

Tech vs Abuse:

Research Findings



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All views and content are those of the researchers

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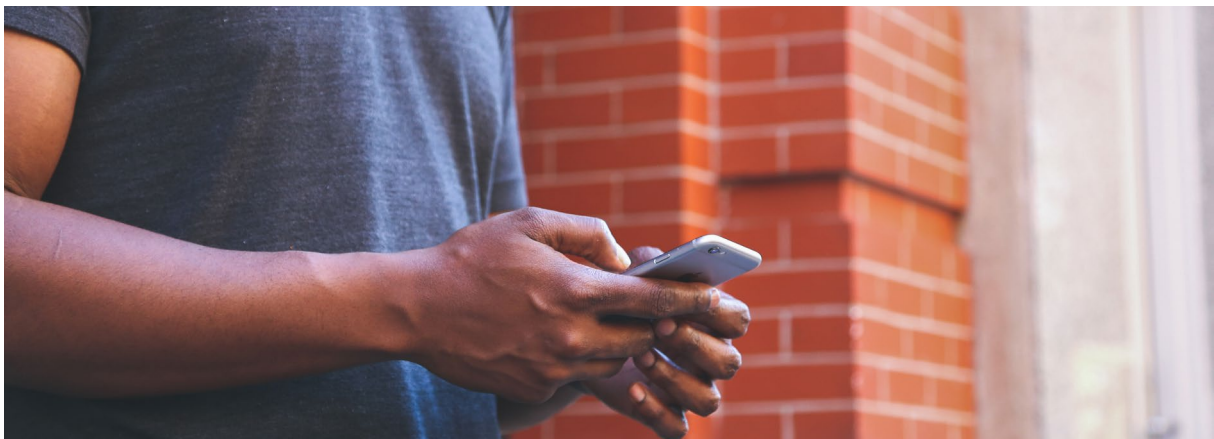
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Summary

‘Tech vs Abuse 2.0’ is a collaborative research project undertaken by Think Social Tech, Snook, and SafeLives, commissioned by Comic Relief, in partnership with Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and the Clothworkers Foundation.

The sector-focused discovery research set out to explore common priorities, problems, and opportunities to better support those affected by abuse today. This involved interviewing practitioners and co-designing the fund with organisations in the domestic and sexual abuse sector with a keen interest in developing and delivering digital services. Its aim was to find out how the landscape has changed since undertaking the original research in 2016 ([by Snook, Chayn, and SafeLives](#)), and what those organisations felt were the priorities for using technology more effectively in the context of delivering support to victims and survivors.





Key Findings

This research discovered new priorities for those organisations working in the fields of domestic and sexual abuse, particularly in terms of the need for more recovery support.

The landscape for tech currently in use is also shifting, with many more tools and resources online. On the whole, however, this research found that the experiences of victims, survivors and practitioners using technology and going online, remain largely unchanged to that in 2016. There is still a need to make better use of technology to deliver services, whilst mitigating the risks: helping people identify abuse sooner, connecting them to support, and helping them to rebuild their lives.



More digital solutions exist, particularly in the UK. Updating the [market scan](#) identified over 90 digital solutions that are useful in the context of abuse (even if that was not their intended purpose, such as apps to detect if a phone is being monitored, or crisis support services). There are many more digital tools, information, services, and resources online compared to 2016. However, the provision of digital services for support in the UK remains patchy and fragmented.



New risks and fears surrounding technology. The widespread uptake and everyday use of smartphones and connected devices in the home means that stalking and abuse online is no longer solely the domain of the most 'tech-savvy' perpetrator. Furthermore, the 'Internet of Things' has opened up new risks and types of tech abuse. There are now many more resources surrounding tech abuse, for both victims, survivors, and practitioners, however, awareness of these resources, and confidence surrounding the safe use of tech, remains low.



Key Findings



Diverse user needs and experiences of abuse. People's experiences of abuse and their journeys through that experience are complex. It is important to recognise that abuse can take place in any relationship, regardless of gender or sexuality. It can also take many forms, including coercive control, and psychological, physical, sexual, financial, and emotional abuse. The key stages of abuse include: Unaware; Aware; Leaving; Staying and Recovering. Those developing and designing digital services in the context of abuse need to account for the different needs people have, according to their background and the different type(s) of abuse they've experienced.



Awareness and recognition of abuse. Since 2016 there has been increasing recognition of the need to consider perpetrators of abuse, in order to keep those experiencing abuse safer as well as to help perpetrators recognise the need to change their behaviour. Online tools and anonymous support could offer an invaluable support approach. This research also identified an opportunity to enable friends, family, professionals and co-workers to better identify and support those in an abusive relationship. Finally, there is an opportunity to use creative methods online to help people realise and recognise when they are experiencing abuse.



Learning more and understanding what next. The Tech vs Abuse research in 2016 identified a number of key gaps in online resources offering general information on abuse, children, help and support, legal information, and finding support in crisis moments. It concluded that there was very little time to find what they needed, and yet much information was duplicated, hard to find, and did not answer their key questions. This research identified that little had changed in the experiences of people searching for help. Furthermore, the information which does exist is hard to find when searching online. Official sources of advice and support are often different to the search terms and searching behaviour of those looking to find answers online.



Accessing services. There are still limited real-time support services specific to abuse. It is also hard to find services, understand how to contact them, and to do this without delay in a format that suits people's circumstances. Many people face additional barriers to seeking support and often lack confidence to take the next step to access services.



Recovery and healing from abuse. There is now a greater recognition of the need to extend support and services to those recovering from abuse. Survivors of abuse face many difficulties in rebuilding their lives – ranging from housing and financial to overcoming trauma and avoiding re-victimisation – but support services often end after crisis point due to limitations in funding and resources.



Tech vs Abuse Design Challenges remain. Overall, this research found that organisations were very supportive of the original Tech vs Abuse Design Challenges ([Snook et al. 2017](#)) and their continuing relevance. These are helpful as a way to prioritise service design and development based on common problems seen across the sector, as well as to understand priorities for funding. We have tweaked them slightly based on findings from the research.



