ThirdStory

Learning from the Horizon

Case studies of tech opportunity in the social sector

May 2025

Prepared by ThirdStory

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Introduction

Across the globe, social service systems are grappling with rising demand, limited resources, and increasingly complex needs. In response, a wave of technological innovation is reshaping how support is delivered, accessed, and experienced. From AI-driven decision tools to peer-powered platforms and data ecosystems, these technologies are not only modernising service delivery - they're redefining what's possible.

This horizon scan explores 34 cutting-edge examples from around the world where technology is being used to create smarter, fairer, and more human-centred social services. It highlights innovations that break down barriers to access, empower people with control over their data, extend the reach of frontline workers, and unlock system-level insights. Each case study is grounded in practical application and points to real-world impact - offering a glimpse into the future of service design and delivery.

While the technologies vary - from mobile apps and chatbots to big data and machine learning - the common thread is their potential to improve outcomes for those who need support most. This horizon scan is intended to inspire policymakers, service providers, designers, and funders to think boldly about the role of technology in building a more inclusive and responsive social service system.

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What might these innovations teach us

In cash-strapped, over-regulated systems where even basic IT is hard to manage, this Innovation can feel out of reach, and perhaps low priority when we believe that its people who make the difference. In our pursuit of greater impact, the question becomes, what can we learn from these innovations? And what might they help us achieve. We think they tell us more than just a story about technology.

A new kind of relationship:

The most impactful case studies here don't start with technology. They start with listening, asking people what's needed and what's missing. Technology's ability to remove the middleman and connect consumers directly often provides the start of a relationship where power is more balanced, with more transparency and less gatekeeping. There's no guarantee of that, as there are many technology implementations that, with the wrong mindset, could lead to more control and less agency.

An opportunity to look seriously at systems:

Whilst many of these innovations are single organisation ventures, many seek to bring together a wider system of support, engaging not just formal service providers, but peers and communities. They are opportunities to convene people broadly around common challenges and solve system problems, not just service ones.

