Federation Learning Report
Insights from the Co-op Foundation’s social enterprise programme exploring the impacts of technology (2018-2020)
We want to thank all the social enterprises involved in this programme for their unwavering commitment to doing things better and doing things differently. We are hugely grateful for their energy, positivity and commitment to this programme and the community they’ve all helped to create. To our fantastic thought leaders – Lauren Coulman, Cassie Robinson, Iona Lawrence, Rachel Coldicutt and Emer Coleman – for their curiosity, guidance and leadership. To the team at The Federation who helped bring to life the vision of this programme, creating a space for like-minded entrepreneurs to flourish. To all the people who played a role in supporting the community of social enterprises. And, finally, a big thank you to Emer Coleman and Andrew Clarke for their enthusiasm and leadership in establishing the programme.
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On the face of it, the Co-op Foundation’s partnership with Luminate was a departure from the norm when we launched in 2018. At the time, we were best known for our ground-breaking Belong programme that was helping thousands of young people to tackle loneliness. A shift towards digital and tech ethics was, at first glance at least, a very different world.

But underpinning both programmes – and the successes that we’ve enjoyed in each – is the power and impact of co-operation.

As Co-op’s charity, we want to help people challenge inequality and co-operate for change so they can share a fairer future. We’re led by our co-operative values and we’re passionate that they, too, inspire and inform our partners. Within our Federation Programme, this has encouraged us to:

- Support early-stage social enterprises that use technology to reduce inequality with funded desk space in a co-working hub. Here, partners could share learning, co-operate on joint ventures and increase each other’s impact.
- Facilitate public events that ask broader questions about the role of technology in society. This has eventually led to Noisy Cricket’s creation of the Greater Manchester Responsible Tech Collective, a collaborative group of organisations that are passionate about tackling issues, including racial inequality and data ethics.
- Empower local leaders to question the role of technology in society, and to start to find answers for their own communities through the Community Tech Fellowship programme.

I am immensely proud of everything we’ve learned and achieved with our partners over the past three years. There was a wonderful synergy about doing this work in Manchester. Home of the industrial revolution that changed the world in the 1800s, it’s now at the heart of the digital revolution that is reshaping all our lives this century. The pioneering programmes we’ve supported also remind me of the Rochdale Pioneers who founded the Co-op back in 1844.

As you may expect, no report published this year could ignore the impact of Covid. We discuss that in the pages to follow and wonder what more we could have done as a collective and a match-funder to strengthen communities in 2020.

I’m a passionate advocate of technology and the possibilities it provides for society and the third sector. That’s why the Co-op Foundation also funded the Charity Digital Code of Practice to improve digital use for charities UK-wide. What our Federation programme shows us is that there is work still to be done to shape technology as a tool to tackle inequality. I hope our future work with Luminate will begin to ask and find answers to this question.

Thank you to everyone who’s worked so hard on our programme over the past three years. I hope you enjoy reading our report and that those interested in supporting early-stage social enterprises and exploring the broader social and ethical impacts of tech find it a useful tool.
Introduction

In January 2018, Luminate awarded the Co-op Foundation a grant of $940,000 running until December 2020. The grant was to be put towards a programme of support for social enterprises and broader community engagement on digital and civic innovation for charitable purposes. The programme was based at The Federation, in Manchester, an open community of digital businesses and social innovators that existed to provide a backbone for collaboration and a forum for shared learning and educational opportunities. The Federation would also contribute to a more inclusive digital economy for Manchester and north west England.

The Co-op Foundation secured this funding working in close partnership with the Co-op to design and deliver:

- A programme of support for early-stage social enterprises, with a focus on organisations using digital technology to achieve social impact and financial sustainability. This support was in the form of:
  - Funded co-working desks at The Federation
  - Access to training and specialist advisers
  - Small grants to support organisations’ overall development

- A programme of thought leadership and community engagement exploring the broader social and ethical impacts of technology, mostly led by early-stage social enterprises
Executive summary

Our programme of support for social enterprises and community engagement on digital and civic innovation was a collaborative effort from the beginning. The highlights outlined throughout this report are due to the collective effort of our partners and their openness to co-operation.

