

Emerging Infrastructure Building Foundations for Change



Careful
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About Careful Industries

Careful Industries is a research organisation based in the UK. Through research and prototyping, we help our clients understand the social impacts of technologies and create new futures. Our sister organisation, Promising Trouble, is a not-for-profit exploring the potential of community technologies. Visit <http://careful.industries> to learn more or contact us at

hello@careful.industries

Authors

Craig Grady, Design Lab Lead

Georgia Iacovou, Copywriter

Contact

Craig@Careful.industries

A note

This programme was funded through the National Lottery Community Fund.

A special thanks to Hannah Paterson, Melissa Ray, and Nitya Teagarajan for their support and feedback in producing this report.



Emerging Infrastructure

This document captures perspectives from organisations, and learning from the programme supporting Civil Society Infrastructure organisations developing a future vision of resilience and sustainability for their organisations.

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Executive Summary

Imagining a Resilient Civil Society Infrastructure

The Emerging Infrastructure Design Lab was a year-long programme which supported infrastructural organisations in becoming more resilient. The roles these organisations play are varied, and integral to Civil Society; they facilitate networks administratively, support and increase the capacity of community networks, and provide structural support through training, development, or grantmaking. Strengthening infrastructure organisations contributes to increased community power, and widens avenues for addressing systemic challenges experienced by different marginalised communities.

The Design Lab worked with Emerging Infrastructure organisations to develop sustainable practices over one year. However, it became clear that this journey of change required a far longer time period; challenges for organisations span beyond establishing more robust internal structures — there are also unpredictable external barriers and constraints which impede their ability to sustain infrastructural roles in communities: access to funding, short term project cycles, wider public sector cuts, and increased demand and need from communities affect how resilient or sustainable an organisation can be regardless of the robustness of their internal systems.

This report explores some of the unique challenges that Emerging Infrastructure organisations face when thinking strategically about how to scale their services:

Not all digital transformation solutions are the best fit: the communities served by infrastructure organisations have changing needs which are impacted by multiple interconnected elements. Therefore they need to have the space to create accessible systems which are inclusive and flexible, and not necessarily digital.

Transitioning from 'business as usual' into new ways of working: organisations already have well-established processes, and often struggle to find the capacity to move to new systems of support. This poses an urgent challenge, because their genesis as organisations is often in response to complex systemic issues: for example, addressing food sovereignty or social isolation through projects and advocacy.

Via interviews with Design Lab participants and coaches, we were able to identify key areas in which organisations require further and more nuanced support from funders. There was a call for funders to simplify application processes, and a general need to reclassify the relationship between funders and organisations as more of a partnership. Some broad suggestions were:

Funding pools: if funders worked together to pool their funding, and allocate it to organisations and ongoing initiatives in larger amounts, this would greatly simplify funding acquisition for organisations, freeing up time for them to work on their services.

Valuing lived experiences and using these when making funding decisions. The organisations that funders work with already hold themselves to this standard, and expect



the same of funders. This subsequently increases the opportunity to be adaptive to changing needs across networks.

A reassessment of continuous monitoring: many organisations mentioned that submitting frequent reports to funders after receiving grant money is a hindrance to their other work, and often requires them to measure against metrics that would otherwise be irrelevant.

There is no definitive model for organisations to transition to a sustainable future in isolation. The Design Lab helped organisations identify opportunities for development, and imagine futures in which they were self-sufficient, rather than relying on solutions prescribed to them by external innovators. However, considering the unique challenges these organisations face, they require a much broader provision of support to realise these futures of internal resilience.

In order to help participants navigate this uncertainty, we explored what it means to work in **complexity**. This helped organisations build an internal shared vocabulary on which activities were part of their simple, everyday processes, and which were part of more high-level, complex, strategic planning. Making these distinctions is key in ensuring infrastructure organisations can adapt to the shifting needs of their networks.

Through the opportunity to learn from one another, allowing for differing perspectives to influence their understanding, and through relational support from peers and coaches, Infrastructure organisations can work towards becoming more sustainable in design.

The goal of cultivating a resilient and sustainable infrastructure for civil society is a collaborative endeavour — and needs both funders and organisations to collaborate on transitioning to this aspirational system.

Through the report- we'll share the support needs, unique challenges, and recommendations for programmes of support to enable Emerging infrastructure organisations to develop sources of resilience and sustainability.

"Our definition of it [resilience] hasn't changed through the programme, but we do now know how to achieve it much more clearly. We are now more critical of what we propose we want to do, and lean towards simplifying things rather than making things more complicated."



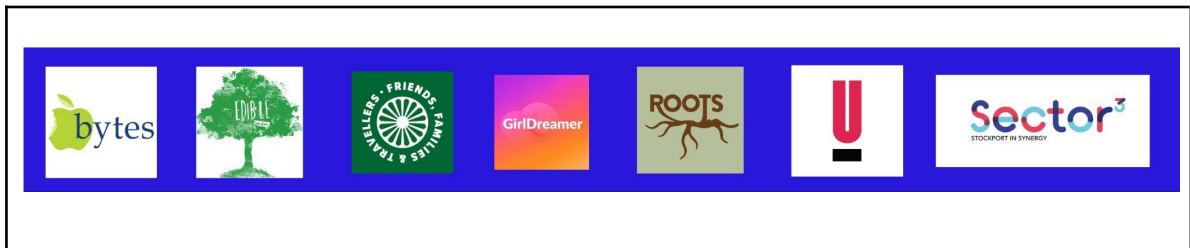
Section One: What is the Design Lab?

Emerging Infrastructure Design Lab

This section introduces the programme, the organisations taking part, and the programme structure of the Design Lab.

The Emerging Infrastructure Design Lab was an 11-month programme, facilitated by Careful Industries, that ran from July 2021. The Lab was funded by The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF) to support seven community organisations to become more flexible, resilient and responsive to the changing environment.

The organisations that took part are “emerging infrastructure organisations” because they are new or growing organisations that provide support to communities, or to other community organisations.



One person from each organisation had funding from TNLCF to “backfill” their role for ten months and take part in the Lab and share their learning with the rest of their organisation.

About the Organisations

More information about the organisations can be found in the Appendix (See contents).

The Bytes project

The Bytes Project is a youth work organisation based in Belfast- they use youth work and technology to help young people transform their lives and give them the confidence and skills they need to change the world around them for good.



Edible London CIC

Edible London is a community food hub organisation- they work to influence food production, distribution and consumption within local communities, and ensure communities have access to more resilient, healthy, and safeguarded local food systems.

Friends, Families and Travellers

Friends, Families & Travellers are an organisation who provide an increasing number of infrastructure roles for Gypsy Roma and Traveller organisations as part of their aim to help the sector succeed- providing support to the small, fragmented Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) Civil Society.

GirlDreamer

GirlDreamer is an organisation supporting communities of young women of colour to empower and support positive change for local communities. GirlDreamer seeks to educate, elevate, and empower young women in their professional development, through facilitating programmes and awarding grants through their Dream Fund.

The Roots Programme

The Roots Programme is an organisation that seeks to break down social barriers and bring people together. Roots facilitate programmes to foster connections between issues, people and communities- through practising radical connection and supporting community members to deepen their understanding of others' lived experiences.

Unlimited

Unlimited commissions artists and artwork, and advocates for rights of disabled artists- championing the experiences of disabled artists in the cultural sector and advocating for change through changing societies perceptions of disability.

Sector 3 Stockport

Sector 3 is a charity infrastructure support network for voluntary, community and faith-based groups, social enterprises and charitable organisations in Stockport. They provide advice, guidance, funding, and logistical support to a variety of community groups or individuals seeking to establish new community focused initiatives within their local area of Stockport- and work closely with the Local Authority to support relationships across the local community.



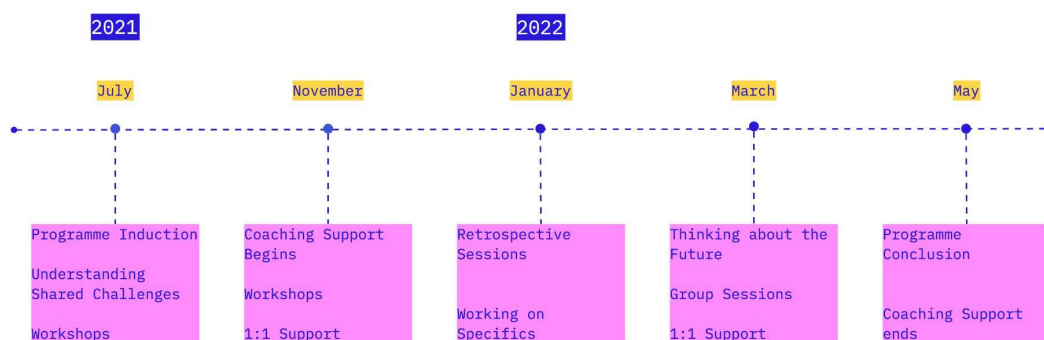
The Plan

By Spring 2021, each of the participating organisations had been through **a period of intense transition and pandemic response**, and they responded to this in a range of ways. For some, it meant thinking through **what kind of organisation they wanted or needed to be**, and creating new ways to adapt to the changing needs of their beneficiaries. Others were considering how to grow to meet an increase in demand, while others sought a more sustainable pace of growth. Our ambition at Careful Industries was to cultivate an environment that was safe and removed from this pressurised context. We hoped participants could **slow down the pace of innovation** and think more critically about which sources of resilience could be nurtured internally — and which ones they simply didn't need.

We were also tasked with helping TNLCF understand more about the needs of and the context in which these emerging infrastructure organisations operated.

Programme Structure

From **July 2021** through to **May 2022**, Careful Industries facilitated a programme of activity for seven Emerging Infrastructure organisations.



The programme consisted of:

- **Workshops** in which facilitators and speakers gave talks or held discussions on a range of topics.
- **Coaching support** where participants received practical advice from coaches with different areas of expertise
- **Group sessions** which gave participants the time to reflect on shared challenges
- **1:1 check-ins with facilitators** for more tailored support

The main activities were structured around **learning new skills, reflecting on goals and experiences of the programme, and supporting specific organisational activity** with the organisations to find the opportunities to develop their internal resilience and sustainability.



The programme timeline had three phases:

1. Understanding the shared challenges of Emerging Infrastructure organisations
2. Working on the specifics with participant organisations
3. Thinking about the future

Below has more detail on these three phases, followed by details on the workshops, coaching, group sessions, and 1:1 check-ins.

Understanding Shared Challenges

The application process for each organisation asked them to consider:

What is their role as an infrastructure organisation?

What ideas did they have about how the Design Lab could support them?

What challenges were they experiencing?

There were differing levels of clarity and specificity over how the Design Lab could support each organisation — some having specific digital or infrastructural challenges they felt could be supported through Lab resources, and others with more open or exploratory needs to figure out how best they could adapt or grow their services.

In the first two months of the Lab, the Design Lab Lead met with individual participants from the cohort to explore these questions, and the programme facilitated workshop content to respond to some of the more immediate needs described in the applications.

Working on the Specifics

Once we had a better understanding of organisational needs and the Design Lab objectives, activities began to focus more on supporting organisations with the **ideas for development or change** they had requested. This was done through coaching sessions and workshops which introduced digital ways of working, or other topics to provoke reflection and action on how best to support organisational development.

Some in the group also revisited their initial ideas and challenges as identified in the application stage. As the programme team and coaches began to form relationships with participants, there were opportunities to surface assumptions, and identify **new or alternative** solutions to test or implement.

There was also opportunity to adapt the structure of the programme as we learnt more about the contextual challenges faced by emerging infrastructure organisations working through specific projects or internal development.

Thinking about the future

Alongside the workshops and coaching sessions, there were also sessions or activities where the programme was able to learn more about **future conditions or goals** that would support a thriving civil society infrastructure.



Participants collectively reflected in different group sessions on the **structural conditions that would support their development**. They were encouraged to challenge their own assumptions on preferred actions to take towards resilience.

Through the programme, these phases of course shifted in focus and overlapped at times; in this report we will talk more about how each organisations' different circumstances meant that the journey of support was less linear than originally laid out.

