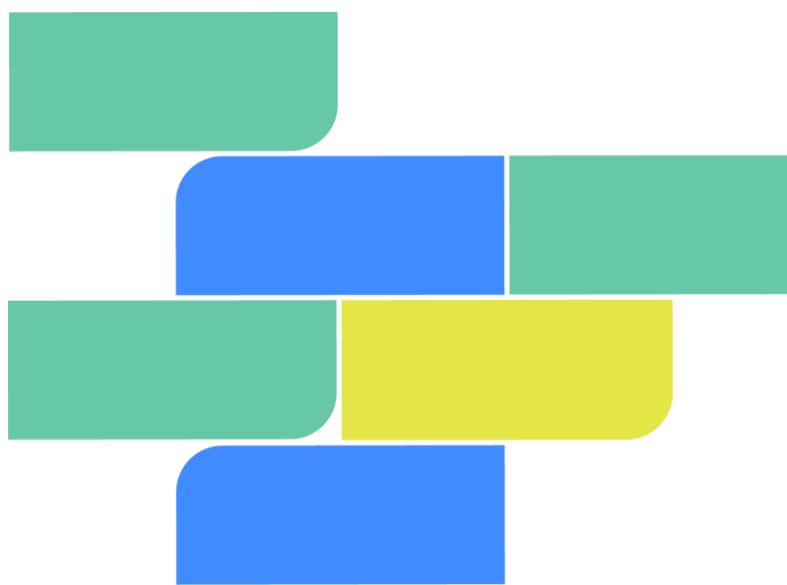# 'No-code' but not alone

A guide for community businesses developing the right tech with the right type of support

Simon Borkin, Commonly

April 2025

Contents

About Power to Change and Commonly

Power to Change is the think-do tank that backs community business.

We back community business from the ground up. We turn bold ideas into action so communities have the power to change what matters to them. We know community business works to build stronger communities and better places to live. We've seen people create resilient and prosperous local economies when power is in community hands. We also know the barriers that stand in the way of their success.

We're using our experience to bring partners together to do, test and learn what works. We're shaping the conditions for community business to thrive.
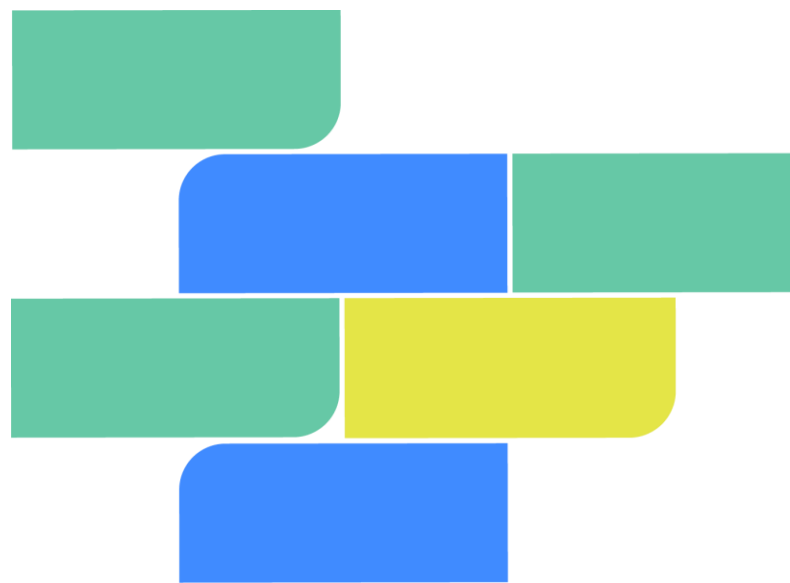
Introduction

About this guide

This guide is designed as a resource to help community businesses explore a model of digital development that balances the strengths of no-code solutions with the benefits of expert collaboration. No-code solutions - platforms that allow users to create digital tools without needing to write code - can significantly reduce technical complexity and dependency, allowing community businesses to take greater ownership of their digital tools.

However, this guide also highlights the benefits of working with a growing pool of aligned specialists who can ensure that this technology is effectively designed and implemented, while simultaneously building the capacity of the organisation. By partnering with experts, community businesses can develop the skills needed to maintain and adapt their digital tools in the long term, boosting their sustainability.

The guide draws on the experience of groups that participated in Power to Change's 'Powering Up' programme, who benefited from this 'hybrid approach' to digital development. It seeks to provide practical insights and recommendations based on their experience to support community businesses seeking to build their digital capabilities.