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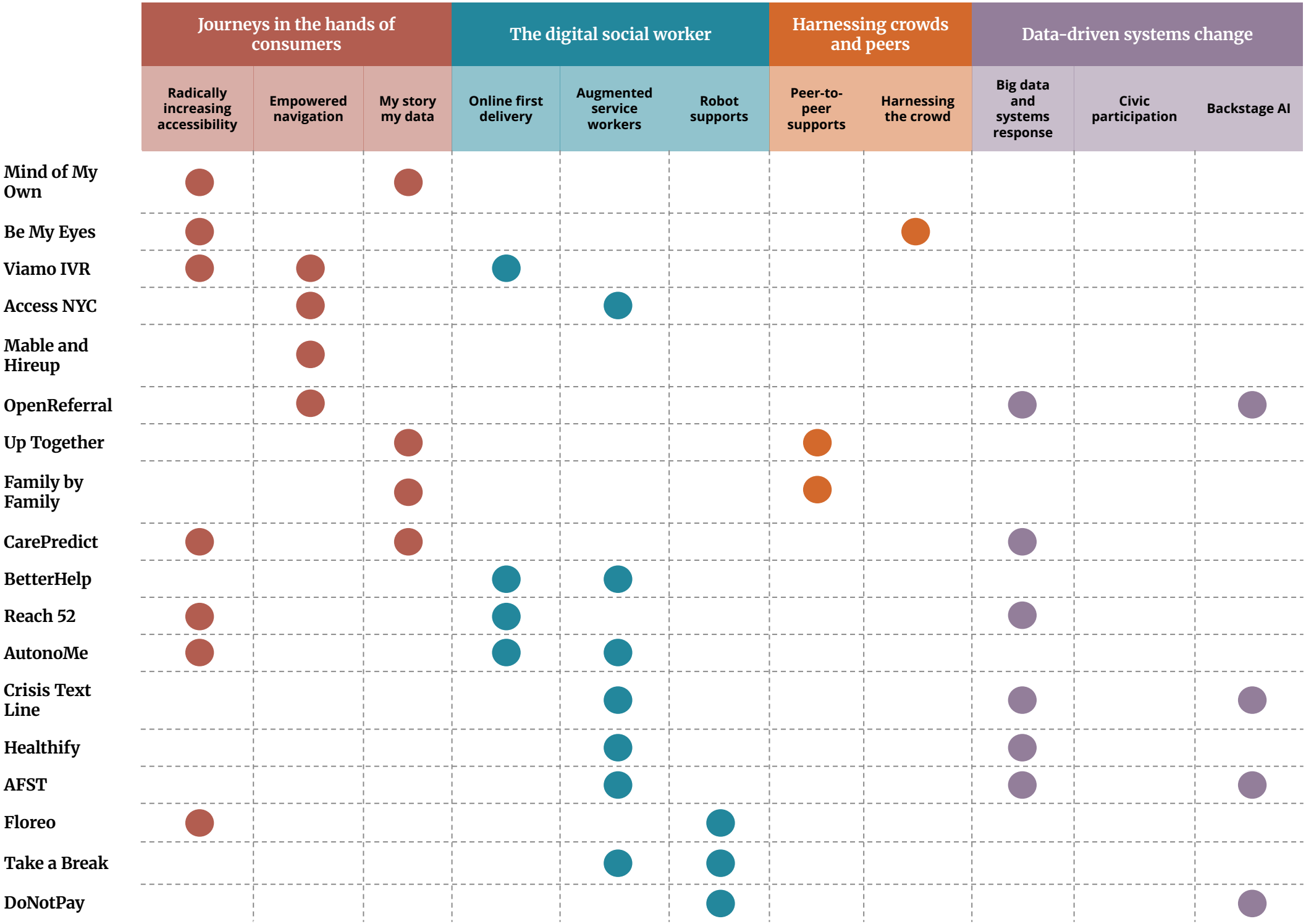
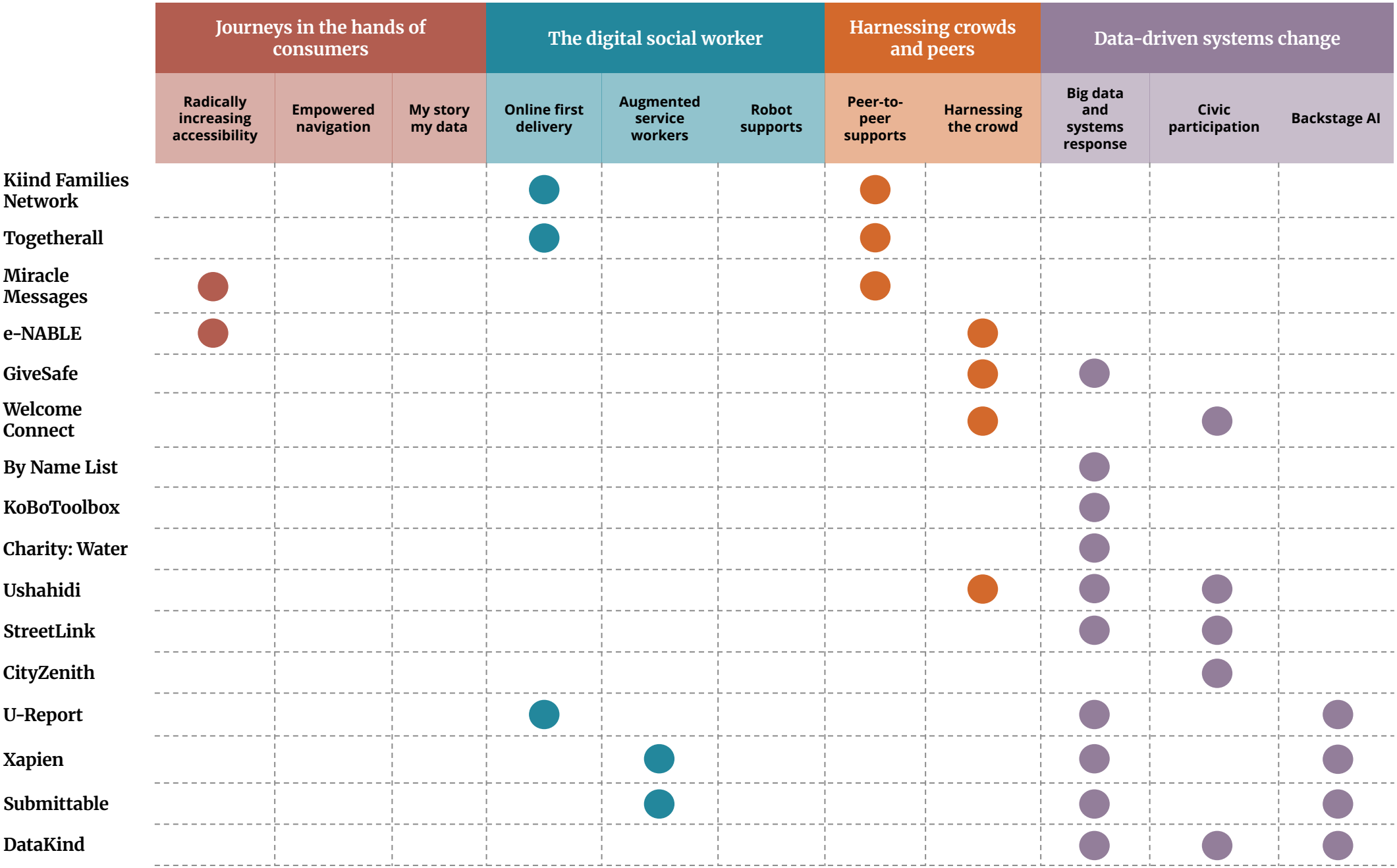
A chance to rethink what a service is (or could be):

