THE CASE FOR **COMMUNITY TECH** SUMMARY
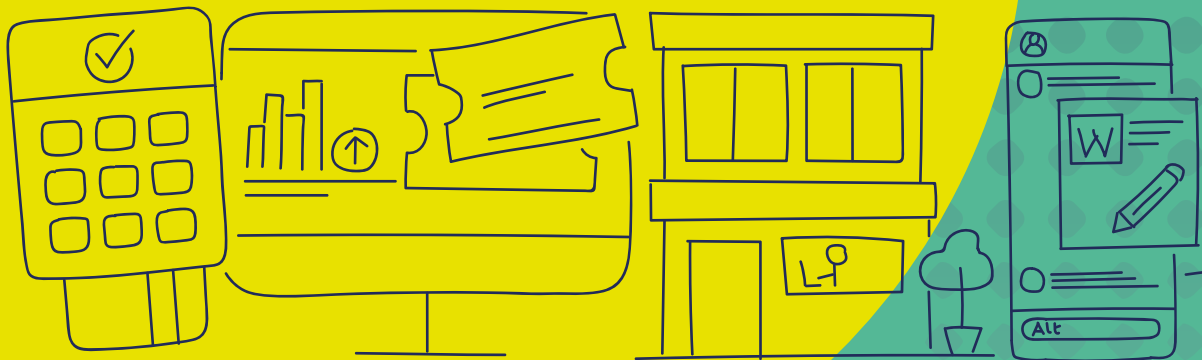
Authors: Anna Dent and Rachel Coldicutt

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Community groups exist outside of the market and the state. They work to achieve common goals, solve problems, or affect positive change in their communities. This work is wholly different from that of a profit-driven business, and therefore the technology that community groups use to support their activities reflects this.

Mainstream technology on the market is often too expensive and/or not suited to a community organisation's needs or values — **thus prompting the emergence of community tech**. Community tech is software or hardware that is created and used by community organisations and businesses, and remains accountable to the community. These provide alternatives to commercial technologies, which are often optimised for scale and growth. Some may be operational tools such as back-office systems designed for the specific activities undertaken by an organisation, and others may be tools that are aimed directly at the community.

There are two clear motivations for community organisations to create their own technologies. It meets their **operational needs**, where the market can't meet their requirements, and they can create it **in line with their values**, rather than using commercial tools that are in direct opposition. As such, these community organisations have a clear vision and a well-defined understanding of the problems they are trying to solve. They can articulate why a tech solution is most appropriate, and how it can complement and support their core values.

Some examples include:

- **The Bristol Cable** are an independent local news outlet, and they built a bespoke CRM for membership management and democratic participation. This piece of software is cheaper, better suited to their needs, and upholds their values.

- **Chilli Studios** is a creative charity supporting those experiencing mental health difficulties. Since the pandemic, they have been working on their own online social platform to keep in touch with members and share their creative work. This is an alternative to Facebook, which provided an unhealthy environment for their members.

- **Knowle West Media Centre** is an arts and education centre based in Bristol who produced an app for local residents with solar panels, which allows them to keep track of their energy production and usage.

Investment in the creation of community tech will not only benefit the community organisations that engage with it, but also the wider technology ecosystem and beyond. This is because community tech seeks to do more than use technology to increase financial capital; it is technology that works for the people who need it, and prioritises diversity over replicability.

There is very little diversity in the wider tech ecosystem: **place-based communities only have a small handful of online spaces at their disposal, and these are run by profit-driven companies** (such as Facebook or NextDoor) who do not reinvest in these communities, or share their technology so that people may adapt it for their specific needs. In the physical world, it is understood that our social spaces should be rich and varied — there are parks, libraries, churches, cafes, and so on — however, online, the majority of digital spaces available are equivalent to a shopping centre.

Community technology has an important role to play in ensuring that any value arising from a given piece of technology is felt by the community it serves, and not by some higher power. Carolyn Hassan, CEO of Knowle West Media Centre, explains that technology which is accountable to a place-based community can help "value to stick to a place".[1]

In order to build and maintain community tech, the sector needs access to the right set of skills. We found that the community sector can be split into three distinct groups: those who are **users** of technology, those who are **curators** of existing technologies, and those who are **creators** of new community technology. It's clear that the majority of the sector is made up of users, and a very small minority are actually creators.

With the above in mind, we recommend starting with the following:

- **Investing in expanding the pool of community tech creators** to diversify the ecosystem and give community organisations and others a wider choice of hardware and software

- **Helping ensure the expanded pool of creators is representative of the UK population**, actively reaching out to and supporting under-represented groups

- **Supporting the development of equitable governance models** and fostering a network of communities that share ideas and establish standards

- **Funding people for strategic delivery rather than for the development of emerging technologies or creation of one-off projects**

- **Investing in building medium and longer-term infrastructure**, including access to skills and resources to support maintenance and "business as usual". This will unlock more capacity for innovation, strategic forward planning, and collaboration.

Our hypothesis is that investment in community tech will result in:

- **Increased resilience and autonomy** for individual community organisations, collections of community organisations and communities themselves

- **Increased social and economic value** for communities

- **Alternative, maintainable infrastructure** for places that is not dependent on the business strategies of platforms, or closed, privately owned software

- **An alternative to big tech and platform dominance** that contributes to a broader community tech ecosystem, and delivers benefits to society

- A model for a **more maintainable, more climate-friendly** approach for the technology industry.

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1   Carolyn Hassan, comment in a Community tech workshop, facilitated by Promising Trouble in May 2022

About Promising Trouble

Promising Trouble is a social enterprise, committed to growing awareness of the social impacts of technologies and building alternative systems, technologies and communities of practice.

promisingtrouble.net

About Power to Change

Power to Change is the independent trust that supports community businesses in England. Community businesses are locally rooted, community-led, trade for community benefit and make life better for local people.

powertochange.org.uk