An introduction to Powering Up

Powering Up was a programme delivered by Power to Change to support community businesses from 2020 to 2024. It provided tailored support packages that included technical support, professional development, and flexible funding. The goal was to enable community businesses to address specific challenges such as digital transformation and climate action.

This report focuses on the digital stream of Powering Up, where the primary goal was to collaborate with community businesses to enhance their digital capabilities, enabling them to thrive in an environment where technology is becoming increasingly vital to the operational concerns of socially-driven organisations.

Unlike traditional support and capacity-building programs, Powering Up distinguished itself by directly addressing the specific needs of community businesses rather than adhering to pre-determined assumptions or rigid funding guidelines. This was evident in how digital support was delivered - through a collaborative, adaptive approach that involved in-depth consultation and

diagnostic activities and ongoing flexibility in response to each community business's unique challenges and evolving needs.

The programme focused on ensuring that community businesses had agency in shaping the support they received, making the interventions more impactful and sustainable.

The programme evolved over two phases to address the emerging needs of community businesses, particularly in response to the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The digital steam was incorporated into the second phase which took place between 2021 and 2024 and supported 68 community businesses through a dedicated support package consisting of:

- **Access to a Community Business Connector**: A trusted advisor to help community businesses navigate their unique challenges.

- **Access to Digital Experts**: Specialists were brought in to support digital transformation where needed

- **Paid Support Providers (up to £9,000)**: Tailored support for community businesses, brokered to meet their specific needs over a 12-month period.

- **Professional Development and Wellbeing Support (up to £3,000)**: This included leadership coaching, peer mentoring, and mental health support.

- **Flexible Grant (£8,000)**: To support community business leaders and their teams, enabling engagement with the programme through covering time, backfilling posts, purchasing essential equipment, or covering other costs that promote business growth.

Digital development models

Approaching digital development in Powering Up

Informed by design of the programme itself, the approach to digital development in Powering Up was determined by the community business' specific challenges and evolving needs but was framed by the underlying hypothesis of Powering Up that in order to address 'unique challenges' in a community business, it is crucial to recognise the challenge within a wider context of the organisation's operating environment. This environment is characterised by both internal facets - people, skills, power as well as external forces such as resources, time, relationships and partners.

To this end, the Community Business Connector worked closely with the community businesses to articulate the digital challenge within this wider context through a detailed discovery process. This ensured that both the challenge was suitably addressed but also the development model regarding the solution was effectively considered, recognising that there are generally three approaches to digital development in an organisational context.

- Custom-built solutions

- Off-the-shelf software packages

- 'No-code' solutions

Comparing digital development models

Each model comes with its own set of strengths and challenges, particularly when viewed through the lens of a community business—typically a locally-rooted organisation with a relatively marginal business model, often relying on limited staff and volunteer input, where often there isn't an emphasis on digital capability given that the purpose of the organisation will be to deliver community benefit.

Each model is summarised below:

Off-the-shelf software packages

Off-the-shelf software packages are pre-built applications designed to meet common needs, such as CRM systems, accounting software, or project management tools. These solutions can often be implemented quickly without the need for significant customisation.

Pros:

- **Quick Implementation**: Off-the-shelf software can be set up and used quickly, making it an appealing option for community businesses needing an immediate solution.

- **Proven Solutions**: These software packages are widely used and tested, offering reliability and industry-standard features that can benefit community businesses.

- **Cost-effective for standard needs**: For standard business needs, such as managing contacts or accounting, off-the-shelf software can be a cost-effective solution without the need for expensive custom development.

Cons:

- **Limited Flexibility**: While off-the-shelf solutions offer many features, they may lack the flexibility needed to address the unique needs of a specific community business. Customisation options are often limited, which can hinder their usefulness in specialised contexts.

- **Licensing costs**: Depending on the software, ongoing licensing fees can become a financial burden for community businesses with limited budgets.

- **Lack of integration**: Off-the-shelf software may not integrate seamlessly with other tools that the community business uses, potentially creating inefficiencies or data silos.

Custom Solutions

Custom-built digital solutions are created specifically to meet the unique needs of an organisation. This approach involves developers writing code to build tools tailored to the precise requirements of the community business.

Pros:

- **Full Customisation**: Custom solutions are built to address the specific needs of an organisation, ensuring that the technology fully supports the unique processes and requirements of the community business.

- **Scalable and Flexible**: Custom development offers greater scalability and flexibility. As the needs of the community business evolve, custom tools can be adapted or expanded without the constraints typically found in no-code platforms.