A social service does not have to be centred on face to face, person to person intervention. These case studies allow us to reimage services. This creates a challenge for procurement and for philanthropic giving. We often treat technology builds like infrastructure, paid for once, then complete. These examples are services, not products, and need to be funded as such, with ongoing ongoing development, people to monitor and maintain usage, and connect these products to the rest of the system. That would give the sector an opportunity to build a digital best practice.

A moment to lead our own disruption:

We are already seeing people using Chatbots in place of formal counselling. The social services sector is not beyond technology driven disruption. However, the profit motive of large scale technology companies is unlikely to create the kind of ethical environment for non-extractive social support. The best technology is said to succeed because it pairs subject matter experts; people who deeply know practice, systems, and contexts, with technologists. The not for profit and public sectors bring those experts. This disruption requires their involvement.


Journeys in the hands of consumers
The digital social worker
Harnessing crowds and peers
Data-driven systems change
Radically increasing accessibility
Empowered navigation
My story my data
Online first delivery
Augmented service workers
Robot supports
Peer-to-peer supports
Harnessing the crowd
Big data and systems response
Civic participation
Backstage AI
Mind of My Own
Be My Eyes
Viamo IVR
Access NYC
Mable and Hireup
OpenReferral
Up Together
Family by Family
CarePredict
BetterHelp
Reach 52
AutonoMe
Crisis Text Line
Healthify
AFST
Floreo
Take a Break
DoNotPay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GiveSafe
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By Name List
KoBoToolbox
Charity: Water
Ushahidi
StreetLink
CityZenith
U-Report
Xapien
Submittable
DataKind

Theme 1: **Journeys in the hands of consumers**

Technology in social services is shifting power to the people who use it - giving them greater control over how they access and experience support. These innovations prioritise dignity, autonomy, and flexibility, enabling individuals to navigate services on their own terms. It's a move from provider-led systems to user-driven journeys, giving people the digital capacity to open physical doors.

We have further divided this into 3 sub-themes:

Radically increasing accessibility: *By overcoming stigma and exclusion, these digital innovations help us be more personalised.*

Empowered navigation: *These digital tools can act like digital guides, helping people find, compare, and choose the right support - quickly and confidently.*

My story my data: *Here, users don't just give data - they own it. These technologies ensure that people can see, control, and benefit from their own information in a way that respects privacy and builds trust.*

Radically increasing accessibility

Follow this icon throughout the horizon scan to find case studies related to this theme.

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Mind of My Own, United Kingdom

An app that helps children and young people in care participate fully in decisions about their lives.

Mind Of My Own is a digital app co-designed with care-experienced young people to help them express their feelings, report concerns, and communicate with professionals in ways that feel safe and empowering.

Built for use in child protection and care settings, the app guides users through structured prompts that simplify complex emotions and situations, using accessible language, visual supports, and culturally inclusive design.

For young people who may have faced trauma, disability, or institutional silencing, this tool acts as a communication equaliser - ensuring they can be heard even if they struggle with traditional casework conversations.

The “Express” version tailors the experience even further for neurodivergent or learning-disabled children, using icons and simplified pathways to support non-verbal communication.

More than a digital feedback form, Mind Of My Own is reshaping how care systems listen - by embedding voice, choice, and participation into the process from the ground up.

Click here to visit the website!