A summary of highlights

Collaboration:
Providing a co-working environment of like-minded organisations resulted in several exciting collaborative projects. The combination of co-working desk space and facilitated group-based engagement created the conditions for shared understanding, trust and collaboration. This enabled social enterprises to enhance their reach, impact and financial sustainability.

Movement building:
We supported Noisy Cricket to launch the Greater Manchester Responsible Tech Collective, a collaborative effort of organisations across the public and private sector that aims to bring the humanity back to tech. Throughout the programme, this collective engaged people from across Greater Manchester’s different sectors, driving action around design ethics, data ethics, diversity and inclusion, and digital exclusion.

Capacity-building civil society:
We supported Cassie Robinson, Iona Lawrence and Rachel Coldicutt to deliver the Community Tech Fellowship and inspire a group of dynamic community leaders to actively engage with the ways technology is changing society. Fellows were able to translate broad themes about data, power and inequality into the context of their own specialisms and identify areas of need, both for their own communities and across Greater Manchester.
Executive summary

This was a new area of funding for the Co-op Foundation and we wanted to capture our learning and challenges. This would help to inform our own work and enable us to share insight with other organisations that have an interest in supporting social enterprises or exploring the impacts of technology. Some of our learnings include:

Eligibility and conversion:
Our eligibility criteria for our early-stage social enterprise support required applicants to already be a recognised form of social enterprise. This excluded organisations that were already doing great work but hadn’t had the time, capacity or expertise to incorporate as an eligible legal entity. We later adjusted our criteria, provisionally offering support to previously ineligible organisations on the condition they would become a recognised form of social enterprise within the first six months of their support. This enabled us to support a much broader range of early-stage start-ups who were closely aligned to the overall aims of the programme.

An appetite to engage in tech ethics:
Through the Community Tech Fellowship pilot, we learned there is both an appetite and a need for community leaders to engage in the ways technology is changing society. In the UK tech ethics debate, the concept of the “digital society” can be over-generalised, and the layers of specialist knowledge that are needed can make it difficult to apply theory to practice. The Fellows translated big, broad themes about data, power and inequality into the context of their own specialisms incredibly quickly, and pinpointed specific areas of need – both for their own communities and for Greater Manchester.
Overview of activities

Early-stage enterprise support:

- Supported 26 early-stage social enterprises with funded co-working desk space for up to 18-months
- Awarded £109,000 in grants to early-stage social enterprises, to support progress towards achieving their organisational objectives as well as respond to the impacts of Covid-19
- Commissioned a series of group-based capacity-building workshops, on topics such as social impact, strategic planning and market proposition
- Commissioned Noisy Cricket to identify needs and create the conditions for collaboration between the Ethical Enterprise community

Thought leadership and community engagement:

- We commissioned Noisy Cricket and Cassie Robinson to facilitate practical, collaborative responses to issues around technology, digital and data, including:
  - Building the capacity of civil society to take a leading role in shaping the impacts of tech on society through the Community Tech Fellowship
  - The formation of the Greater Manchester Responsible Tech Collective, a collaborative effort of organisations across the public and private sector, looking to bring the humanity back to tech
- We supported a programme of events exploring the issues and opportunities in tech, digital and data, through £20,800 worth of grants to Tech for Good Live
Achievements

By the end of their support programme, our early-stage social enterprises reported that:

- 100% had identified specific benefits gained through the programme’s networks
- 100% had described meaningful progress towards their social impact objectives
- 94% had described financial growth, including new income streams
- 89% had described progress towards their plans for improved use of technology
Collaboration

Collaboration has been described as a key benefit of the programme by social enterprises. Providing a co-working environment of like-minded organisations has resulted in several exciting collaborative projects. The combination of co-working desk space and facilitated group-based engagement created the conditions for shared understanding, trust and collaboration. This has enabled social enterprises to enhance their reach, impact and financial sustainability. Examples of collaborative initiatives within the community include:

- **The Education Collective:** This was formed of six social enterprises working collectively to shape strategic priorities for digital and informal learning in Greater Manchester. The collective has had engagement from the Department for Education, local government and Co-op Academies Trust on an ambitious programme to establish and embed digital learning standards. These organisations are working collaboratively to fund, research, design and test more holistic approaches to learning.