- **Integration Potential**: Custom-built tools can be integrated more easily with other systems and platforms, allowing community businesses to create a seamless digital ecosystem that supports all areas of their work.

Cons:

- **Higher Initial Costs**: Custom development requires a significant upfront investment, which can be a barrier for community businesses with limited financial resources.

- **Dependency on developers**: Custom solutions require the expertise of developers to create and maintain. This dependency can be challenging for community businesses that may not have the financial means to hire or retain ongoing technical support.

- **Longer development time**: Building a custom solution takes time, which can be a disadvantage for community businesses that need quick, ready-to-use digital tools to address immediate challenges.

No-code Solutions

No-code solutions allow users to create digital tools—such as websites, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems, databases, forms - all without often needing to write a single line of code. These platforms provide a user-friendly interface, drag-and-drop tools, and pre-built templates that simplify the digital development process.

Pros:

- **Ease of use**: No-code platforms are designed to be accessible, allowing non-technical users to create and maintain digital tools. This is particularly useful for community businesses that may lack dedicated IT resources.

- **Cost-effective**: The upfront costs of no-code solutions are typically lower than those of custom development, making them an attractive option for organisations with limited funds for digital.

- **Reduced dependency**: No-code solutions can empower community businesses to have greater control over their digital tools, without relying heavily on external developers. This can be crucial for organisations that need flexibility in managing their systems without waiting on third-party support.

Cons:

- **Limited customisation**: No-code platforms have inherent limitations in terms of customisation. This can pose a challenge for community businesses that have unique needs which may not be fully addressed by off-the-shelf features.

- **Scalability issues**: As the community business grows, the limitations of no-code tools may become apparent, particularly when more complex features or integrations are needed.

- **Hidden costs**: While the initial costs are low, scaling with a no-code platform may incur additional subscription fees or necessitate workarounds that increase overall costs in the long run.

No-code but not alone – how Powering Up provided a 'hybrid model' to digital development

Overview

Out of the cohort of digital groups participating in the Powering Up programme, only a handful pursued a *fully custom solution* due to the costs and complexity typically associated with such an approach. The groups that opted for custom development generally had relatively high levels of digital capability, making them better equipped to handle the challenges of managing a custom solution and maintaining it longer term.

For many groups, there was a clear business case for adopting an *off-the-shelf solution* for specific use cases. This was particularly relevant for applications such as implementing Xero as a cloud accounting system or migrating to Donorfy as a fundraising management system. Off-the-shelf solutions often provided a practical, tested option for the community business that could be implemented relatively quickly.

However, a significant number of groups found themselves in a position where their needs were not fully met by off-the-shelf solutions, but the barriers to a purely custom-built model—such as cost, skills, and dependency—were too high. For these groups, the *no-code approach* emerged as an optimal middle ground, allowing them to develop tailored digital solutions without the high costs and complexities of custom development.

The Powering Up programme provided the ideal environment for these groups to pursue a 'hybrid' approach, leveraging no-code tools alongside expert support to create effective solutions. This hybrid approach was made possible through several key elements of the programme's support offer:

- **Unrestricted grant:** The £8k grant allowed leadership teams to carve out the necessary time and space to engage deeply with the digital challenge, considering it within the broader context of their operating environment.

- **Access to an independent adviser:** The Community Business Connector acted as an 'honest broker,' helping the groups identify and articulate their challenges which could in turn lead the way to determining the best solutions. Importantly, the Connector did not have a commercial interest in the outcome, which often contrasts with common approaches to digital development, where organisations engage agencies at the discovery stage and can be influenced by commercial motivation of the provider rather than their specific needs of the client.

- **Technical support budget:** This dedicated £9k budget provided a clear, bounded resource to engage technical specialists for delivering the digital work, ensuring that the groups had the professional assistance they needed to design an effective solution, even in light of the fundamentals of the 'no-code' platform that often required limited technical capability once implemented effectively.

- **Professional development budget:** The additional £3k budget supported the 'capacity building' aspect of working with no-code tools and specialist providers. It ensured that group members were upskilled and capable of maintaining and adapting the digital tools over the long term, reducing dependency on external developers.

Powering Up Case Studies – bringing hybrid digital development to life

Overview

This section focuses on three case studies of hybrid digital development examples that took place through the Powering Up Programme, to hopefully bring the model to life. The case studies span three different 'digital applications' to demonstrate the breadth of the model.

