



Quartet
Community
Foundation

Bristol
North Somerset
South Gloucestershire
Bath & North East Somerset

Local philanthropy for
the West of England

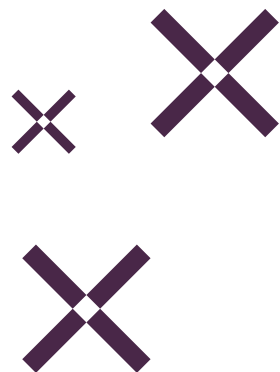
Insights Report 2025

In View

The Digital Divide



Setting the scene for local charitable giving



Contents

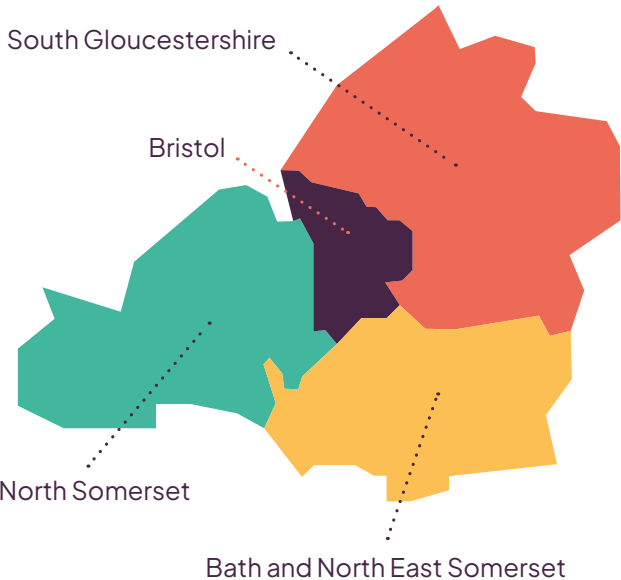
About Quartet

Quartet is the local community foundation for the West of England – the second largest in the country – helping drive lasting, positive change in our communities.

Our expert philanthropy team connects local people who want to donate to local causes they care about. Led by our knowledge and insight, we encourage and direct local philanthropy to where it is needed most.

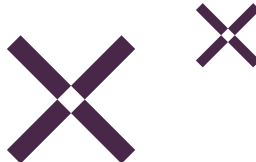
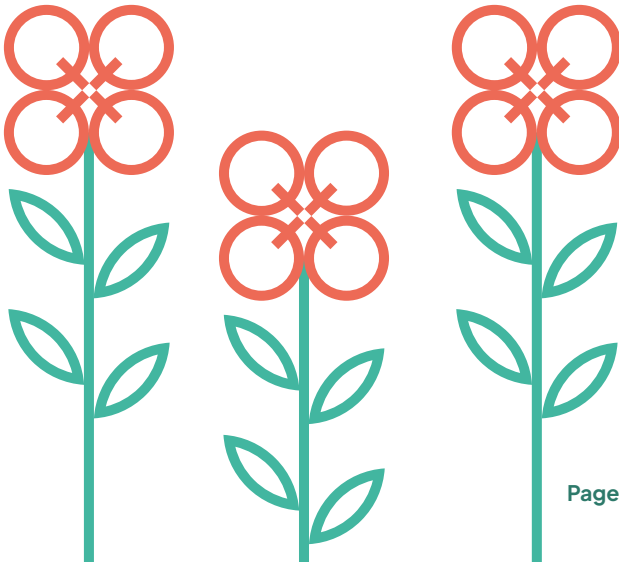
Through the generosity of our donors, we are proud that last year we awarded over 1000 grants to voluntary and community sector organisations in our area worth more than £5.2 million.

Our grants help grassroots organisations continue their vital work, whether they're addressing local issues, improving local places or providing essential support and opportunities to people most in need.



About In View

In View reports contain up-to-date information and reflections on social needs in our area. We produce them to share learning, help guide local giving and showcase ways that philanthropy can help. If you have questions or feedback on this report or would like to discuss our work in more detail, please get in touch at philanthropy@quartetcf.org.uk or visit page 22 for other contact details.



Introduction: Bridging the Digital Divide

Close your eyes for a moment and think about the last 24 hours: how many times have you picked up your phone or accessed a computer? How many messages did you send to colleagues, friends or family? How many times did you tap a card or phone to make a payment...?

For most of us, digital tools and services are woven through our personal and professional lives. From accessing healthcare or paying for goods, to socialising, learning and work, many of us spend an increasing amount of time on our devices, online. The West of England has been right at the forefront of this digital movement as part of the 'Silicon Gorge', a successful hub for digital research and innovation and with a growing number of tech businesses based here.