System-wide implementation that doesn't require system change

It integrates into existing workflows and reporting structures, making it easier for services to adopt youth-led practice without a full system overhaul.

Challenging adult-centric systems

Mind Of My Own inverts the usual dynamic of adults speaking for young people, enabling kids to share views without filtering or translation.

Redefining communication as an act of agency

Rather than viewing communication challenges as deficits, the app positions expression as a right, offering multiple modes to meet young people where they are.

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Be My Eyes, Denmark

A crowd-powered app that connects blind and low-vision users with sighted volunteers via live video for instant, everyday visual support.

Be My Eyes is a mobile app that lets blind and low-vision users tap into a vast global network of volunteers for instant visual support through live video calls.

Whether checking expiry dates, navigating unfamiliar streets, or matching clothes, users can connect with someone who sees what their camera sees - right when they need it.

The brilliance of the innovation lies not just in the tech, but in the simplicity of its human connection model: rather than building specialised equipment, Be My Eyes turns everyday smartphones and ordinary people into assistive infrastructure.

It leverages crowd volume to ensure someone is always available (7 million volunteers strong) while maintaining intimacy and immediacy for the user.

It's accessibility at scale, not by replicating professional services, but by reimagining who can provide support, and how.

Reframing 'help' as connection, not charity

Be My Eyes doesn't medicalise or institutionalise support - it's peer-to-peer, low-friction, and deeply humanising.

Solves for spontaneity, not just access

Most accessibility solutions are scheduled or conditional. This app meets everyday, unplanned needs that traditional services can't reach.

Turns ubiquity into utility

The innovation isn't in new hardware - it's in rethinking what existing tools (like a smartphone and video call) can do in the hands of millions.

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Viamo IVR, Global

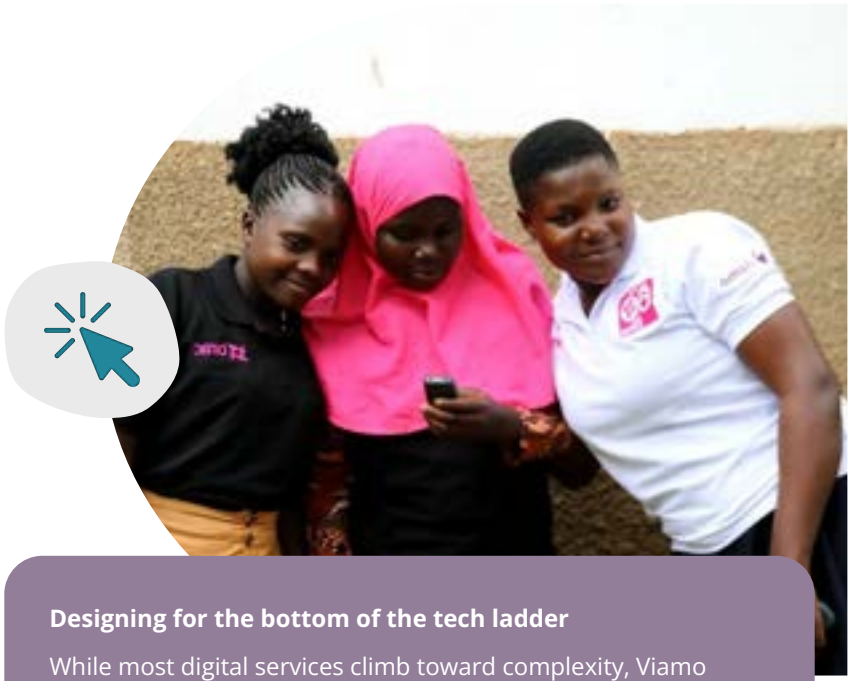
A voice-based platform that delivers health, safety, and development information to people in low-resource settings.

Viamo's Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system delivers vital health, safety, and social development information through a simple phone call - no literacy, data, or smartphone required.

Designed for rural, low-literacy, and low-income communities, users dial a number and follow prompts in their local language to access life-saving information or report issues.

What sets Viamo apart is its understanding that accessibility isn't just a technical problem - it's cultural, linguistic, and infrastructural. By using voice instead of text, and basic GSM signals instead of apps or internet, Viamo meets users on the devices they already own, in languages they already speak.

It's not only a tool for access, but for equity - offering frontline support where institutional reach is limited or non-existent.



Designing for the bottom of the tech ladder

While most digital services climb toward complexity, Viamo innovates in the opposite direction - ensuring inclusion by removing tech requirements.