Workshops

Workshops were held one or two times a month, and were facilitated by Careful Industries. Each workshop was on a different topic with speakers and facilitators coming in to give talks, hold discussions, or share tools and resources with the cohort. These sessions were virtual, and recorded and saved to a public drive for those who were unable to attend.

The aim of the content was to provide **practical advice and support** for organisational development, and also provoke reflection on how best organisations could **identify opportunities to change** or adapt their organisations to create more resilient or sustainable internal infrastructures.

The following topics were explored:

- Organisational Design
- Data, Privacy & Safeguarding
- Strategies for Growth & Leadership
- User Centred Thinking & Design Research
- Accessible and Inclusive Design
- Data Storytelling
- Systems Thinking & Working in Complexity

Other workshop topics emerged in response to learning from the programme, such as supporting **leadership of change** management. The facilitators were selected based on their experience of working with, or within, VCSE organisations.

Facilitators agreed on a brief and then adapted content on relevant topics to **address the needs of participant organisations**. For example, commissioning a workshop on [accessible content design](#) where a number of participant organisations had identified a support need with content or communication with their beneficiaries.

Post-workshop surgeries were held by facilitators, where participants could **follow up with questions or individual conversations** on workshop topics. The Design Lab lead also shared relevant resources and further reading, and gauged feedback through quick surveys on how to adapt future content.

Coaching Support

During phase one of the programme, coaches convened as a group, and held monthly meetings to discuss the needs of the organisations, identify who could offer support and how, and whether the approach to coaching support needed to adapt or change in response to emerging needs.



Participants in the Lab were able to contact and book time with coaches **to support their thinking, testing, or implementation** of innovation or change into their organisations.

The coaching group consisted of expertise and experience in:

- Developing safeguarding, Data Security, and privacy policies
- Service Design & Visual Design
- Testing, Experimentation & Prototyping
- Digital Products & Software consultancy for the charity sector
- Understanding & developing services in response to complexity

Coaches worked alongside organisations on activities such as consulting on organisational strategy, implementing new digital products into teams or internal infrastructures, and developing new policies or procedures.

The role of the coaches was to support the organisations in making changes which were identified by the participants as **important for introducing resilience and sustainability**. This process was structured in a way that supported the group to identify the right opportunities themselves, rather than having the coaches prescribe standardised solutions. Coaches held time to form relationships with participants, understand the context in which their organisations work, and provided positive challenges to participants' thinking, ideas or identified solutions.

This helped embed the ethos that emerging infrastructure organisations should **work towards having their own capacity to maintain their sustainability**, even after the programme

The coaching group were also invited to feedback on the programme aims and structure throughout, offering advice and ideas on how innovation programmes such as this could be more valuable to Emerging Infrastructure in approach and design.

Group Sessions

Reflective group sessions with the cohort were held throughout the programme, to understand where there were common challenges or needs. The report details examples of these in Sections Two & Three.

Some of the sessions held were:

- A workshop revisiting the programme aims, and identifying support needs in the group's applications. This helped to develop a shared understanding amongst the cohort and programme facilitators about the aims of the Design Lab.
- A [retrospective session](#) with an external facilitator, to reflect on **what had changed — if anything about — the group's understanding** of becoming or being a resilient and sustainable infrastructure organisation.
- A workshop utilising the [Three Horizons framework](#) to **identify a shared cohort picture of a future** in which VCSE organisations such as themselves were able to thrive doing their work to support their beneficiaries or communities.

"The tracks have merged, but there is still a journey to go on to feel more aligned"

– Workshop Facilitator reflecting on the incremental journey of establishing a collective understanding of the programme aims



In the latter stages of the programme, Careful Industries facilitated sessions for the group to share their learning, or outcomes from coaching support and other interactions from the programme. These sessions **provided space for the group to share their experience, expertise or feedback** on how other external **funding structures, programmes of support, or other resources** could further enable working towards the goal of a stronger infrastructure for civil society.

1:1 Support

A final part of the programme consisted of time for the Design Lab facilitator to meet with organisational participants individually to work through their **support needs** from the programme, **identify relevant resources and tools**, opportunities to **access further support** and **connections** with other peers within the cohort. These sessions took place on average once a month, with other more informal catch ups with different organisations when needed.

This ran in tandem with workshops and coaching support, enabling the programme facilitator to manage relationships, opportunities and capacity challenges across the programme.

More about the participating organisations

There were a variety of organisations taking part in the Design Lab, describing their roles in civil society as **connectors, advocates, and activists** for different marginalised communities and member networks.

The cohort organisations ranged from **regional or place-based support** — such as food bank logistical support, or managing a network of local grants and grassroots organisations — to more **national infrastructural support** — such as acting as secretariat for an All-Party Parliamentary Group or coordinating networks, advocacy, and care for disabled artists across the UK.

Within our group, the Design Lab learnt about **three different but interconnected** types of infrastructure roles these organisations play: **system convening, capacity building, and offering structural support**.

System Convening

Emerging Infrastructure organisations of this type **play a leadership role** in ensuring that members or beneficiaries voices are **represented and centred in decision making**, in order to support a greater level of community influence on policy and legislation.

These organisations **lead through relationship building** (by chairing or resourcing forums and connections) rather than through their own position or influence. They are also structured in ways that allow them to embed, internally and in wider networks, the **lived experience of the communities they represent or advocate for**.

Organisations such as [The Roots Programme](#), [Unlimited](#) and [Friends, Families & Travellers](#) use their position, influence or resource to fund programmes or direct support to highlight the experiences of marginalised communities, and influence policy discourse at a national level.



Capacity Building

Infrastructure organisations of this kind provide training, platforms or logistical support for other organisations or members to increase their own **skills and knowledge**, or provide **resources, products and platforms** to support communities.

Organisations such as [Bytes](#) and [GirlDreameer](#) directly support other local third sector organisations with their internal infrastructure (e.g. digital skills development), or have developed community platforms to host member networks to (e.g. communities of young women of colour in their personal and professional development) to tackle social inequality.

Structural Support

Organisations of this nature are well placed to support the **physical connections and opportunities** to access support such as **funding**, or **information sharing** within localised communities.

Infrastructure organisations here provide **advice** and **guidance** on access to funding or grant allocations between funders and organisations, or provide **logistical support** through direct services to address gaps in local area provisions. The type of structural support these organisations provide is also often utilised to help mobilise, maintain and coordinate networks of voluntary infrastructure as well.

Organisations such as [Edible London CIC](#) or [Sector 3 Stockport](#), operate as **trusted bodies** in localised communities and provide infrastructural support to facilitate programmes to feed local communities, or allocate funding to a variety of grassroots organisations in collaboration with a local authority.

The importance of adaptability in these organisations

One of the hallmarks of Emerging Infrastructure organisations is their adaptability in ambition or design to **be able to support a range** of infrastructural offers to communities. This means that it's unlikely they will engage in just one of the above roles.

Over the course of the programme the participants shared their experience and expertise recognising the **structural challenges** that their organisations need to address, as well as the immediate and more easily observable needs of the communities they serve.

“[We see] tension between infinite needs and desires and practical reality”

-Design Lab Participant

From delivering food, to providing grants to disabled artists to produce great art — there is an **inherent understanding of how** these mechanisms support addressing deeper social challenges such as racial injustice, power imbalances or social inequality.



The interchangeable nature of infrastructure roles therefore, is a recognition and skill of Emerging Infrastructure organisations to balance the pragmatic and possible needs to enrich their communities and support more impactful change in civil society as a whole.

What they offer to the wider sector

Independence: Their structures often represent, or include the **voices of their member networks** at the forefront of their influencing activity or initiatives for social change. Organisations in the group had, or were putting in place governance structures to provide more opportunity to be represented by the beneficiaries they support.

Connections and Opportunities: They facilitate **connections between beneficiaries and external supporters** that enable assessments of local need, and create opportunities across local systems to match support with need. Where gaps in sector provision emerge, infrastructure organisations can move quickly to meet demand, or contribute to identifying gaps in support.

Relationships and Knowledge: They act as a **trusted and accessible bridge** between more centralised bodies and local communities, particularly in circumstances of maintaining relationships and knowledge with more marginalised communities. Their position can help facilitate a network, and help with coordinating localised activity.



Section Two: What kinds of support do emerging infrastructure organisations need?

Types of Support for Emerging Infrastructure

This section details what sources of support are most needed in the view of participating organisations, opportunities to enable resilient and sustainable development, and how funders can engage in different ways with Infrastructure Orgs to enable these conditions.

The Design Lab has allowed participants to reflect on the kinds of support they'd been receiving from funders so far, and identify any gaps where further or more nuanced support is needed. In this section we will explore three areas:

- What more funders can be doing
- Existing gaps in support
- Effective modes of support currently in place

Note that the discussions which this section is based on were about experiences with funders across the sector, and not just The National Lottery Community Fund.

What changes can funders make in order to provide better support?

When discussing clearly identifiable gaps in support, participants made suggestions on what funders could do differently to fill in these gaps. There were three prominent suggestions which we will explore in turn, and they are:

- Understand an organisation's needs
- Make the funding process more accessible
- Build trusting relationships

Many organisations find they have to fund their infrastructure services with many different sources of funding, and **this plays a large part in how funders misunderstand their needs**. One participant even described their provision of infrastructure as being '**unfundable**', until very recently: "because it wasn't funded, it was an add-on, and it had no structured planning behind it". So, part of the challenge in securing the right kind of funding for infrastructure support is that in many cases, **it doesn't fit a funder's criteria**. This can lead to organisations trying to co-opt or adjust their applications to reflect current trends in tenders, stifling opportunities to develop sustainable internal infrastructures.



Participants expressed a need for funding to focus much less on the impact of an initiative, and more on backend infrastructure — such as digital tools needed for capturing and maintaining data. While there are frequently funding bids available for specific projects, there is rarely reference to funding which is meant to sustain administrative, infrastructural activities, which do not produce clear, measurable impacts.

Sometimes a lag between the design of a funding programme and its delivery will also manifest a misunderstanding of needs. **The Design Lab itself was cited as an example of this:** where, by the time it was delivered, concepts and intentions weren't clear to the participants, because they'd perhaps drifted away from what they were at the point of design.

Some participants said that their initial understanding of the Design Lab was that it was a programme that would help them implement digital tools, such as a CRM, and were surprised to learn that **its scope was actually much wider** than this. Other participants understood that the 'draw' of a programme like this was support with digital tools, but were perhaps slightly more established than others, so would not need that kind of support at this stage. Section four of this report goes into further detail about how the programme was received, including what worked and what didn't.

In one conversation, a participant mentioned that in order to truly understand the needs of different organisations, **funders must fundamentally change the way they make funding decisions, which may very well include undergoing a shift in who has power.** Many infrastructure organisations consist of staff with relevant lived experiences to those that they work with — funding organisations should hold themselves to the same standard:

“If they don't have the knowledge to be able to best place their funds, then they need to pay for other people to make those decisions on their behalf. They need to monitor their own demographic and value lived experience as highly as academic experience – in fact higher. [...] if they're promoting equality objectives, then I think they need to walk the walk and lead by example.”

All participants alluded to a need for broader funding application processes to be **simpler and more accessible.** Decisions on where to allocate funding should not rest solely on the quality of a written application. Application processes need to fit with the **needs and capacity** of the organisation. Discovering needs may be done through site visits, or one on one conversations; low capacity may mean the application processes should be simplified. Criteria for assessment may also need to be interpreted differently. For example, rather than 'low capacity' being a negative factor in assessment criteria, it could be considered as a stronger indicator of eligibility for 'infrastructural support'. Having alternative modes of engagement in processes may create more opportunities for access to support, that still aligns with aims to increase resilience or sustainability, and contribute to greater impact for communities.

One proposition was for **funders to work together to ensure infrastructure organisations receive core funding,** rather than individually funding a single project or particular activity. Currently organisations work to secure funding from many different sources so that they have runway for the year ahead — one participant mentioned they often need £1 million to fund their projects for a year, and have to make it up in chunks of around £20k-50k.



Funding networks could support infrastructure organisations more effectively through closer pooling of available sources of investment. For Design Lab participants, access to more core funding and opportunities to engage in more collaborative funding allocation processes were both cited as the most important sources of sustainability.