It's an area where change is happening fast. And so, rightly, more attention is now being paid to those who find it challenging to participate in this new digital world. Without concerted effort, the 'digital divide' between those with the skills and access they need and those without will widen, especially as public services like the NHS move to a 'digital first' model. We could find that in the push to drive our lives online, increasing numbers of our residents will be unable to meet their basic needs.

Our voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations are important partners in tackling this digital divide, as the Government's recent digital inclusion strategy² acknowledges. These organisations have the knowledge and relationships to ensure that support is tailored to residents' needs and that no-one misses out.

But VCSE organisations are themselves having to keep up with a changing digital landscape, with new tools like generative artificial intelligence (AI) making waves in the sector. Evidence shows that larger organisations are managing to harness these tools but smaller organisations, like those we support, risk being left behind.

There's a huge amount of expertise and passion locally for using tech for good. Addressing digital exclusion is an area that we know needs more investment, so we'd love to increase our support for digital inclusion through both grant funding and our pro bono service, ProHelp. Aligning our priorities to the wider strategic goals of organisations such as Tech4Good South West and our Combined Authority, philanthropy can help ensure the digital world works for everyone in our region.



Did you know?



The West of England is one of the largest, most productive and most innovative centres for tech in the UK.³

98,000

But there are at least 98,000 households with children in our region that fall below the Minimum Digital Living Standard.⁴



"Whilst we are using technology across all aspects of our organisation we lack in-house skills and expertise in this area. It is too costly for us at the moment to employ a specific expert. This often means we take longer to implement tech developments that would support our strategic goals."

VCSE Digital Skills Survey respondent (see p10)

Digital exclusion

Digital exclusion is strongly linked to poverty. But the cost of devices or broadband isn't the only factor. People can be excluded due to a lack of skills, knowledge or confidence to navigate the online world safely, or because the infrastructure required for decent connectivity is missing, as in some rural areas.

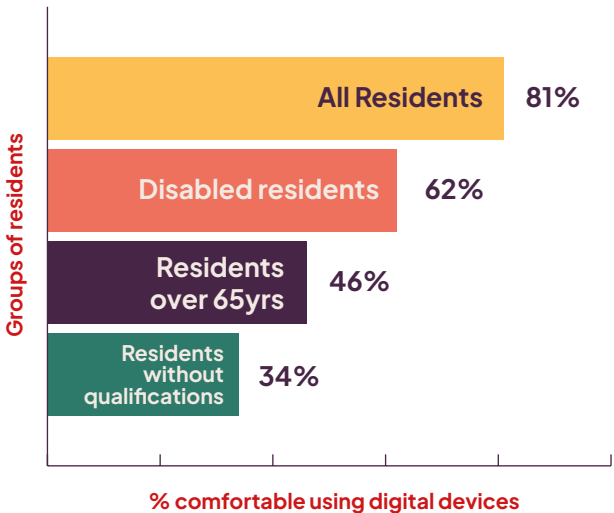
Being unable to use online tools and services can be isolating, and leaves people unable to access information or get the support they need. People most likely to be digitally excluded are, among others, those in low-income households, people with few/no qualifications, disabled people, older people, people with health conditions, people for whom English is not their first language and people experiencing homelessness⁴ or in temporary housing. Nationally, more than 1 in 10 people lack basic digital skills.⁵ This signals the need for more training and support, tailored to the needs of the most excluded people.

13% are non-users or very limited users of the internet

The West of England Combined Authority (WECA) estimates that over 13% of people in the WECA region are non-users or very limited users of the internet. This means that over 100,000 local residents may need more support to access essential services online.⁴

Young people in low-income households are more likely to face digital exclusion: 23% of young people who receive free school meals don't have broadband at home, compared to 15% of their peer group overall.⁶

In Bristol, 81% of residents report being comfortable using digital services but this drops to 62% among disabled people, 46% of the over 65s, and just 34% of people without formal qualifications.⁷



55%

More than half (55%) of charities are offering the people they support some form of help with digital inclusion, rising to 64% of charities led by older people.⁸



Supporting people to increase their digital skills for the workplace would benefit the economy to the tune of £23bn.¹⁰

Ofcom monitors homes and businesses that fall beneath the Universal Service Obligation (USO), designed to improve broadband availability by establishing a legal right to access. For most of our urban areas, all buildings meet this standard. But in Hutton & Locking ward in North Somerset nearly 4% of premises don't meet the standard, making this one of the worst places in the country for connectivity. Households in Marshfield and Wick in South Gloucestershire, and Chew Magna and Bishop Sutton in Bath and North East Somerset, also lack sufficient broadband access.⁹



Improving Lives of Older People

Improving Lives of Older People (ILOP) was formed by older people who'd been researching loneliness with the University of Bristol. Off the back of what they found, they set up a weekly Talk and Tech group in Bedminster, Bristol, to give people aged 55+ an opportunity to socialise and learn a new skill.