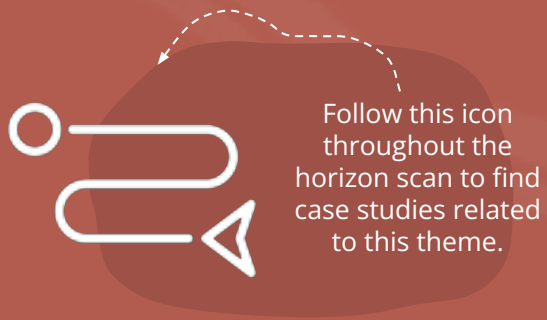
Using voice to restore autonomy

Voice menus give people the ability to self-navigate critical services without relying on intermediaries, building confidence alongside access.

Democratising broadcast power

By partnering with local NGOs and governments, Viamo enables even small communities to share trusted, hyper-relevant information at national scale.

Empowered navigation



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Access NYC, USA

Digital one stop shop that allows New Yorkers to discover, self assess and apply for multiple benefits and low income payments.

ACCESS NYC is a sleek, user-centred web platform that demystifies access to public benefits for New York City residents.

By entering a few simple details, users receive personalised eligibility results for over 30 programs - including housing, food assistance, healthcare, and childcare - and can apply or learn how to apply directly through the site.

It's available in 11 languages and intentionally designed for mobile use, recognising that many users rely solely on smartphones for internet access.

But the real innovation lies in its philosophy: ACCESS NYC doesn't just display information - it guides users through a system that's typically fragmented, bureaucratic, and overwhelming. By creating a unified entry point, it turns social services from a maze into a map. It acknowledges that when people are in crisis, they need clarity, speed, and autonomy - not jargon and paperwork.

ACCESS NYC exemplifies what's possible when government embraces user-centred tech to empower, rather than burden, those seeking support.

Built for lived complexity, not ideal users

ACCESS NYC accounts for multi-program needs, multiple household types, and multilingual access - reflecting real users, not policy abstractions.

Not just a tool, but a transformation in service logic

It shifts the burden of navigating complexity from the individual to the system - quietly but powerfully.

Open-source, scalable, and shareable

NYC made its platform code public, enabling other cities to replicate or adapt the model rather than start from scratch.

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Mable and Hireup, Australia

Online marketplaces that connect people with disability directly to independent support workers - letting users choose who helps them, how, and when.

Mable and Hireup are digital platforms revolutionising how people with disability find and manage support workers.

Unlike traditional providers, they function as person-led marketplaces - allowing users to browse profiles, compare prices, message workers directly, and book care that suits their preferences, culture, and lifestyle. This flips the script on care delivery: instead of agencies allocating support, users become agents of their own support journeys.

Mable caters to people wanting independent workers, while Hireup employs its workers directly, offering insurance and admin support.

Both models centre the user's right to navigate services on their own terms. In systems often marked by paternalism and rigidity, these platforms inject autonomy, choice, and flexibility - without compromising safety or accountability.

They're not just tech upgrades,they're a cultural shift in how support is delivered and experienced.

Disrupting the gatekeeper model

Users no longer rely on intermediaries or agencies to make choices for them - platforms put the steering wheel in their hands.

Tech-enabled relationships

Users and workers build longer-term, personal connections - platforms provide the infrastructure, but people shape the care.

Platform accountability meets user control

Both sites embed safeguards (e.g. police checks, reviews) while still enabling direct, user-driven matching and communication.

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OpenReferral, Global

Open data standards are helping communities connect people to the right services, faster and more fairly.