“If [funders] could sit down in a funding team and just go ‘I have so much to spend, and I think this project is really good, and I can give around 20 or 30k to it’. And other funders will learn about the project and say ‘okay I can match that’ or whatever. I think it would be more beneficial for the funders because then they're collaborating. It's better for the charity organisations because then they're not chasing funding. The funders are coming to them”.

Taking a more comprehensive approach to decision-making will help in negating bias when considering applications. A ‘strong’ application containing the right buzz-words may not be an accurate indicator of whether the organisation is equipped to deliver their proposed programme. A lot more can be gleaned from a conversation, than a series of forms.

Filling in forms is also an organisational time-sink. Many participants pointed out that they use a lot of capacity on filling out the same information over and over again across multiple forms given to them by funders; one participant mentioned that even those who have funded them before ask for the same information, and another said “I think a lot of funders invest way too much time in asking organisations to fill out countless forms with information that's already on the charity commission website”. So, infrastructure organisations can be relieved of a lot of bureaucracy if funders simplify the process for them, and look at publicly available information when doing due diligence.

Many participants pointed out the importance of funders and organisations establishing **better relationships of trust** in order to move forward with more nuanced support. Some feel that the continuous monitoring from funders illustrates a lack of trust coming from them; some feel that funders may not be equipped with the relevant expertise to make decisions, and so don't fully trust their decision-making.

One suggestion was to reframe the relationship between funders and organisations as a **partnership**, as opposed to ‘funder and beneficiary’. This framing could be more productive in helping funders understand what kinds of support different organisations need. In our evaluative discussions, every participant proposed that **funders make site visits** as part of this relationship-building. With site visits, funders can meet those who are delivering and receiving these services, and have a first-hand look at what is actually being funded. One participant said that the best funders they'd worked with were the ones who “employ a good grant manager, who is given the leeway to actually go and spend time talking to people [...] and actually finding out about the quality of organisations, what they're doing and what the issues are, and where the need is”.

Participants maintain that making site visits has the potential to inspire confidence in funders and remove the need for frequent reporting, or making lengthy applications. Without sitting down and having conversations about the work, funders won't learn much about the organisations besides the fact that they are able to write a good funding application.



Many of the challenges and frustrations outlined above have been compounded by the pandemic, but in some cases created opportunities to do things differently. One organisation shared their experience of receiving new funding for work on racial justice, in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. During this point of the pandemic, racial justice issues had become more visible to other institutions working outside of the sector — but of course, this organisation and many others like it were already acutely aware of these issues, and highly experienced in actively addressing them.

The stark difference in expertise between the funder and organisation allowed them both to establish a more collaborative relationship. There was a kind of role reversal, where the organisation was assessing the funder's eligibility to legitimately fund this type of work. This meant that the organisation was able to influence the funding structure to more accurately reflect their needs.

New Philanthropy Capital explores similar examples of re-balanced power dynamics in grant-making, which provides examples of where and how collaborative relationships can be strengthened. Organisations such as [Rosa](#) have utilised participatory grant-making approaches to address where factors such as wealth, knowledge, status, independence, privilege, and the ability to set values and norms create imbalances in power between funders and communities or organisations.

Principally, in order to foster more collaborative relationships, examples of where “participation” can range from involvement in internal processes such as fund designs, or more external and engagement focused work with communities and beneficiaries highlight where opportunities lie. For programmes such as the Design Lab, identifying systemic challenges like support for Civil Society Infrastructure necessitates thinking about systems change as a “key approach for solving intractable problems”.

For Emerging Infrastructure orgs, participants in the programme recognised alongside a need for individual support, the ability to engage in more distributed decision making within programmes is an additional form of support that would enable them to work towards goals of increased resilience and sustainability.

Existing gaps in support: Providing infrastructure is not a one-off project

Funding is a consistent challenge for participating organisations, and was one of the most prominently discussed areas of support throughout the programme. With infrastructure organisations, there is a common frustration around a lack of **core funding**, and the support that might come with it. Infrastructure is a long-term process, and therefore cannot be realistically funded with a series of overlapping single-year grants.

A large reason for this is down to capacity. Organisations spend a lot of time and energy on both **making funding applications**, and **creating reports for funders**. If work on these activities could be minimised, organisations would have more capacity for actually providing infrastructure to the communities they support.

One participant mentioned that it's often that their organisation has to **cobble together a patchwork of funding**, even for short-term programmes: a funder might provide £20k funding to run a ten-week programme, but fail to cover staff wages, which means another application



has to be made to secure funding for this. The same goes for buying equipment; a funder will cover the cost of equipment, but not the labour needed to install it. This creates vulnerability for an organisation where their assets — their people and places — which are integral to the infrastructural roles they take, are always at risk.

A common sentiment among participants was that **the way in which many funders monitor progress after granting funds indicates a lack of trust** in how the funds are being used. Infrastructure is ongoing, and so its success cannot be measured in the same way as short-term or one-off projects. Continuous monitoring and frequent requests for reports are a hindrance to organisations getting their actual work done. One participant explained that some funders ask for “spreadsheets and spreadsheets of information”, too frequently, and based on metrics that would otherwise be irrelevant to the organisation.

This kind of continuous monitoring, before any measurable impact has even taken place, means that organisations have to do extra work to **set up reporting mechanisms they don't really need**. This may be especially challenging for emerging organisations, who would already be working to implement a reporting system that works for them internally.

The gaps in support of course span beyond funding- not unique to the programme itself, but manifesting as something which participants felt within the Design Lab environment. When speaking about the programme, one participant mentioned that they “would be really keen to hear about what's next, because there was no ‘what's next’ from The Lottery. Great, you've funded emerging infrastructure organisations to emerge [...] but it makes no sense if it doesn't go anywhere”.

In many respects, a one year programme is not enough in the view of the cohort; it's a fairly short amount of time in which to implement organisation-wide transformations, and need for further support was brought up by another participant:

“It might be beneficial if it was maybe like a multi-year process. Just trying to do all these changes within a year is massive. It takes a mind shift of the entire organisation from top to bottom. Going from the way things were to the new process takes time to develop, it takes time to embed. [...] Yes, we have certain deliverables by certain days, but it would be nice to have a longer timeframe to implement, and it also would be nice to have maybe a follow-on programme.”

Coaches from the Design Lab also shared ideas around how funding isn't the only key to staying resilient. **Having the budget to make the necessary changes for sustainability is meaningless if there isn't organisational buy-in**. When making these changes, organisations must commit to the transformation as an **organisational behaviour, rather than a project**. Part of this challenge includes organisations understanding what they need: problem-setting is a necessary prerequisite to finding solutions. Many participants came to the Design Lab knowing that, for instance, a CRM is something that would put them on a path of greater resilience — but with the understanding that spending the time and money to implement a CRM is pointless if staff teams don't understand why it's useful. One participant even found that the programme confirmed to them they in fact *do not* need a CRM.



Understanding what the problem is before finding and implementing solutions is an important part of staying resilient. Organisations should not be prescribed with 'innovative' solutions from external sources — rather, they should be supported to become self-sufficient in building their own solutions.

Finally, an important consideration is the avoidance of resilience for the sake of resilience. Organisations should exist to serve their communities, and not themselves. One participant observed that “there is a slight concern that when we talk about resilience, we're sticking plasters over structural and systemic problems. [...] You can do as much colouring-in as you like. It's not gonna make a difference to the way the government treat you”. Developing 'resilience' or becoming 'more resilient' are subjective terms; sometimes it can be interpreted as simply sustaining current systems that exist in pressurised contexts, rather than unlocking the space to strategize for the future. Outgrowing the sector to the point where the organisation no longer serves its community is a concern that our participants are aware of.

“Infrastructure organisations should exist to serve the sector. But when an organisation's been established a long time, it can end up serving its own purposes rather than the sector [...] it may have developed its own initiatives, have a large staff, and take on its own life, and it doesn't actually engage in the sector that much”.

Hope and Encouragement

Within the Design Lab programme, we also learnt about **what support** was helping, or **what conditions** were supporting participants in working through infrastructural change, or engaging in organisational development work.

Developing a shared sense of trust and growth

Through exposure to one another's experiences participants started to recognise **common** or **shared** challenges they perceived impacting on infrastructure organisations of their kind. This fostered and developed trust to engage with broader learning objectives of the programme.

Having this across a wider group of stakeholders involved in commission, facilitation and participation in infrastructural change programmes helps as it creates conditions where organisations can be **more secure** in being able to share the reality of challenges they experience in becoming stronger organisations.

Humanising communication and cultures

A common sense amongst the group was that sources of resilience or sustainability came from exploring opportunities to **humanise** the **way they worked**, rather than seeking more technological innovations to increase their capacity.

As we'll explore later in section three, participants reflected that in fact, to remain accessible to the needs of their beneficiaries, they needed non-technological solutions to effectively be able to provide support.



Building skills and Capacity

Being able to work on practical challenges, and developing good practice on digital security (e.g. sessions on data governance, privacy and safeguarding) gave participants the opportunity to test and explore new ways of working **without risks or shocks** to their organisational development.

Depending on the stage of development of an organisation, or their digital maturity, having access to content and expertise to provide firmer foundations for digital adaptation or innovation supported the confidence to try new approaches. For some in the group, having these sessions helped to spot, at an earlier stage of development, areas of risk or vulnerability in their internal infrastructure.

Mentoring Support

Mentoring support was an important part of supporting organisations through major changes and transitions. Mentors had sector-level expertise as well as a proficient understanding of change management, thus were able to explore the needs and opportunities for development via both the **personal and the professional experiences** involved in this process.

For Emerging Infrastructure organisations in the group, these areas of focus, activities and approaches provided more confidence and security to be able to focus on renewal or redesign activity.

Care and Repair

A final reflection on the support needs for Emerging Infrastructure organisations builds on the enablers, opportunities, changing behaviours, and signals of hope and encouragement described above.

Programmes for infrastructural change or support need to focus on the conditions for '[care and repair](#)', as well as on the support for **response** to the needs of civil society.

The mix of aims within the programme — developing stronger organisations, and also catalysing greater impact for communities — create conditions in which both Infrastructure organisations and funders' attention gravitate towards the activity that more directly impacts the outcomes for communities.

These elements are integral to ensuring that outcomes, new innovations, and changes don't just sustain a dominant system, but rather incite positive transformations and introduce sustainability for participating organisations.

Care and repair is a part of resilience and sustainability, in that supporting infrastructural capacity to become more practised and comfortable in adversity or complexity creates healthier environments, which result in change emerging more naturally. A system with more balance between how change supports organisational activity to be responsive and restorative helps make these organisations stronger.

We can collectively think of innovation that it is all about the new and possible- for Emerging Infrastructure organisations or other community organisations, digital innovation is also about maintaining those systems. Enabling conditions to maintain, sustain, and repair ways of



working are also a developing source of sustainability and resilience that helps Infrastructure organisations continue their roles in communities.



Section Three: The Unique Challenges that Infrastructure Organisations face

Challenges for Emerging Infrastructure

This section details what challenges, perspectives, and digital innovation challenges Infrastructure organisations experience when developing more sustainable practices and systems.

Infrastructure organisations provide support for different communities facing a **variation of hardships and systemic injustices** — this means the organisations themselves will have to overcome unique systemic challenges, and continually find ways to work in complexity. In this section we will build on what was explored in section two in terms of the gaps in support, and look into more detail on what the barriers are, and where opportunities might be.

First we will look at some of the challenges shared by the participants in the Three Horizons workshop. Second, we explore what it means to support communities with a range of complex needs, and then we will outline how overcoming these challenges requires more than just a new set of digital tools and capabilities.

A Shared Understanding of the Challenges

Through the programme, we learnt that emerging infrastructure organisations need two layers of support: one to help them **adapt and introduce new ways of working**, and another which **accounts for the unique contexts** that these organisations work in. Support to work through how, in an internal capacity, organisations could adapt the ways they work to unlock capacity, become more efficient, or improve their offer to communities- but also support to maintain their infrastructural role in civil society through more enabling conditions that sit outside of their influence. For example, changing the ways in which organisations can access funding in order to introduce more sustainability.