- **The ‘GoDigital’ programme:** Funded by Greater Manchester Combined Authority and delivered jointly by three social enterprises, this programme works across the north west to link schools with the digital industry and teach core digital skills. Read more in the case study, right.

**Case study: GoDigital**

“Like other parts of the country, Greater Manchester has a widening digital skills gap, which is impacting the performance of local companies that are struggling to recruit diverse talent into digital roles. We partnered with two other social enterprises supported through the Co-op Foundation’s Federation Programme, Digital Advantage and Hive Learning. Together, we created the GoDigital project in 2018 in response to a tender from the Greater Manchester Combined Authority which aimed to develop the talent pipeline. This collaborative programme has since engaged more than 5,000 students across 55 schools.

“We felt that co-location enabled putting together the bid easier and by securing the bid, we’ve been able to scale up our impact. This, in turn, has meant we are now able to evidence working at this level, which has put us in a better position for securing this size of grant in the future.”

Joanne Morfee, Co-founder, GoDigital
Movement Building

Noisy Cricket was funded to launch the Greater Manchester Responsible Tech Collective, a collaborative effort of organisations across the public and private sector that aim to bring the humanity back to tech. Highlights from the collective include:

- Engaging people from more than 60 different organisations representing different sectors and driving action around design ethics, data ethics, diversity and inclusion, and digital exclusion, through the following projects:
  
  **Responsible Tech Diagnostic Tool:** An organisational tool to influence strategic decision-making around responsible tech
  
  **Racial Equality in Tech:** How representation and innovation in tech can be increased by understanding the experiences of people of colour and tackling racial inequality
  
  **People Powered Smart City:** Ensuring the concerns and considerations of citizens are integral to future ‘SmartCity’ design, data capture and usage
  
  **Citizen-led Security Standards:** Exploring and establishing the security needs of citizens when it comes to their own data

- Ethical Tech Ecosystem Mapping: Raising awareness and facilitating understanding around ethical tech practice
  
  • Helping to shape local government strategy, business practise and public policy.
  
  • Giving an increased platform to some of the social enterprises, showcasing their work and giving a real sense of movement building.
  
  • Facilitating wider conversations about social value and co-production. This has highlighted the opportunity to establish co-creation best practice at the heart of the collective’s project work, particularly as they begin shaping a co-operative governance structure as part of their scaling and sustainability plans.

More information on the Collective’s work can be found in the ‘Further Reading’ section of this report.

Pictured, Annette Joseph from Diverse & Equal. Annette worked with Vimla Appadoo, from Honey Badger, to research the experiences of people of colour in tech.
Capacity-building civil society

We provided funding to Cassie Robinson, Iona Lawrence and Rachel Coldicutt who set out to inspire a group of dynamic community leaders in Greater Manchester to actively engage with the ways technology is changing society. In total, nine Fellows joined their Community Tech Fellowship and they committed to engaging in a series of monthly workshops, group work and wider reading.

The fellowship wrapped up in December 2020 and, in their last session, the Fellows shared the thoughts and ideas the fellowship had sparked in them. This included ideas about:

- How libraries can help LGBTQI+ refugees become more confident in the ways data about them is used and captured ahead of the 2021 Census.
- A call for more open and accessible data around energy use, to better support people experiencing fuel poverty.
- A case for more inclusive data about domestic violence. Afro-Caribbean women are under-represented in ONS domestic violence data, but the information is not granular enough to inform the provision of better services.

Through the programme, Fellows were able to translate broad themes about data, power and inequality into the context of their own specialisms and identify areas of need, both for their own communities and for Greater Manchester. The Fellows have started organising their own follow-on projects and Rachel Coldicutt is exploring how this pilot project can be evolved into a repeatable programme.
Challenges and learning

Eligibility and conversion
When we launched our funded co-working offer in 2018, uptake in applications was low. Our eligibility criteria required organisations to already be a recognised form of social enterprise, as per Social Enterprise UK’s definition. This ensured our charitable funds would be used to support exclusively charitable activities, especially when our offer of support was organisational capacity-building. However, we learned this excluded organisations who were already doing great work but hadn’t had the time, capacity or expertise to convert their organisation into a recognised form of social enterprise.

