

ReBOOT: SUMMARY REPORT (November 2024)



We are delighted to share the summary report of BSSEC CIC's innovative technology event, ReBOOT, as an experiential technology interchange for the social economy sector across the West Midlands.

ReBOOT was hosted at STEAMhouse, Belmont Row, Birmingham B4 7RQ on Thursday 14th November 2024.

This event was made possible by kind support from West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and our event sponsors, Forward Carers CIC.

1. BACKGROUND

The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) has a Digital Roadmap 2024-2027 which details the technological strengths of the region which includes 5G coverage (65% across the region), businesses growing by effectively using technological solutions plus the use of AI. They have appointed a Tech Commissioner and they are working with Tech West Midlands [About TechWM: Driving Tech Innovation in the West Midlands](#) who are the voice of the tech ecosystem in the region.

Currently, the social economy has no specific presence in this agenda and is largely overlooked although it could be considered the sector is viewed as part of resources available to SME's.

Martin Ward, our West Midlands Tech Commissioner, said: *"It's essential that we fully embrace new digital technologies as a key driver of future economic growth in our region. Our tech sector has transformed over time, and there are now job opportunities here in start-ups, scale-ups and major enterprises that were previously only available in London. We must build on that momentum and be bold in our actions to realise the potential we have to become a global tech superpower in our own right."* (Feb 2024).

Social Economy organisations need to embrace these opportunities.

For the last few decades, the focus for social economy organisations has been on managing technologies, tools, applications, frameworks, data ecosystems, and other things that work together. Adoption is often ad hoc, with a needs-led approach rather than something planned and integral to the operation of the business. This approach could be seen as being less dynamic and does not necessarily stimulate innovation.

The ReBOOT Conference came about as a direct result of feedback from a BSSEC CIC Roundtable in March 2024. The Roundtable explored the importance of technology as



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integral to the growth of social businesses but it also considered the barriers to implementation. Identified barriers included: lack of confidence to make the right purchasing decisions, cost, access to impartial advice on new products, and understanding the products and applications available.

Attendees also spoke about the importance of hearing from other social businesses regarding their experiences using technology to enhance their business processes. They requested that there be an event that incorporated sector peer learning and support.

The Roundtable concluded that they would like to have further events to explore the use of technology within the sector, particularly to hear case studies, approaches to implementation, and experiential workshops to try out different technologies.

These are some of the technology challenges raised by VCFSEs before attending ReBOOT:

- How can technology support people's independence as they age?
- AI and its value/challenges to the sector.
- Addressing digital poverty for beneficiaries of the sector.
- How can VCSFE organisations use technology to articulate their challenges so that they can focus their efforts effectively?
- Choosing a CRM solution.
- Solutions for disability digital divide.
- How to address Cyber Security.
- Funding technology and innovation.
- Technology to support our referral process into our service and follow-up messaging.
- Future networking on technology issues.
- Unpicking digital challenges for VCFSEs.
- Issues to address to support the needs of those with learning difficulties or disabilities to embrace or learn technology easily.
- How to navigate the opportunities that technology can bring to an organisation.

2. SOCIAL ECONOMY AND TECHNOLOGY

The **ReBOOT** event was designed to be a half-day experiential conference covering the strategic context, and sector support, and showcasing the experiences of fast-growing social enterprises working in the West Midlands using technology to boost growth.

Our **ReBOOT** event facilitator was **Pauline Roach**, Digital WM Productions.



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The introductory panel session provided us with input from:

- **Dan Carins** Policy Manager Business, WMCA.
- **Marika Beckford**, Innovation Manager BMET.
- **Simon Fenton** CEO of Forward Carers CIC.

The panel outlined the challenges faced by social economy organisations, and the support available to businesses and they were asked to consider what the future should look like. The discussion also focused on why technology adoption is so important for the growth of the social economy sector.

DAN CARINS (Policy Manager – Business, WMCA)

- Has over 20 years of experience in various economic development roles in local authorities, LEPS, and MCAs across the West Midlands.
- Current role: Synthesising data from various sources such as academic or Office for National Statistics research, the WMCA's delivery partners through Business Growth West Midlands own commissioned research to design policies that support businesses to respond to challenges and opportunities in the local, national and international economy.