Organisations often feel that they need to make a choice between sustaining the present, and strategising for the long-term — they only have the capacity to prioritise one or the other. They often face what feel like binary choices- sustain or change, strategise or react. This perspective is driven by both a risk averse approach to organisational design or innovation- and a growing sense of scarcity in the sources of available funding or investment around them.

One coach remarked that future development and change could feel like “being asked to talk about the colour of the paint in the living room, whilst the kitchen is on fire”. Understandably, some organisations in the Lab felt like this throughout the programme — despite recognising the value of focusing attention on how to develop in more sustainable ways.



The International Futures Forum (IFF) provided helpful insight into these challenges with their workshop, which used the [Three Horizons framework](#). This framework is designed to help organisations think more clearly about the future: what they want it to look like, and what they have to do to get there. The workshop gave participants the space to share their ambitions for the future, and the potential challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

The International Futures Forum describes the Three Horizons framework as a way to **map the shift from an organisation's current, established activities** to new ways of working via a transitional period of activities.

So the Three Horizons are:

1. The **current** system of working — it may have worked for a long time but as the world changes, the system must adapt
2. The **transitional** period where you adopt new innovations and ideas in order to respond to the changing landscape
3. The **new system** of working — this is what the second horizon builds towards, and also what replaces the first horizon, become the new 'business as usual'

The session also surfaced some of the absent perspectives from this process, the different interpretations of the lab goals of resilience or sustainability, and some of the value tensions in this context.

Continuing 'business as usual' while also planning big changes

The first horizon represents the established system in which Emerging Infrastructure organisations find themselves in; the conditions that they are trying to change, and what they find difficult about this.

This brought up challenges around how **mindsets, established structures, and capacities** played a part in inhibiting growth or development. Working to serve the immediate needs of their communities doesn't leave much room to find new and more effective ways of working.

Emerging from the session was also a need to focus on the **care and repair** for organisational renewal and development. There was a shared understanding of the value of slowing down the process of innovation, but little room in the current system to do so.

Scaling too quickly was also a concern. A common challenge within this was the organisational capability to deal with data appropriately: keeping it secure, knowing how to use it to better support their communities, and figuring out what tools they would need to do this.

While the programme sought to cultivate the necessary skills for organisations to work through these challenges, the group noted that capacity was an intersecting issue — having the skills is one thing, but having the time and space to learn/use them is another.

The group also gave some examples of the **external pressures that introduce further complexities and constraints**. Lack of political recognition and sector investment, budget cuts in public and social sectors, rising inequality, and the short notice and complicated procedures for accessing funding contributing to sustained pressure on organisational continuity, not just development and growth.



Building towards a new system

The second horizon surfaced challenges around **sustaining innovation**: maintaining those transformative processes which eventually lead to the establishment of a new, aspirational system.

Improved access and data sharing, improved reach across communities, and wider conversations about organisational development were examples of 'sustaining innovations' which support infrastructure in the present system. There was also a shared sentiment around how **open source and community owned assets** could support their capacity to reach their communities and transition to a new system.

Other methods for transformation that the group explored included becoming more '**systemically informed**'. Participants felt a need for having more pluralistic conversations about organisational development both internally, and with new and existing external stakeholders.

So, the unique challenges around striking a balance between sustaining current systems, and focussing on renewal and transformation, must be considered when providing support to emerging infrastructure organisations.

Arriving at the aspirational system

The third horizon is the new system that an organisation aspires to. This part of the session was spent imagining futures where Emerging Infrastructure organisations feel greater resilience and sustainability.

The attributes of these futures included more **shared learning spaces, expert support**, greater capacity and skills within organisations, more productive **local connections**, and flourishing people and communities.

The group agreed that the aspirational system should also entail strong relationships across the network of infrastructure organisations, empowered communities and member networks, and engaged funders and stakeholders in learning, adapting and responding to increasingly complex social challenges.

The group found it difficult to imagine an "aspirational" system that felt like it reflected the wider network of stakeholders needed in order to represent a viable alternative to the current system infrastructure organisations exist within. As was noted in the Three Horizons session the Lab facilitated- in order to enable this system, it was important to include the perspectives of funders in addressing the value tensions that emerge when trying to identify the mechanisms for transition.

The session captured glimpses of an aspirational system where there would be stronger communities of practice between funders and infrastructure organisations- but also an acknowledgement that, as contextual factors (external pressures) impact on Emerging Infrastructure organisations they also impact funders. Other stakeholders in this aspirational system will also have their own perspective on the conditions sustaining the current system, and subsequent challenges. For funders, the scale of portfolios or volume of applications can make it difficult to sustain a relational approach to individual Infrastructure organisations.

In the context of the Design Lab- imagining the aspirational system they described was driven more by the needs and challenges the group of organisations were commonly



experiencing, and could not account for the likely similar barriers and value tensions from a funding perspective that would also need resolution to enable a transition to an alternative ecosystem of support.

The mechanism that would enable both perspectives however, lies within the glimpse of this aspirational system that the group described. Both Infrastructure organisations, and funders would benefit from the social negotiation involved in imagining together an aspirational system that is equally inclusive of current mindsets, and ideas for change in which a more pluralistic shared goal emerges. Through the Design Lab programme, we learnt about some of the challenges both funders and Infrastructure organisations experience around innovation- and the mechanism for change in this context would be to enable more opportunities for those perspectives to be shared with one another.

Any systems put in place have to be flexible

In one way or another, all participants in this Design Lab are currently building or improving a system that works for their service users. Developing effective infrastructure systems for communities who are subject to many forms of systemic oppression means that organisations often need to take a step back, and get a wider view of what they hope to achieve, and therefore what steps need to be taken first.

This is all part of working in **complexity**. In going through the Design Lab, and in evaluative discussions afterwards, two key challenges were identified:

1. **Distinguishing between concrete ambitions for impact and an actual sustainable strategy:** knowing what you want to achieve is not the same as knowing *how* you're going to achieve it — it's especially hard to do this strategic planning when a lot of capacity is spent on the day-to-day crises.
2. **Providing infrastructure within an already complex system, for communities with differing needs:** communities and individuals that Design Lab participants support will have multiple interconnected elements impacting their situations; support will be ineffective unless focus is placed on all elements.

One participant aptly likened the first challenge to getting a kid dressed in the morning: “You can't put your jeans and shoes on and then try and put your socks and underwear on. You have to put the socks and underwear on first”. Having an end-goal to aim for is great, but laying down the groundwork for how you're going to get there is just as important. Coaches noted that a lot of support they gave to participants in the Design Lab was around helping them **turn their ambitions into plans**.

In some cases this meant going over some fundamental processes, which sit on the somewhat less exciting side of innovation. For instance, explaining what a policy is, and what it's used for. One coach explained that “you can't write a policy without a discussion about how you want this organisation to be”. Writing out a set of policies shouldn't be done for the sake of it; rather the policies should help realise the participants' vision for their organisation. Getting internal processes such as this one nailed down is a necessary prerequisite to providing infrastructure.

Something from the Design Lab that helped one participant navigate this was **being given the tools to know when a process is simple, complicated, or complex**:



“We learned something about person-centred planning, which I took back to the organisation and we now have a shared vocabulary around whether things are simple, complicated, or complex, and we know what that means. And that helps us focus our energy and attention on the complex. We can leave the simple and the complicated to the people who are just getting on with running those. We don't need to interfere. They will just take as much time as they take”

The distinction this participant made between complicated and complex was that **building a rocket is complicated**; it has many steps that all need to be done in a certain order, and the end goal is very clear. **Whereas raising a child is complex**; children have different needs, and anything you do to support/nurture them will be affected by external factors.

This is why working in complexity requires flexible systems. There is never just *one* way of providing support; the system should work for people, and not the other way around. Establishing a vocabulary around what is simple, complicated, and complex has helped participants feel comfortable enough to take a step back from the day-to-day crisis and panic of delivery, and slow down to look at the big picture, and think about the future.

This brings us to the second challenge in working with complexity: **building systems to facilitate the external and interdependent factors that impede on service users' situations.** If an organisation needs to gather information from individuals in order to provide support, they cannot expect sending an email will be an appropriate way to reach out to everyone. Some people may not have access to a device or an internet connection — in which case they have to be contacted by phone, or by some other means.

Some Emerging Infrastructure organisations from the Design Lab also provide grants for individuals or other organisations, and emphasise that they accept applications in any format, be it email, a series of voice notes, or even video submissions. Keeping the system flexible means being more accessible to those who may need grants.

Staying flexible is especially challenging when infrastructure organisations need to work within rigid systems and processes imposed by the government. For example, a participant explained that as part of the UK government's levelling-up agenda, there will be increased access to culture and the arts in 109 places in England. For UK-wide organisations in the cultural sector, this shift in priorities skews the way they work; where before they may have only been monitoring needs in larger areas (e.g. The North, East Anglia, The Midlands), they now have pressure to demonstrate that they are having an impact in those 109 specific places. In this sense, **an organisation may have been delivering their services already with great success, but external factors have had an effect on what success actually looks like.**

Understanding how to manage and work around these external factors and shifting priorities is key to making an impact and staying resilient. One participant described this as understanding what the levers for change are, and how you might be able to influence them:

“It's [about having] the knowledge of the issues and the beneficiaries, and the systems that you are working within and identifying where the levers might be. And [being aware of] your strengths and your ability to influence those things, whether it's something you do directly or that you work with with other organisations or intermediaries to try to effect change. It's certainly complexity”



The organisation that this participant works in is established enough to engage in policy work, and so have developed different approaches depending on what issues they're addressing on behalf of their community. With healthcare, they interface directly with policy leads in the NHS, and this has a clear positive effect for their members. But if they want to affect change in education, they know that working directly with the Department of Education won't be effective, because there is no strong institutional link between the department and schools. So they have to look at what the key issues are for their client group — such as bullying — and then work with other organisations to build anti-bullying programmes and embed them into schools.

So infrastructure organisations will thrive when they are able to work with a wide array of tools which address all the different issues that their communities face.

Developing systems and tools is not all about digital

Many participants entered the programme with the understanding that it would help them learn about or set up new digital tools — such as a CRM. The Design Lab did provide this support, but in a way that was not prescriptive. Coaches aimed to help the participants figure out *why* they thought they needed a CRM, and what problems it might solve for them. This programme was not designed to simply train staff on how to use certain digital tools — just having a CRM (or some other tool) in place is not going to guarantee resilience.

The need for new digital tools is of course valid, because these organisations are emerging and need certain technical systems to be up and running so that they can deliver their services. But relying solely on digital tools, or holding out for one big technical solution to be implemented, will never address every need an organisation has. In many situations, technical solutions don't work, and this can be because:

- **There is no buy-in from the staff at the organisation:** if a new system is introduced from the top, and those who are actually supposed to use it don't understand what it's for, they will likely not use it. In which case, the problem that the new system was meant to address will go unsolved.
- **The technical solution is unnecessarily complicated:** sometimes the simplest solutions are best, and technical ones often come with extra friction, because they may be rich with features that are irrelevant.
- **The technical solution is quite literally not needed:** sometimes there is a misunderstanding of needs, and new innovations introduced into an organisation, but do nothing to improve workflows, and potentially make work even harder.

If a system isn't serving an organisation's needs, it becomes a burden. When something isn't working, introducing a technical solution might not always be the answer. Internal knowledge sharing is a good example: one participant explained that achieving this successfully is often more about how teams communicate with each other, than it is about locking the information down in some centralised filing system.

Another participant noted that the programme did help them stay critical about the things they propose to do and how they propose to do them. In the past, there had been a tendency to overcomplicate internal processes when they would benefit from being simplified.

As outlined in section two, coaches emphasised the importance of participants learning to be self-sufficient in identifying problems — and therefore implementing the most sustainable solutions. Part of this coaching was to challenge underlying assumptions held by the



participants, and allow more practical solutions to emerge, rather than prescribing solutions for them. So if a participant was to say ‘we think building an app would best serve our community’ a coach would not simply explain how to build an app, but question why they think an app is the right decision.

