

Democratising data in London

An Evaluation of the Datawise London Programme 2019 – 2025



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Introduction

Datawise London, a 6-year partnership programme led by Superhighways, involved London Plus, HEAR Network, Coalition for Efficiency, DataKind UK, the Greater London Authority (GLA) and Makerble. Partners supported small civil society organisations (CSOs) in London to better use data to shape services and influence change, resulting in better outcomes for Londoners. The programme received support under rounds one and two of the [Cornerstone Fund](#), a systems change fund for civil society infrastructure organisations led by City Bridge Foundation and running from 2019 to 2025.

The programme faced and overcame the challenges of delivering a programme during the Covid-19 pandemic period, which made the programme even more relevant to a sector needing to rapidly move much of its work online, and created a real recognition of the value of grassroots community data to themselves and a range of stakeholders.

Partners came together under Datawise London to create a better civil society data support ecosystem, enabling small charities and community groups to better access and use data to shape services, influence change and shift power. This was a response to the barriers for voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations in becoming more digital and data mature, by upskilling and building confidence as well as facilitating peer learning, equipping more workers in these organisations to safely and legally access and use data (quantitative and qualitative) and to make better use of the digital tools that are available for storing and making sense of their data. Datawise London has also responded to the problem of inaccessibility of data about the charity sector, lack of data standards and duplication of data collection, by identifying opportunities to build shared data systems and more consistency across funders, commissioners and infrastructure bodies.

Partners took on specific roles. Superhighways coordinated technology user groups (e.g. Aide CRM, Power BI), led CRM implementation projects, and supported borough-level data sense-making using shared platforms like the London VCSE Dashboard of data from the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector. HEAR Network (Hear Equality and Human Rights Network) brought learning from Datawise London sessions back to equalities-focused and migrant-led organisations, helping adapt digital tools and data language to the needs of groups often excluded from mainstream digital initiatives. London Plus supported strategic framing at the regional level, including contributions to State of the Sector reporting alignment and shared sector-wide tools.

The programme worked at scale as well as depth, reaching hundreds of charities and community organisations across the city, involving many VCSE infrastructure bodies and funders and touching every London Borough. Data about the breadth and scale of the programme can be found in [this dashboard](#).

Superhighways commissioned this evaluation to support the capturing of learning as the programme reaches its end. To gauge the direct impacts and ripple effects of activities, the cross-cutting question guiding the evaluation became: *How has Datawise London contributed to*

democratising data access and use in civil society and the public sector? This evaluation answers that question, charting the legacy of the programme from three points of view: individual and peer-to-peer data capabilities, organisational and sector data collection, sharing and use, and civil society sector data infrastructure.

Methodology

Alongside the Superhighways team, we co-developed a cross-cutting learning question as well as a set of indicators pointing to the changes to data access and use and enablers of that change. Then, we conducted four interviews with project partners and collaborators: London Councils, the GLA, HEAR Network, and David Kane, Data Scientist and Research & Product Lead at 360Giving. It became apparent that with changes of staff and organisation structures over the period, along with busy workloads and diary clashes, we weren't able to speak to everyone we'd have liked to.

We also drew on interviews and [case studies](#) where participants spoke about their experiences of developing data skills, the barriers and enablers they encountered on their data journeys, how they currently collect, analyse and use data, and their aspirations for using data to influence services, funding, and wider change. These were carried out on behalf of Datawise London by Nissa at Think Social Tech consultancy.

We coded data from interviews and Datawise London reports including grant reports for the Cornerstone Fund and Small Charity Data Journeys report using these indicators, distinguishing between barriers, enablers and outcomes. In support of analysis and to communicate findings, we grouped indicators and themed the data according to three points of view: increasing confidence and capability; improving data collection, sharing and use; and influencing change in civil society data infrastructure.

Ripple effects are mapped according to the Foundations for Systems Change framework for tracing the development of key conditions for systems change, which Collaborate developed while serving as learning partner to the Cornerstone Fund. The Foundations framework was co-developed with Cornerstone Fund partnerships as the core learning framework for the Fund. We know that systems change is a long process, to continue beyond the lifetime of Datawise London, yet the examples of ripple effects point to deeper and lasting change.

Key Findings

In addition to participating in events like the London Funders Festival of Learning and [London Data Week](#), Datawise London convened sessions and peer groups like their Data Essentials session; produced tools and resources including [automation and integration tools](#) and [geo mapping tools](#); how-to guides such as their [guide to qualitative data](#) and [7-step CRM selection and implementation guide](#), research reports and blogs like the [Small Charity Data Journeys report](#) and [public data in action stories](#); and built the [London VCSE Dashboard](#).

Our findings demonstrate that Datawise London activities like those listed above grew individual confidence to work with data and laid foundations for more strategic data use by voluntary and community organisations in shaping decisions and services. Programme participants have reconsidered what data they collect and why and mapped their data collection to their theories of change.

We can also see that local influence by voluntary and community organisations on services at a borough level is starting to snowball into cross-borough collaboration and shifts in funding discourse. Several borough CVS (Councils for Voluntary Services) leads reported better coordination and peer support relationships around data as a result of participating in shared learning spaces facilitated by Datawise London partners. In some boroughs, Datawise London-supported datasets have been used to inform funding strategies or collaborative commissioning plans.

Notably, the programme's deliberate experimental approach enabled partners to prioritise exploration over delivery and created the cultural conditions for learning from failure, iteration, and shared sense-making. Delivery partners recognised that their pivot to small-scale training in Year 1 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, would not, by itself, shift systemic data inequalities, and they could move into roles as convenors and connectors between funders, infrastructure organisations, and voluntary and community organisations.