Website Development: How Veg Box People used Webflow with the provider Purple Banana to create a new 'shop window' marketing website

Background

Veg Box People is part of the family of enterprises incubated and supported by the Kindling Trust in Greater Manchester. It grew from deep concerns about the impact of the current food industry on climate change and biodiversity, on our high streets, on small-scale farmers, and on the health of our communities.

They launched their organic box scheme in the summer of 2015, in partnership with the University of Manchester, and their support has grown across the city. Veg Box People connects Greater Manchester residents with some of the freshest, most local and organic produce around.

Delivering to collection points (shops and community spaces across Manchester) rather than individual homes keeps the scheme really affordable (meaning more money goes back to the farmers and growers, and customers save money too), it saves on transport, and it means that customers don't have to wait in for deliver

The Digital Challenge

Veg Box People had a website that was originally created by a volunteer in Drupal with backend customer registration and ordering systems managed through CiviCRM. This system was overly cumbersome and difficult to maintain so the organisation identified a third party platform - Ooooby to manage the e-commerce and backend systems i.e.:

- Online store

- Product management

- Logistics management

- Customer management

- Financial management

Ooooby did offer some 'front-end / marketing' functionality i.e. ability to create a homepage and associated pages. However Ooooby's platform constraints limited the design and structure.

On this basis, through the discovery process of the Powering Up programme, it was recognised there was a clear need to develop a new 'shop window / marketing' site that could better reflect their brand identity and could offer some additional content options to explain who they are and what they do - but that integrates seamlessly with the Ooooby platform for the e-commerce functionality and associated back-office systems.

Key to the project was the need to ensure an affordable annual / monthly costs for hosting and maintenance. It was recognised that a no-code platform was the optimum model that provided a good balance of customisation and ease of use.

The Brief

Based on this challenge, Veg Box worked with their CBC to develop a brief that set out the key project aims:

- Create a 'shop window' / marketing website that integrates effectively with their Ooooby instance.

- Reflect their brand identity, tell the story and showcase the work they do

- Delivered so that the team can embed it into their ways of working and train them so they can update and amend it as they need to

Recognising the relational and partnership element of the work, the CBC and Veg Box people identified the values and experience that was required from the technical partner, beyond pure 'technical ability':

- **Partner values:**

  - Simplification and reduction of complexity

  - Collaboration and user engagement

  - Delivering value for money

  - Building capability within the organisation as part of the project

  - Communicate in plain English and in understandable terms.

- **Partner experience:**

  - No-code website development

  - Supporting community businesses and charities working at a community level

  - Problem solving in ways that deliver value for money.

The Procurement Process

The design of the programme meant that the CBC could support Veg Box People in identifying an aligned partner to work with based on their 'honest broker' role. The brief was shared with a number of potential providers to ensure the procurement process was manageable but that Veg Box People could receive multiple responses to be able to make a more informed decision. The procurement process also involved conversations with a shortlist of providers, again to reinforce the relational aspect of the work.

Furthermore, the Tech Support Budget and Professional Development Budget provided by the Powering up programme put clear boundaries on the scale and scope of the work to ensure all parties were aligned as to what was being delivered on a 'fixed price' basis. Again this reduced the uncertainty and cost-overruns that can often characterise tech projects.

Based on this process, Veg Box People selected Purple Banana as their preferred provider. Central to their decision was the emphasis Purple Banana placed on not only supporting organisations to create bold and compelling sites but more importantly empowering teams to manage and evolve their site within their organisation. As they set out themselves:

"Your site is your own, and we want you to own the keys, not just rent them. We do this by using and co-producing in tech stacks that you can access and learn, ensuring you know what's going on at every step (and why) and ultimately being there when you have questions whilst empowering you to take ownership."

Central to this was the proposed use of the **Webflow** platform as the 'no-code' platform that would underpin the website. Again Purple Banana were able to articulate the value of the tool they worked with in a considered and aligned approach. This can be seen with this slide they provided in their response:

The Outcome

As they set out in the brief, Purple Banana worked closely with the Veg Box people team to build out their website using the Webflow no-code platform. Purple Banana emphasised that the unrestricted grant provided by the programme covered Veg Box People's time to engage with the project, which was one of the most crucial forms of support, allowing them to be actively involved in the digital transition.

Both parties flagged the importance of defining the problem clearly before diving into solutions. This ensured that the digital tools being implemented were well-matched to Veg Box People's actual needs, rather than just adopting technology for technology's sake.

Ultimately Purple Banana delivered a website that met all requirements set out in the brief. The design, functionality and integration with their e-commerce system was completed successfully and the Veg Box People team were highly satisfied with the solution.