MARIKA BECKFORD (Innovation Manager, Birmingham Metropolitan College)

- Marika connects industry and education, empowering regional businesses with technology adoption.
- Previous: Senior Business Manager with Microsoft leading a skills team to implement the Microsoft UK Skills Plan.
- Current role: Innovation Manager for Birmingham Metropolitan College, she leads a £2.4M Innovate UK project, supporting West Midlands SMEs in dental and social economy sectors, while driving innovation in immersive technologies for the creative and healthcare industries.

SIMON FENTON (CEO, Forward Carers CIC)

- CEO of a very successful social enterprise providing support to carers in Birmingham, the West Midlands, and nationally.
- An innovative social entrepreneur who has embraced technology as the backbone of his influential social enterprise.
- In a previous life Simon was a commissioner for Birmingham City Council.





PAULINE ROACH (Founder, Digital WM Productions)

- Award-winning producer, journalist, broker and networker
- Increasing the digital and data literacy of small organisations in the VCFSE sectors.
- Delivering a Birmingham-wide digital evolution project, producing/co-presenting the weekly [Dr Tech Show](#) on YouTube, and co-organising national [Open Data Camp](#) events.
- Highly active in the UK tech for social good ecosystem and supports the West Midlands Funders Network.

3. SHOWCASING INNOVATION IN SOCIAL ECONOMY ORGANISATIONS

The second **ReBOOT** session showcased how technology is integral to innovation, increasing reach to our clients, and underpins project management and data collection for growth and social value measurement.

We were delighted to have 6 organisations who were able to demonstrate the technology they use and why they implemented the approaches they have taken.

THEME: How technology is integral to innovation, increasing reach to our clients, and underpins project management and data collection for growth and social value measurement.

CHANTELL MARLER (Head of Service, Forward Carers CIC) [We are Forward Carers and we care for carers across the country.](#)

- Uses AI and digital platforms to gather and present data that drive better outcomes and impact for Carers.
- Always taking a continuous improvement approach and looking for innovative ways to enhance our services.
- Passionate about connecting with others who are equally passionate about using technology to make a difference.

VENKAT NIHAR (Programme Manager, Forward Carers CIC)

- Focus on optimising technology solutions to improve the delivery of services for unpaid carers and the wider community.
- Extensive experience in IT infrastructure, digital platforms, and process automation.
- Passionate about enhancing operational efficiency within the VCFSE sector, helping organisations achieve greater impact.





THEME: Maximizing Your IT Budget: Repurposing, Leasing, and the Circular Economy

DAVID ABOSCH (CEO, ReCognition Circular CIC) [ReCognition Circular - Tackling digital exclusion and eWaste](#)

- Sustainability advocate with over 20 years of experience in technology and business consulting.
- Passionate about the circular economy, digital inclusion, and social justice.
- Leads an organisation focused on building a vibrant, circular community in Birmingham.

THEME: Technology in publishing, advertising, and digital marketing with a focus on diversity and inclusion

INDI DEOL (Director, DESIblitz) [DESIblitz | UK's Award Winning British Asian Magazine](#)

- Visionary leader and the Founding Director of DESIblitz, the UK's largest online British Asian magazine, and spearheads the magazine's disruptive initiatives.
- Passion for advertising, leadership development, and strategic business growth.
- Director behind Aidem Digital CIC, a West Midlands social enterprise and digital media agency.

THEME: Customer Relationship Management, booking systems, and Artificial Intelligence to create a customer journey that feels human.

MARTIN HOGG (Managing Director, Citizen Coaching CIC) [Citizen Coaching and Counselling Birmingham](#)

- Citizen Coaching & Counselling supports adults and young people to live better lives through access to; jargon-free, timely, and affordable counselling, anger management, and personal development coaching.
- In 2020, Citizen Coaching delivered 20,000 one-to-one sessions.
- The flagship programme, Citizen Anger Management, had a social return on investment of £7-£13 for every £1 invested.
- Social impact includes a reduction in homelessness, fewer criminal justice interventions, less access to medical services, a re-engagement with work and training, and increased well-being.





THEME: AI, social inclusion, and robotics.

SIMEON DOUGLAS (Strategy Director, Make More) [Make More | Community Organisation | Townend House, Park Street, Walsall, UK](#)

- Remarkable journey marked by impactful leadership and innovation.
- Background steeped in technology, encompassing mobile devices, VR tech, and digital services.
- Instrumental in spearheading training programs that have empowered and equipped thousands of individuals across the UK.
- Commitment to leveraging technology for the betterment of communities reflects a deep-seated passion that permeates every facet of his work at Make More.