This report describes three ways that Datawise London has contributed to democratising data access and use in civil society and the public sector:

1. by increasing the confidence and capability of individuals within CSOs, particularly through peer-to-peer engagement
2. by improving data collection, sharing and use within and between civil society and public sector organisations through improvement to data sharing processes and collaboration/co-production
3. by influencing change in civil society data infrastructure through through convening and collective action with funders and tech companies

Increasing confidence and capability

Context

Before engaging with Datawise London, the average person working in a small charity related to data as something scary and daunting, and not for them. The prevailing perspective was that data was either a compliance requirement for funders or the domain of tech-savvy professionals rather than a tool for their own learning, reflection or influencing.

People were often uncertain what counted as data or whether they were 'doing it right'. Many lacked relatable examples of how (and why) to access and use data for their day-to-day work. The perception of data as not for them reinforced existing power dynamics i.e. where data serves funders or policymakers, rather than reflecting and benefiting the knowledge and insight already held within communities.

Even when people wanted to engage, the sheer number of tools and jargon-heavy language were overwhelming, and many tools were too complicated, expensive or otherwise inaccessible. Staff often faced multiple "swamps" (a term from Datawise London's Small Charity Data Journeys work): messy spreadsheets, unclear reporting requirements and platforms not fit for purpose. Those already using CRMs (customer relationship management systems) sometimes struggled to extract insights, while others questioned whether they needed a CRM.

Effective data access and use often relied on one or two individuals, and when those individuals lacked the time, confidence, or organisational backing, the work often stalled. In this context, Datawise London's work to foster individual confidence and peer support became powerful enablers. Several people described moments of realisation during their Datawise London journey where learning and advice helped them see that they didn't have to be an expert to take control of data.

Activities

The activities in this area supported individuals within CSOs to develop the capabilities to organise and use — explore, synthesise, analyse, present — the data they had. This redistributed and decentralised the power in using data and grew the voice and agency of CSOs.

"My main motivation came from the requirement to produce quarterly monitoring reports for our funders. It was only when I started to do that on a quarterly basis, that I started to build up a pattern with that data. That made me realise the real motivation should be to understand if we are providing the sort of service that clients want." - Datawise London participant (charity)

Many organisations lacked basic data-handling skills, let alone dexterity with more sophisticated tools. Before engaging with Datawise London, it was common for groups to feel unsure about what data to collect, how to collect it safely, or how to interpret what they had. "Swamps" like unclear frameworks, patchwork spreadsheets, or expensive and inaccessible tools often led to inertia. One participant noted, *"We are still entering everything into the Excel spreadsheet once a*

month...There must be a simpler way.” For many, barriers were not just technical but also emotional: fear of getting it wrong, working in isolation, and uncertainty about where to begin.

Hands-on Datawise London sessions built comfort with tools. Real-world scenarios were used to demystify approaches, and dummy datasets — including for a fictional mentoring charity, sports club, and community centre — allowed participants to test without fear of failure. Participants could test data entry, reporting and automation in dummy environments, which were low-risk and tailored for small charity operations. These scenario-based tools were co-designed in collaboration with infrastructure bodies and experts, and are now freely available as part of the Datawise London resource library.

“Fostering Excel skills has been almost as key as training on the database tools...it’s also where many people fall down.” - Datawise London partner

Participants repeatedly noted how scattered or technically inaccessible guidance could be. Datawise London’s co-designed materials (explainer videos, checklists, animations) helped reduce barriers to entry. Unlike many off-the-shelf resources that assume baseline expertise, these materials used practical language, step-by-step visuals and VCSE-specific examples to help people understand not just how to use a tool, but why they might need it.

User groups for peer learning about Airtable, Power BI and Aide CRM specifically exposed participants to how others were doing things and allowed for shared problem-solving and exchanges of templates. As one user group participant shared, *“Joining the user group was really helpful...I saw people run their entire organisations from Airtable with automations like welcome emails and Google Maps integration.”*

Some participants also received one-on-one tailored mentoring to decide upon and implement the platforms and techniques best suited to their needs, from cleaner spreadsheets to ways of automating tasks. This enabled tailored, low-pressure learning at different speeds and catered to different needs.

“It’s like building a Lego house...you can make it as easy or as complicated as you want.” - Datawise Year 1 report

Participants helped shape and test resources like toolkits, guides and video walk-throughs about how to assess ethical data risks, plan qualitative data collection, and link systems to wider strategic goals. This iterative approach allowed the tools to reflect real user needs, not assumed use cases. Datawise London has published several self-directed learning materials, including [guidance on creating custom Census 2021 datasets](#), an [Excel for data five part bitesize learning series](#), a [seven-step process and toolkit for choosing and implementing a CRM](#), Power BI Resources and a [guide to building your own small charity database](#). Across the board, Datawise London has contextualised and improved the accessibility of guidance for the VCSE sector, reducing barriers to entry.

Learning spaces had to feel safe, relevant, and responsive. This meant designing activities that shifted how staff engaged with data, not as a performance or reporting burden, but as something that could support their mission and day-to-day work. The collaboration of infrastructure organisations (Superhighways, HEAR Network and borough CVS's) brought trusted relationships, local knowledge, and delivery capacity. Their involvement helped root the work in context, and positioned them to continue supporting charities beyond the lifetime of the programme. Building the confidence and capability of these infrastructure actors was therefore not just a delivery mechanism, but a sustainability strategy in itself.