Early stage funding is needed most. Organisations were keen to use the Tech Vs Abuse fund to prioritise what to develop, to scope what already exists, collaborate with sector partners, and find the right digital partner. In other words, they were seeking flexible funding for discovery and alpha stages of development, including user research, market analysis and prototype development.



Ten key challenges for developing digital services. Practitioners identified ten key challenges for developing digital services. These included: Accessing flexible early stage funding; finding the right digital partner; knowing what it should cost; collaborating with other organisations in the sector; knowing what else exists; safeguarding against discovery by perpetrators (including sensitive marketing); building trust in the safety of the solution; embedding tech skills in the organisation; sharing learning from user research and development; open sourcing solutions.

These findings have been used to inform the development of four key design challenges that could make the most immediate difference to victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

These are:

- Realising it's abuse
- Finding the right information at the right time
- Effective real-time support
- Recovery

These can be found in the [‘Tech vs Abuse: Design Challenges’ report](#).



Introduction

Over two million people experience domestic and sexual abuse in the UK in any given year. This number has shown little change over the past decade, and includes 1.4 million women. 21% of people have experienced some form of domestic abuse since the age of 16, which accounts for 7 million people ([ONS, 2018](#)). Domestic abuse takes many forms: psychological, physical, sexual, financial, and emotional, with control and coercion at its heart. Its impact on individuals and families is profound and long-lasting.

Tech vs Abuse 1.0

In 2016, Comic Relief commissioned the research, 'Tech vs Abuse', to better understand the potential opportunities for technology to play a supportive role in the context of domestic abuse and how to minimise the associated risks. People were increasingly living their lives online and, according to the [Office for National Statistics \(2016\)](#), 82% of adults in Britain were using the internet every day. Yet there was little research or knowledge in the sector about the risks of, or how to best make use of, technology (either to deliver services or to safeguard victims and survivors).

To fill this gap, SafeLives, Snook, and Chayn gathered insights from over 200 survivors of domestic abuse, as well as 350 practitioners who were supporting them ([Snook, Chayn, and SafeLives, 2017](#)). The research discovered that key opportunities were missed to better protect and support victims and survivors online at crucial moments in their journey. There was also a distinct lack of capacity, confidence, and knowledge in using tech among frontline practitioners. Furthermore, the majority of digital tools available to those experiencing domestic abuse had been developed by private companies in America. The overwhelming conclusion was that there is a joint responsibility to ensure victims, survivors, and the services supporting them, can make best use of technology.

Introduction

Based upon the research findings, Comic Relief and the research team, in consultation with a number of organisations in the domestic abuse sector, prioritised 5 design challenges for funding ([Snook et al. 2017](#)). The Tech vs Abuse grant initiative was funded jointly through the Tampon Tax Fund, a partnership between Comic Relief and HM Government, and the Big Lottery Fund, now the National Lottery Community Fund ([Comic Relief, 2017](#)).

10 organisations were granted funds to take their projects forward, producing inspiring technological innovation and effective digital solutions. The organisations funded included The Haven Wolverhampton, Aanchal Women's Aid, The Mix, Refuge, SafeLives, Hestia, Rape Crisis Scotland, Chayn, the Cithrah Foundation, and the Chinese Information and Advice Center (CIAC). The funded cohort represented a wide range of organisations, from founder-run volunteering organisations to sector leaders with substantial employee numbers. They included second-tier organisations as well as those delivering frontline services. Some grantees produced tech solutions, whilst others provided capacity-building support and safeguarding advice. Many of the organisations used the first months of their initial funding to comprehensively research and conduct user testing, using the insights gathered to inform their programmes.

Comic Relief saw an opportunity to continue supporting 7 grantees for an additional 12 months, to increase their impact and improve their sustainability. This included The Haven Wolverhampton, Aanchal, SafeLives, Hestia, Chayn, The Cithrah Foundation, and CIAC. The organisations have put extension funding to a variety of interesting uses, including translating their existing content to reach more vulnerable audiences, adding functionality to and promoting their products, or hiring a digital lead to upskill staff.





Tech vs Abuse

Inspiring technological innovation and effective digital solutions which improve the safety of those affected by domestic abuse.

Five Design Challenges, Ten Projects

Realising it's abuse

THE HAVEN WOLVERHAMPTON

The Haven are working with survivors to develop a digital tool to help women who are experiencing abuse to realise it is abuse sooner and find routes to support.

AANCIAL

Aanchal are developing an app to support GPs safeguard patients affected by domestic abuse and reduce the gap between identification of abuse and a referral to appropriate support.

The Mix

The Mix are creating content and information to help young women using their digital service to identify abuse and signpost them on for further specialist support.

Safer digital-footprint

REFUGE

Using Technology to Tackle Tech Abuse will improve infrastructure and systems and upskill staff to ensure Refuge are ready to protect abused women from tech abuse.

SAFE LIVES

Addressing E-vulnerability is a project to enable frontline practitioners to help victims of abuse to use technology and stay online safely.

Fifteen minute window

HESITA

This project will see the development of the Bright Sky app to include more languages, expanded content, and significantly improved overall design and interface.

Accessible legal and financial information

RAPÉ CRISIS SCOTLAND

FollowApp is an app for women experiencing stalking that will be a quick, convenient and secure way to record incidents.

CHAYN

Soul Medicine is a multi-lingual learning platform delivering micro-courses for women experiencing abuse, including migrants and refugees

THE CTRAH FOUNDATION

The Keep is an app for victims of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland to record and store the factual details of incidents simply and securely.

Effective real-time support services

Chinese Information and Advice Centre (CIAC)

CIAC are creating a digital platform using WeChat to provide vulnerable Chinese women immediate and anonymous access to practical guidance and advice.

Introduction

Tech vs Abuse 2.0

In 2019, Comic Relief, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and the Clothworkers Foundation came together to relaunch the Tech vs Abuse funding programme, 'Tech vs Abuse 2.0' ([Comic Relief, 2019](#)). They commissioned Think Social Tech, Snook, and SafeLives to revisit the original research and design challenges, undertaking sector-focussed discovery research to explore common priorities, problems, and opportunities for technology to better support those affected by abuse today ([Ramsay, 2019](#)). The aim was to understand how the landscape has changed since undertaking the research in 2016, and what the sector's priorities for using technology to tackle abuse effectively are now.