We re-visited our approach and relaxed the criteria to welcome applications from start-ups that weren’t recognised forms of social enterprise but displayed evidence of delivering charitable activities and had an interest in converting. For these organisations, we provisionally offered project support, rather than organisational support, for six months with the condition of becoming a recognised form of social enterprise within that timeframe. In addition to this, we provided funding for organisations to access specialist governance support – this tailored advice has enabled enterprises to take good governance decisions and ultimately become eligible for the support offered. Making changes to initial eligibility has enabled us to support nine additional organisations that would otherwise have been ineligible for the programme.

Although the new six-month eligibility offer ensured we could support a broader range of enterprises, some found the conversion more time-consuming and stressful than anticipated. This has mainly been the case where big and unexpected changes, such as financial insecurity, also happened to the organisation and where conversion was perceived as a distraction or additional hurdle at a time of organisational stress.

Freeing up founders’ time
We consistently found that social enterprise founders struggled to free up time to attend the full suite of support available, such as workshops and events. However, they continued to also express regret at not attending, particularly where the information or support would have been of significant value and where other enterprises have fed back positively about particular sessions.

Helping founders to prioritise development opportunities over day-to-day running was a real challenge.

We introduced development grants of £2.5k per social enterprise for founders to use to cover the costs of organisational development activities, such as HR or accounting consultancy, new equipment, or providing some additional capacity and time for founders to engage in these kinds of activities.
Challenges and learning

The impact of the pandemic

The pandemic and subsequent government lockdown restrictions had a significant impact on the programme throughout 2020. Due to government guidelines, most of the community moved out of The Federation building and became geographically dispersed. Like other organisations, they faced disruption and delays to plans and had to adapt in response to new and uncertain challenges.

We made several changes to our social enterprise support offer in response to Covid to ensure budget was re-diverted to where it was needed most. Between March and December 2020, we re-purposed over £160,000 of funding directly to social enterprises by:

- Transferring the cost of funded desks directly to social enterprises
- Relaxing the criteria of development grants so they could be prioritised for more urgent needs
- Extending our support offer by up to three months
- Awarding emergency grants to all social enterprises to respond to new and uncertain challenges

Noisy Cricket also created virtual opportunities for ongoing engagement and peer support within the social enterprise community. They facilitated ‘soap boxes’ and informal socials, which roughly two-thirds of the community regularly engaged with. A key development was a skills audit carried out with the social enterprises, which focused on identifying development needs during the pandemic. This fed into our decision to commission external experts to provide one-to-one learning sessions on forward planning, crisis management and bid-writing. This offer received very positive feedback.

The closure of The Federation

The closure of The Federation building had created uncertainty within the community. The building provided social enterprises with the space they needed to work, meet and deliver events, with Federation staff playing a key role in signposting and connecting the community to wider networks. The commitment to the Federation community remains and was represented in the willingness to listen to their aspirations around the further iteration of the programme and work collaboratively using relationships in the wider Co-op movement to find a new space. When news of the closure was shared with the community, they expressed a strong intention to find a new space together. During this process, the community has discussed what’s important to them about a co-working space, which included:

- Access to meeting, event, storage and communal space
- Run by an organisation who is ethically aligned to the community
- Has staff who can help facilitate connections and support community events

The majority of the community have collectively decided to move over the road to Holyoake House, run by Co-operatives UK, which will be co-designing how that space looks and is managed alongside the community. In the absence of any physical space in the interim, the community are trialling the use of ‘Gather Town’, an online co-working space with private booths, meeting rooms and event spaces.
Challenges and learning

Written by Rachel Coldicutt

The aim of the programme was to see if we could inspire a group of dynamic community leaders in Greater Manchester to actively engage with the ways technology is changing society.

The active role that communities play in using, shaping, and tidying up after technology is often underestimated. But — as the pandemic has shown — the wisdom and generosity of neighbourhoods and informal networks, committed campaigners and established charities is still a vital source of innovation in a healthy society. Yet people from those communities are often only invited to discussions about “R&D” or “innovation” when they are being called upon to modernise or become more efficient. And that feels like a missed opportunity.