"Our teaching is really friendly and accepting...being allowed to fail — using real data but not 'mine' — encourages a fearlessness." - Datawise London partner

Direct impacts

- In Datawise London's qualitative data analysis training, participants learned how to use story-based evidence for reporting, countering a norm in which only quantitative data is seen as legitimate. This included structured support to identify themes, code data, and link stories to strategic or funder-relevant outcomes. By treating qualitative experience as evidence, Datawise London has reshaped what knowledge is considered valid, and informs decisions.
 - This shifts epistemic power to communities and practitioners who tell their own stories.
- Lightly convened user groups became key sites of learning. Rather than relying solely on external trainers, participants shared screen recordings, swapped templates, and collaboratively worked through real challenges, such as automating welcome emails or mapping service delivery by postcode. This demonstrated that capability could be grown laterally, through relationships and collective problem-solving, not just through formal training or consultancy.
 - This reshapes learning infrastructure in the sector by introducing peer models of capability-building, which are more adaptive and trust-based, and challenges a dependency cycle where small organisations must outsource data work to external consultants.
- Datawise London user groups motivated and inspired participants and were a safe space to ask questions, challenging gatekeeping around data expertise. More practitioners have started to see themselves as data capable and their perspectives are influencing how their teams use data. For instance, LAWRS used community-led data collection to surface healthcare access gaps for Latin American women. Their findings have influenced local policy discussions and strengthened their case for culturally appropriate care.
 - This challenges who gets to ask questions, interpret findings, and make decisions based on data.
- As a result of support, some groups have built databases, enhancing management of their data and how they can use it. For example, an after-school sports club built an Airtable database for parent signups with emergency contacts and medical needs using a webform

connected to Airtable, and a local infrastructure organisation created a database with built-in automations and integrated mapping, disrupting the idea that data systems must be designed by 'professionals'.

- → This redistributes technical power and challenges reliance on external expertise and expensive off-the-shelf solutions
- Some organisations have delayed implementation of actions so that they could first clarify their goals. In a system that often rewards or necessitates speed of implementation, choosing to pause and be intentional about data becomes a quiet act of resistance to external demands.
 - This adds another dimension to data maturity, reflecting an intentional approach to data independent of grant reporting needs.

How/enablers

- Peer learning environments such as the round 1 Data cohort programme and more recently a range of user groups provided a psychologically safe space where people felt comfortable asking questions, exchanging real-life examples, and receiving encouragement from those in similar roles. Relatable, scenario-based learning tools and dummy datasets used in these environments helped build comfort and reduce fear. Who hosts these will be a question moving forward; while Datawise London has exercised a light touch approach, it has nonetheless filled this role and will leave a gap.
- Where organisations had someone internally who was curious about data and had time carved out to experiment, progress was more sustainable. In some cases, this meant protected staff time or board-level buy-in; in others, it was about having the freedom to try, fail, and try again without penalty. Capability grew not just from training, but from permission to learn, iterate, and embed data into day-to-day decisions.
- Excel skills, such as using pivot tables and formulas or data structuring, were often a gateway to using more powerful platforms like Power BI or Airtable. Recognising this, Datawise London invested in foundational training and offered hands-on sessions grounded in familiar tools. Rather than pushing new platforms, the programme respected where people were, and helped them build up from there.
- Relatable, sector-specific scenarios and dummy datasets (e.g. for a youth mentoring charity) allowed participants to practise using tools without risk. These were especially effective in helping people grasp concepts like relational databases, dashboards, and automations and lowered the emotional barriers that often accompany data work. By abstracting from their own data, organisations were able to build foundational skills more fearlessly, and apply them more confidently later.
- The development of visual models and metaphors such as “swamps and bridges” helped people understand and talk about their data journeys. It also played a translation role, simplifying funder reporting requirements and helping organisations see how to meet them in practical, proportionate ways. This enabled organisations to build internal alignment around data work, often for the first time.

Barriers

- The perception that data is technical and only for experts discouraged people from trying.
- People often worked alone in hybrid or overstretched roles, with no colleagues to turn to, reinforcing anxiety and low confidence.
- Many people struggled to carve out protected time to learn, or lacked office space, computers, or internet access, making regular involvement with data hard to sustain.
- People often didn't know where to start or feared asking the 'wrong' questions.
- Basic data cleaning and Excel skills were often a significant obstacle to using other features or tools.
- Leadership buy-in was uneven and when senior staff weren't involved, individuals struggled to embed approaches long-term.

Improving data collection, sharing and use

Context

Many of the organisations that engaged with Datawise London began with fragmented or improvised data systems, typically consisting of Excel spreadsheets, paper records, and email records. These informal approaches often developed out of necessity, but over time became barriers to deeper analysis as well as effective sharing, storytelling and collaborative learning.

Sharing data externally for small voluntary or community organisations was not common. While small charities collected rich, community-level data about and through their work, they often lacked the tools, confidence or clarity about when and how it could be shared ethically or effectively. Many described being unsure of whether other organisations were collecting similar data or unknowingly duplicating their efforts.

Issues inhibiting data sharing included misalignment in data definitions (e.g. inconsistent use of categories like ethnicity or service type), lack of clarity on permissions i.e. whether service users had given consent for wider use, whether organisational leadership endorsed participation in external data collaborations and so on, as well as a lack of interoperable systems or standards.

At the same time, there was an emerging appetite for change. The pandemic response and cost-of-living crisis highlighted the need for shared intelligence, faster coordination, and real-time understanding of community needs. These pressures prompted some organisations to look beyond their internal data and consider the value of cross-organisational sharing, even while lacking a clear path to do so.

Activities

Activities in this area enhanced data collection, sharing and use within and between civil society and public sector organisations. These activities supported more collaborative relationships and addressed duplication, and began to enable more people to be able to understand the work of the sector and make better choices based on that understanding. The tailored support that Datawise London delivered to organisations at different stages of their data journey described above, particularly on database implementation, was instrumental to organisations being better positioned to share data about their work and its impact.