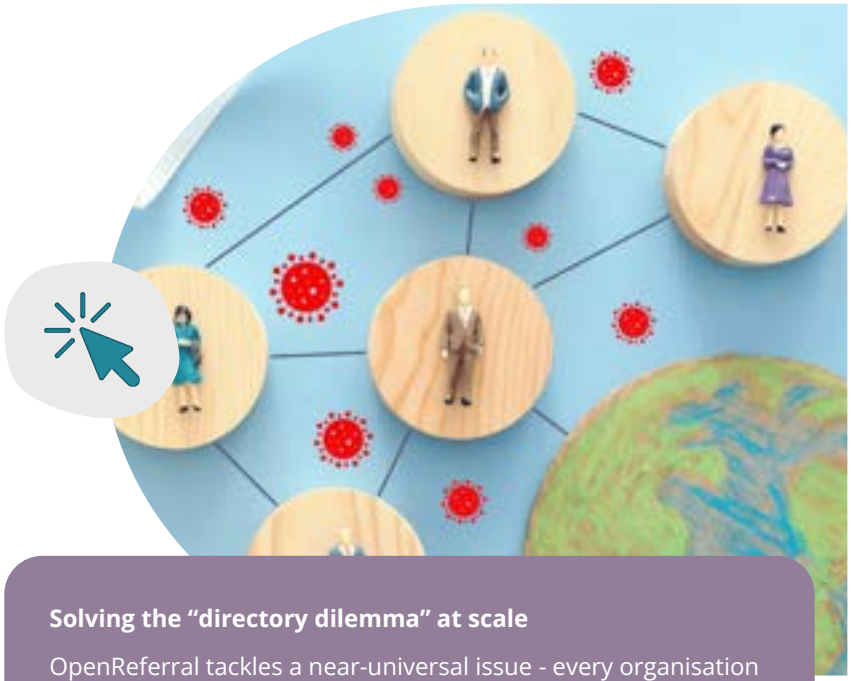
OpenReferral is a groundbreaking initiative that tackles one of the most overlooked challenges in social service access: fragmented and outdated service directories.

Instead of building a new platform, OpenReferral created a shared data standard that enables different systems - from helplines to local council databases - to share and update information about available services in real time.

It's a bit like building a universal language for community services - so that whether you're a chatbot, case manager, or search engine, you can pull from accurate, current information.

For users, this means more reliable and up-to-date referrals. For organisations, it reduces duplicated effort and wasted time maintaining siloed databases.

The innovation here is in the quiet infrastructure - the connective tissue that makes everything else work better. OpenReferral empowers navigation not by creating a new tool, but by making all tools smarter, more coordinated, and interoperable.



Solving the "directory dilemma" at scale

OpenReferral tackles a near-universal issue - every organisation needs service data, but few have time or resources to keep it updated alone.

A hidden fix with wide impact

By improving the back end, OpenReferral enhances user experience across multiple unrelated platforms without users ever knowing.

Enabling an ecosystem of choice

Standardised, sharable service data allows new tools to flourish, like community-built apps or AI assistants, without rebuilding the wheel.

My story, my data

Follow this icon throughout the horizon scan to find case studies related to this theme.

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UpTogether, USA

A platform that lets families share their own stories, track their own progress, and access funding on their own terms.

UpTogether flips the usual script of service delivery by trusting low-income families to know what they need and how best to get there.

The platform allows participants to set goals, share updates, and connect with peers, all while gaining direct access to cash transfers and resources without jumping through bureaucratic hoops.

Families control what data they share, when, and with whom, and are treated as trusted experts -not as passive recipients of help. Instead of extracting data to justify interventions, UpTogether gathers stories, milestones, and reflections that affirm people's strengths.

This isn't just a funding tool, it's a technology that turns lived experience into actionable insight, while preserving dignity and agency. By honouring people's narratives and returning control over data, UpTogether reshapes what accountability and impact measurement look like in community-driven services.

Data as empowerment, not surveillance

Users choose what to share, turning personal progress into something they own, not something used to police them.

Funding flows through trust, not red tape

Cash support is given without eligibility hoops or invasive checks - data is used for reflection, not control.

Reframing impact through narrative

The platform measures success through stories and self-defined goals, offering a more human-centred understanding of change.

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Family by Family, Australia

A peer-support program where families track and share progress together through a co-designed digital tool.

Family by Family pairs families who've "been there" with those going through tough times - and supports them to walk the journey together.

Their digital platform doesn't just record data; it helps both sides set goals, track their progress, and reflect on what's working in real time.

The tech was co-designed with families, so it's simple, strengths-based, and focused on what matters most to them. Rather than being used for monitoring or compliance, the tool is designed to prompt reflection, celebrate wins, and adapt support as things change.

Families own their stories - and they shape how their journeys are documented and shared. This transforms data from a tool of oversight into a tool of connection, insight, and growth.

Co-designed for lived use, not case management

Every feature of the tool reflects what families wanted to see, track, and celebrate - not what services thought they should.

Peer reflection, not professional reporting

Progress isn't just data - it's shared conversations, mutual check-ins, and peer recognition.