THEME: Immersive technologies, Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality [BOM - BOM Birmingham Open Media](#)

MIKAYLA SINEAD (Immersive Studio Manager, Birmingham Open Media CIC)

- Immersive Studio Manager at Birmingham Open Media (BOM).
- BOM is an immersive arts organisation, empowering communities through immersive innovation & learning
- Mission to diversify the immersive sector.
- Award-winning experiences in Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and games that have strong social purpose.
- BOM's inclusive learning programmes give underserved communities the skills to become confident creators.

Some of the key messages from the session were:

- Time: If we can't make the technology work, we won't use it.
- Technology doesn't do everything; we need a person to input the information.
- Work with AI – there is a toolbox of different AI applications, and they will help you save time and be more efficient.
- Lots of software will give you a free trial – try them out and see what works for you!
- TechSoup [technology for non-profits, charities and libraries – as a sector we need to be able to access these services in the UK.
- Partner up to access innovative funding.



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- Technology for access and equality – we are seeing gamified applications unlock opportunities for disadvantaged groups including young people and older people.
- Discussion on the importance of websites to send people in the right direction.
- Technology supports measuring impact – it supports capturing relevant information. You need to understand your stakeholders and what they want.
- The National Cyber Security Centre will give advice and guidance and NIST [National Institute of Standards and Technology](#) provides information on everything you should know about NIST compliance.

4. TECH GURU'S

The final session was designed to bring together VCFSEs and social economy sector technology expertise for problem-solving. The experts brought a wide range of practical knowledge and this was a very active and practical part of the day.

EXPERTISE: Communications web design, video production, and digital services.

GEOFF HENDERSON (Director, Urban Hax CIC and Director of Digital Native Academy)
[Urban Hax – Learn. Design. Build. Create](#)

- Experienced in digital innovation practice and implementation.
- Extensive expertise in social economy and SME start-up and growth.
- Data and project management are at the core of his work.

EXPERTISE: Support available to the sector, AI and Chat GBT, supporting digital transformation.

MARIKA BECKFORD (Innovation Manager, Birmingham Metropolitan College) [Welcome to the BMet Innovation Hub - BMet](#)

- Connects industry and education, empowering regional businesses with technology adoption.
- Innovation Manager for Birmingham Metropolitan College leading a £2.4M Innovate UK project.
- Driving innovation in immersive technologies for the creative and healthcare industries.





EXPERTISE: Effective digital tools and avoiding common pitfalls in tech adoption.

NATE SHERIDAN (Managing Director, Citizen Click CIC) [Home - Citizen Click](#)

- Over a decade of experience in digital media and strategy, specialising in upskilling third-sector organisations.
- Expertise includes helping charities and social enterprises navigate the tech landscape.
- Ensures sustainable growth through effective digital tools and avoiding common pitfalls in tech adoption.

EXPERTISE: Tech innovation and business systems, practical IT challenges for VCFSEs.

NIGEL SMITH (Founder, BEEVEE) [Home | beevee](#)

- Pioneering career in FinTech, launched one of the UK's first insurance websites and a leading B2B eCommerce hub.
- Consultant blending tech innovation with real business needs.
- Passionate about social impact, he's spent over 15 years supporting charities and social enterprises in Birmingham.

EXPERTISE: AI, social inclusion and robotics [Make More | Community Organisation | Townend House, Park Street, Walsall, UK](#)

SIMEON DOUGLAS (Strategy Director, Make More)

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- Background steeped in technology, encompassing mobile devices, VR tech, and digital services.
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EXPERTISE: *Organisational IT Infrastructure, digital platforms, inclusion and process automation*

VENKAT NIHAR (Head of Service, Forward Carers CIC) [We are Forward Carers and we care for carers across the country.](#)

- Focus on optimising technology solutions to improve the delivery of services for unpaid carers and the wider community.
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- Passionate about enhancing operational efficiency within the VCFSE sector, helping organisations achieve greater impact.

5. FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

Evaluation and feedback taken immediately after the close of the event.

Great Event!
Useful topic and novel format!
Table discussions were difficult to hear because of the room acoustics (and my bad hearing).
Great Action-focused event!
Lots of new connections.
Very useful to hear about ways to use AI.
Thought-provoking event. Thank you!
Name badges helpful in connecting with people.
Sometimes a little tricky to hear.
Amazing and informative event.
A brilliant event, informative and inspiring.
Looking forward to putting what I've learned into action.
Fantastic Informative!
Well-paced event with welcomed comfort breaks.
Great opportunity to learn more about integration.
Unusual format but really worked!