A foundational strand of work involved helping organisations getting their data organised and ready to share. Many of the tailored activities/interventions described in the previous section of this report, particularly those supporting the CRM selection and implementation, were instrumental in enabling sharing and use of data to communicate impact and engage service designers.

To foster shared learning and influence tool development, Datawise London convened user and learning groups. These groups allowed participants to compare systems, explore how others used CRMs and dashboards, and share templates and feedback. This work directly influenced the creators of Aide CRM (a platform used by small charities) to release new APIs (application programming interfaces) to improve data integration and reporting functionality.

Datawise London also helped six small charities one-on-one to design and implement custom databases. This included scoping data needs, cleaning existing datasets, and setting up automations and dashboards to support future reporting and interoperability.

This work had ripple effects. A grants manager for Lloyds Bank Foundation in London introduced a colleague who wanted a sense check of a new CRM support offer being developed under the Foundation's Funder Plus model. Superhighways fed in ideas for how this might work best and subsequently supported two London grantees through the process. This demonstrates a wider reach and ongoing legacy for key resources developed through Datawise London, and a key ongoing role for Superhighways to play in this space with relevant and in-demand expertise.

"I see Superhighways as a leading light in this area and love and use your 'choosing and implementing a database' to give a charity an idea of what is involved" - LBF Grants Manager

Datawise London also supported some infrastructure organisations and funding bodies with data management for better sharing and informing. For example, they advised London Councils on shifting its data management approach for its pan-London grants programme, resulting in new ways of collecting, storing, and using data to support learning and accountability. Data from grant-funded projects is now publicly available. Rather than producing complex borough reporting once a year, grantees, London Councils staff and Grants Committee members and other CSOs and public sector organisations can share and see progress and impact data in a real time [dashboard](#).

"Data is like marmite. You're comfortable with it or not. It's about looking at info and being comfortable with accessing it, and understanding what you want to do with it...bad use of data can influence terrible decisions. You need to help people know what it is they're looking at. The data itself isn't telling you whether something is good or bad....Use data to ask the next question." - Datawise London participant (funder)

"GDPR is not telling you not to share data but exactly how to share data." - Datawise London participant (funder)

In parallel, Datawise London worked to help small charities better understand and use external datasets, especially those not designed for VCSE use. Scenario-based, interactive training sessions were delivered using Census 2021 data and tools like Local Insight. Participants explored how national and local datasets could support service targeting, funding applications, and needs assessment and they hosted a series of Data Talks where data platform providers or report authors could share information with a small charity audience.

However, Datawise London recognised that despite the availability of public datasets, most organisations lacked the capacity, tools, or confidence to use them effectively. This insight further reinforced the case for tools like the VCSE Dashboard, not just as a data visualisation product, but as an infrastructure intervention making existing data actually usable by the sector. This followed earlier input into the new Community Lens tool (developed by the Data Collective, a community of people who work in the UK social sector making more and better use of data) allowing groups to

explore their own post code data alongside the Indices of Deprivation and then went on to commission a sister tool to allow easy visualisation of geographical heat maps.

Direct impacts

- Bromley Well, delivered by Bromley Third Sector Enterprise (BTSE), used Power BI and a shared CRM (Charity Log) to improve how they monitored service demand and referral patterns across a multi-agency partnership. The drive to use data more strategically came from a new CEO, who in 2021 initiated an impact reporting process that revealed unexpected insights — for instance, over a third of calls came from people identifying as disabled. This prompted a deeper review of systems and data gaps. Bromley Well joined the Datawise London Data Cohort programme and began attending the Power BI user group. BTSE has now invested reserves and secured contract funding to appoint a full-time data manager for Bromley Well. This has driven improvements in data consistency across partners, redesigned collection methods to be more person-centred, and supported development of Power BI dashboards used in quarterly meetings with commissioners. These dashboards have helped BTSE identify gaps, understand local needs, and raise their profile as a trusted data partner. Data is now embedded not just in reporting, but in strategy, service improvement, and borough-wide planning.
 - This shows how investment in internal data roles, combined with tailored tools and leadership buy-in, can shift organisations from compliance-led reporting toward proactive, insight-driven strategy. It also demonstrates that commissioners respond when VCSE data is presented clearly and consistently.
- The Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS), in partnership with IRMO, responded to gaps in Covid-19 vaccine access and GP registration data for Latin American communities, a group not officially recognised in the UK census or most borough monitoring forms. Through a Southwark Council-funded project, they designed and implemented a multilingual data collection process featuring a structured data sheet, case study interviews, and interactive webinar tools like Zoom and Menti polls. By capturing lived experiences alongside quantitative data, they surfaced deep structural barriers to healthcare access from language and digital exclusion to poor maternity care pathways. The result was a powerful, community-rooted evidence base that LAWRS now uses to engage local authorities and healthcare providers, advocate for policy change, and reshape services for a population otherwise rendered invisible in official data.
 - This shows that when grassroots groups define their own questions and collection methods, they can surface inequities that mainstream systems overlook and use this evidence to shape local policy and service design, especially for structurally excluded communities.
- Sobus (Hammersmith & Fulham CVS) were supported to prepare for a Data Dive run by DataKind UK looking at mental health provision and access by the BAME community. Datawise London worked with Sobus to source a number of data sets e.g. from the Mental Health Trust, as well as to collect data from community groups providing related services. The DataDive, bringing together 30 expert volunteer data scientists in a weekend-long event to analyse and interpret the data, provided a better understanding of access to

mental health support for BAME people in the Borough. This gave Sobus the credibility and data they needed to advocate for change. The report and the findings had a big impact amongst their stakeholders and in the local authority, showing the need for more services, for services to be more culturally sensitive and the importance of co-designing services. This contributed significantly to the creation of the Hammersmith & Fulham Mental Health Community Grants Programme in April 2022. West London NHS Trust funds the programme and manages it in partnership with LB Hammersmith & Fulham and Sobus.