Interrogating needs this way helps avoid the trap of ‘exciting’ innovations which are cumbersome to use, and difficult to set up. The introduction of new digital tools comes with considerations about **digital inclusion**. One participant explained that “a lot of the tools that are on the market wouldn’t work for us because they’re not flexible or adaptable enough. They don’t work with screen readers; they only use ‘male’ and ‘female’ in forms when we have a lot of non-binary staff and non-binary service users. Digitally, there are masses of access-related barriers that are either inherent within the build or inherent within the way a system is used”

So with all digital tooling, alternatives must be considered. For the organisations who give grants, it’s obviously much more efficient to perhaps use an online form for beneficiaries to fill out. While this may work for 99% of applicants, there will always be someone for whom this system does not suit — the edge cases cannot be ignored, so there should always be a human alternative.

Looking back on the roles and contribution these organisations make to Civil Society (as explored in section one), the need for flexibility is integral to supporting Infrastructure organisations. An effective convening, capacity building, or structural infrastructure organisation needs to maintain balance between the new, what could be repurposed, and what is in need of repair.



Section Four: How the Design Lab worked for Participants and Coaches

Assessing how the programme worked

This section brings together feedback we received about the programme from the participants and coaches. We synthesised this feedback into three parts: **what worked, what didn't work, and ideas for future programmes.**

What Worked

Participants found utility in the Design Lab via a number of avenues, the most prominent being:

- An opportunity to reflect on challenges with the group and bond on the ones that resonate with others
- Meeting other organisations in the same boat, and staying in touch to share learnings
- Being given the time and space to focus on elements of organisational transformation

For many organisations in the programme, simply meeting others who were experiencing similar challenges was a **reassuring confidence builder**. One participant mentioned that when working in the third sector, it's easy to forget that a challenge you're facing is probably being faced by others in one way or another.

A common challenge was drawing from lived experience: every organisation saw a lot of value in lived experience, but did not have representation of their client groups within their staff teams. The urgency to take steps to change or address this — and indeed other challenges — is often met with staff burnout and a general fatigue for transformation.

In one session participants expressed the difficulty of managing this emotional journey, alongside trying to lead change, and develop sustaining strategies for the future.

The most prominent shared challenge was within frustrations surrounding the lack of core, long-term funding for Emerging Infrastructure organisations — this will be explored more deeply in *Ideas for future programmes* below.

Shared challenges also opened up opportunities for shared learning: two participants found that they happened to both be in the process of setting up very similar CRM systems, so were able to troubleshoot and share tips with each other. There were also shared learnings in organisational development; for instance, sharing strategies on how to find and onboard more volunteers.



“There were a number of organisations that bonded over the fact that we have billions of Excel sheets rather than a comprehensive system that everybody uses.”

Finally, some participants noted the capacity that this programme **temporarily unlocked**. Receiving funding to attend meant that they had the time and space to reflect on their role as an infrastructure organisation, and therefore much more clearly define what being resilient might look like for them. For one participant, the extra capacity meant that they were even able to raise the profile of their sector by completing and sharing a state of the sector report. Having this funding is one part of “unlocking capacity”- as this time could then be utilised to engage with workshops or coaches with a mindset more focused, or able to focus, on longer term planning, innovation, or redesign.

Having this space to reflect also helped participants verify that some of their **existing plans were indeed putting them on the right track** for the kinds of changes they wanted to see. One organisation suspected that introducing a CRM would not be appropriate for them; the work they did during the programme confirmed that their model of establishing relationships and having conversations within their sector did a lot more in helping them develop infrastructure for their community than a CRM ever could.

“Just even spending a year on thinking about, reflecting on and engaging with what is our role in infrastructure was hugely helpful”

Within another organisation, the process of finding new ways of working had already begun before the Design Lab started. In this case, the programme provided them with tools and insights that helped them crystallise their plans, and speed up the process of transformation.

Coaches shared how they felt the Design Lab worked for participants, and also where the Design Lab enabled them to provide helpful support to organisations.

Mostly, coaches reflected on being able to **just be present to listen to and advise organisations** on the different ideas, sources of, and opportunities they were exploring to become more resilient and sustainable organisations. Focusing on beneficiaries and staff motivations for change, scoping risks and assumptions in planning, and helping to create and influence more sustainable cultures of innovation where areas where coaches felt the programme worked well. One coach noted the value of this, as it is rare to have this kind of resource on offer to help organisations in civil society earlier on to establish themselves in more sustainable ways.

Being able to get a **better sense** of the organisation, being **able to leave challenges** at the door during coaching support, and focusing on **what was valuable** to each organisation were when the programme felt most impactful according to the coaching group feedback. Achieving this through engaging in practises like active listening, interviewing multiple stakeholders across an organisation, or facilitating a group activity with a staff team from an organisation helped to shape more impactful ideas and activities for support.

Structurally, feedback on where the programme worked centred on **environments and cultures**, acting as a critical friend to **test ambitions and strategies**, offering opportunities to



try something new, and working **relationally** with organisations to galvanise activity and address complexities. Helping to slow down the pace of innovation in collaboration with organisations presented opportunities for reflection which produced new ideas, or helped re-evaluate and uplift existing mechanisms within organisations current knowledge and experience.

Where coaches felt the programme was helpful, was in contexts where they could support developing and setting the **right environment and relationships within** an organisation, in order to identify the right challenges to address. Before shifting focus to the outcome, building or supporting the pre-existing mechanisms within organisations that could catalyse change in the long term.

Rather than focusing on a set course or series of content, the coaches felt they could provide **better support in more personalised settings**. Meeting individually or with smaller groups (predominantly coaches met individual organisations in 1:1 settings), allowed their support offers to be more adaptive. At times, coaches fed back to the Design Lab Facilitator that they were needing to help organisations **think about the future in a calmer, and more relaxed environment**, meaning they have taken different roles at times through the process. This resonated with participant feedback on preferring, or feeding back to us suggestions to start with individual activity in a Design Lab programme to lead into more group focused collaboration and activity.

Feedback also highlighted where both technical expertise and personal support in combination also helped to alleviate a sense of “panic” or crisis- particularly where participants either lacked confidence or felt they didn’t have skills in particular areas. This looked slightly different across different coaches and coaching relationships, but common among them was **making the communication and relationships** around innovation processes safer first- before moving to testing or implementing new products or processes.

Coaches felt **introducing “safer” innovation cultures** supported the goals of enabling an Emerging Infrastructure organisation to feel more resilient and sustainable. A safer innovation culture involves not just cultivating particular skills or expertise, but helping individuals or individual organisations feel more confident in their approach to innovation of any kind.

The methods that worked in supporting “safer innovation” cultures included introducing alternative approaches to test, scoping risks and assumptions, and building capacity and accountabilities for more autonomous decision making on development.

“I think, if you're a really effective leader, you should be thinking about how things might go wrong, and how we need to make sure they don't.”

To introduce alternative ways of working, coaches had to act in different circumstances to **resist prescribing solutions** to organisations, and instead, utilise more **exploratory approaches** and questioning in coaching relationships to get a better understanding of the context in which any change is being introduced to. This was a part of the programme coaches felt worked well, and would recommend more of, as it allowed for opportunities to emerge where a new, or potentially more impactful approach could be tested- particularly



where there was **opportunity to do this at an earlier point** in the relationship with an organisation.

Initially, it was not always immediately clear to coaches or participants what was valuable about a particular session, and needed a **more joint agreement** to explore and assess at the end what was valuable about it that helped a participant in their thinking or planning. This fostered **joint accountability, creativity,** and more **focused analysis** on how an organisation could explore opportunities to develop sustainable practices. It also allowed coaches to reflect back accumulated learning and change over time- helping show that a change in idea or strategy was not a setback, but a positive outcome building on testing concepts and evaluating their impact.

“[A sign of developed resilience] ...is the ability to learn from failure,[having] the internal infrastructure to continuously learn, develop and respond to complexity is a signifier of how mature an organisation is in being able to test, experiment and learn...”

This flexibility meant that when things changed, or ideas changed, it was a sign that coaches had been able to get closer to a **more fundamental** or **potentially impactful** area of support they could then offer to an organisation. What worked in the context of the Design Lab, was enabling coaches to **make connections** between interconnected elements within an organisation introducing complexity (for example- system mapping a variety of projects and roles across an organisation), and also build the confidence to make decisions on innovation without outside influence.

Many of the coaches talked about **“resisting” prescribing solutions,** and the importance of letting the organisations make their own decisions ultimately on how they made use of the Lab support, as a first principle means to make the process a sustainable one.

This approach considered two things:

- Coaching support from the programme was finite, and there was a growing understanding across the programme (coaches and participants) that the journey towards sustainability would **outlast the length** of the programme.
- Coaches felt that a lot of ideas for innovation they were supporting were **driven by ambition, or from narrow perspectives** within organisations that allow assumptions and risk to creep into strategic planning.

Coaches felt what worked in these situations was to **foster a sense of accountability** to exploring, as a wider team, what kind of organisation they intend to be, and how their internal infrastructure aligns with this vision. In some cases testing these cultures out **incrementally** with **teams, leaders and stakeholders.** Often, there is no “right or wrong” across these perspectives, but those relationships being unclear become problematic for emergent change. So, coaches felt what worked well were the circumstances in which they could engage, or put a **positive challenge back to an organisation** to explore their ideas with their staff or team members.

How this was characterised by one coach, was where coaching relationships were able to mirror a **“double loop feedback”** system of engagement. Rather than being a “single loop”-



where there is a transactional question and answer relationship between coach and organisation. A double loop feedback system involved groups, or multiple members of an organisation exploring questions and answers, but also modifying goals or plans based on experience.

"[They] came back to me a few weeks later and said "Oh, I've had a re-think", and if at any point someone says that I'm always pleased because there's something in there that's been helpful in some way- helped [them] challenge [themselves] a little bit about what capacity [they've] got and what needs to be done."

Where this worked, coaches reflected it enabled organisations to **move past impasses** and make accountable **decisions** on **development**, helped to **identify new measures** of success, re-evaluated understanding of sources of resilience and sustainability, and **find opportunities** to support the goals of both organisations and the programme.

In two different organisations one coach supported- they reflected that the organisations were similarly composed of people that are very, very passionate about what they do and have clear ideas about what impact they can have. The challenge though, was that they **both hadn't mapped this out**, or might not think in visual terms about how they could articulate their goals. System mapping, visual design of organisational elements, and strategic consultation were all areas where coaches felt they had impact on supporting organisations to identify, or re-think, their strategies and plans for sustainability. Support of this kind helped to **bring realities about implementation, resource, or scale** to life, and was a useful means to act as a critical friend to the organisation to flex the thinking around sustainable innovation and change.

Finally, a positive but emergent area in which the programme worked- was the ability to **connect** and **support one another** across the programme around individual experiences of the programme to foster personal resilience. Examples of this being where coaches and individual participants had more conversations on personal experiences than always being on organisational development, or as a coaching group reflecting on and reacting to experiences of the coaching support process in different iterations through the programme.

Coaches felt that having the opportunity to surface concerns around "the fret of funding", or other external pressures was a useful part of the programme given its goals. One coach noted that "until you've got the ability to build **psychological safety**, people aren't necessarily going to take more agency in their work". The combination of having a "secured" period of funding to engage in this work, and a relational approach seeking to empower and motivate individuals to explore beyond their comfort zones in a safe environment form what is meant by "psychological safety" in this context.

The Design Lab was an opportunity not just to surface the internal developmental opportunities for Emerging Infrastructure organisations- but also to learn more about the environment in which change can be successfully catalysed and embedded. The environment for Infrastructure orgs was commonly one of constrained resources, time sensitive to achieve, or risk adverse to some digital innovations to safeguard their communities- so defining, testing, and implementing new or novel solutions needs to take place in a safe environment.



An important influence on the programme has been coaches trying to interpret the funders' aims for the support they then offer to organisations, and seeing where this aligns with the organisation's goals or where it creates tensions for what they want to achieve, or how well they feel they can work towards this. Finding opportunities then to explore or offer support to meet both these goals, or working to resolve the tensions between them. Coaches found themselves naturally playing the role of “socially negotiating” the different needs and aims of stakeholders across the programme- much like a facilitator role described in the Three Horizons framework. Where both perspectives wanted similar outcomes of resilience and sustainability, or a stronger civil society infrastructure as an outcome of participating in the Lab- Coaches over time observed different, changing ideas on where the best opportunities to work towards this lay. For example, a focus on developing resilience through digital skills brought a perspective that focused on internal structures or ways of working being the opportunity to foster sustainability in the future- but the emerging perspective on working on this with organisations taking part in the Lab necessitated a need to look for opportunities for change in the environment around Emerging Infrastructure organisations to support a more sustainable civil society infrastructure as a whole.