Dynamic, evolving stories

The tool enables flexible, non-linear journeys - honouring the real ways families change and grow.

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CarePredict, United States

A wearable and analytics platform that tracks daily patterns in aged care settings and gives families and residents control over what's shared.

CarePredict combines discreet wearable tech with sophisticated data analytics to detect subtle changes in an older adult's routine, like reduced mobility, skipped meals, or longer time in bed.

But unlike many monitoring systems, CarePredict gives residents and families meaningful control over how that data is shared and used.

The platform enables early intervention while respecting autonomy: alerts can be sent to family, care staff, or medical providers based on resident preferences.

It's more than a monitoring tool - it's a data-sharing model that supports dignity, transparency, and consent. By placing control with the people being monitored, CarePredict changes how aged care can be both proactive and person-centred.

Consent-driven care insights

Residents set the rules on what's shared, with whom, and when - empowering them to manage their own risk.

From routine to risk detection

The system turns everyday patterns into early warning signs, without needing constant check-ins or intrusive measures.

Data strengthens relationships, not just systems

Families feel more connected and confident, and staff can act sooner, with everyone on the same page.

Theme 2: **The digital social worker**

Across the social service sector, technology is transforming how support is delivered - making it faster, smarter, and more responsive. These innovations don't replace the human connection at the heart of good care; they enhance it. By taking on routine tasks, surfacing key insights, and enabling access from anywhere, digital tools are redefining what's possible in frontline service delivery.

We have further divided this into 3 sub-themes:

Online first delivery: *Designed for the digital age, these services take the frontline online, allowing scale and reaching people wherever they are.*

Augmented service workers: *These tools make frontline staff more powerful, not redundant - lifting the capacity and flexibility of teams.*

Robot supports: *Chatbots, virtual assistants, and automated systems can provide fast, scaleable, always-on help. What is their potential amongst a sea of options?*

Online first delivery

Follow this icon throughout the horizon scan to find case studies related to this theme.

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BetterHelp, Global

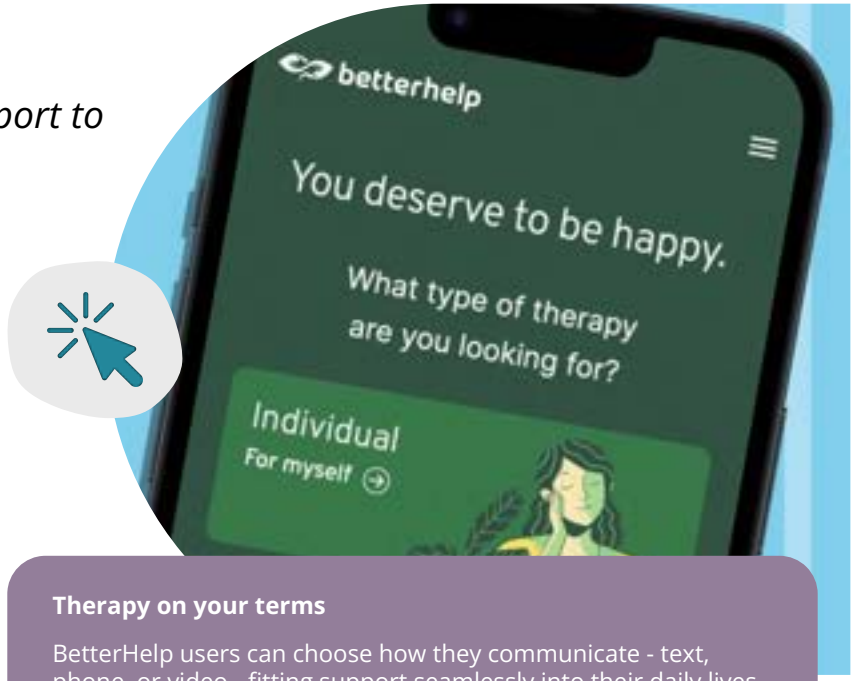
Online therapy is bringing accessible, on-demand mental health support to people around the world, whenever they need it.

BetterHelp is a global, digital-first mental health platform connecting users with licensed therapists through a fully online experience. Launched in 2013 and now serving over five million users, BetterHelp offers therapy via messaging, live chat, phone, or video - making it one of the most accessible and flexible mental health services available today.

New users complete a detailed intake questionnaire, which uses algorithms to match them with an appropriate therapist based on preferences, needs, and availability. The service is designed to reduce wait times, remove the stigma of in-person visits, and offer a more affordable alternative to traditional therapy.