→ This further highlights the important role of CSOs in accessing and analysing existing data to interrogate it, highlighting gaps in provision which can then result in new service opportunities.

- Infrastructure partners like Superhighways, London Plus, and several borough-based CVSs moved beyond training delivery to model and steward collective data practices. These organisations held space for experimentation and peer exchange, supporting others to navigate tensions between technical tools, funder expectations, and on-the-ground realities. Through convening working groups, hosting co-design sessions and sharing early-stage prototypes, they acted as intermediaries between data systems and civil society experience.
 - This reframes infrastructure bodies not just as intermediaries, but as data stewards: institutions capable of brokering relationships, surfacing collective needs, and convening collaboration. Their trusted position allows them to align technical systems with sector values and priorities, enabling more equitable data governance.
- As part of its systems change work, Datawise London partnered with London Councils to co-design a new grant reporting and data management system for its 2022 – 2026 pan-London grants programme. Instead of procuring a bespoke or off-the-shelf system through a vendor (the typical route for public sector programmes) they used Knack (a no-code database tool) and Make (an automation platform) to collaboratively build a lightweight, custom system that fit the specific needs of both grant managers and grantees. This shifted their grant reporting model to make near real-time data from their pan-London grants programme publicly accessible via a live portal, enabling not just internal accountability but sector-wide visibility. Grantees can now see each other's activity, fostering peer alignment, and borough teams (e.g. housing, VAWG) can draw on the data for local planning. The portal has captured the attention of strategic actors like the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, prompting conversations about how it could bridge persistent data gaps between boroughs and statutory bodies. (Note: this work was not directly funded by the Cornerstone Fund. It was delivered on a consultancy basis for London Councils, but would not have happened had they not built relationships through Datawise London. They continue to work together on a new 2026 – 2030 programme portal.)
 - This demonstrates how civil society data, when structured for openness and accessibility, can change who sees what, when, and for what purpose. It shifts visibility from internal compliance to collective intelligence, and suggests a path toward federated systems where statutory and VCSE actors draw from shared infrastructure rather than operate in silos.

- HEAR Network brought learning from Datawise London sessions back to member organisations, making insights available beyond workshops. HEAR Network's role in carrying learning across their wider membership shows how sector infrastructure bodies and specialist networks expanded the reach of the learning.
→ This highlights the viability of scaling reflection and capability through trusted actors.

How/enablers

- Superhighways, HEAR Network, and London Plus played critical roles as bridges between fragmented actors in the data ecosystem. They held peer learning groups, tested prototypes with small charities, surfaced governance questions, and facilitated borough-wide use of shared tools. Their ability to navigate both grassroots realities and technical landscapes allowed them to model what participatory data stewardship can look like in practice and helped ensure that solutions were contextually relevant and more likely to be adopted.
- Co-design processes (CRM implementations, London Councils grant reporting system, and VCSE Dashboard) led to clearer data structures, aligned taxonomies and systems designed to support future or real-time sharing. In the case of London Councils, the reporting system was intentionally designed to enable data use and cross-programme learning (including by grantees themselves), not just internal oversight.

Barriers

- Even when organisations were motivated, choosing and switching tools like CRMs came with uncertainty, and demands of time and sometimes money.
- Even where new systems were in place, some organisations lacked capacity to maintain them without ongoing support.
- Some guidance or tools (e.g. Census custom datasets) were not always immediately user-friendly or accessible for smaller charities.

Influencing change in civil society data infrastructure

Context

While public bodies and funders sought data from CSOs to validate their funding and inform decision-making, there was little coordinated investment in making that data ecosystem accessible, equitable, or relevant for smaller voluntary and community sector organisations, nor was there much willingness to fund the kinds of supports these organisations needed to contribute and meet requirements for data. Challenges around data maturity were revealed to be more than just about capability but rather structural conditions such as underinvestment and digital exclusion.

Before Datawise London, voluntary and community organisations across London often found themselves outside of the city's data infrastructure. Data power sat more with funders, commissioners, statutory services, and software providers, leaving small charities with limited influence over what data was collected, how it was defined, and how it was used. Funding was often the main driver of data work, with organisations collecting information primarily to meet grant or commissioner requirements. While some found this helped sharpen their focus on outcomes, others struggled with the demands, particularly when working with paper-based systems, limited capacity, or multiple funders with differing expectations. Research by IVAR showed that 71% of charities feel funders underestimated the time and effort it takes to respond to reporting requirements, making data feel burdensome rather than empowering.

This reflected broader structural issues in the VCSE data landscape, including the absence of shared data infrastructure, common taxonomies, and clear guidance on publishing or reusing data responsibly. This fragmentation also limited visibility of the sector as a whole. Organisations, infrastructure bodies, and funders struggled to answer fundamental questions like: who is delivering what, where, and for whom and what is the impact? This gap in collective intelligence inhibited decision-making and constrained the sector's ability to influence policy or funding practice at scale.

At the same time, major datasets — like those from the Charity Commission, Companies House, Indices of Multiple Deprivation and to a certain extent Census 2021 — remained technically open but practically inaccessible to most charities. There were few intermediaries translating these datasets into usable insights, and the systems that existed were rarely designed with VCSE users in mind, reinforcing why funder involvement in the codesign of the VCSE dashboard was so important.