"You know, that whole sort of really testing whether things are worth doing, even within a big organisation- that should be the first thing that you should do but you still get caught up in [the initial idea or end outcome], because people are doing things for the best possible reasons, and they want to make a difference."

A significant enabler for this was where coaches were able to meet or visit a participant, or an organisation on site or in person. This helped to form a more positive relationship, and be able to gain trust. The simple act of being able to step away from the desk to meet a coach also helped to make the time more valuable, and less likely that other priorities would interrupt the coaching support.

What Didn't Work

For **participants**, the main issues with the Design Lab were around:

- Timing and structure.
- Not enough space for open discussion and getting to know each other.
- A misunderstanding or misalignment of needs.

When providing feedback, many participants mentioned the Design Lab having a ‘slow start’, with one participant saying that “we were funded from April, but we didn’t meet the cohort until the end of May, and then the actual training sessions didn’t start until June”. There was also mention of not being given enough notice for sessions, making it hard to block out time in advance to attend.

The structure of the programme was seen by some as being **designed ‘on its head’** and therefore not fully addressing the needs of the group: the early sessions were pre-planned without consultation from the cohort, and so were not fully relevant for all attendees. For instance, there were sessions on things like **data protection** and **cyber security** — these are important activities for emerging infrastructure organisations, but some **already had these**



systems set up. So this led to feeling obligated to attend certain sessions, even if they weren't necessarily useful.

It's possible that some of these factors resulted in poor attendance, and a couple of participants noted that this was disappointing towards the end of the programme, when they finally had the opportunity to properly meet each other.

"It started with a whole series of sort of baseline workshops because they started from the premise that all the organisations would be emerging organisations and all needed these baseline things. But they did this without asking the organisations if these were things they would need."

For those who shared this sentiment, the programme's most useful and interesting sessions didn't come until the end, with the one on one coaching sessions, and the session where members of the cohort got to meet each other and have an **open, unstructured discussion**. Many described this session fondly, and wished there had been more like it, with one participant saying "I don't think we really got to a point where we were doing much collaborative working if I'm honest, which is sad because that was one of the appeals."

The initial slow delivery of the programme was also perceived to have contributed to a misalignment of needs. By the time the Design Lab was delivered, the intentions behind it were **not 100% clear to all participants** — some thought the programme was designed specifically to enhance digital capability and help with the implementation of new technical tools, such as a CRM.

Finally for participants, there was some confusion about who to talk to if there was a problem, and a lack of open communication channels between them and the funders:

"We didn't know who to talk to when things weren't working. Do we talk to the people who are delivering it or do we talk to the people who were funding it? We didn't have a route back to the people who were funding it until quite recently. So, we didn't know who to go to, to be listened to"

For **coaches**, what didn't work included:

- The structure of the programme in relation to the aims of the programme
- The focus on short term solutions while supporting goals of sustainable development
- The consistency with which they could meet and engage with participants

For coaches, the things they didn't feel worked as well in relation to the Design Lab, came from similar barriers they observed within individual coaching relationships like struggles with capacity, a difficulty in coming away from external pressures, and a lack of certainty about how sustainable practices would embed within organisations.

Access, consistency, and communication created barriers for coaches which they felt impacted on the efficacy of the support they could provide. As participants reflected, the



feeling of a “slow start” to the programme filtered into the content of coaching support- in some situations making it more difficult for participants to slow the pace of change, have time to explore more in depth alternative solutions or ideas, and also spend enough time on discovery or mapping activities.

A consistent piece of feedback on the programme was how running the **programme virtually was a significant barrier** for coaches to feel the programme (or their support) was landing in the right way, and having the intended impact. Primarily, it impacted on how far and how well coaches could form trusting relationships with participants- and then, be allowed to see more of the organisation in context. As noted in what worked- where coaches were able to form relationships, or get to understand a broader picture of an organisation, there were subsequent opportunities to pitch support in more **leverageable** and **impactful ways**. Without opportunities to be present within an organisation, it was also then challenging for coaches to know what support was most impactful.

Coaches also recognised the need for organisations to **practise new behaviours** before implementation of new products and processes. Having access to a coaching group was helpful- but coaches noted that before organisations could, or would, utilise new mechanisms, they needed to **recognise the value of such interventions or offers of support**. When supporting organisations, coaches would listen to their needs and offer support such as mapping activities, which **would not always connect** in the minds of participants to the goals they were trying to achieve.

Focusing on the end goal of implementation meant necessary steps such as adequate scoping or problem defining felt like less valuable offers of support.

This, some coaches noted, was also down to trying to offer this kind of developmental support in a period of crisis for some organisations. In periods of difficulty or constraint, coaches recognised that organisations would rightly **defer and default to the things that they know**, even if they're not necessarily going to help them in the long term. In part, coaches reflected this was down to challenges caused by differing perceptions and expectations of the Design Lab, and then structurally trying to balance a variety of individual needs. A potential for compromise which doesn't adequately satisfy any party.

Coaches joined the programme later on in its design, as the Design Lab facilitator initially worked with organisations to find the **right composition of coaches and experience to meet the groups' needs**. Coming into the programme, and then trying to reconcile what the organisations felt they needed help with and what the programme's overall aims hoped to achieve created challenges. Coaches felt they **needed to balance the type of support** they could offer between two perspectives- a funder perspective on a sector challenge, and the individual perspectives of different Emerging Infrastructure organisations.

Whilst working in this way, coaches reflected that at times they felt their offers of support could be **seen as “interfering”** with organisations rather than introducing resilience and sustainability. Advising to revisit assumptions, or reexamine problem definitions was felt to be at odds with receiving “valuable” support from the coaching process.

Differing understanding of programme aims also meant for coaches it was unclear how organisations **intended to use the resource and support**, and what seemed most essential was the access to funding to sustain their organisations in the present. This created an additional barrier to exploring how that organisation could change or adapt- being asked to support **survivability activities**, not support change projects or testing innovation.



Developing an App, selecting a CRM system, or a particular digital product were mentioned earlier as examples of ambitions to come unstuck from present circumstances, but coaches felt this focus on digital could also be a red herring that diverted organisational thinking away from more necessary or important sources of sustainability which they could support developing.

Another “understanding” challenge also came with the inclusion of “digital skills”- for coaches, digital challenges or opportunities were often presented to them, but through exploration were often found to be not the most important, or potentially impactful, areas they could provide support to.

“You know they might not just need something simple like a, you know, an email kind of CRM type thing rather than a full-on digital product”

Whilst participants reflected the lack of opportunity to connect on the programme, coaches saw this from slightly different perspectives- reflecting that they struggled, and felt the Design Lab struggled where there was a **lack of consistency in communication or contacts** from organisations they were supporting.

This happened for a number of reasons, structurally impacting the programme. Illnesses, absence or competing demands have been cited as overall barriers to working towards the aims of the programme. It also had a secondary impact on how well a **coach could build momentum** with an organisation- not having access to information or context about an org and therefore creating barriers for making sessions feel more valuable and impactful. Subsequently, it was also then a challenge to create an environment where organisations could connect more fully with one another to share what they had been exploring with coaches.

Coaches reflected this was also impacting on the **enthusiasm for working in different ways**, and getting closer to root causes and opportunities for more impactful change- an important aim of the programme. What was felt was not working in this instance- was the **transactional relationship** between some organisations and coaches they felt they were engaged in. Caused by how the aims of the programme were communicated to organisations during the application process. Feedback from interviews talked about how in some situations, coaches felt they were expected to be able to provide **simple answers** to problems, rather than support a journey of change.

In some circumstances, more technical queries on digital product selection or implementation were able to fit this model of relationship- for example, selecting a new CRM system or general requests for resources. The coaches fed back as well though, that many things they needed or were asked to support were challenges in which it was **not possible to provide simple solutions**- such as, what should go into a policy as opposed to how to structure that process.

What also challenged the programme from the Coaches perspective, was how it was hard for the participants to truly feel they were being **“removed” from the fret of funding, or funding expectations** they experience more broadly, and likely felt in relation to engaging in the Design Lab.



Coaches fed back that it would be **very difficult** for organisations to share what they're actually struggling with, or what they need to develop to become more sustainable- as they likely feel they are **still under a spotlight to some extent**. The perception of "power" over the participants in the Lab, was felt to be associated with both the facilitators and coaches working on the programme, and from coaches was reflected that it meant it was difficult for some organisations to open up to and trust coaches.

A common challenge coaches perceived was a general sense of **fear and anxiety around current constraints, access to and conditions** of funding. Even within the programme space, where some of these pressures were meant to be alleviated- these concerns were present in how organisations or participants interacted with coaching support during the programme.

Some coaches fed back to us that in experiencing the organisations and working on the programme, there was an **absence of a "funder voice"** to alleviate these concerns. In pointing to what they felt was not working, one coach noted that generally, and in this context, funders are seeing problems across the sector in the language they use to talk about resilience and sustainability- and organisations are seeing their own problems when talking about these concepts- and they look very different. So, not having a common language between funders and participants on the aims of the programme was an area in which the Design Lab didn't work. As an example, in Section 3 organisations described how developing "systems" is not exclusively about digital- but the programme existing in the Digital Fund portfolio, and the examples referencing "digital" as a catalyst to more significant change tempered the perceptions that this is what the focus of introducing resilience or sustainability should be.

Participants and **coaches** did also offer where they felt future iterations could better support the structure and outcomes of a programme like a Design Lab- which we'll share in the next section.

Ideas for Future Programmes

All **participants** we spoke to shared two key ideas on how the programme could be improved for the future:

- A programme of support and funding that lasts longer than a year
- Greater opportunities to engage and collaborate with those funding the programme

As we've explored throughout this report, Emerging Infrastructure organisations have an overwhelming need for **core funding**. The provision of infrastructure cannot be funded like a one-off project. This need is apparent in the suggestion that — coming from multiple participants — the programme would have benefited from being longer. In Section 5 there are suggestions on different programme structures, or approaches but overall- reflections on 2-3 year programmes of change to effectively discover, test, and embed more purposefully sustainable change felt like a minimum for most Emerging Infrastructure organisations as their understanding of the programme aims, and necessary stages of systemic intervention grew.

Supporting organisations to both emerge and potentially implement radical changes realistically requires more than a year. Some participants felt that a year was just about enough to get their heads



around new ideas and new ways of working that the programme introduced to them. Successfully embedding changes takes more support, and more funding.

Some suggested a follow-on programme: where mentorship continues to ensure any transformations are taking place smoothly. This is especially important if organisations expect to stay resilient and self-sufficient. It is understood that while there may be initial excitement and energy behind kicking off positive changes within an organisation, this will likely dissipate with shifting priorities, and staff turnaround. Therefore there is a need for further support for carrying plans out until the organisation has properly embedded them into their day-to-day.

“Because a lot of what we got was ‘this is how you do something!’. And it's in a box. And what we need is someone to help us take it out of the box, and then deal with the snags over the next six to twelve months, and to check in with us to make sure we're still using it”

This longer-term support requires greater engagement with funders so that they can better understand an organisation's needs. Packages of support provided to organisations once they move on from the initial programme should be **bespoke**.

This means structuring the first year of the programme differently: initial sessions should consist of **more open, unstructured discussions** so that cohort members have the opportunity to get to know each other, and the coaches. These open discussions can be **supplemented** with **one-on-one coaching sessions**, where coaches can get a grasp on the particular pain-points for each organisation, and what specific problems they're interested in solving. Then, the workshops that follow will be more relevant.

The Design Lab helped participants understand the value of slowing down and looking at the big picture; there was a sentiment coming from this year's cohort that funders can afford to do the same. Focussing on the needs of organisations and creating programmes of support **that span multiple years** are both key to setting Emerging Infrastructure organisations up to be self-sustaining. In order to achieve this, short-term funding aimed at instant change and clearly measurable impact should be avoided, and rather it should come in the form of a much **slower, handheld delivery** of change. If radical organisational transformations take time to embed, then programme delivery should take the time needed to support this.

