



Digital Inclusion Fund, 2022–2025

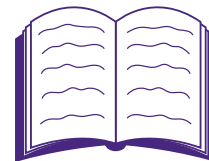
What Barnwood Trust learned
about funding for social change



January 2026

The Digital Inclusion Fund was a practical attempt to fund change differently and to learn, in real time, what that requires of a funder.

Key learning at a glance



Through designing and delivering the Digital Inclusion Fund, Barnwood Trust learned that:

Test-and-learn funding requires active partnership, not passive grant management - learning doesn't happen automatically; it needs structure, time and support.

Relational funding is essential - trust-based relationships create the conditions for honest reflection, adaptation, and stronger outcomes.

Collective learning is hard when a theme is too broad - diversity brings rich insight, but shared learning needs clearer shared questions and outcomes.

Funders must apply "test-and-learn" to themselves too - we had to adapt our own approach (including stopping what wasn't working) to stay true to the model.

Purpose of this report



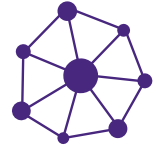
This report shares what Barnwood Trust learned about funding for social change through designing and delivering the Digital Inclusion Fund (DIF) between 2022 and 2025. DIF was Barnwood Trust's first themed funding programme and an early expression of our ambition to act as a social change funder. We shifted from traditional grantmaking towards a test-and-learn approach grounded in relationships, learning, and accountability to lived experience.

This report complements, rather than duplicates, the Digital Inclusion Fund Impact Report, which documents the outcomes and impact of the six funded projects for individuals, communities, the organisations themselves, and the wider system.

We created this report to reflect honestly on what DIF taught us about funding differently - including what worked well, what didn't, and what we changed as a result. In particular, we share learning about:

- How Barnwood Trust learned to act as a social change funder
- What we learned about creating the conditions for test-and-learn funding
- What we learned about funding a group of organisations to explore different approaches to a shared challenge
- How this learning has shaped Barnwood Trust's subsequent funding practice and strategy

The Digital Inclusion Fund as a Social Change Programme



Why digital inclusion?

We chose to focus on digital inclusion following research evidence showing that disabled people and people with mental health conditions were disproportionately excluded from accessing digital tools, spaces and resources, particularly during and after the COVID19 pandemic. The research demonstrated that digital exclusion was a structural barrier, affecting access to services, social connection, safety and independence.

“ Some people do not possess the technology required to access these services remotely: they may not have a smartphone, tablet or computer they could use and, if they did, may not have access to a reliable broadband connection. ”

Our Changing World Report

Rather than attempting to deliver solutions directly, we chose to resource organisations embedded in communities to test different approaches to improving digital access and confidence.

A shift in Barnwood Trust's role

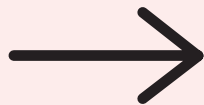
The Digital Inclusion Fund marked a deliberate shift in Barnwood Trust's role:

From funder of activity



To test-and-learn funder

From seeking certainty



To embracing experimentation

From prioritising outputs



To focusing on learning what works, what doesn't, and why

DIF was therefore not only a fund about digital inclusion, but also a test of a different way of funding.

Designing a test-and-learn funding programme



Key design principles

The Digital Inclusion Fund was designed around several principles that were new for our funding practice:

Time limited and closed

A single funding round, with projects funded for up to three years

Shared learning focus

Learning was valued alongside delivery

Acceptance of uncertainty

Projects were encouraged to adapt over time

Accountability to lived experience

Experts by Lived Experience (EbLEs) were involved in making decisions about who was funded for the first time

Together, these principles aimed to create permission for experimentation, without fear of failure.

What Barnwood Trust learned about “test-and-learn”

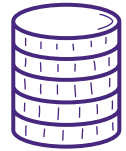
Through delivering DIF, we learned that:

Test-and-learn funding requires a partnership approach, rather than passive grant management

Relational support is essential to enable adaptation and honest reflection

Learning requires structure and space; it does not emerge automatically

Funding a group of organisations to explore a shared challenge



Diversity as strength and challenge

Six organisations were funded to address digital inclusion across different communities and contexts in Gloucestershire. This diversity generated rich insight into digital exclusion as a complex and multifaceted issue (see our Impact Report for more on this).

However, we also learned that:

- It's challenging to learn collectively when the topic itself is too broad. The concept of digital inclusion is vast, multi-faceted, and nuanced, which meant what we learned about improving digital access was disparate – but interesting!
- Projects often had limited overlap in practice, even when addressing the same theme, due to the diverse solutions being tested in varying contexts.
- A shared label (“digital inclusion”) is not always sufficient to sustain peer learning; shared outcomes help to create greater connections.