"With a grant of £3,970, we expanded our regular sessions at the Tobacco Factory into other community spaces, helping us reach a wider audience. These sessions provide a warm and welcoming place for participants to socialise, develop digital skills, learn from peers and connect with others in their community. We cover the cost of transport so that attendees and volunteers with mobility issues can attend.

Student volunteers from the University of Bristol not only provide valuable extra support but also create an intergenerational dynamic

that enhances the sessions. Older attendees appreciate the patience and knowledge of the younger volunteers, while students gain hands-on experience working within the community.

The response from participants has reinforced how valuable these sessions are, not just in helping people develop digital skills but also in reducing social isolation. Many attendees have expressed greater confidence in using technology to access doctors and other services and explore new interests."



"Thanks to funding from Quartet, we have been able to run sessions where older people can connect with others whilst learning useful digital skills. For some, it may be the only contact they have all week. The funding has been vital for our continuation and allowed us to reach people who might otherwise have been unable to take part, and has been essential in removing barriers to access and improving older people's lives and online skills."

Rob Thomas , ILOP



"When I came to my first session, I was nervous, as I feel I am very slow to pick new things up and have large gaps in my knowledge. I found the Talk and Tech team very kind and patient and what I appreciated most was the one-to-one personal time and encouragement."

Talk & Tech participant



Digital skills and the community sector

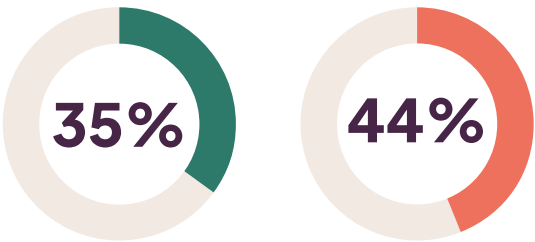
As well as trying to foster digital inclusion among the people they support, many VCSE organisations are grappling with digital developments themselves.

But making the most of digital tools requires that organisations have the capacity, training and funding to explore and adopt them, and for the majority of organisations this is far from the case. VCSE sector organisations report being highly over-stretched, trying to meet increasing need with fewer and fewer resources.¹¹

National studies of the digital needs of VCSE sector organisations provide useful insights, but we wanted to know where funding could meet the specific needs of organisations in the West of England. So we partnered with Tech4Good South West on a local survey to ask our VCSE sector where they are at with all things digital and what help they need to make the most of the new digital world. The findings highlight how important it is that local VCSE organisations are able to properly invest in digital infrastructure, and have the time and resources needed to develop digital strategies and enhance digital skills.



VCSE Digital Skills Survey: West of England results



Our local VCSE sector is a little behind the curve, with a greater proportion of people reporting that their organisation is just starting out or exploring digital tools: only 35% report being at a more advanced stage, compared with 44% nationally. Smaller VCSE organisations across the board are more likely to be at an early stage of exploring digital than larger ones.¹



59% of people reported feeling either very confident or confident in using digital tools in their day-to-day work. But over a third (36%) were only 'somewhat confident', meaning they can use basic tools but struggle with advanced features or new technologies, or are confident with some tools but less confident with others.¹



Most organisations are using some digital tools in their everyday work, with a quarter of people (25%) confident that they are using tools effectively, and 53% reporting they are doing this but with room for improvement.¹



Only 16% of respondents report that their organisation has a digital strategy. 46% have an organisational strategy but it doesn't include digital. A quarter (25%) said their organisation doesn't have any kind of strategy, which indicates a significant support need.¹



A quarter of VCSE survey respondents reported issues with their internet access. Wi-Fi is regularly slow or unreliable, old buildings or rural locations affect connectivity, and many work in mobile or remote settings such as food distribution, home visits or visiting prisons, where internet is unavailable. Upgrading to faster connections or better devices is often prohibitively expensive for charitable groups.¹



People in VCSE sector organisations wish their board members would:

- Allocate more resource to digital and IT (47%)
- Learn more about emerging tech and AI tools (42%)
- Understand more about risks like cybersecurity, data protection and safeguarding (33%).¹

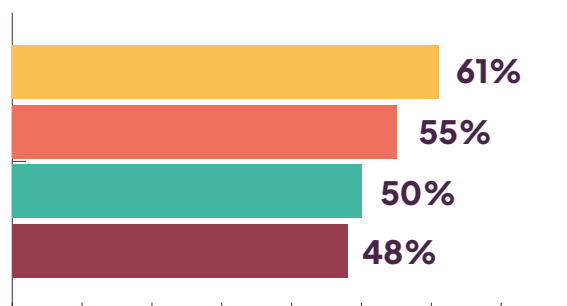


By far the biggest barriers to the VCSE sector making progress with digital are a lack of time (76%) and lack of funding (73%). Organisations cited lack of funding, limited staff capacity and competing priorities as the main reasons digital progress is slow.¹



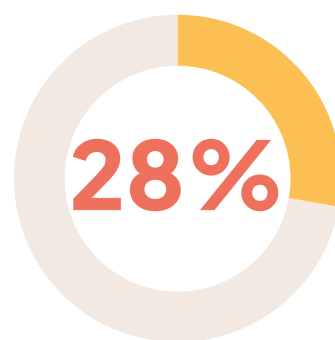
“Due to lack of funds we are working with limited equipment which has always been second-hand or donated.”

**VCSE Digital Skills
Survey respondent**



Local VCSE organisations say they most need support with:

- Data collection, analysis and impact measurement (61%)
- Online fundraising (55%)
- Social media and digital marketing (50%)
- AI and automation (48%).¹



have no relevant digital expertise on their board.¹

Just over half of people in local VCSE organisations (51%) report at least one board member with relevant digital expertise, higher than the national figure of 42%. But 28% say they have no relevant digital expertise on their board, indicating a gap in the sector's skillset.¹



"We are heavily dependent on skills from volunteers to develop our digital strategy and infrastructure."

**VCSE Digital Skills
Survey respondent**



1 in 10 respondents said their organisation lacked critical hardware needed to achieve their goals. A further 46% said they had gaps in the hardware they need. Many are relying on old, second-hand, or privately owned equipment, with devices that are often low spec and unsuitable for key tasks like hybrid meetings.¹


Stand Against Racism & Inequality

Stand Against Racism & Inequality (SARI) works across the West of England to support victims of hate crime. It's an essential local service, working closely with a host of other agencies to give victims the emotional and practical support they need. SARI also works in schools, supporting pupils experiencing racism, and delivers training to local professionals and others to increase understanding and equality.

Last year, SARI approached John Stienlet, manager of our pro bono matching service, ProHelp, for some specialist legal support. SARI had developed a bespoke Case Management System (CMS) that could be used by other agencies delivering hate crime services. The new system would strengthen the co-ordination of multi-agency support for people who have experienced hate crime, and enable information sharing.

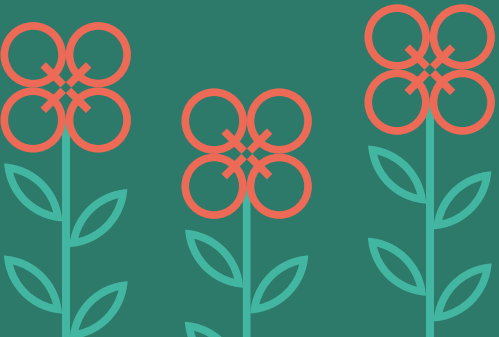
Sharing sensitive and personal information online is a legal minefield. SARI needed support from a solicitor with specialist knowledge of Software as a Service agreements to make sure what they had drafted would be fit for purpose, outlining each party's responsibilities, intellectual property, licensing, confidentiality requirements and liabilities.

The law firm Eversheds Sutherland stepped in to offer SARI professional advice, for free. This has given SARI the confidence to move forward with this transformational digital project, knowing that it is safe and legal to do so, and has saved them money that can now be spent on delivering their service.



“The support was invaluable for SARI. It saved us time and money, especially in finding the right legal advisor. John at ProHelp summarised our request brilliantly and coordinated a swift response. Eversheds Sutherland were exceptional—experts in their field who made complex advice accessible, liaised with all stakeholders, and even drafted the final document. We’re hugely grateful.”

Alex Raikes MBE DL,
Chief Executive, SARI



Voluntary Action North Somerset

One reason many VCSE organisations lack digital infrastructure is that funding for this is scarce; much of what is truly needed by organisations seems mundane and not something many funders are eager to support.