In this context, Datawise London partners stepped into a system-facing role as infrastructure organisations to build understanding of the needs of CSOs in relation to data: advocating on behalf of them, negotiating with software providers and funders, and creating shared spaces for learning and influence. These roles were crucial for bridging the gaps between grassroots practice and the user interface design of digital tools as well as policymaking and funding.

In addition Datawise London also initiated important work to begin to bring together and standardise datasets which describe and make visible the work of CSOs through the creation of the VCSE dashboard, providing an accessible, easy to use way of exploring London's civil society

sector. This became particularly interesting to VCSE alliances working with the recent (though about to change) Integrated Care Systems configurations across London.

Activities

Activities in this area focused on making the needs and realities of small charities visible to funders, infrastructure bodies, and policymakers both through advocacy, and co-developing shared tools, templates, and narratives rooted in real organisational experience. Datawise London worked with funders such as the Clothworkers Foundation to influence their refreshed capital digital funding to ensure it was relevant to current tech payment models e.g. set-up costs and subscriptions for CRMs. They contributed to the new guidance to help applicants better understand the criteria, signposting to other useful resources.

To support a broader shift in sector intelligence, Datawise London pitched and ran sessions at cross-sector events including the London Funder's Festival of Learning where they shared their learning from the Small Charities Data Journey research and showcased a co-design of a new reporting database that they had collaborated with London Councils on, using no-code tools. This system streamlined data submission for grantees and grant managers, and was built with the intention of enabling future sharing of funding data across the sector.

Across these activities, the voice of frontline organisations shaped how "digital maturity" and "data infrastructure" were defined. Rather than top-down assessments, Datawise London centred the lived experience of small charities navigating data "swamps," enabling a shift in how funders and infrastructure bodies interpreted what support was needed and what progress looked like.

To tackle sector-wide data fragmentation, Datawise London initiated a workstream titled "Data About Our Sector". This strand addressed a core challenge: the lack of accessible, collated, and up-to-date information about London's VCSE organisations. Data was scattered across open or siloed datasets (e.g. Charity Commission, Companies House), with little standardisation and limited utility. Through a series of co-design workshops, Datawise London engaged infrastructure organisations, funders, researchers and public sector actors to explore what questions needed answering, how VCSE organisations should be categorised, and what presentation formats would support better 'State of the Sector' and similar reports which describe the civil society ecosystem.

The outcome of this work was the development of the co-designed [London VCSE Dashboard](#), a free, easy to use interactive tool designed to help stakeholders across the city use data more confidently and effectively. The dashboard is built from publicly available datasets using Power BI and allows users to explore the shape, scale and geography of VCSE activity in [London](#). It was co-designed with input from 50-60 different organisations from all stakeholder groups - funders, infrastructure (national & local), NHS, Government, Councils, charities & social enterprises. The dashboard was piloted with London Youth, Tower Hamlets CVS, and North East London VCFSE Collaborative, driving borough-level strategy sessions, service planning, and funding decisions. NEL VCSE Alliance are now using it for the North East London state of the sector report. The dashboard has been very well received.

"I've just been having a play on the dashboard and it is totally AWESOME! I'm thinking back to the beginning of the Way Ahead, when being able to access data about civil society seemed such a pipe-dream. Well done for keeping going on this dream and making the reality so much better than I had imagined it could ever be." - Manager, London Funders

This work had systemic implications. By convening cross-sector contributors, surfacing infrastructure gaps, and advocating for standardised approaches to categorisation and metadata, Datawise London began laying the foundations for shared data stewardship across London's civil society ecosystem.

With the knowledge gained, Datawise London were able to contribute to national conversations about standardising data collection fields and enabling local analysis of civil society capacity and reach e.g. with NAVCA and Nottingham Trent University's Data Observatory. These efforts were directly supported by resources like the VCSE Dashboard and guidance for borough infrastructure leads.

The Datawise London team proactively sought collaboration with other data support providers and networks, both within and outside London, to share learning and swap expertise. For example, Superhighways partnered with Data Orchard to test using the Data Maturity Assessment tool for the Data cohort programme, has been a member of the Data Collective's Place based data spoke group, and is now trialling a referral process with DataKind UK for small London charities looking for support to implement CRMs. They have also engaged with Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Insight Infrastructure programme, testing a range of new tools.

Direct impacts

- The Aide CRM user group, convened by Superhighways, brought together small charities using the same CRM system, many of whom had never been in a space where their feedback could directly influence the tools they rely on daily. A persistent frustration was the system's limited reporting capability, which forced organisations to rely on manual workarounds. Instead of reporting issues in isolation or adapting around them, participants collectively articulated a shared technical need: access to their raw data via an API. In response, the CRM provider committed to developing and releasing an API, a feature usually prioritised for large clients. Superhighways followed up with training on how to use Power BI to connect with the new API, enabling charities to build real-time dashboards and generate insights previously out of reach.
 - This example reconfigures how power operates in tech development for the VCSE sector. It challenges the norm where tools are designed elsewhere and charities must adapt, often inefficiently. Instead, it shows that when infrastructure bodies convene users around shared challenges, they can broker influence with vendors, even in low-budget contexts. More than just fixing a feature, this created a pathway for small charities to become active co-creators of the tools they use, setting precedent for more equitable, participatory tech ecosystems in civil society.

