, not just in their application, with sector specialist organisations taking the lead in product development.

The following sections outline broad themes of findings and key learnings from product journeys.

User testing

Projects conducted user testing to varying degrees with some opting to hold off until they had a beta version of their final product, with no testing done during the development phase. A key challenge for projects that did conduct preliminary user testing was how to access prospective users. Engaging survivors of domestic abuse bore the risk of potentially making them re-live past trauma. Individuals currently living in abusive circumstances face the additional challenge of limited communication channels and the risk of reprisals from abusers for engaging with domestic abuse services. Despite this, some projects managed to conduct user-testing at early stages of product development with some conducting multiple rounds at subsequent stages.

For two organisations, user-testing resulted in a 'pivot' or a change to the fundamental specification of their original idea:

- One project realised that they had to alter their target group early on based on feedback from a focus group of potential users engaging with their initial prototype. The feedback challenged their assumption that women in their target group required support in recognising that they are in an abusive relationship and showed instead that women wanted more support to build their knowledge and confidence to act. This was followed up by further user-testing at more advanced stages of product development.
- The second project engaged a focus group made up of women from diverse backgrounds in order to ensure that the messaging in their online service was accessible for users. Although the product itself did not change, the project leaders learned that the initial framing of an 'online course' made their product less accessible to their target group. Instead, they emphasised the visual aspects of their messaging and re-framed the product as a 'series of episodes' which was found to be more accessible for a diverse target group.

A key learning from user-testing with survivors of abuse highlighted that appropriate follow-up actions need to be part of the process. In one case, a project was collecting stories from women who had faced abuse to be used as real-life examples in their product to help potential service users identify abuse more effectively. The organisation ensured that the participants received individual support after the sessions and that they had the opportunity to provide feedback on the final products. Other projects that had crowd-sourced user feedback through online platforms found it more challenging to close the feedback loop.

Another observation made by some organisations is that the process of user-testing should ideally be empowering for those involved and should benefit participants in some way. A testimonial from one woman whose story was used in a product claimed that she felt empowered by the process as she was given an opportunity to share her negative experience with police with others.

Some projects that were unable to conduct user-testing at an early stage faced challenges later on, including a lack of uptake of their final product. For one project developing an app to address stalking, product development had considered many essential elements such as the legal and policy implications as well as pilot testing with violence against women (VAW) workers and consultation with national policy groups. However, the uptake on the final product was low, with only six women signing up. An evaluation of their approach highlighted that there were certain assumptions that they had not challenged, which could have been mitigated through early user-testing.

Domestic abuse organisations adopt an innovative approach

As mentioned above, TvA projects varied in terms of experience with tech and began their product development at various starting points. The projects also varied in their position on the spectrum of tech and domestic abuse experience. One of the ways in which organisations used a new approach to develop a product was through their partnerships with tech firms. Some organisations engaged their tech partners to build their understanding of tech within the domestic abuse space. Most of the organisations did not require support in finding tech partners with some coming into the grant with pre-existing partners. Overall, projects reported a positive working relationship with tech partners. In some cases, tech partners did more than implement the vision of the project by giving vital feedback. For example, one tech partner helped a project to gain a clearer understanding of potential safety issues with their prototype and suggested that the scale of the project should be smaller to keep users safe. Other projects used tech partners as a conduit to access further resources and external contacts that they drew upon for their products; for example, one tech partner signposted a project to a graphic illustrator. One outlier in the cohort was a tech organisation that was matched with a domestic abuse sector specialist organisation. A key learning overall is that these partnerships add value to the final product being developed.

Another aspect of projects taking a service design approach using the test-and-learn methodologies of digital development was internal tech capacity increasing within domestic abuse organisations. One organisation reported a ‘different mind-set’ with their focus now on maintaining continuous momentum around product development with others referencing the uptake of productivity technology such as Trello, making their work more efficient. Another mindset shift took place with general support provided by the tech partner CAST which helped organisations apply principles of user-centred design allowing them to simultaneously consider the ‘social problems’ as well as the ‘user problems’ that their digital products set out to address.