Back in 2023 we awarded a grant of £4,948 to North Somerset’s VCSE support organisation, Voluntary Action North Somerset (VANS), for a new digital casework system – one such ‘dull’ grant – to be used in a programme supporting individuals into volunteer roles and towards employment.

“Having this software has helped VANS carry out detailed analysis to meet the intense reporting needs of a UK Government Levelling Up programme in 2024/25. It’s also given us solid data to back up future funding bids. We were so pleased to receive the grant, which enabled us to move away from using lots of Excel spreadsheets to capture the records!”

Sue Stone, VANS



1625 independent people

1625 works with young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Bristol and wider the South West. A grant of £15,600 enabled them to develop and deliver research, training and free resources around Technology Facilitated Abuse (TFA), raising awareness among young people at risk of online harm as well as the professionals who support them.

“1625 supports young people at the intersection of homelessness, poor mental health and unhealthy relationships who are at greater risk of harm via the internet and social media. Over 80% of the young people we surveyed had experienced some form of TFA. This opened our eyes to the size of this challenge.

This grant enabled us to train local professionals to spot the signs of TFA and offer appropriate support for victims, as well as provide free and accessible resources to keep young people safe.”

John Thornfield, 1652

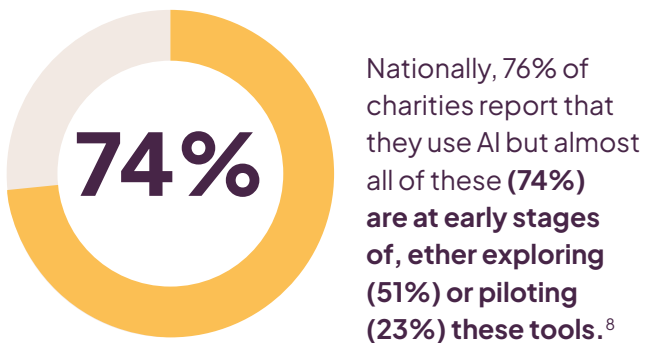


Generative AI and philanthropy

Whether it will prove to be a passing fad or a game-changing development, there's no doubt that the big technology news story of the day is generative artificial intelligence (AI).

Like most sectors, philanthropy is adjusting to these new tools, as grant-makers across the country look at the implications for their processes, ways of working and relationships with grantees. Some have reported seeing an increase in applications for funding that have been written using AI, as VCSE organisations understandably try and reduce the many hours they spend on bid-writing.

There's no doubt that using AI can save time, but AI comes with ethical implications around data use, data ownership, bias, accuracy and power. There are also implications for the environment in the quantities of energy and water required by the data centres that power AI. Most charities are in the early stages of exploring this world and want more guidance on navigating the ethics of AI as well as which tools can best support them in their mission.⁸



Nearly 1 in 3 (29%) of people involved in local VCSE sector organisations aren't using AI tools in their daily work at all. Another third (35%) are but feel they are using them poorly.¹

Although larger charities are further ahead in their use of AI, **smaller charities more commonly use AI to write grant funding applications, at 43% of small charities compared with 27% of large charities.**⁸ This may reflect smaller charities' reliance on grant funding and lack of alternative funding streams, or it may signal the lack of capacity that smaller organisations face.

Analysis suggests that around 60% of jobs in the UK are now exposed to AI. While half could be negatively affected, half could see productivity benefits. **Younger and more educated workers are likely to be most adaptable to AI-driven changes** in the workplace.¹²



Quartet and AI

Like many funders, Quartet has been exploring the risks and opportunities of emerging AI tools. Last year we set up an internal working group to investigate whether and how AI could help us, to ensure that any use of AI is thought-through and in line with our values. Our team received initial training from Simon Allen at Level.ai, useful because Simon knows the local VCSE sector and Quartet well. It's exciting to think that AI tools could enhance what we do, getting more from our data and making us even more efficient. At the same time, we are clear that our focus is always on the added value we provide to our donors and to the charitable sector. We don't believe that AI could ever supplant the local knowledge we hold or the trusting relationships we value. Our Board is giving AI its careful consideration, and you can be sure we'll be fully transparent about any tools we might start to use and why.

You can see our guidance for grant seekers using AI on our website – quartetcf.org.uk.