Furthermore, central to the work was Purple Banana's aim to build digital skills within Veg Box People's team, providing regular check-ins to assess progress. The project highlighted the need for upskilling beyond mere technical handover, as well as the challenge of maintaining continuity in the face of staff turnover. This involved a dedicated training element to the team at Veg Box People, as well as providing them with the tools and resources they needed to maintain the site themselves. Throughout the project, Purple Banana aimed to create an environment of digital empowerment, moving away from ongoing transactional maintenance relationships.

Ultimately this environment of digital empowerment was realised through the application of an aligned and high quality no-code platform in Webflow, the skills, culture and approach of the development partner and the ability for the leadership team at Veg Box People to engage with the process.
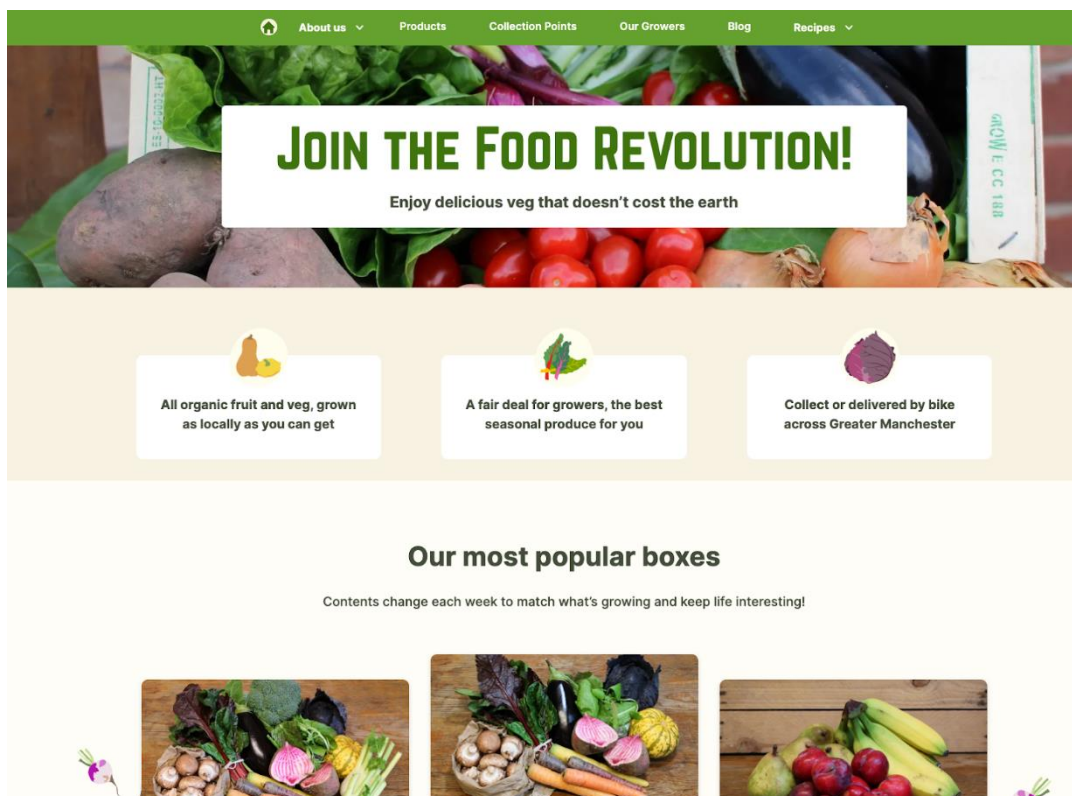
[Screenshot of the new Veg Box People homepage powered by Webflow, designed by Purple Banana]

Digital automation: How TACO! used Airtable with SaaSy Software to transform their community radio operations

Background

Thamesmead Arts and Culture Office (TACO!) is an artist-led space for research, production, and exchange located in Thamesmead, South East London. TACO! is engaged with its local context and centres the work and role of artists in all the work it undertakes, supporting a dialogue between artists, audiences, community and place.

TACO! runs and manages a number of projects in the Thamesmead community. For a number of years, it has managed RTM.FM - a community radio station providing a platform for local people, artists, musicians, producers from across South East London to broadcast. As well as running their station they also run training workshops in audio production and broadcasting. The organisation joined the Powering Up programme at the same time as moving to a new public-facing space. Working in a changing operating environment, it recognised the need to adjust and improve some of its core processes.