The lessons we learned here directly informed later themed funds, which were designed with clearer outcomes to support shared learning and influence.

Funded partners as a community of practice

We aimed to treat funded partners not simply as delivery agents, but as practice experts and co-learners, contributing insight into:

How digital exclusion presents itself in different contexts

Which interventions or approaches are effective, feasible and sustainable

What indirect or unintended outcomes emerge

This required us to listen differently, valuing reflection and narrative learning alongside data.

Learning about conditions for collective learning



The Community of Practice: intention vs reality

We established a Community of Practice (CoP) to enable shared learning between funded partners. While partners valued the opportunity to meet each other, the CoP did not generate the depth of collective learning that had been anticipated.

Key reasons included:

- Significant variation in project focus and delivery models
- Limited shared language or immediate practical overlap
- Competing delivery pressures within small organisations

Rather than persisting with a model that was not working, we adapted our plans, discontinuing the CoP and shifting to more tailored, one-to-one learning support. This was a critical learning moment: test-and-learn applied to Barnwood Trust's own practice, not only to funded projects.

“ The Digital Inclusion Fund was our first themed funding round and represented a new way of working for Barnwood Trust. We used the programme to test new approaches - not only in the projects we funded, but also in how we managed the fund. This included introducing the Community of Practice to bring partners together to share learning. Not everything worked as intended, but the experience helped us learn quickly and adapt, and many of the approaches we tested have since become standard features of our grant's programmes. ”

Ged Cassell, Funding Policy and Evaluation Manager,
Barnwood Trust

Relational funding as a condition for learning

The DIF experience highlighted the importance of relational funding roles. Ongoing conversations between Barnwood Trust staff and funded partners enabled:

Honest reflection
on what was and
was not working

Adaptation
in response to
changing contexts

Learning to be
captured as it
emerged, rather
than retrospectively

This learning directly influenced the development of the Funding Relationship Manager role, now embedded across Barnwood Trust's funding programmes.

Power, accountability and lived experience



Involving Experts by Lived Experience

Involving Experts by Lived Experience (EbLEs) in funding decisions was a significant step in redistributing power. Through this process we learned that:

- EbLE involvement strengthened the quality of decision making making
- Lived experience added nuance that professional or learned expertise alone could not
- Induction, support and facilitation were essential to meaningful involvement

This approach has since become standard practice, representing a lasting shift in accountability.

What this meant for Barnwood Trust

DIF reinforced for us that accountability requires:

- Sharing decision making power
- Being transparent about uncertainty and trade offs
- Accepting challenge as a legitimate and valuable part of learning

This learning has shaped how subsequent funds have been designed, governed and evaluated.

What DIF revealed about digital exclusion

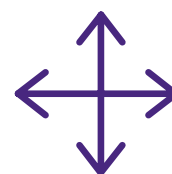


While detailed findings are covered in the Impact Report, DIF generated several high-level insights relevant to Barnwood Trust's future role:

- Digital inclusion is foundational, rather than a nice-to-have
- Small-scale, local interventions can have as big an impact as large, countywide projects
- Digital inclusion requires safety, human support, and confidence
- Analogue solutions remain essential alongside digital ones

These insights now inform Barnwood Trust's broader approach to accessibility, inclusion and systems change.

How DIF learning shaped subsequent funding practice



Learning from DIF directly influenced later programmes, including [Short Breaks](#) and the Accessibility Fund. Key changes include:

- Clearer change questions and outcomes
- Stronger emphasis on learning as an outcome in its own right
- Greater flexibility and trust in funded partners
- Embedded roles focused on relationship and reflection
- Continued involvement of people with lived experience
- Stronger use of evidence and partnership to influence systems change

Conclusion: Digital Inclusion Fund as a learning journey



The Digital Inclusion Fund was not only about improving digital access – for Barnwood it was also about learning how to fund differently, specifically how to:

- Hold uncertainty and experimentation
- Support learning across diverse organisations
- Adapt our own practice in response to evidence
- Shift power and accountability meaningfully

While the dedicated Digital Inclusion Fund has now closed, its learning continues to shape how we fund, how we partner with others, and how we use what we learn to influence the parts of the system that need it - strengthening future efforts to improve conditions and reduce barriers for disabled people across Gloucestershire.

For detailed evidence of impact and case studies, see:
Digital Inclusion Fund Impact Report (2025)



If you would like to know more about this work, please get in touch with Ged Cassell Funding Policy and Evaluation Manager at ged.cassell@barnwoodtrust.org

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