Similarly, from **coaches**, imagining or reflecting on future iterations of this type of support focused on taking a slower and more critical approach to developing a programme in collaboration with participating organisations. In this way then creating a structure that is more **valuable** and **adaptive** to Infrastructure organisations perspectives on goals of catalysing change in more sustainable ways. Taking digital as an example: defining this more accurately to generate clearer **aims** and **conditions** for participating in a programme of support, and agreement on what success would look like at the end.

As with participant feedback on “starting with 1:1 focused” activity: coaches felt there would be added value in a coaching group **providing support** and **facilitating workshops interchangeably** to be able to build more momentum. This would then help support what is



commonly understood now to be a challenge that spans multiple years; a goal of systematically addressing and sustainably supporting infrastructural assets within civil society.

Like with participant's ideas on flipping the structure of the programme, coaches also shared with us how a programme like this in future could start and spend more time with bringing together the multitude of perspectives defining what civil society infrastructure is, or needs to be. Then creating the compelling convening call for collaborative activity and structure.

A final reflection from coaches on collaboration in future programmes also reflected on the uncertainty and ambiguity involved in taking on a goal of catalysing change in Civil Society with Infrastructure organisations. The support needed has to be "offered in the moment, without the expectation that it germinates in that moment". All stakeholders in the system of support need to be **comfortable that the outcomes may come at a very different point in time** to when the intervention takes place.



Section Five: Recommendations for a Sustainable System of Support

Enabling a Sustainable System of Support

This section brings together reflections on how future programmes of support for Infrastructure organisations could adapt and change, and how programmes focused on innovation or change could be structured to create stronger enabling conditions for impact.

Taking into account what we've learned, we've now been able to identify different opportunities (or leverageable opportunities) to introduce a more sustainable system of support for Emerging Infrastructure organisations.

Programme Content

Considering how to go about curating content for participants, or anticipating the needs of participating organisations would benefit from taking a different approach to the criteria for selection.

Digital and '**digital skills**' were concepts of interest to funders, recognising the catalysing impact on public services that these ways of working unlocked. In relation to developing resilience, there were different opinions on how effective this is to underpin the type of content explored in a programme such as the Design Lab.

If it relates to resilience, then developing digital skills can be useful, but resilience comes from understanding **the need behind utilising a digital solution**, rather than simply teaching Emerging Infrastructure organisations how to use or implement these technologies.

"The pace of change towards digital skills became huge during the pandemic because it was necessary"

Some organisations came in with digital "ideas" they had that felt like problems, but there was never a sense across the group that digital was **the most immediate challenge they faced**. For many organisations, the legacy of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions made digital adaptation a necessity, but most organisations haven't yet had the chance to reflect on what is essential from these adaptations that would need to continue as part of their internal infrastructure into the future.



If coaching support or programme content is anchored on a focus on developing digital skills, as opposed to understanding what value they could offer- it means the impact of **support can be limited** for participants.

A broader offer of content then may be more suitable to structuring any instructive elements of a Design Lab programme- and in selecting what kinds of training or workshop content to run, would benefit more from considering:

- What needs from discovery or scoping does the content address?
- How practically it relates to what an organisation would like to test or develop?
- How would the workshop environment allow participants to try something new before application to an aspect of their organisation?

Based on feedback during the programme, using this criteria informed how the Design Lab structured workshops and group activities in the latter stages of the programme- the preference for the latter sessions voiced by participants in feedback indicates a positive influence for facilitating future programme content.

Changes to Programme Structure

Having phased, or longer term programme structures could be facilitated with a similar level of investment. The timing of a programme focused on developing sustainable practices is important both to participating organisations, and to stakeholders delivering support to them.

Considering times of the year, or phases of delivery that are facilitated with gaps in between could stretch the time in which support could be reflected on, allowed to embed or influence, or evaluated over a longer period of time. For example, shorter developmental sprints at less intense periods of the calendar year for organisations- but facilitated over a longer period of overall developmental time.

Investing in **extended discovery time** within the programme- which may shorten the time for implementation, but create more opportunity to form the right relationships and the right opportunities to introduce sustainability to a network of Infrastructure organisations.

Investing also in a more **co-designed approach** to programme structure would also allow for more flexibility to adapt to the needs of participants after going through a discovery period. Building on the recommendations from participants, coaches also agreed overall that more discovery and more collaboration for how and what a programme like this could focus on would strengthen the ability to work towards the aims of the Design Lab in future iterations.

Clarifying the Case for Collaboration

In setting up a future iteration of a Design Lab, considering:

- Who is, or should be in a **cohort**?
- What elements make them a **distinct group** of organisations?
- What levels of **digital** or **organisational maturity** are they at?



Having a stronger rationale for bringing together a group of organisations would support then setting clear and equally understood aims and objectives for the participating organisations.

This would allow for increased and valued group collaboration- where organisations interacting as a network would see or identify more common challenges and experiences amongst them that could be explored through a programme.

In either application or scoping phases, having a **particular project or initiative** in mind would also strengthen the ability to structure support around this activity. Organisations identifying, or developing a distinct initiative, as part of the conditions for accessing the programme would support having something with which coaches or facilitators could focus activity around.

As opposed to finding “digital initiatives” to structure activity around, what helped in the programme was where coaches and facilitators were able to develop ideas to focus on that were intended to introduce sustainability with a clearer rationale for supporting their development.

Recognising the challenge for society as a whole in strengthening outcomes for Civil Society means also paying attention to the **signals and signifiers** within the present system of what is, or could, enable the transition to a shared aspirational system. A future where Civil Society Infrastructure is having a transformative impact on outcomes for different communities.

Enablers for Transition

From the Three Horizons perspective, and through reflecting on the final outcomes of the programme we have learnt much from participants about some of the unique challenges Emerging Infrastructure organisations face. External pressures and internal challenges overlap and intersect — and contextualise where some of the support needs and opportunities to enable change come from.

We have learnt from the group where they feel the opportunities to **catalyse change** are coming from, and what signals the beginning of a transition to a stronger network of infrastructure for civil society. Some of these enablers could form part of a convening call for bringing together Infrastructure organisations into future programmes of support.

Focusing on, or **segmenting** types of support to help Emerging Infrastructure become more established, or to introduce **new kinds** of infrastructural offers to communities can take the shape of:

Conditions for Stronger Community Power

Programmes focusing on **creating forums for connection** or sharing growth challenges between infrastructure networks, or support for **developing, protecting and ownership** of organisational **initiatives** and **community assets**. Introducing a sense of ownership and continuity to the roles these organisations play in civil society.

Feedback from participants reflected on the desire for more opportunities to connect as a peer group or network; signalling the opportunity for programmes or funding which could focus explicitly on this area of support.



Funding Infrastructure Organisational Core

Programmes or packages of support that focus on **security or stability** for an organisation over a set period- funding the **core** of the organisation. As discussed in section two, an overwhelming sense of anxiety about the future inhibits organisational change and development.

By putting resources where organisations need it most, Emerging Infrastructure organisations can allow themselves to cultivate a stronger environment for change. Unlocking the potential for alternative revenue generation, or increasing the confidence to scale up activities such as digital offers of support.

Adaptive Programme Structures

Programme structures that allow for **alternative measures of impact**- moving the focus away from key performance indicators or scale- can create an environment where organisations can focus on telling compelling stories about the **impact of their work**. A longer or iterative programme structure would also **create stronger conditions** for infrastructure to grow in different, and more sustainable ways.

Uplifting the Voice of Community Infrastructure

Providing a platform for the **independent voice** of Infrastructure organisations to communicate the **intersectional impacts** of current societal challenges, and particularly their complex impacts on the communities they support were highlighted as an enabler for **resilient infrastructure**. Removing the disabling barriers, or gaps in understanding about the experiences of marginalised communities, and subsequently creating more visibility on the necessity and value of the infrastructural roles they play.

A reflection from the programme group, surfacing in our group sessions and in evaluation and feedback, was a sense of either not understanding the aims of the programme, or feeling that there was too broad a focus in goals of the fund.

Segmenting the aims and objectives, or breaking down these aims into different offers of support would help to **convene the right networks** of organisation, and also give more **power and support** to them to utilise funding more effectively for internal development, or greater impact for communities.

In feedback from participants and coaches on the programme, there is a combination of new structures or amendments to the current structure which would both support a Design Lab approach focused on similar goals of developing resilience and sustainability.



Observations and Conclusions

The Design Lab started with a hypothesis that the development of digital skills, and the time and space to think through sustainable development and goals of resilience would **catalyse more impactful change** for Civil Society.

The programme experience has been about more than internal change, innovation, or digital adaptation however, what we have heard strongly from Emerging Infrastructure organisations is that there is a **broader ecosystem of influence**, with more leverageable opportunities to strengthen Infrastructure. The relationships between, and conditions and interactions around funders and grantees playing infrastructural roles being an important foundation for change.

Digital ways of working have been a useful starting point, but longer term development and support for civil society infrastructure via more **flexible** and **patient forms of investment** are the priority for organisations playing and maintaining important infrastructural roles within different communities.

We've also learnt that there are many examples of existing organisational wisdom, knowledge, and expertise, by virtue of Emerging Infrastructure organisations close links to communities. Driving active planning, advocacy, and infrastructural support to change outcomes for marginalised groups of beneficiaries, and providing a unique perspective on the needs of the sector.

The programme had a **broad range of goals and aims**, and also adopted an approach that was new for participants and funders- therefore complexity and challenge is to be expected, and learning from the programme as an iterative step in a process is important to continue to work towards a shared goal of transformative change for, and more positive outcomes within civil society.

What next?

Participants and coaches, and the recommendations from the facilitating the programme agree that continuing to fund and support Infrastructure is essential- particularly in a context of increased financial constraint and uncertainty.

Working collaboratively, and focusing on sustaining the core of infrastructure organisations to invest in more closely aligned and mutually beneficial programmes of activity would serve to connect and strengthen the potential of reaching a shared aspirational system.

We intend that the findings from the Design Lab programme inform the social negotiations between funders and Emerging Infrastructure organisations to create a sustainable system of support in future.



Recommendations

The Design Lab brought together a myriad of intersectional challenges and opportunities for different stakeholders to think through how programmes such as this in future could work towards an overall goal of a strengthened and sustainable Civil Society Infrastructure, actively working towards positive impacts for different communities.

From the report and programme delivery we would recommend the following:

- Providing support to Civil Society Infrastructure needs **longer term funding** to sustain organisational impacts for different marginalised communities and communities of interest- it also needs to address both internal infrastructural development, as well as creating enabling conditions for organisations to influence the context around them.
- Providing opportunities for Emerging Infrastructure organisations to **access more unrestricted core funding** is also a means to foster resilience and more sustainable practice into their organisational design.
- Programmes supporting Emerging Infrastructure to implement organisational change needs a **broader focus in design** to allow alternative sources of resilience and sustainability to be tested and implemented. A programme also needs to be able to cultivate a safer environment for participants to more fully engage with the programme aims.
- Programme Structures need to more **accurately reflect the context** in which Emerging Infrastructure organisations operate- allowing more flexibility, longer term, and adaptive periods of support over the course of a programme lifespan.
- Programmes supporting Infrastructure organisations require a more **collaborative approach to cohort selection**, identifying **programme aims and goals**, and a deeper **assessment** of digital needs, skills, and maturity before moving into delivery.
- The Design Lab had a number of goals and areas of interest- future programmes would benefit from **segmenting** goals of impact for communities, catalysing internal change and development, or exploring digital innovation into different cohorts or different funds.



Thanks

We would like to express our gratitude and thanks to all **participants, facilitators and coaches** involved with the Design Lab programme. Especially for taking the time to contribute to and inform our final learning report. All participants, coaches, facilitators and funding partners engaged with us with great patience and kindness whilst facilitating the programme. We're grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from and work with a diverse group of stakeholders to explore Infrastructure and Civil Society.

A special thanks as well to **Georgia Iacovou** who has been instrumental in bringing this report together. Interviewing, writing, and editing our final learning report.



Section Six: Appendix

Cohort Organisations

Information on participating organisations in the Design Lab programme, coaching group, and links to related content and reading

Edible London CIC

About the organisation

[Edible London](#) is a food infrastructure organisation and the main Tier 2 food provider in Haringey, supplying 11 tonnes of food (equivalent to 29,000 meals) to 36 partner organisations weekly.