Words from our facilitator Pauline Roach

It's clear that an enormous amount of thought went into this event right from the beginning. The venue and the organisation of the day conveyed to the attendees that BSSEC CIC is taking the matter of digital transformation very seriously, and investing in it for the long term.

The use of STEAMhouse as the venue was inspired and the layout of the room was engaging. It was important to have someone from STEAMhouse welcoming people to the event. I was pleased to be invited to facilitate the event, bringing together my worlds of the tech community and community organisations/social enterprises. I was a familiar face to many at the event, and thus I may help to bridge the current gap between social enterprises and the West Midlands tech ecosystem.

The expert panel set the scene for the day and was an enlivening introduction to the topic. The three panellists were interesting, informative, and engaging. They spoke with passion and knowledge about the tech ecosystem, and it felt like they understood the needs of social enterprises in the West Midlands around technology. They are experts in the field and can open doors for social enterprises in the region. Having experts from the three different backgrounds enabled delegates to see what policy around this matter might look like and what practice might need to happen to make important changes for social enterprises in the region.

It was particularly useful to have a social enterprise that is already using technology in their enterprise to talk about what they have done. It would be useful to follow up with each of the panellists to talk about what they might do differently now that they're more aware of the interest in technology from other social enterprises in the region. It would be particularly interesting to follow up with Simon Fenton about what he would do differently now, as a commissioner for Birmingham City Council, based on his current expertise.

Taking questions from the floor from the start as I did convey to delegates that their presence and involvement were critical to the success of the event.

The social innovator's section gave people a decent chunk of time to talk to individual experts, and delegates were able to choose for themselves which 3 tables to attend.

The speakers at each table seemed to have no difficulty engaging with delegates and keeping the focus on the technical solution they were discussing. The only thing I would have done differently if I had the time over would be, as the facilitator, to move to each table in turn and introduce the host instead of introducing them from the front of the room. That might



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have led to more engagement with some tables that seemed less popular. Having said that I dropped into several of the table discussions during that section and everybody seems to be getting something from the discussion.

Similarly, for the tech gurus' section, the individual experts were able to stimulate discussion and answer questions from the people who attended their table.

It was a shame that Charles Rapson was unable to attend the wrap-up session, due to ill health, as I think it would have conveyed better to delegates how seriously the WMCA is taking the matter of the needs of social enterprises around technology. It would also have been useful for him to meet some of the delegates and take their questions.

There was a lot of interest at the event in the AI and immersive technology (VR and AR) hosted tables. Looking at the wider technology ecosystem it is still early days for AI and I think it's more important to proceed with getting AI policy and wider data literacy right before social enterprises put a lot of energy and investment into it.

Overall, it was exciting to see the commitment of delegates to using technology to make their social enterprise better and the commitment of the presenters and panellists to involving social enterprise owners and workers in the development of policy and the use of technology going forward.

I'm excited to see what happens next.

I think more hands-on demonstrations and discussions would be useful, perhaps in another six months as technology development moves so quickly. It would be important to involve delegates from other parts of the region. It would also be useful and encouraging to see more directors of social enterprises involved in the discussions and perhaps some social enterprises could spend some time over the next six months recruiting digital trustees to help them with their thinking going forward.

6. NEXT STEPS

There was much discussion about involving VCFSEs and social economy organisations in Birmingham Tech Week in 2025. This is a regional technology festival and conference with over 7500 people attending. It would be great if we could hold a dedicated social economy event as part of this.



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There needs to be more consideration of the needs of social economy businesses and their inclusion in capacity-building and innovation programmes across the region to support their active role in economic development.

ReBOOT was the first conference of its kind in the region and it would be great to see it become an annual event. It had huge interest but due to budget constraints, our target audience was 70 attendees. Given the number of social economy organisations in the region, there is still an enormous need for technology confidence building to support sector growth.

Business support organisations need to be confident in advising on technology planning as part of their overall offer to social economy organisations.

Social economy organisations should be better represented in mainstream business support technology and innovation programmes.

BSSEC CIC will aim to forge these links and promote opportunities and to continue to work with WMCA and their framework for social economy growth and to raise awareness of the importance of technology adoption going forward.

Finally, BSSEC CIC would like to thank our sponsors, without their support we would not have been able to hold this event. Thank you to Charles Rapson and West Midlands Combined Authority, and Simon Fenton and Forward Carers CIC.

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