The research involved interviewing practitioners and co-designing the Tech vs Abuse 2.0 fund with 20 organisations from across the domestic and sexual abuse sector that were expressing a keen interest in developing and delivering digital services (see [Acknowledgments](#) for an overview). They included organisations delivering frontline services, generalist and specialist providers, women's centres, organisations supporting perpetrators, second-tier organisations, as well as other funders and support agencies. They all had an interest in Tech vs Abuse, and were made up of previous grantees, applicants, research participants, and those who have recently started to prioritise digital transformation in their organisation or their digital offering. Most of the organisations involved had some experience of developing digital services and – successfully and unsuccessfully – applying for funding (from the original Tech vs Abuse fund, Comic Relief's Tech for Good fund, or from other funders). The remainder were interested and actively exploring how to expand their digital service offer.



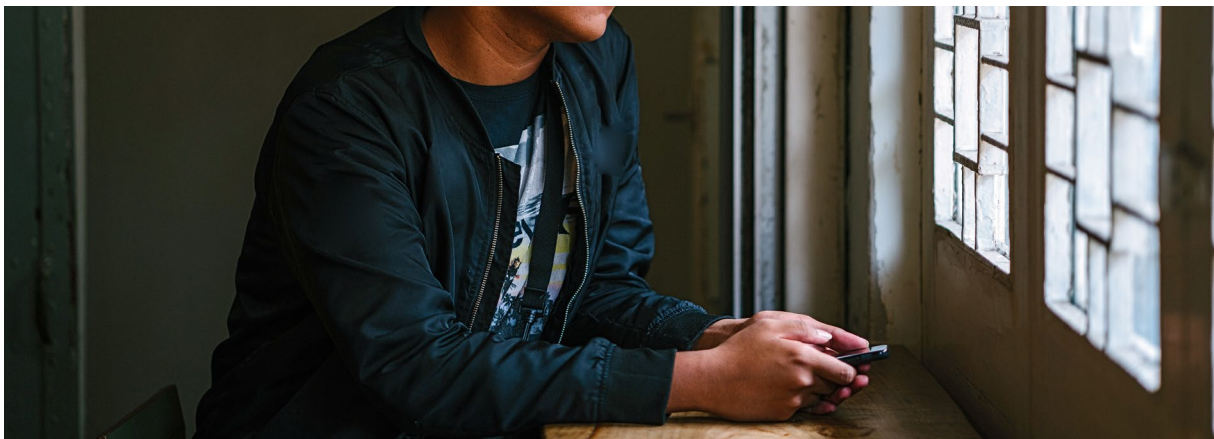
Introduction

We also undertook desk research; attended relevant events, including the launch of Hestia's employers platform and a workshop on Tech Abuse hosted by Ava; and reviewed insights from the evaluation of Tech vs Abuse 1.0.

Finally, we updated the market scan produced for Tech vs Abuse's original research. This provides a list of the digital tools available to those experiencing abuse, as well as for professionals and others supporting them. This was curated with extensive input from SafeLives and Hestia, as well as those practitioners attending the workshop. It is available as an Open Google spreadsheet which can be accessed by [clicking here](#). It does not provide any analysis or peer review of the value of these tools, but is intended as a point of reference for those developing digital solutions, particularly in response to the design challenges.

Based upon the research findings, we revisited the original 5 design challenges and, along with the research participants, identified 4 key priorities where significant needs remained, or new opportunities for tech had emerged. These are detailed in a separate report '[Tech vs Abuse 2.0: Design Challenges](#)' and are briefly detailed in the conclusion below.

The focus of this report is the range of views, experiences, and uses of technology shared by practitioners working in the fields of domestic and sexual abuse. It examines the current landscape for technology in the context of abuse, the opportunities where further digital services and tools could add value, and the needs for funding to support organisations develop better digital services.





Findings

Part 1: Tech vs Abuse landscape

1.1 More digital solutions exist

In 2016, the [market scan](#) found over 60 tools available to those experiencing domestic abuse. Most had been developed by private companies in America; less than a handful were developed by UK charities. Common tools included wearable technology solutions, information websites, safety apps, evidence collection, and peer support groups.

The scope of technology defined here has been taken in its widest possible context, and includes hardware, devices, apps, online guides, digital services, and websites, as well as the ability to communicate with services through text messages, webchat, emails, and other media. In other words, technology has been defined as any medium which allows those affected by abuse to realise it's abuse, find information, access support, find services, or focus on recovery. It is also important to note that these are not necessarily designed for, or solely used by, those experiencing abuse. For example, there are many apps which will stop a phone being monitored, such as Spot the Spy ([Apple](#) and [Android](#)), [Privacy Pro SmartVPN](#), and [Certo](#), which are designed to delete any spyware on the handset, and inform the user if hacking is detected.

In 2019 we discovered much greater digital provision of information, services, and resources available online, uncovering over 90 tools for people affected by abuse. The process of updating the [market scan](#) discovered that 25 of the originally identified tools no longer exist, including safety alarms, apps to record abuse and wearable technology, or campaigns. Many of these look to have been developed by individuals, tech start-ups, and grassroots movements rather than social sector organisations. Overall, an additional 55 digital solutions have been added to the list that could be of value to those affected by abuse in their relationships.

Part 1: Tech vs Abuse landscape

1.2 More digital services in the UK

In total, 25 uses of technology specific to abuse in the UK were identified through this research. Examples to note include:

[Bright Sky](#), developed by Hestia, has a UK-wide directory of support services, questionnaires to assess the safety of a relationship, information to dispel myths around domestic and sexual abuse, and suggested steps to improve online safety. It's available in four languages: English, Urdu, Punjabi, and Polish. It includes a secure My Journal tool to record incidents of abuse via text, audio, video, or photo, without any of the content being saved on the device itself.

[My Plan](#) by Johns Hopkins University is a tool to help with safety decisions for someone (or their friends and family) experiencing abuse in their intimate relationship. The tool includes danger assessment and options for support.