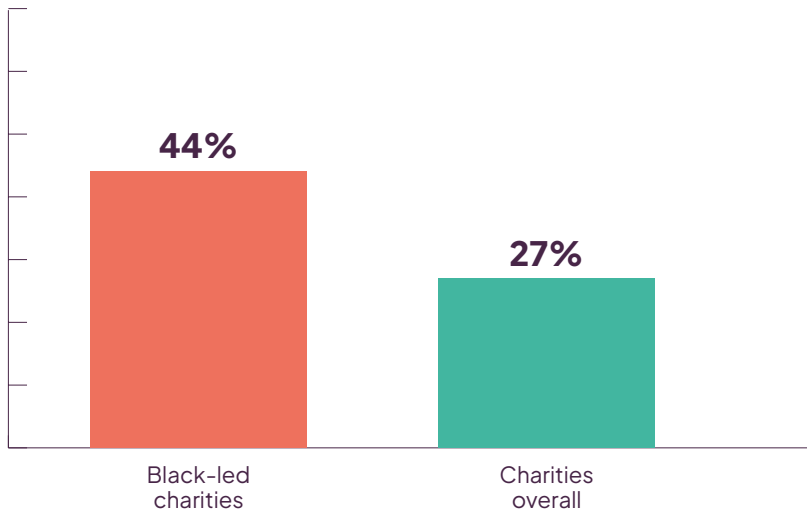
"AI is like a new member of staff but it only becomes a real asset once it's had a proper induction, learned your values, and understood how your organisation works."

Simon Allen,
co-founder, Level.ai

"We try not to use AI too much as we feel that it might take jobs away from our sector, but perhaps there are areas that it would be useful and ethical."

VCSE Digital Skills Survey respondent

A recent national survey found that charities where leaders are from Black ethnic backgrounds are finding it harder to find funding for digital projects (44% compared with 27% overall), despite reporting high take-up of AI tools and strong links to digital inclusion work.⁸



% finding it hard to source funding for digital projects

Bath Digital Divide Collective

Founded by Bath Bridge and Tech4Good South West, the Bath Digital Divide Collective is a cross-sector partnership that brings together organisations and individuals across Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES) to tackle digital exclusion, particularly in Twerton, Whiteway and Southside areas.

At the heart of the Collective is a commitment to collaborative, community-led action. A £5,000 grant from Quartet has helped fund some paid staff time for a digital inclusion co-ordinator to drive engagement with this work.

Their key successes and priorities to date include:

- Networking and influence – bringing front-line VCSE organisations together with others who can influence policy and make change
- Storytelling – highlighting the voices of people with direct experience of digital exclusion from within B&NES communities
- Pilot projects – testing ways to engage people in playful, creative learning that enhances digital skills
- Research, learning, and advocacy – using insights to shape strategy, unlock funding and drive systemic change.



“I spent much of my working life in a bakery. There was no need for a computer, so now I need to learn skills so I can do more.”

Lorraine, Participant, Twerton







“Digital exclusion deepens inequalities. By aligning effort, sharing learning and sparking local action, we’re helping communities gain the skills, confidence and access they need to thrive in a digital world.”

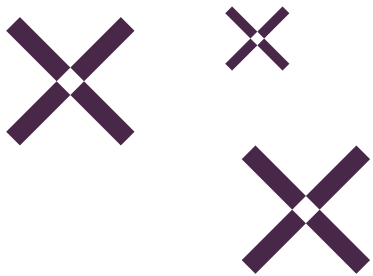
Bath Digital Divide Collective

What next? Our recommendations

Recognising the growing importance of digital inclusion in addressing wider disadvantage, we want to channel more of our funding to help everyone in our region make the most of the digital world.

Keeping pace with new developments, we also recognise that many local VCSE organisations need more investment and support to embed new technologies that can help them enhance their efficiency and increase their impact. We will work with partners to share the findings from the VCSE Digital Skills Survey widely, and aim to enhance the support available to the local VCSE sector to make progress with digital.

To learn how best philanthropy can contribute to collective action on digital inclusion, Quartet is already involved in several local collaborations. These include the Bath Digital Divide Collective (see page 18) and the West of England Digital Advisory Group, convened by the West of England Combined Authority (WECA). We are also part of the Connect West ecosystem of support for tech businesses and initiatives across the West of England, alongside WECA and Bristol-based business incubators and accelerators. Quartet is also a member of Tech4Good South West and we have collaborated with them on events like Bath Digital Festival. We're always happy to work with others and learn from experts, so if you think there is something else we should be part of, please get in touch.