> *“This support has fundamentally changed our confidence and understanding of how to use technology and digital tools that can support and meet the needs of our stakeholders.” – TvA funded partner*

Sector experts take the lead

While tech partners were able to support projects in various ways, the initiatives were conceptualised and led by sector experts in the domestic abuse space. Experiences varied between different projects, but some common learnings emerged. Where relevant, project leaders found that linkages with statutory sectors were key for project success. This includes government services for survivors of domestic abuse as well as broader stakeholders. Securing buy-in from these key stakeholders ensures the legitimacy of the digital product from the perspective of both service users and industry workers.

Another consideration that projects faced was having to be prepared to manage an increased demand for their services brought in through their digital products. This is a concern for organisations using their tech solution to scale-up their user-base. Organisations had to plan for re-allocating staff or hiring new positions as well as obtain additional resources to manage the expected surge in referrals.

Product Journeys

A key finding that emerged from the evaluation was that the starting point of projects, organisation size, and level of experience in tech are not key determinants of the speed at which a product journey takes place. They are also not pivotal to project completion. This was apparent from an analysis of each of the product journeys, documenting the different stages of development and looking retrospectively at the end of the grant period. Some projects that started with a clear concept progressed slower, while others with less advanced starting points were able to launch their products by the end of the 12-month grant period. User-testing appeared to be a more telling factor for project success.

Wider outcomes from the TvA programme

roduct sustainability

Project sustainability was a general concern across funded partners and manifested in different ways for the projects. Some felt there was a risk of a 'vacuum of support' if their products required support beyond the grant period. This could be in the form of maintenance costs of web hosting and updating apps. Some grantees covered maintenance costs using core funding. Another challenge that arose for some organisations was the need for support to analyse the progress of their projects, particularly for smaller organisations. This could include usage data of users engaging with services or setting up feedback systems with existing users. Extra funding for marketing the product was also a consideration for some projects.

Key learnings and recommendations that emerged around sustainability include:

- Organisations should build in a sustainability plan from the outset to ensure the longevity of digital products.
- Funders need to imbed an 'exit plan' into the programme with clear expectations of financial sustainability.
- This should include proactive signposting to potential funding sources as well as third-party experts who can provide essential non-financial support.

Influence of the TvA programme

Encouraging innovation

Sourcing innovative solutions to challenges in the domestic abuse sector was an objective of the TvA programme and the design challenges presented to applicants were intended to be a framework that encouraged innovation. The evaluation found that for some funded partners, the design challenges

may have potentially limited innovation as it may have encouraged applicants to adapt pre-existing ideas to fit the framework. It was also suggested that Comic Relief revisits its emphasis on the 'newness' of ideas as existing ideas that fill a gap in the sector can also be powerful drivers of change. Finally, the evaluation findings suggested that the TvA programme's role was more to support a pre-existing appetite for innovation within the domestic abuse sector rather than spark new ideas.

Influencing other funders

External stakeholders consulted as part of the evaluation felt the TvA programme was influential, particularly to other funders who may decide to fund digital projects and who could benefit from the lessons learned from TvA. It was also suggested that the funding approach used in TvA could be useful across other thematic areas that wish to encourage digital projects as solutions to social issues.

Recommendations

The evaluation report outlined some key recommendations for Comic Relief. Some useful recommendations were also made around the support package the organisations accessed, however, the recommendations below focus on the structure of the funding programme itself. Points relevant to the project outcomes and wider influence outcomes are as follows:

- Comic relief should set clearer expectations around which stages of product development they want to fund from the outset.
- User-testing should be given stronger emphasis and future programmes could require its use more explicitly. The benefits to projects that conducted user-testing early on are clear and it was seen as unique compared to other grant projects the funded partners had worked with.
- In the absence of clear plans for follow-on funding, Comic Relief should actively signpost funded partners to future funding opportunities. This would ensure better sustainability and avoid a 'vacuum of support' at later stages of digital product development.
- There was appetite for more collaboration between funded partner projects and more opportunities to convene them for collective learning. This could extend to organising events to forge links across the domestic abuse sector beyond funded projects to share knowledge to the tech sector as well.
- Comic Relief should consider how transferable learning could be shared more widely to other contexts, particularly around how tech can enhance service user safety.

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