- Superhighways, through its work leading the Datawise London partnership, engaged directly with the Clothworkers Foundation during a refresh of their capital fund. Drawing on evidence from small charities supported through CRM implementation and data coaching, Superhighways were able to provide guidance to the team about how digital systems and data infrastructure could be eligible under capital investments, whilst still fitting the criteria. This wasn't simply about influencing one funder's checklist — it was about embedding the language and priorities of small charities into funding policy. The organisations that had long struggled to justify investment in systems now had a reference point and language to make their case.
 - This shows how infrastructure bodies can reframe dominant narratives around what "counts" as infrastructure. By evidencing the real world value of data systems for small organisations as core tools for service delivery, Superhighways helped shape investment norms. This helps signal a move from top-down definitions of digital need to ones that are defined by those doing the work, potentially influencing a wider set of funders.
- The development process for London Councils' new grant reporting and data management system for its 2022 – 2026 pan-London grants programme was not built behind closed doors. The development process drew directly on lessons from Datawise London's earlier work on the Small Charities Data Journeys research about over-reliance on spreadsheets and duplication of effort, fragmentation in monitoring frameworks and barriers to data reuse and sharing. The result of building the system was to simplify the reporting process for funded organisations, create structured, queryable data for London Councils and create a design with future interoperability as a key mechanism, allowing for data to be shared beyond the funder for wider ecosystem learning. This system and process were presented at the London Funders Festival of Learning, where Datawise London shared the case study as a working example of what funder-civil society co-design can look like in practice.
 - This example challenges the default model of top-down data design in grantmaking. By involving infrastructure experts and drawing on real-world pain points from charities, Superhighways and London Councils co-produced a system that prioritised usability, transparency, and future data sharing. It shifts the paradigm from funders being simply data collectors to being partners in building usable data infrastructure. And it demonstrates that with the right tools and trust, public institutions can adopt flexible, affordable, co-designed systems, setting a precedent for open, scalable solutions in public grant management.
- A key product of this systemic stewardship was the VCSE Sector Dashboard, developed through Datawise London's Data About Our Sector strand of work. This interactive Power BI tool brought together open datasets — including Charity Commission, Companies House, and 360 Giving — to visualise and map VCSE activity across London. Co-designed with local and national infrastructure bodies, funders, NHS alliances such as the North East London VCSE Alliance, local and regional government and community organisations, it offers a new way to explore "who's doing what, where" in the capital's voluntary sector, and to produce more robust State of the Sector reports. For many, it was the first time sector data felt relevant, navigable, and actionable. Attendees of the Dashboard launch events saw the dashboard as a valuable tool for identifying gaps in provision, informing

funding strategies, supporting more equitable resource distribution and better understanding and advocating for the communities they serve.

The VCSE Dashboard has generated strong interest since its launch, with positive feedback from funders, infrastructure bodies, and local authorities on its potential to support borough-level planning, identify service gaps, and increase the visibility of grassroots organisations. Tower Hamlets CVS has already used the dashboard in borough-wide workshops to inform funding priorities, while North East London VCFSE Collaborative who helped shape its development are now using it for their state of the sector report. Feedback gathered at the launch reflects enthusiasm for using the tool in future borough workshops, funding conversations, and strategic planning. The dashboard helped spark conversations about aligning formats and taxonomies across borough infrastructure bodies and how to better co-design tools and share data across London. These early steps toward standardisation reflect the groundwork for future interoperability, rather than a completed system.

→ This demonstrates how building shared tools from open data, when co-designed with the sector, can redistribute analytical power, inform resource allocation, and lay the groundwork for a federated data infrastructure that reflects and serves civil society's priorities, not just institutional reporting needs.

- Through the Datawise London programme, Superhighways supported VCSE organisations to access and use public datasets from Census 2021 (ONS) and Local Insight (OCSI). This included scenario-based training, one-on-one guidance, and workshops on creating custom datasets relevant to local service delivery. As part of this strand, Superhighways hosted a session with OCSI to walk through Local Insight features and field user questions. In June 2025, Superhighways were also involved in beta testing a new Local Insight API. They experimented pulling data into PowerBI — bringing greater flexibility and new capabilities for maximising data held within the Local Insight platform. Separately, in partnership with HEAR Network, they ran pre-Census consultation sessions with the ONS, where participants raised concerns about accessibility and the lack of visibility of certain groups — including the Latin American community, which is not listed as a recognised ethnicity in official datasets. While no structural changes were made to the platforms, the activity gave small charities an opportunity to critically engage with data sources that are often perceived as fixed or out of reach. However, With the ONS recently confirming that a 2031 Census will go ahead, there is now real potential to build on this groundwork and influence future categorisation and data collection practices.

→ This work supported small charities to access and question national data sources, not just extract from them. While it didn't result in changes to Census categories or data platforms, it showed the value of building technical confidence alongside critical reflection, laying groundwork for more informed, assertive engagement with open data in future.

- Together, partners helped prototype and promote shared data infrastructure. For example, through the co-design of the VCSE Dashboard, which they tested and iterated with borough CVSs and funders. Their leadership also helped align language, categories, and expectations across local and regional datasets, an often-invisible foundation for future interoperability. Datawise London-supported organisations also themselves developed

tools for greater transparency, more informed decision making and better engagement. For instance, Young Brent Foundation used Flourish to create a public-facing visual map of youth services in Brent and London Youth co-developed a version of the VCSE Dashboard prototype to explore youth work provision in boroughs, sparking wider conversations about data infrastructure among other funders and networks.

How/enablers

- Partners took on deliberate roles as translators, conveners, and advocates, representing the needs of small charities in conversations with funders, vendors, and national stakeholders. This included surfacing friction points in data systems, articulating needs from frontline organisations, and brokering more collaborative design processes.
- Spaces like the Power BI user group allowed charities to share challenges and collectively navigate gaps in commercial tools not tailored for the UK VCSE sector, such as missing postcode mapping for UK charities. These groups also surfaced practical workarounds and created pressure for tool improvement.
- The creation and adoption of the VCSE Dashboard marks a breakthrough in enabling data use at scale. Built through co-design and testing with stakeholders, with publicly available datasets and co-designed with infrastructure bodies and funders, it is addressing a challenge identified by many sector infrastructure bodies and has the potential to reduce 'survey fatigue'.
- Datawise London aligned with other Cornerstone Fund grantees and national bodies (e.g. GLA, London Funders, 360 Giving) to disseminate resources and shape wider ecosystem practices. For example, through presenting the London Councils reporting system and the VCSE Dashboard at the London Funders Festival of Learning, they helped connect funders with practical, co-designed solutions and prompted conversations around standardising data approaches across boroughs.