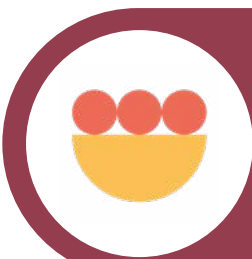
For philanthropists – if this isn't an area you're already supporting, speak to us about bridging the digital divide in communities and helping our VCSE sector to make the most of digital tools. Where possible consider donating additional resources to support digital inclusion through your fund at Quartet, so that more investment in this area doesn't reduce support elsewhere.



For the tech sector – organisations with a 'tech for good' mission are warmly invited to talk to us about how your knowledge/skills/resources can meet the needs of the VCSE in our region. This could be through offering funding or valuable pro bono support, or a mix of the two.



For businesses – give back to your local community and create local value by sharing your expertise or channelling your charitable giving towards digital inclusion. Speak to Anna Smith or Sabita Ravi about ways to do this, or to John Stienlet for our pro bono matching service.



For the VCSE sector – we have a pro bono matching service, ProHelp, that may be able to help you access professional expertise for free. Please talk to John Stienlet if you have digital or other professional support needs, and we will do our best to help. If you have funding needs around digital, please talk to us about what support might be available or look at our current grant programmes on our website.



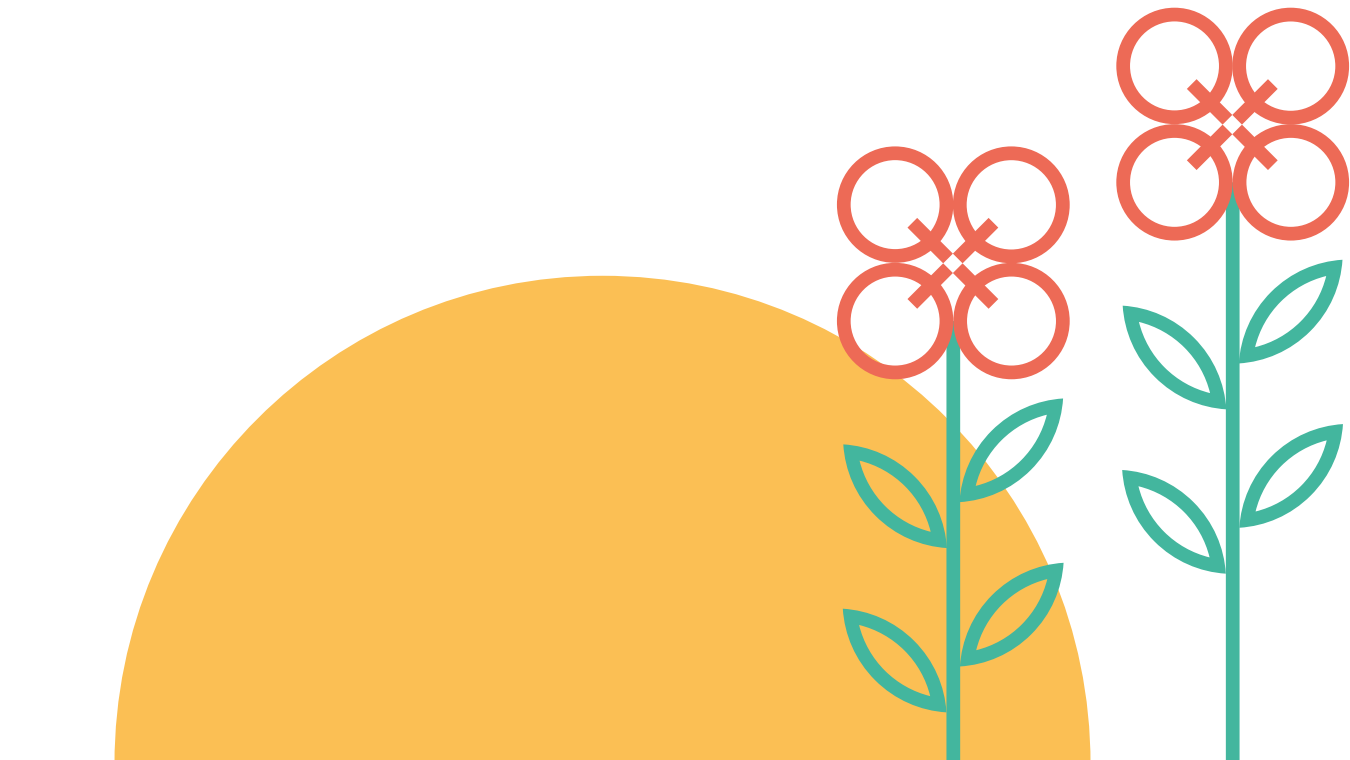
Partner organisations – keep working collaboratively with us and let us know if there are other ways that you think philanthropy can support digital inclusion in the West of England.