[Chayn](#) self-help guides include 'How to Build Your Domestic Abuse Case without a Lawyer', 'Do it Yourself Online Safety Guide', 'The Good Friend Guide', and 'Getting Better & Moving On: Recovery after abuse and trauma'. These tools are all free, crowdsourced with the help of survivors, and openly licensed.

[TecSOS](#) is an initiative that seeks to support victims of domestic abuse and other vulnerable people, through the provision of a specially adapted piece of technology that enables enhanced access to the police in an emergency.

Interesting projects in development include a [Game](#), by the University of Huddersfield, to educate young people on healthy/abusive relationships (currently being piloted in schools), and [SmartWater](#), a traceable invisible liquid being trialled by West Mercia Police. The liquid, which transfers onto anything it comes into contact with (staying for weeks), is used to mark the property of domestic abuse victims. The perpetrator is then informed that this provides irrefutable evidence that they have visited the property. In the pilot, they found a 95% success rate, with only one out of 20 perpetrators returning to the property.

A key change in the digital solutions available is the use of tech to deliver support by organisations tackling crisis and mental health, but not specific to abuse. For example, [Shout](#) provide crisis text messaging services which are delivered through a number of other charities, mostly those working with young people.

The Mix offer webchat and a helpline for young people. There are also increasing numbers of online mental health apps and support tools that could be beneficial to, or are used in, the context of abuse.

A second key change since 2016 is the increase in survivors – and survivor networks – sharing stories publically using Instagram, podcasts, and blogs to raise awareness and share positive recovery messages. Established charities in the domestic and sexual abuse sector are also starting to recognise the potential value of creative storytelling in recovery and awareness raising.

“I’ve seen more digital use among grass roots movements to reach out to people and help them, like telling stories on instagram to connect with others.”

Overall, practitioners involved in this research were positive about developments in the landscape.

“There’s been a lot of innovation since 2016. The 7 projects funded seemed fantastic and I’d love to know more about them. To see that people are using the Bright Sky app just shows how much these solutions are needed and can make a difference.”

Although they were more aware of positive uses of technology, they felt that not much has truly changed for their sectors or for the original design challenges ([Snook et al. 2017](#)). In particular, they recognised gaps in the provision of real-time services, and in information that is easy to discover and use.

“I’ve seen a couple of organisations deliver real-time support, but they either do it for under 18s or at very specific times. Something that allows you to connect straight away would be fantastic. I’ve seen one for suicide, but not for abuse.”

Part 1: Tech vs Abuse landscape

1.3 New risks surrounding technology

Recent research ([UCL, 2018a](#); [Refuge, 2017](#); [Women's Aid, 2018](#)) has documented a rise in tech abuse, where online platforms are increasingly used to perpetrate domestic abuse. Online domestic abuse can include behaviours such as monitoring of social media profiles or emails, abuse over social media such as Facebook or Twitter, sharing intimate photos or videos without consent, or using GPS locators and spyware. This was also found by the original Tech vs Abuse research ([Snook, Chayn, and SafeLives, 2017](#)), where almost half of the 200 women involved said they were monitored online or with technology through trackers, apps, or internet blockers, and 90% of 307 practitioners surveyed agreed technology was a tool for abuse.

In 2019, the widespread uptake and everyday use of smartphones and connected devices in the home means that stalking and abuse online is no longer solely the domain of the most 'tech-savvy' perpetrator. Furthermore, the Internet of Things has opened up new risks and types of tech abuse. As the [UCL IOT guide \(2018b\)](#) explains:

“The Internet of Things (IoT) is a term used to refer to 'smart' internet-connected devices that can share data with each other, creating a 'network' of devices. Going beyond laptops, phones and tablets, IoT includes smart watches, and internet-enabled household appliances such as smart fridges, TVs and locks. By 2020, some 25 billion devices will be connected to the Internet with studies estimating that this number will rise to 125 billion in 2030. IoT devices are 'smart' because of how they collect and send data, analyse this data, and take action, potentially without direct human intervention. For instance, IoT-enabled heating can be controlled remotely through your voice, smartphone or other Internet-connected device, instead of with a physical switch.”

An abuser can make use of these devices for monitoring and control.

There are now many more resources surrounding tech abuse, for both victims, survivors, and practitioners. Some of these include [the UCL \(2019\) 'Gender and IoT Resource List' \(2019\)](#); [the Refuge \(2017\) 'Tech abuse and tech safety resources'](#); [the Tech Safety \(n.d.\) 'Toolkit for survivors'](#); and the [Chayn \(2018\) 'Do It Yourself: Online Safety Guide'](#). A range of tools also now exists to prevent tracking and spyware, and The Keep App, to record evidence of abuse safely, is currently in development by the Cithrah Foundation. Refuge and SafeLives have also been developing a range of resources to help build capacity in this area. Furthermore, SafeLives have recently appointed a Digital Lead to develop and disseminate responses for practitioners supporting victims and survivors of abuse, as well as to grow their internal expertise. They will work with survivors and practitioners to understand how online tools and tech present both risks and opportunities for those in abusive situations.

However, awareness of this work, as well as confidence in tech use, sector solutions, and safeguarding against tech abuse, remains low. Whilst the provision of information and support for practitioners is being addressed, emerging smart tech, the Internet of Things, and the pervasiveness of smartphones with connected apps and platforms (creating metadata as well as possibilities for monitoring) pose new issues and challenges to keep up with developments. As such, there is still a strong demand for training and support for practitioners to better safeguard and support victims of tech abuse in light of the ever changing tech landscape. Those involved in the research noted an increasing awareness of the risks posed by technology amongst practitioners, as well as amongst those experiencing abuse, to the extent that fear of technology use was increasing:

“Lots of women want to get a new phone - they feel very panicked that their perpetrator has access to their current mobile.”

The challenges surrounding the safe use of tech remain, as found in the original research ([Snook, Chayn, and SafeLives, 2017](#)). It is also important to note that some of the practitioners involved in this research were reluctant to trust or recommend solutions developed in the sector as a result, fearing that they could be discovered by perpetrators despite precautions taken and the safeguards in place.