The Digital Challenge

Following the initial diagnostic, it was clear that TACO! had relatively strong levels of digital capability in the organisation based on the skills and confidence of key members of staff. Yet while there was strong digital competency amongst some of the staff team, the day-to-day management of the radio station was heavily dependent on volunteers where there was greater variance in digital capability.

Crucially TACO! used Craft as their CMS (content management system) for their predominantly online radio station. Around 20 volunteers were currently processing content, which is emailed in from content producers. There was inconsistency in the information received, and a lot of manual duplication of data for the volunteers.

The team had begun to streamline processes connected to the management of RTM.FM but recognised they needed more technical support to improve the processes to ensure:

- More central visibility

- Efficiency

- Time savings

Crucially this would free up staff time on the day-to-day oversight of the station so they could focus on other key activities that TACO! was delivering.

The Brief

Like with VegBox People, the CBC worked with TACO! to develop a brief that clearly articulated the project needs which at their core comprised:

- Be a simple solution for the volunteer presenters and producers to use

- Follow and simplify the current processes used at the station

- Reduce the number of emails related to publishing shows

- Improve consistency across the detail pages for shows

Again beyond this, the brief set out the partner values and experience to ensure a meaningful and constructive relationship with a technical partner.

- Partner values:

  o Simplification and reduction of complexity

  o Collaboration and user engagement

  o Delivering value for money

  o Building capability within the organisation as part of the project

  o Communicate in understandable terms

- Partner experience:

  o Connecting data with simplicity at the fore

  o Supporting community businesses and charities working at a community level

- o   Problem solving in ways that deliver value for money

The Procurement Process

The procurement process for this work was different to the approach taken with Veg Box People in that it was focusing on a relatively niche area. As a result, identifying a suitable partner was reliant on the CBC's networks within the digital sector. Based on their experience, the CBC led the procurement process by having informal conversations with a pool of potentially suitable providers and identified SaaSy Software as a good fit for the organisation.

SaaSy Software was founded by Andreea Daly, who describes herself as someone who 'lives and breathes' software. Her experience of helping social businesses buy, build and integrate the right software for their needs, was the ideal input TACO! needed.

The CBC convened an initial conversation between SaaSy Software and TACO! And it was through this experience, that it became clear a valuable partnership would be forged to deliver the work.

SaaSy Software finalised the scope of work which hinged on a further 'Discovery' phase where it was recognised that a more detailed process mapping exercise would be necessary to document the current processes and set out what the ideal process would look like. From there, Andreea could identify the optimum automation options for moving captured data to the Craft CMS which powers their internet radio station.

Following this Discovery Phase, she would then move into an 'Implementation' phase - building out the solution but with a strong focus on testing, training and capability building.

The Outcomes

Overall, the partnership between TACO! and SaaSy Software has resulted in transformative outcomes for the management and operation of RTM.FM, TACO!'s community radio station. The implementation of a hybrid digital solution has addressed core challenges, streamlined processes, and laid the foundation for sustainable growth and efficiency in TACO!'s operations.

The underlying solution used a key 'hybrid' platform in **Airtable**. Airtable serves as a versatile and accessible platform that combines the simplicity of a no-code tool with the potential for deeper customization through integrations and coding. It acts as the central "hub" where data is collected, organised, and managed, enabling teams to streamline workflows while maintaining user-friendly interfaces.

The integration of Airtable as the core platform, paired with custom coding to connect it to the Craft CMS that underpins the RTM.FM website, has significantly reduced the manual data handling

previously required by volunteers. This has minimised duplication of effort and inconsistencies in the content submission process, enabling a smoother workflow for uploading and publishing shows.

Underpinning the system is a number of integrations and automations that the Airtable platform can facilitate - specific processes that move data between systems based on specific 'triggers' or 'events'. This has reduced the reliance on a large pool of volunteers, shifting the organisation's focus to fewer, better-trained volunteers who can work more effectively within the streamlined system. Additional training has been provided to ensure volunteers are confident in using the new tools, improving their overall experience and productivity.

By automating repetitive tasks and improving data visibility, TACO! staff can now dedicate more time to strategic and creative activities, such as developing new projects and engaging with the Thamesmead community. This shift has had a meaningful impact on the organisation's ability to deliver on its mission.

The hybrid solution has been designed with flexibility in mind, ensuring TACO! can adapt and grow with its evolving needs. Discussions are already underway to explore further automation of the Craft CMS to eliminate remaining manual steps, positioning TACO! for long-term efficiency gains.

SaaSy Software's approach placed a strong emphasis on capability building. The detailed process mapping, comprehensive training sessions, and creation of step-by-step guides have empowered TACO! to independently manage and expand the system, reducing future dependency on external technical support.