Contact Details

CEO	Anna Smith	07795 924040	anna.smith@quartetcf.org.uk
Interim Head of Philanthropy	Sabita Ravi	07443 646296	sabita.ravi@quartetcf.org.uk
Philanthropy Manager	Angela Emms	07827 738091	angela.emms@quartetcf.org.uk
Pro Bono Manager, ProHelp	John Stienlet	07884 053413	john.stienlet@quartetcf.org.uk
Head of Research & Learning	Lucy Gilbert	07788 214667	lucy.gilbert@quartetcf.org.uk

For all other team members and general enquiries, please email info@quartetcf.org.uk or call **0117 989 7700**.

Visit or write to us at:
Quartet Community Foundation, Royal Oak House, Royal Oak Avenue, Bristol, BS41 4GB.



References

1. Tech4Good South West. 2025. VCSE Digital Skills Survey for the South West

Earlier this year, Quartet partnered with Tech4Good South West on a VCSE digital skills survey which ran from 9th June - 14th July 2025. The survey aimed to provide insights into the existing level of digital skills in the South West, local skill gaps and any barriers to upskilling. The survey used some of the questions from the national Charity Digital Skills Survey to enable local comparison with national findings. Local VCSE infrastructure organisations fed in to the survey design, so that the results could be useful in helping them tailor their support to the VCSE sector’s needs. The survey received 191 responses from 132 organisations in the South West. In this report, we share the results from VCSE sector respondents working within the West of England region only: 135 responses from 87 organisations. Keep up to date with the full survey results via their website, tech4goodsouthwest.org
2. Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology. February 2025. Digital Inclusion Action Plan: First Steps. Gov.uk. Accessed 16.7.25, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-inclusion-action-plan-first-steps/digital-inclusion-action-plan-first-steps#joint-ministerial-foreword>
3. Invest Bristol & Bath. Digital overview. Accessed 11.7.25 at <https://www.bristolandbath.co.uk/key-sectors/digital-tech/>
4. Good Things Foundation, University of Liverpool, Cosmic, Better Places. December 2024. Understanding digital exclusion in the West of England: A report to inform the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority’s digital inclusion programme. WECA. Bristol, UK.
5. Good Things Foundation. April 2025. Digital Nation UK 2025. Good Things Foundation.
6. Nominet Digital Youth Index 2023, cited in Good Things Foundation, University of Liverpool, Cosmic, Better Places. December 2024. Understanding digital exclusion in the West of England: A report to inform the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority’s digital inclusion programme. WECA. Bristol, UK.
7. Bristol City Council. 2025. Bristol Quality of Life Survey 2024/25.
8. Amar, Z. & Ramsay, N. 2025. Charity Digital Skills Report 2025. Zoe Amar Digital/Think Social Tech
9. Ofcom. 2023. Premises with broadband speeds below the Universal Service Obligation (USO). Accessed via Local Insight 4.7.25
10. Centre for Economics and Business Research/FutureDotNow. Spring 2025. The Economic Impact of Closing the Work Essential Digital Skills Gap. Available at FutureDotNow.
11. National Council for Voluntary Organisations. 2025. The Road Ahead 2025. NCVO.
12. Cazzaniga, M. et al. 2024. “Gen-AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work.” IMF Staff Discussion Note SDN2024/001, International Monetary Fund, Washington, DC



Quartet
Community
Foundation

Insights Report 2025

In View

The Digital Divide

There are many ways you can keep up to date with our work and learn more about ways to support:

Visit our website – www.quartetcf.org.uk – where you will find lots of information about Quartet and stories about the impact of grants we make. You'll also be able to sign up to our newsletter to receive our latest news direct to your inbox.

If you'd like a more detailed conversation with us to discuss ways that you can support the digital inclusion of communities in the West of England, please get in touch with our CEO, Anna Smith, at anna.smith@quartetcf.org.uk or 0117 989 7700.



Follow us on social media to keep up to date.

Registered Charity Number: 1080418.

A company limited by guarantee.

Registered in England and Wales, Company Number: 3981052.

Registered office: Royal Oak House, Royal Oak Avenue,

Bristol BS1 4GB.

FSC certified paper, using fully sustainable, vegetable oil-based inks. Print production process includes recycling of all plastic and paper waste, 0% landfill waste, using only sustainable packaging for deliveries.