Edible London provides free fresh produce to food poverty organisations across North East London. Sourcing, sorting and distributing surplus food, and working with partner organisations to turn this into nutritious meals for communities and vulnerable people experiencing malnutrition and food poverty.

Application Summary

Edible London applied for support from the Design Lab to “[create] an efficient management and decision making structure that reflects our values and ethos.”

Improving cross-organisational communication to reduce stress, decentralising decision making and establishing a clearer organisational direction were areas described as in need of support.

Financial stability, Implementing correct protocols and procedures, and supporting continued development of a greater understanding of Edible London’s partners and service user needs were goals of receiving support from the Design Lab.

Emerging Outcomes

Edible London participants worked with the Design Lab to identify pain points across their organisational system- with support from a Service Designer who co-produced a map of the organisation. Identifying the need for specific roles, where the organisation could strengthen communication across projects and teams, and where over the lifecycle of a programme are the shock points where Edible London encounters difficulties.



Friends, Families & Travellers

About the organisation

[Friends, Families & Travellers](#) are an organisation who provide an increasing number of infrastructure roles for Gypsy Roma and Traveller organisations as part of their aim to help the sector succeed- providing support to the small, fragmented Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) Civil Society which is made up of around 30 organisations. Most of these organisations are small, single staffed or volunteer run with the remainder mostly regional or sub-regional organisations.

Friends, Families & Travellers provide direct support to communities, work closely with other GRT organisations and partners, and provide infrastructural and Secretariat support to contribute and develop the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Gypsies and Travellers.

Friends Families & Travellers support communities, provide training and resources, work with partners such as Solicitors and Health partners to frame evidence for commissions, and work to influence national policy and legislation.

Application Summary

Friends, Families & Travellers (FFT) applied for support from the Design Lab to develop their structures and processes to continue their development of their Infrastructural offer of support to partners and communities.

They wanted to work with the Design Lab to identify new skills and capabilities to lead the sector in conversation on meaningful support for GRT community members, how to become more responsive and adaptive as an organisation, and reflect on how to use data more effectively and build effective partnerships.

Friends, Families & Travellers described the challenges in taking on their Infrastructural role in the sector- citing the GRT communities experience of having the poorest life outcomes and highest experience of prejudice than other marginalised communities. The lack of trust in “authority” organisations or more mainstream organisations from the GRT community that needs an adaptive approach to build trust and effective support, and the need for more joined up working across organisations advocating for support for the GRT community.

Emerging Outcomes

FFT participants explored with coaches how they could develop their offer to lead the sector in a more “conversational” approach- to build a better understanding of the value in engaging in more collaborative activity, as well as build the recognition of the vital role FFT would play in infrastructurally facilitating this.

FFT worked with a coach to explore how learning and approaches from public sector innovation- such as Human Learning Systems and cycles of experimentation- could inform a developmental approach to testing conversations with partners to work towards an offer to the wider sector.



FFT began to then develop a greater understanding of their respective partners' individual needs by engaging in a cross-organisational relational approach to GRT community support. For example, working on how to identify and support a shared goal between activists and funders in the GRT Civil Society space.

The Bytes Project

About the organisation

[The Bytes Project](#) is a youth work organisation based in Belfast- they use youth work and technology to help young people transform their lives and give them the confidence and skills they need to change the world around them for good.

The Bytes project has been supporting young people for nearly three decades. Their goal is to create “accessible, non-judgemental” spaces for young people. Their programmes help young people speak about issues affecting them or their communities, and advocates for community voices at local and national policy levels.

Application Summary

Bytes applied for support from the Design Lab to develop new skills and capabilities by identifying what to “stop doing, becoming more user centred, better able to use digital tools and data and the ability to use data more effectively”.

The organisation also sought to utilise Lab resources to develop how they test, experiment and iterate new ideas of initiatives as an organisation. With the intention to become better able to share data and knowledge that would attract additional funding and support establishing a funding consortium within the local sector.

Emerging Outcomes

Bytes worked with coaches from the Design Lab to experiment with different ways the organisation could share knowledge across their organisation to strengthen their organisational strategy. Using time with coaches to revisit their business plan to develop a more robust theory of change- helping to shape new opportunities to test new approaches in their local community to support other third sector organisations.

The Roots Programme

About the organisation

[The Roots Programme](#) is an organisation that seeks to break down social barriers and bring people together. Roots facilitate programmes to foster connections between issues, people and communities- through practising radical connection and supporting community members to deepen their understanding of others' lived experiences.

Roots describe themselves as a “connector” organisation- enabling organisations, varied communities, and different communities of interest to come together. Facilitating networks



between different schools, partner organisations, and groups of young people from different socio-economic backgrounds to learn more about one another's experiences.

Application Summary

The Roots programme application sought to use the Design Lab space and resources to explore how they could better galvanise support and communicate with their extensive network of volunteers and supporters. Roots had established itself through community engagement, crowdfunding, and engagement with stakeholders, and sought support to mobilise this network, and create opportunities for them to become more involved in telling the story of their organisation.

Whilst thinking about growing this movement, Roots also wanted to do this whilst remaining true to a grassroots and “focused” approach on supporting working class communities, advocating and sharing their voices and experience in a space that would traditionally be dominated by academic language. Influencing policy and contributing to national discourse on social issues without losing a sense of participant or member led voice and experience.

Emerging Outcomes

The Roots Programme worked with coaches to revisit their assumptions and plans about how to approach organisational storytelling through something like a marketing or comms plan, into rethinking how they communicate about the work they do with other partners.

Roots also had support from coaches to bring together the overlapping initiatives, planned projects and programmes, and the narrative driving their organisational mission to create more coherent and user-led stories to engage with external partners such as schools and teachers.

GirlDreamer

About the organisation

[GirlDreamer](#) is an organisation supporting communities of young women of colour to empower and support positive change for local communities. GirlDreamer seeks to educate, elevate, and empower young women in their professional development, through facilitating programmes and awarding grants through their Dream Fund.

The organisation facilitates programmes, workshops, and is developing a community platform to support a network of young women across different parts of the UK. GirlDreamer has over 12,000 followers across social media and almost 2,000 active participants across our programmes, initiatives and direct support services.

Application Summary

GirlDreamer applied to the programme for support around how to make better use of digital tools and data, wanting to explore how to use data more effectively, and how to build effective partnerships with external stakeholders.



The application reflected on how well, and how focused the organisation was on understanding their communities needs and engaging with them, but wanted to move to a place where aggregating and drawing together all their impacts could be brought together more effectively.

As the organisation was continuing to grow, GirlDreamer were also aware and keen to develop more robust policies and practices to continue to support their community in sustainable ways.

Emerging Outcomes

GirlDreamer worked through the Lab to develop their community platform- and focused with support on coaching developing robust policies and terms and conditions for protecting and safeguarding members of their community platform. Coaching support also helped GirlDreamer to think through the risks and practices needed to safely moderate an online community, and also safeguard the interests of members from extractive data practices from other potential partners.

Unlimited

About the organisation

[Unlimited](#) is an arts commissioning body supporting artists and artwork, and advocating for the rights of disabled artists- championing the experiences of disabled artists in the cultural sector and advocating for change through influencing society's perceptions of disability.

Unlimited is now an independent organisation- having been incubated from Shape Arts London and launched as a new organisation towards the end of the Design Lab programme.

Unlimited runs programmes and commissions artists, facilitates a network for disabled artists across the UK, develops resources, and leads campaigns to advocate for the rights of disabled artists.

Application Summary

As Unlimited/ Shape Arts was working towards a deadline of emerging as an independent organisation during the Design Lab programme- Unlimited had identified a specific need for support to identify new tools and systems for their organisation.

Unlimited wanted to select and implement a new CRM system to support transferring, storing, and managing data for their community of artists and activists.

In exploring this new approach, they also sought to determine how they could use data effectively to support decision making and become more "skilled" as an organisation to use data more effectively.

Emerging Outcomes

Unlimited used support from coaches to identify, test, and implement a new data management system for their organisation- and also utilised time to explore how as a team decision making could be supported through approaches such as active listening. Time spent



with coaches helped identify ways to test different functions to support distributed decision making amongst the new team, and supported understanding the new system for managing membership data.

Sector 3 Stockport

About the organisation

[Sector 3](#) is a charity infrastructure support network for voluntary, community and faith-based groups, social enterprises and charitable organisations in Stockport. They provide advice, guidance, funding, and logistical support to a variety of community groups or individuals seeking to establish new community focused initiatives within their local area of Stockport- and work closely with the Local Authority to support relationships across the local community.

Application Summary

Sector 3 applied for support from the Design Lab principally to challenge their thinking, and support their development of their innovation culture internally. Sector 3 were concerned with thinking about how what they do provides value both to the local community they support, and also the partnership network of organisations involved in commissioning and designing Sector 3. Within this, Sector 3 also sought support to develop a database or CRM system to support data collection and analysis.

Emerging Outcomes

Sector 3 worked with coaches to onboard new team members, and also selected and set up a new database system for the organisation. The organisation also used resources from the Lab to identify new roles, and processes for the organisation to help establish more formal data collection and management processes.

Coaches

Further information about the Coaching Group members.

Rebekah ford

Rebekah is a Senior Digital Creative: Service and UX Designer, Developer, Illustrator and Artist.

Rebekah is the owner of [Afterwards Ltd](#), a design studio that builds digital projects, prototypes and help clients improve their digital offerings. She is also the director of [Just Before It Happened Ltd](#), a fledgling arts co. with projects in early development.

John Mortimer

[John](#) has been working in the public sector since 2003, with local authorities, helping them with transformative change. Redesigning their services so they are person-centred, rather than council driven. Leadership and team working development. Creation of person centred



measures. Looking at simplifying services and working together with stakeholders, so they don't all pull in different directions.

John works with Human Learning Systems, a phrase that denotes establishing new ways of working that are helpful, changing the way councils traditionally work.

Much of John's work is with front line teams, helping them to change and develop new ways of working. This involves how to communicate complex ideas to leaders, in the form of stories.

Lydia Ragoonanan

[Lydia's](#) supported dozens of mission-led organisations and social entrepreneurs over nearly a decade.

Her support has largely focussed on supporting people to test new ideas, and to grow and scale what works. She is knowledgeable about both ways to explore product innovation, and is also deeply skilled and experienced in fostering a culture of experimentation.

Liz curry

[Liz](#) is a Data Protection & Information Governance Consultant.

Liz is also passionate about Data and the ethical challenges inherent to its use and manipulation—she is also a great facilitator and passionate speaker.

Liz is very used to operating at the most senior level, ensuring that planning reflects the overall business strategy. Ability to present data-based ideas for improvement in an easily understandable and quickly digestible way.

Chris Hall

Chris is the founder of [Impact Box](#), a software consultancy for the charity sector with an emphasis on low code solutions and capacity building.

Impact Box has a staff team of ten and has actively supported over a hundred charities and social enterprises since 2016. Prior to launching Impact Box he worked in delivery roles for two charities focussed on reducing educational inequality. He has particular expertise around CRM systems, product management and digital strategy.

Facilitators

[Naomi Stanford](#) Organisational Design

[Rowenna Fielding](#) GDPR & Data Protection

[Stefanie Posavec](#) Data Visualisation & Storytelling



[Elisabeth Ward](#) Accessibility & Content Design

[Gemma Drake](#) Systems Thinking & Design Lab Retrospective

[Paul Hills](#) Online Communication

[Cath Cooney & Graham Leicester](#) International Futures Forum- Three Horizons

[Andrew Grimes](#) User Centred Design & Rapid Prototyping

[Jamie Pike & Nick Hunt](#) Bio-Leadership Project- Changing the Story of Leadership

Resources

[Careful Industries](#) A link to our organisational home page where you can read more about our other projects

[The Lab](#) - A link to our Design Lab learning blogs

Interesting Reading from the Programme

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Careful
Industries

For more information

Please contact

Rachel Coldicutt
Rachel@Careful.Industries



hello@careful.industries
www.careful.industries

Registered address: 3, Queen Square, London WC1N 3AR
Registered in England & Wales No: 12102762