Both TACO! and SaaSy Software stressed the importance of a detailed Discovery Phase in uncovering the complexities of the existing workflows. This phase ensured the solution was tailored to TACO!'s specific needs and avoided implementing generic tools that would not address their unique challenges.

The collaboration also highlighted the critical role of having a knowledgeable consultant who could bridge technical and non-technical perspectives. This "connector" role not only ensured a successful implementation but also fostered a deeper understanding of digital tools within the organisation.

CRM development: How EMS used Microsoft PowerApps with JMK & Co. to build the foundations of a customised CRM system

Background

Environmental and Management Solutions (EMS) Ltd, an incorporated charity operational since November 2009, addresses food and fuel poverty across Yorkshire and Lincolnshire through collaborative partnerships with residents, community groups, and businesses. Its initiatives include:

- **Growing:** Establishing community allotments, edible gardens, and growing spaces.

- **Energy:** Providing energy-saving equipment, support, and advice to help residents reduce fuel costs.

- **Food:** Tackling food poverty by offering affordable surplus food through Hull Community Shop, running "Cooking on a Budget" sessions, and delivering nutritious ready meals via the Freedom Food Project to community fridges in Hull.

- **Nature**: Promoting biodiversity through tree planting, education in schools, and building bird, bat, and insect habitats with communities.

- **Collaboration & Volunteers:** Partnering with organisations and empowering diverse volunteers through training and hands-on projects that build confidence, improve health, and enhance well-being.

EMS Ltd continues to drive impactful, community-led solutions to address pressing social and environmental challenges.

The Digital Challenge

Through the diagnostic phase of the Powering Up, it was recognised that EMS had some key digital components in place. In particular, they had good foundational spreadsheets used to manage the donations, requests, and the support they offer in their community.

However these spreadsheets, although workable, were becoming increasingly overburdening as the need for the charity's support increases. They were in the process of transitioning away from an inhouse server to M365 and the cloud which presented the opportunity to convert these spreadsheets into the foundations of a CRM using **PowerApps** - an example of the 'hybrid' platform within the Microsoft ecosystem.

Like the other hybrid tools highlighted, PowerApps seeks to combine the simplicity of no-code/low-code tools with the power of integration across Microsoft services like SharePoint, Teams, and Excel - enabling organisations to create custom applications, streamline processes, and scale solutions tailored to their needs.

The Brief

Central to the brief was the recognition that the technical support budget from Powering Up, that EMS were able to utilise for the project, was less than what is typically seen for standard custom CRM builds which can often run to tens of thousands. On this basis, the CBC that worked with the EMS emphasised the need to take a lean approach - focusing on core data sets that will bring significant positive impact.

Furthermore, in line with the hybrid approach explored here - it was emphasised that the supplier would actively support EMS to take ownership of their system, understand how it connects, and how to connect new data sets when needed.

The Procurement Process

Similar to the experience with TACO!, the CBC found it difficult to find an external provider that was able to play the role of 'aligned partner' within a limited budget, through an open tendering process. Again the knowledge of the sector was key to the procurement approach in which JMK were approached as a suitable partner with the right mix of technical expertise and commitment to a 'hybrid approach' of capacity building in the organisation.

JMK & Co, founded by Janinah McKenzie in February 2022, is a consultancy specialising in supporting positive impact organisations through no-code solutions. Her most recent work was with a Birmingham-based community charity on a comparable project which highlighted her capability to deliver impactful solutions tailored to EMS's needs.

In particular recognising that CRM systems for community organisations often need to focus less on typical features such as pipelines and sales but rather would support groups on:

- Improving their impact measurement process

- Improving their reporting processes

- Improving the efficiency and quality of their operational processes through use of automations

The Outcomes

The EMS case study illustrates the potential of implementing a tailored digital solution using Microsoft PowerApps, while also highlighting important challenges and learnings. Through the collaboration with JMK & Co, EMS transitioned from relying on multiple Excel spreadsheets to a centralised system that streamlined key data management processes. This new solution allowed EMS to efficiently track food bank users, donations, and food parcel deliveries, reducing duplication and improving real-time visibility of their operations.

The project also included the creation of custom dashboards to enhance EMS's reporting capabilities. These dashboards simplified the process of preparing for board meetings, replacing manual chart creation with automated visual displays of key metrics. This improvement saved time and enabled clearer communication with stakeholders. By leveraging Microsoft PowerApps, EMS benefited from a tool within their existing ecosystem, making the transition easier for staff familiar with Microsoft products.