“The way you publicise tech, you have to be understanding about the nature of abusive relationships. It means that the second you find out that there is a domestic abuse app, you will go on to someone’s phone and would be literally checking if it’s there. That’s one of the things that there is generally in the sector - a real gap in working out that safeguarding issue.”

Despite the fears, all research participants emphasised their commitment to making use of technology to deliver services whilst mitigating the risks. Overwhelmingly, funding was seen as a key route to achieve this:

“Tech just gets forgotten about within how you deliver services. There’s just this real lack of confidence in the sector, so projects like this are just really, really good and funds just push to do more innovative things and not only what they do every day.”





Findings

Part 2: Key opportunities for tech

Meeting diverse user needs at different stages of abuse

The original Tech vs Abuse research and funding was developed as part of Comic Relief's Women and Girls strategy. The fund was targeted at domestic abuse organisations, and open to those working with domestic abuse victims and survivors. In this research, practitioners emphasised the need to broaden the focus to take in to account that:

- Those experiencing abuse may approach any number of services and professionals for support for other issues related to abuse, but not for the abuse itself.
- Domestic abuse services continue to experience cuts to funding, and their funding is often tied to delivering specific services, largely for those in crisis. The people they support are often signposted to other follow-up services.
- Other support services, including sexual abuse organisations offering counselling and women's centres, often pick up many domestic abuse cases.
- People's experiences of abuse, and their journeys through that experience, are complex. We have to acknowledge that they may choose to stay or return to a perpetrator. They may not realise it was abuse until they leave a relationship, or may never recognise it as such. Also, they might never access services, or the services they need might not exist (for instance, those providing specialist support).
- Additionally, some victims do not meet the risk threshold for support from services. [Women's Aid \(2017\)](#) explain that this is connected to the commissioning of services to provide time limited support for 'high risk' survivors facing imminent harm.

Part 2: Key opportunities for tech

For this reason, we recommend following the SafeLives and UK Government definition of domestic abuse:

“Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional.”

This broader definition is more inclusive. It also enables those developing and designing tech to account for the different needs people have, according to their backgrounds and the type(s) of abuse they have experienced, whether this is psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse. To paraphrase the original Tech vs Abuse research ([Snook, Chayn, and SafeLives, 2017](#)):

“What people want to know and why is different based on their individual circumstances and their relationship. Technology was a barrier for some and an enabler for others to get the support, information, and advice they wanted. Accessibility, background, and circumstances were crucial to how women were able to access services generally, as well as their ability to access and use technology.”

The key stages of abuse identified in the original Tech vs Abuse research prove helpful when identifying potential opportunities for technology to play a supportive role in the context of abuse, like those outlined in the [scenarios](#) and [experience maps](#). This research identified one key addition: acknowledging that someone might choose to stay in a relationship (or feel they need to at that point in time). In summary, we identified five key stages of abuse, noting that these are distinct and inter-related, rather than a linear progression.

These stages are:



Unaware: experiencing abuse although yet to understand or recognise this.



Aware: recognises that a partner is abusive, but has not made any decisions about what to do next.



Staying: deciding to stay in the relationship and not intending to leave.



Leaving: Deciding to end the relationship and actively working out the best way to do this, including thinking about alternative living arrangements (if relevant).



Recovering: Has ended the relationship and is focusing on the future, but may still be in contact with their abuser, fearful of further harm, considering returning to their ex-partner, or potentially at risk of entering into another abusive relationship.

This research identified 4 key opportunities or gaps that remain for digital solutions to help across these stages of abuse: awareness, information, accessing support, and recovery. These are very similar to the previous Tech vs Abuse research. It is important to note that whilst new sector priorities are emerging and the landscape for tech is shifting, the experiences of victims, survivors, and practitioners remain largely unchanged.



Part 2: Key opportunities for tech

2.1 Awareness

Educating professionals, friends, and family to recognise abuse

Practitioners in this research highlighted a range of opportunities to use digital to expand their support beyond the person experiencing abuse, and to those professionals who come into close contact with them. [SafeLives \(2018\)](#)

data shows that 85% of victims sought help an average of five times from professionals in the year before they got effective help to stop abuse. There are also digital tools starting to address the need for support from alternative sources. For example, Hestia have developed an employers portal to help people recognise an abusive relationship (in their own lives or for a colleague). Others were also keen to support friends and family more effectively:

“We want to expand our digital offer for family and friends, as we have to target our face-to-face work for survivors.”

Worrying behaviour and symptoms of abuse come up on other platforms

It is also important to note that relationships can start online and continue online. Practitioners noticed abuse on dating platforms and the potential for light touch interventions where people are exhibiting unhealthy relationships.

These areas are relatively unexplored, but are seen to offer a strong opportunity for innovation, whether this involves advocacy and influencing tech companies, providing services through that platform, or the platform developing their own interventions:

”If you’re looking at the same profile 5000 times or looking up how to get your own back, can we use that obsessive behaviour positively, to nudge them towards support?”

Supporting perpetrators

Since 2016 there has been increasing recognition of the need and value of working with perpetrators of abuse, in order to keep those experiencing abuse safer, and to create behaviour change.

“You can’t keep the cause of the problem out of the equation - there will always be a new cycle of victims.”

Respect’s nationally recognised quality and safety standard accredits best practice in domestic violence prevention. Key to this work is keeping victims safe. There are approximately 40 perpetrator support programmes across the UK, yet fewer than 1% of perpetrators receive any intervention to reduce harm or focus on changing behaviour ([SafeLives, 2018](#)).

“In the last 3 years it’s been the thing that no one talks about, to the thing that lots of people talk about, but people are really uncomfortable with any serious pockets of money going in to it because victims and survivors don’t have enough funding going in to their services, so why on earth should perpetrators have money spent on them? But if we reduce the number of perpetrators, we reduce the numbers of victims. Perpetrators will keep on having new relationships and do the same again.”

Many practitioners identified the potential for digital approaches to support those exhibiting unhealthy relationships, or starting to recognise that they were hurting their partner, to fully recognise the need for change:

“At the moment, men do go online but there isn’t much out there, so they fall upon sites which make them more angry. They find out how to get their own back not how to let go.”