We didn’t want to interrogate digital capacity or build digital skills, as there are plenty of other programmes doing that. The purpose of this project was to find out what would, or could, change when a group of leaders was immersed in some of the most urgent issues for technology and social justice and introduced to some inspiring thinkers and practitioners.

We learnt that there is both an appetite and a need for community leaders to engage with the ways technology is changing society. In the UK tech ethics debate, the concept of the “digital society” can be over-generalised, and the layers of specialist knowledge that are needed can make it difficult to apply theory to practice. The Fellows translated big, broad themes about data, power and inequality into the context of their own specialisms incredibly quickly, and pinpointed specific areas of need – both for their own communities and for Greater Manchester.

Cassie, Iona and I learnt a lot about the design of the course. This was neither an academic course, nor a formal piece of professional development; it was more like an immersion, and we’re very thankful for the patience and good cheer of the Fellows, who helped us to work it out as we went along. For future iterations, we learnt that we need to leave more space for reflection and group work, and to be clearer on learning outcomes.

Some of the Fellows have already started organising a follow-on project, with a greater reach across the voluntary and community sector in Greater Manchester. And after some evaluation work, I have been exploring what needs to be in place to turn the pilot into a more robust and repeatable programme.
Three years ago, the Co-op Foundation and Luminate asked the team at Noisy Cricket to explore how we might establish Greater Manchester as an exemplar for ethical tech. So, what have we learnt?

Through establishing the Responsible Tech Collective we learnt that before all else, ethical tech is about putting people first when it comes to the creation and deployment of technology, and thinking holistically about the impact of the tech digital solutions we create and use on communities, society and the environment too.

It comprises Tech-for-Good – which speaks to externally focused-products and services offered to more holistically serve humanity, beyond individual users and competitive industries - and responsible tech – which concerns the internally driven processes and practices that teams and organisations use to create digital solutions. Civic tech (somewhat) bridges the two.

With Tech-for-Good Live leading the charge in supporting and upskilling the third sector, and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) pioneering ethical approaches to data in the public sector, what quickly emerged were gaps around responsible tech understanding and action within the region’s businesses, local government and national bodies, plus, civil society more broadly.

Bringing together organisations as diverse as Co-op and the BBC, the Department for Education and Manchester City Council, plus, Thoughtworks, Code Computerlove, Open Data Manchester and Reason Digital, the collective recognised that while strides were being made in diversity and data ethics, design ethics and digital exclusion needed greater attention across the city-region.

Understanding these cross-sector and community organisation needs was paramount to ongoing engagement, and in a world where Amazon’s approach to workers’ rights and Facebook’s impact on global democracy is eroding trust, better meeting the expectations of digital users and tech employees emerged as a key requirement (alongside the desire to mitigate bad PR).

Understanding that investing in design and data ethics - alongside ensuring inclusion both internally and externally to the organisation - could also contribute to the design, development and deployment of better products and services and enhanced innovation, engaging in responsible tech became a no-brainer.

Fuelled by the collective’s shared ambition to establish Greater Manchester as an exemplar for ethical tech - with a mission to bring home the humanity to tech by putting people first, always - we committed to working together to share learning and best practice, and co-create solutions underpinned by responsible tech disciplines. The question was, how?

While awareness of some of the challenges around data ethics (e.g. GDPR) and diversity (e.g. gender representation) was good, understanding how to best approach such practices was patchy, with even less insight into the issues underlying digital exclusion and the opportunities afforded through ethical design.

Working with a bevy of values-led organisations and a group of responsible tech pioneers based in The Federation, the collective decided that aligning with priority areas for the region’s digital ecosystem would best enable us to take action, and inherently raise awareness and improve understanding of responsible tech practices, processes, policy and governance.

As a rapidly growing tech hub, with investment already underway in smart city technology and cyber security, and with a growing interest in ethnic equality and digital inclusion during the pandemic, we recognised an opportunity to contribute to existing conversations across Greater Manchester, and engage influential partners already active in each of the four focus areas.