However, there were some challenges during the implementation phase. The project's reliance on the CEO as the primary driver of adoption created a bottleneck when personal circumstances delayed their ability to focus on the system. This underscored the need for involving additional team members in training and planning to ensure continuity and reduce reliance on a single individual. While PowerApps aligned with EMS's familiarity with Microsoft, its limited documentation and support at the time created some obstacles during development, requiring additional effort from the provider to overcome these gaps.

Recommendations for community businesses adopting a hybrid approach

This guide has highlighted the value of a hybrid approach to digital development, combining no-code tools with expert guidance to create sustainable, impactful solutions for community businesses. Based on the experience of groups participating in the Powering Up programme, we have pulled together some recommendations for organisations adopting a similar approach:

- **Choose the right development approach** Evaluate whether your needs are best addressed through an off-the-shelf solution, custom code, or through no-code tools.

- **Off-the-shelf tools** - Cost-effective and quick to implement but may lack flexibility for unique requirements.

- **Custom code** - Offers maximum customisation but demands significant resources for development and maintenance**.**

- **No-code tools** - Potentially strikes a useful balance for community businesses, enabling customisation without requiring advanced technical skills.

When opting for no-code, ensure the tool meets many of the key characteristics that lend themselves to hybrid development and have been set out already - including easy-to-use interfaces, strong integration capabilities, scalability for future needs, and the ability to exit with minimal friction.

1. **Engage a trusted advisor** - Akin to the Community Business Connector role on Powering Up, Involve an independent advisor if possible to guide the process, ideally from the outset to ensure the solution is tailored to your needs. This role is invaluable in bridging gaps between technical and non-technical perspectives, fostering trust, and maintaining focus on organisational goals rather than external agendas.

2. **Start with discovery** - Similar to the Powering Up programme design - allocate time for a thorough diagnostic process to understand your organisation's needs, existing capabilities, and potential barriers. Clearly define your digital challenge in its organisational context to align technology decisions with strategic goals.

3. **Leverage familiar ecosystems** - Select platforms that align with your team's existing skills and workflows. Familiar ecosystems, such as Microsoft or Google, can lower the learning curve and improve adoption rate. They're increasingly offering no-code development environments for more custom applications such as PowerApps.

4. **Focus on simplicity** - Prioritise solutions that simplify processes and reduce manual effort. The tools and systems adopted should be intuitive, enabling both staff and volunteers to confidently engage with them.

5. **Invest in capacity building** - Digital development is not just about the tools but also the people who will use them. Allocate resources for training, documentation, and skills development to empower your team to maintain and adapt the solution over time.

6. **Build in leadership time -** Powering Up provided the conditions for community businesses leaders to carve out time and space to engage in the project. This is crucial to ensure any external adviser brought in to develop a digital system is being suitably directed and the solution is effectively adopted within the organisation.

7. **Plan for continuity** - Avoid over-reliance on a single staff member to lead implementation. Engage multiple team members in the development and training processes to ensure knowledge is distributed and the system is resilient to staffing changes.

8. **Build for flexibility** - Opt for solutions that can grow with your organisation. While no-code platforms can provide scalability and adaptability, assess potential limitations as your needs evolve. Hybrid solutions seek to ensure flexibility by working with robust tools and technical partners that have designed them effectively.

9. **Evaluate and iterate** - Success in digital development extends beyond implementation. Regularly review and evaluate the system's performance, collecting feedback from users to refine and adapt your approach.

Further reading

Beyond this guide, there are a number of resources which provide more information and insight for community and social enterprises considering digital tools:

- [Shared Digital Guides](#) - a library of step-by-step guides showcasing non-profits using digital tools - many of which focus on no-code solutions.

- [Tools for Good](#) - tools, case studies, and resources for non-profits ready to innovate with no-code.

- [100school](#) - learning resources for a series of no-code and complementary techniques for developing and using digital tools.

Power to Change
The Clarence Centre
6 St George's Circus
London SE1 6FE

020 3857 7270

info@powertochange.org.uk
powertochange.org.uk
X: @powertochange_
Bluesky: @powertochange.org.uk

Registered charity no. 1159982

We back community business from the ground up. We turn bold ideas into action so communities have the power to change what matters to them.

We know community business works to build stronger communities and better places to live. We've seen people create resilient and prosperous local economies when power is in community hands. We also know the barriers that stand in the way of their success.

We're using our experience to bring partners together to do, test and learn what works. We're shaping the conditions for community business to thrive