They also emphasised that the priority for services and support needed to start with victims of abuse, but that digital could offer a way to improve their safety:

“The value would be targeting those who know there is something wrong to manage their behaviour in the short term - to keep their partner safer tonight. Not to promise a solution, but to start them on a journey for behaviour change.”

Recognising it is abuse

There are now more creative online approaches to help raise awareness of consent and healthy relationships, supporting people to recognise it's abuse, and to think about what to do next. Key examples from the Tech vs Abuse fund include:

- **The Mix' [Is my relationship healthy? tool](#)** which is a chatbot that asks young people questions about their relationship dynamics and how they feel in their relationship, providing information relevant to their situation. There is also a direct option to engage in real time chat/crisis support.
- **The Haven's [interactive website](#)** which uses sensitive and co-created case studies to help women establish whether they are experiencing abuse, and signpost them to appropriate support.

On average it takes three years for those experiencing domestic abuse in England and Wales to access support from a service. In Scotland, this takes four years ([SafeLives, 2018](#)). Recognising abuse is a key component of the problem and practitioners felt much more could be done to support this, including the use of social media, interactive digital approaches and creative storytelling.



Part 2: Key opportunities for tech

2.2 Information

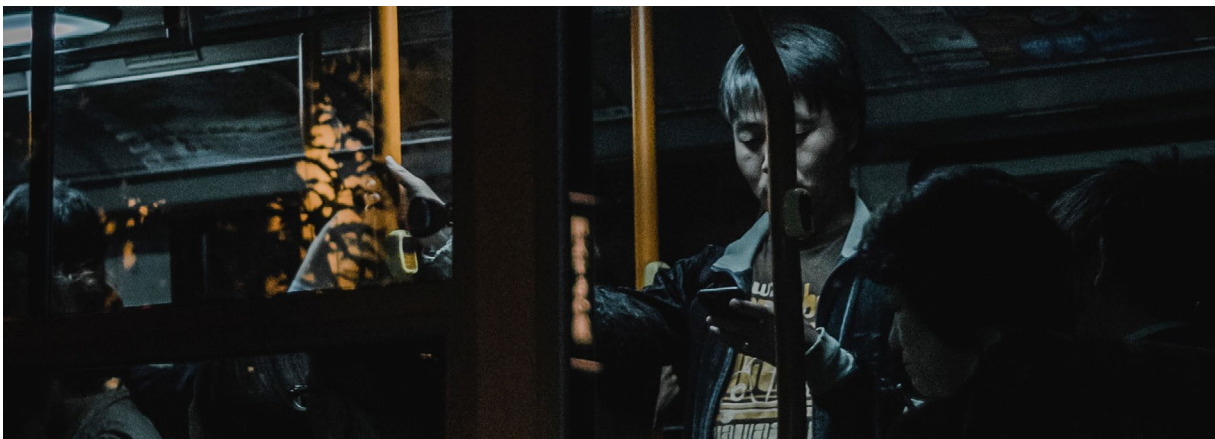
Finding information and services

The Tech vs Abuse research in 2016 identified a number of key gaps in online resources offering general information on abuse, children, help and support, legal information, and finding support in crisis moments. It concluded that there was very little time to find what they needed, and yet much information was duplicated, hard to find, and did not answer their key questions. This research identified that little had changed in the experiences of people searching for help online:

“People aren’t getting the right info through Google when they are trying to get to grips with what it is and what that means. They just want to know, ‘what can I do, is there support, am I eligible?’”

Whilst there is still a need to develop online resources and information, there is also a need to ensure that content is optimised so that people can easily find it via search engines like Google. Practitioners reflected on the poor quality of resources, circular linking and repetitive information that failed to answer the questions people had.

“Being able to find information easily and safely is the most crucial problem we need to address.”



A key issue underpinning this is a lack of tech-savvy marketing and analytics surrounding sector specific services, websites and tools. One organisation involved in the research had received pro bono analysis of the searches people undertake on Google, to inform how they could develop their online presence and search engine optimisation (for example, through the use of [Google Ad Grants](#)). They explained:

“In terms of how people in the UK are searching for help on abuse, they found the searches were actually very simple. The most shocking finding was for scenario based searches (‘What if my boyfriend pushes me?’; ‘gaslighting’) the websites that came up were very bad quality (forums, Psychology Today) and not the charities you’d want to see them signposted to unless they used very specific language (‘What is domestic abuse?’).”

Whilst a number of service directories also now exist online (for example, on the Bright Sky app and through sTandTall), it does not mean they are easier to find or access.



Part 2: Key opportunities for tech

2.3 Accessing services

More inclusive or targeted information and access to services

There are only a small proportion of services with specialist provision for ethnicity, age or sexuality. These services recognise the interlocking forms of discrimination that women face, and provide specialist support tailored to their specific needs and experiences ([Women's Aid, 2019](#)). However, they are largely confined to London and face increasing uncertainty surrounding funding. This research identified a key opportunity for digital to support these groups, for recognising that they are in an abusive relationship, giving them the confidence they need to access services, or providing targeted and tailored support.

“General helplines have general advice, there’s a lack of specialised advice, and a high need of it.”

[SafeLives \(2018\)](#) report that only 2.5% of referrals for domestic abuse services identify as LGBT. Yet [Stonewall \(2017\)](#) report that one in four lesbian and bisexual women are likely to have experienced domestic abuse in a relationship. Two thirds of those say the perpetrator was a woman. There are only 4 specialist services for this group in the UK, with 3 based in London.

“A lesbian woman would see this service exists (when looking online) and read that it is for women and girls, but automatically think that, ‘it’s not for me’, even if it is.”

Addressing people’s fears and concerns

Whilst there is now more information online, it can be hard to find, digest and believe. Practitioners noted that there are many reasons why someone may not access services. They identified a need to provide better information, in a way that is more user centered in its language and format, to help address the questions and concerns people have in their minds, as well as the need to use digital to improve their engagement and outreach:

“There still needs to be much clearer financial and legal information - women think their children and house will be taken away, and it creates additional challenges in their head.”