Leveraging the city-region’s socially and environmentally progressive history - engendered through a culture of cooperation, issue-led activism and progressive changemakers - we brought together cross-sector and community project teams to address responsible tech challenges across each, all embedded with participation or people-first approaches.
Future plans

The Co-op Foundation has been awarded a continuation grant from Luminate to carry on supporting people affected by inequality to speak out and make change together. The next phase of the programme is grounded in our learning around capacity building, community building and collective action. Over the next two years, we will aim to support people across Greater Manchester to:

- Challenge the ways in which technology and data can reinforce existing inequalities.
- Co-operate to build trust and deliver digitally-enabled products and services that are inclusive, respect people’s rights and safeguard their privacy.

Subscribe to our blog and follow us on Twitter to hear updates on our future plans with this programme.
Social enterprises we supported

Access Hospitality
Uses a platform which breaks down tasks using iconography. Access Hospitality provides adults with disabilities the opportunity to gain meaningful, long-term employment, primarily within the hospitality sector.

Amity
Supports communities to co-create solutions to issues affecting them and enables more people to have a say in local decisions through digital democracy.

Belong
A national professional network of individuals and organisations that will champion integration and cohesion locally, nationally and internationally, especially via a digital platform.

Jomila
Provides science, tech, health and inclusion activities for disadvantaged communities.

Bounceback Food
Fights food poverty by teaching people how to cook and donating to foodbanks.

Children’s University
Expands children’s horizons by putting familiar activities such as after-school sports and clubs on the same online platform as culture and arts activities, STEM opportunities, and FE and employer-led outreach programmes.

digital advantage
Provides industry-led digital training and work experience to young people in Greater Manchester and beyond. They have a dedicated programme for special educational needs and disability schools and students in Greater Manchester, linking talented students with progressive employers in the region.

LifeSkills
Equips young people with digital thinking skills, so they can make sense of information – and misinformation.

DiversE
Empowers organisational change through workshops and events to increase the diversity within the tech sector in Manchester.

Disposal
Is developing a waste management system using data to improve the efficiency of waste disposal and its environmental impact.

Ethics Kit
Is developing a collection of best practice methods and tools that support design teams to make considered, ethical decisions when developing a tech product or service.

Foodinate
For every Foodinate item sold, the restaurant funds a nourishing meal for a local person in need. We try to match each restaurant with a food-giving charity in the same area.

Treehub
Delivers film workshops designed to raise the awareness of life limiting and long-term conditions that can affect mental health.

Happen Together CIC
Tackles inequality and detoxifies public and political spaces through coaching, facilitation and digital tools.

Hive
Provides digital making experiences for young people from economically disadvantaged communities, aiming to give them access to the city’s thriving tech sector.
Social enterprises we supported

- Inovate <her> runs courses to get young women into coding and digital.
- Invisible (Manchester) works with people who have been affected by homelessness and trains them to become walking tour guides.
- MIC provides training to charities on how podcasts can be used as a tool to amplify their voices and raise their profile.
- NC builds people-powered movements to achieve social impact, through bringing diverse groups, including businesses, charities and the public sector, together with impacted people to develop and deliver innovative solutions for equality.

- Open Data Manchester helps people, organisations and communities use data better through advice, advocacy, events, research, support and training.
- PII Pursuing Individual Excellence supports young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to improve their communication and digital skills through coaching sessions and workshops.
- The Politics Project supports young people to engage and learn about democracy. This is achieved through technology, such as their Digital Surgeries with local MPs and their online Democracy Hubs.
- reply uses co-design principles and research techniques to help community organisations make the right digital solutions to human problems.
- The People’s Powerhouse connects local people to power to create inclusive growth across the north through their series of events and online engagement.

- WeAreASSIF: A digital community for peer-to-peer support, for those worried or suffering from mental health illnesses.
# Further reading

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About the Co-op Foundation

The Co-op Foundation is Co-op’s charity. We help people challenge inequality and co-operate for change so they can share a fairer future. We’re here to make a difference long-term but for now we’re focusing on:

• Sharing what we’ve learned tackling youth loneliness so that others can make a difference long-term.
• Funding in partnership with others to help people do even more in their communities.
• Helping voices to be heard from communities that feel the effects of inequality, and investing in organisations that truly represent those who are often ignored.

About Luminate

Luminate funds and supports non-profit and for-profit organisations and advocates for policies and actions that can drive change. They prioritise delivering impact in four connected areas that underpin strong societies: Civic Empowerment, Data & Digital Rights, Financial Transparency and Independent Media.