Barriers

- Organisations were often unsure why funders requested certain data, or how to deliver it without duplicating efforts.
- Many small organisations were repeatedly asked for the same types of data by different public and funder systems, without alignment or reusability.
- Organisations struggled to push back when tools or reporting systems didn't meet their needs, especially when working with large-scale vendors or statutory partners.
- Although Datawise London created tools and shared learning, uptake by external actors remained inconsistent and dependent on individual relationships.
- Significant time and marketing is needed to socialise and spread a new tool, no matter how useful and welcome it is.

Ripple effects

The direct impacts of Datawise London activities are well established. Many ripple effects of those activities will emerge in time as systems change is a long process, though some are already identifiable. We include some of them here, mapped according to the Foundations for Systems Change framework for tracing the development of key conditions for systems change, co-developed with Cornerstone Fund partnerships. The ripple effects cover all five of the key conditions, illustrating how the actions of Datawise London have driven more sophisticated and democratised data access, use and sharing, which is enhancing the voice and influence of civil society organisations (particularly small charities), building collaborative structures and system understanding, and supported peer learning communities to emerge.

Voice, agency and equity	Vision, structures and relationships for collaboration	System understanding and behaviours	Learning and co-production	Shared power and influence
Using Datawise London training, Rye Lane Chapel produced a 77-page community audit, which has been used by leadership and a new pastor to shape local redevelopment plans. They are now using the insights to seek funding.	BTSE's integrated use of Charity Log and Power BI helped secure contract renewal, enabled faster referrals, and improved reporting to commissioners. Their dashboard is now used in council/NHS meetings, raising their profile as a key data partner.	The community development agency Sobus partnered with Datakind and Superhighways to create a data-driven mental health needs assessment, which contributed to the launch of a new Mental Health Community Grants Programme in Hammersmith & Fulham.	The Power BI user group evolved into an ongoing community of 38 data leads who are now connected on Teams, suggesting a shift in collective capability and sustained peer infrastructure.	Improved spreadsheet design for social prescribing enabled One Westminster to produce impactful reports for the council and NHS. Smarter systems helped them make a case for sustained investment in integrated services.

Conclusion

Datwise London activities directly supported individuals and small CSOs to develop the capabilities to use their data, distributing the power in data use and growing the voice and agency of CSOs. Their resources have been taken up and used more widely in the sector and infrastructure organisations and funders have shared them with charities they are supporting. The work has influenced data collection and sharing within and between civil society and public sector organisations, supporting collaboration and better decision making. Datwise London have made the needs and realities of small charities visible to funders, infrastructure bodies, and policymakers both through advocacy, and co-developing shared tools, templates, and narratives rooted in real organisational experience.

Datwise London stories have been shared at high-profile events like London Funders Festival of Learning, and London Data Week, enabling sector-wide learning and inspiring others to adopt similar practices. Datwise London partners have also been invited into wider sector events, consultations, and advisory conversations. The partnership's role in capturing and disseminating these stories has raised awareness of what's possible and how even small changes can be life-changing. Take for example Kentish Town Community Centre introducing a QR-code sign-in process for registrations allowing them to better identify service gaps and target provision. Or Streets of Growth in Tower Hamlets making their data work smarter, not just to evidence how their approach to working with young people reduces harm but to reveal patterns in young people's engagement, resilience, relapse, and recovery to support more timely interventions.

Datwise London partners have demonstrated the power of working relationally to foster trust, supporting peer-to-peer learning, and translating grassroots insight into sector-wide influence and visibility. There has been important progress in tackling fragmentation through syncing up data, contributing to a small shift in the democratising of data access and use in London, and in the data infrastructure and systems which enable this.

In the first round of the Cornerstone Fund, the Datwise London team envisioned a London Data Community of Practice as a cross-sector space to connect civil society, infrastructure bodies, funders and policymakers around shared data challenges. While it has yet to be launched, this vision reflected the programme's broader ambition to build long-term capacity and relationships around collaborative data governance. Something like this may indeed be the legacy of the programme, building on what they've started through cross-sector collaboration.

As the programme comes to an end, the team are focusing on the legacy of the past six years — ensuring that the resources and learning can be shared with the thousands of small charities and community organisations in London that have yet to be reached by Datwise London. Ongoing collaboration with London's infrastructure organisations is seen as the route for this engagement to ensure that as society becomes ever more digital and data-driven, the VCSE sector and the communities it supports, is not left behind.

Some work already lives on e.g. the data literacy training and support funded by Trust for London for grassroots organisations in the capital to better use data to raise the voice of communities and influence the anti poverty agenda. Superhighways continues to build relationships and actively pursue funding opportunities to take forward other key areas of Datawise London activity.

Glossary

API: application programming interface, connection between computers or between computer programmes

CRM: customer relationship management, a system for managing interactions and relationships with "customers"

CSO: civil society organisation, generally non-profit organisations with charitable or community-benefiting aims, like charities, NGOs, trade unions and clubs

CVS: Councils for Voluntary Services are a type of infrastructure support organisation that exist to support frontline voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors

Epistemic power: the power that comes with producing/acquiring knowledge or knowing

VCSE: voluntary, community and social enterprise, a term used to reference the sector comprised of these organisations