Connecting to support sooner and in real time

There are still limited real-time support services specific to abuse. The only ones discovered were by [Respect](#) which delivers online support during key hours for perpetrators and male victims of abuse, and [CIAC](#) is now active on WeChat for Chinese people living in the UK. These were particularly important at key moments alone and in crisis situations.

“At the beginning, online information as quickly as possible is key. Calling a helpline or service is a huge barrier, even just finding somewhere private and safe to call from is really difficult - if you only have time in the toilets at work you can’t just call there. We haven’t met that need yet.”

Funders also reported insights from the experience of their grantees providing real-time and online support. They had expected to divert resources from face-to-face support to online support, but instead discovered more people accessing their services. In other words, offering real-time support had increased demand and access from those who may not have sought their services otherwise.

Overall, the use of digital to provide effective real-time support continues to present a key opportunity to help those experiencing abuse to access support sooner, at the time when they most need it (in crisis or in the middle of the night).



Part 2: Key opportunities for tech

2.4 Recovery and healing from abuse

Whilst recovery support was identified as a significant need and stage of abuse in the previous Tech vs Abuse research, there was limited exploration or interest in the role of digital to support this. What has changed for those organisations involved in the research is an increasing recognition of the need to expand their support offer beyond the crisis and safety stage (when leaving or staying in a relationship).

Expanding support to help people rebuild their lives

Due to funding constraints and lack of expertise, the support offered to those experiencing abuse tended to focus on crisis and safety (for domestic abuse organisations) with sexual abuse organisations and mental health services picking up the need for counselling and support around trauma. Organisations providing broader services, such as debt and criminal justice, also interact with many survivors of domestic abuse, not all of whom will have recognised that it was abuse or, indeed, the long term impacts of that.

“Our focus is recovery from sexual abuse, but we get a lot of referrals from domestic abuse organisations for counselling because their funding is limited to very practical crisis and safety support.”

Those leaving and recovering from an abusive relationship may need to access a range of other services for practical and logistical support around finances, housing, employment, mental health, drug and alcohol misuse:

“We don’t have any crisis provision, but people do come in when they’re in crisis and we work closely with a number of local specialist domestic abuse services. We also see a lot of people with experience of domestic abuse across all of our services. They come to us when they are sorting out their benefits, moving on from refuge accommodation, untangling debt and the impact of economic abuse, and many women end up in our criminal justice support programme, when they have experienced abuse but never accessed any support.”

It is also important to note that domestic abuse has an incredibly high revictimisation rate, whether that involves a survivor returning to a perpetrator, moving in to a new relationship that becomes abusive, or the abuse continuing after a relationship has ended. A key support need is understanding what a healthy relationship looks like when abuse has become a normal, everyday occurrence:

“When people are repeatedly moving between abusive relationships it’s about not understanding what healthy relationships look and feel like.”

Mental health

“Survivors need mental health support - anxiety and depression emerge over the long term.”

In the past three years, awareness of mental health across the population has increased dramatically. [NPC \(2019\)](#) has documented increasing numbers of digital tools available to support wellbeing, address anxiety and depression, as well as to manage crisis situations such as suicidal thoughts or self-harm urges. This research also discovered increasing desire to support survivors of abuse as well as the potential for digital to add value to how they provided recovery support:

“We’ve got 239 women on our waiting list for counselling, which is effectively up to 18 months. Online services could help sooner.”

However, organisations also raised concerns that mainstream models of support for anxiety and depression, both in terms of face-to-face Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programmes and popular apps such as Headspace, may not be helpful in the context of abuse and trauma (particularly for those who had not yet disclosed or realised the connection to abuse and mental health issues.

“When you’re trying to deal with your recovery, digital mental health services, for example, are not tailored specifically to that trauma... or there’s no wrap-around advice and support, with advice about safeguarding for example.”



Findings

Part 3: Tech vs Abuse funding needs

3.1 Design challenges

Overall, this research found that organisations were very supportive of the original Tech vs Abuse Design Challenges ([Snook et al. 2017](#)) and their continuing relevance. Furthermore, they valued how the challenges showcased the priorities for the fund:

“The Design Challenges fit really well for the value chain and service users journey. How do you raise awareness? Get people in a position to take steps towards safety and support, support them to feel empowered to make behaviour change and recovery.”

In the previous fund, the Design Challenges were used as part of the application and decision-making process, in that organisations applied to address a specific challenge. However, the evaluation of the fund noted that organisations already had plans for digital and that the Design Challenges were facilitating their application rather than inspiring new ideas for digital. There were also varied numbers of applications to different challenges, which had implications for the shortlisting and assessment processes as well as funding decisions. This research similarly found that organisations were keen not to be required to ‘shoehorn’ their ideas in to a specific challenge when they are addressing a key problem relevant to it. There is also a risk in the format of Design Challenges detracting from good practice in developing charity digital services, by focusing on sector problems rather than user needs.

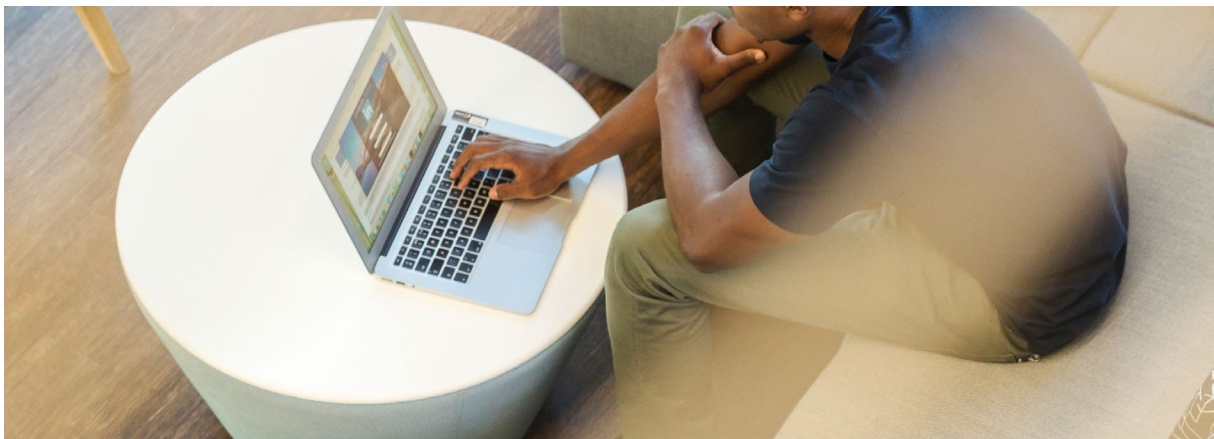
Part 3: Tech vs Abuse funding needs

3.2 Discovery stage funding

Overwhelmingly, all of those involved in this research, including those with existing digital products and services, felt they most needed funding for very early-stage discovery and development of prototypes:

“The early help to boil down the problem statement so that we know what that is, to get it off the ground to go to prototype. To us, it’s that early stage that it is really hard to get funding for and also really useful. If you get funding you get staff dedicated to doing this work, and then once you get past that stage and you can say, this is what we’re doing and this is how we would scale it up, it can be a lot easier to do that way so you can look at whether you get funding or a paid for service.”

Organisations reported that other funds were challenging because they were not open to agile development processes, and expected them to know what the solution would look like in advance, as well as the cost of that. Organisations were keen to use this fund to prioritise what to develop and to scope what already exists, collaborate with sector partners and find the right digital partner. In other words, they were seeking flexible funding for discovery and alpha stages of development, including user research, market analysis and prototype development.



Part 3: Tech vs Abuse funding needs

3.3 Building digital capacity

This research identified ten key challenges that organisations tackling abuse faced when developing a digital product or service. These are:

1. **Accessing flexible early-stage funding**
2. **Finding the right digital partner**
3. **Knowing what it should cost**
4. **Collaborating with other organisations in the sector**
5. **Knowing what else exists**
6. **Safeguarding against discovery by perpetrators (including sensitive marketing)**
7. **Building trust in the safety of the solution**
8. **Embedding tech skills in the organisation**
9. **Sharing learning from user research and development**
10. **Open sourcing solutions**

It is important to note that some of these challenges are common to many charities embarking on developing digital services, including the need for flexible funding, knowing what it should cost, knowing what else exists, and poor digital capacity. However, these challenges are enhanced when developing digital products and services in the context of abuse. In particular, organisations struggled to find a tech partner who could empathise with the issue and experience of abuse. Many were also looking to find a tech partner with a high proportion of women on their staff team, to ensure sensitive user research, user testing and user centered design. There are also more safeguarding concerns in the context of domestic abuse that are particularly sensitive, including the use, storage and retrieval of data, the use of tracking, analytics, privacy settings (and the need for tailored legal privacy notices and policies), and very different routes to market.

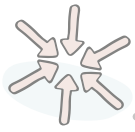
With the challenges in mind, organisations were supportive of funding that did not require a digital partner to be in place at the point of the funding application, and could be flexible on costing:

“When we applied, we felt that we had to find a tech partner first and we had to explain exactly what we were going to do, so it became really formalised and narrowed things down very quickly, instead of it being about innovation about the problem and approach, so we were relying on the tech partner too much to answer those questions. It should be about problems and our expertise.”

They were also keen for the funding to encourage partnerships and collaboration, which may not happen in a competitive funding round for individual applications:

“Prioritising partnerships for the funding would be an amazing way to accelerate what we are trying to do. We’d get better results more quickly and would create something more useful, whilst requiring less resources.”

Finally, they were keen for the funding to capture and share learning – as well as supporting them to do the same – to ensure the impact of their work and the trust amongst others in the sector. Their budget may also need additional time and resource for marketing through word of mouth promotion, and for training professionals to make use of the tech. In other words, the Tech vs Abuse funding, for them, is as much about building digital capacity in and through digital services, as it is about the tech solution itself.



Conclusions

In 2016 we discovered that many people experiencing abuse may not recognise it as such, may be fearful of disclosing any information, or unsure of what support is available. In 2019, we discovered the same again, but what has changed is that technology is increasingly becoming a source of support enabling survivors to make connections, and ensuring they have the information they need to make their own choices. It also opens up opportunities to increase the remit for service delivery for awareness raising and recovery, supporting new audiences such as friends and family, prevention work, as well as providing access to services for those who may not previously have been able to access them. As [SafeLives \(2018\)](#) state:

“The speed at which we identify and respond to domestic abuse is critical to limiting the harm caused to victims and their children. Too many people are being left to face abuse alone, for too long.”

This research has discovered increasingly creative uses of technology to raise awareness and support recovery, as well as crisis support. The need to secure evidence of abuse and hold information safely, and the need for more information about how to stay safe online and safeguard against tech abuse are also now being addressed, both within and outside of the domestic and sexual abuse sector. However, there are both continuing and new opportunities to use tech effectively and safely improve the situation for victims and survivors of abuse; particularly around raising awareness, providing information, access to real-time services, and support for recovery. These are detailed further in [the design challenges report](#).



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Think Social Tech is an independent consultancy specialising in tech-savvy research, learning, impact measurement and funding design. Current clients include Nominet (discovery research for their funding programmes on digital mental health support and internet safety), Nesta Challenge Prize Centre (reconfiguring their theory of change reporting) and CAST (capturing learning about their digital leadership initiatives).

See: www.thinksocialtech.org / @NissaRamsay

Snook is an award-winning service design agency working globally across the public, private and third sectors. We've been transforming services and organisations since 2009: working with companies across the world to ensure the products, campaigns, and services they deliver work for people. Within our team, we have dedicated researchers who focus on uncovering people's needs, using a range of design ethnography methods and tools. Our researchers work closely with our design and events teams to translate these into design principles for services and products to be developed in the future.

See www.wearesnook.com / @wearesnook

SafeLives is a national charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse, for good. We combine data, research, and insight from services and survivors to find out what makes people safe. SafeLives wants support for people to be early, effective and consistent – wherever you are, whoever you are. We do this by providing training, analysing data, providing support to frontline services, creating a platform for survivors to be heard and testing new interventions that do things differently. We want solutions, not short-term fixes. The statistic and stories continue to shock, and they're not getting any better. We must commit to finding what works to stop it, for good, for everyone.

See: www.safelives.org.uk / @safelives_

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