With a network of over 35,000 professionals and availability in over 100 countries, BetterHelp is built to scale. Progress tracking tools like PHQ-9 and GAD-7 assessments are integrated into the platform, enabling therapists and users to reflect on changes over time. The platform has been shown to improve symptoms for a significant majority of users within 12 weeks.

BetterHelp is a clear example of how social services can live entirely online - removing barriers to care, matching users to the right support quickly, and delivering therapeutic outcomes at a global scale.



Therapy on your terms

BetterHelp users can choose how they communicate - text, phone, or video - fitting support seamlessly into their daily lives.

Smart matching, fast access

Users are algorithmically paired with therapists based on their unique needs, often within 24 hours - no waiting room required.

Global reach, personal care

With over 35,000 therapists across more than 100 countries, BetterHelp delivers tailored mental health support to anyone with a smartphone.

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Reach52, Global

A mobile-first health platform extending essential healthcare services to underserved rural communities across Asia and Africa.

Founded in 2016, Reach52 is a social enterprise committed to bridging the healthcare gap for the 52% of the global population lacking essential services.

Operating primarily in low- and middle-income countries, Reach52 leverages an "offline-first" digital health platform designed to function in areas with limited internet connectivity.

This platform enables community health workers, known as Reach52 Agents, to deliver a suite of services including health education, screenings, and access to affordable medications.

By partnering with local governments and private sector entities, Reach52 has trained over 14,000 agents and connected more than 600,000 individuals to its services.

The platform's data-driven approach allows for the collection and analysis of health information, facilitating targeted interventions and resource allocation.

Through its innovative model, Reach52 not only enhances healthcare accessibility but also fosters economic opportunities within the communities it serves

Offline-first technology

Ensures functionality in low-connectivity areas, allowing health workers to operate effectively without constant internet access.

Community empowerment

Trains local individuals as health agents, promoting employment and ensuring culturally sensitive service delivery.

Data-driven interventions

Collects and analyses health data to inform targeted healthcare strategies and improve outcomes

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AutonoMe, United Kingdom

Utilising digital technology to support autonomy and skill development among adults with learning disabilities.

AutonoMe is a UK-based digital platform helping people with learning disabilities gain the confidence and skills they need for independent living.

Delivered through smartphones and tablets, the service provides bite-sized video prompts that walk users through everyday tasks - from brushing their teeth to making dinner or managing a bank account. It's always available and designed to be used in real time, meaning users can access the support they need exactly when they need it.

The platform is co-designed with users and integrated into social care systems, allowing support workers and commissioners to monitor progress, adjust support plans, and track outcomes through a secure backend dashboard.

By combining personalised content with real-time usage data, AutonoMe bridges the gap between digital support and real-world impact. It reduces pressure on care services while giving users more agency over their day-to-day lives.

It's not just a digital tool - it's a practical, scalable model for delivering personalised, person-centred care that meets people where they are.

Support in your pocket

AutonoMe gives users 24/7 access to personalised video coaching, helping them build independence one task at a time.

Insight that drives better care

Real-time data dashboards show progress over time and help care teams personalise plans based on what users actually need.

Designed with, not for

Engages stakeholders in content creation, ensuring relevance and responsiveness to user requirements.

Augmented service workers

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Crisis Text Line, United States

A text-based mental health service that supports people in crisis and equips volunteers with real-time AI tools.

Crisis Text Line is a 24/7 mental health support service where people in crisis can connect with trained volunteers via text messaging. It's free, fast, and anonymous - an essential combination for those who may be isolated or reluctant to seek in-person help.

But what truly sets it apart is the intelligent technology that empowers its volunteer workforce behind the scenes. As each message comes in, an AI engine analyses the text in real time to assess risk levels and highlight priority cases.

Volunteers are supported with a dashboard that suggests possible responses, offers de-escalation strategies, and flags language linked to self-harm or suicide. This real-time augmentation means volunteers can focus on empathy, not guesswork, leading to quicker, more effective interventions.

Over time, the system also learns from millions of interactions, improving both its accuracy and its recommendations. And the anonymised data collected offers unique insight into mental health trends across regions, times of day, or age groups.

Crisis Text Line shows how AI and human support can combine to offer rapid, compassionate help at scale - especially in moments when every second counts.

AI-powered triage in real time

Natural language processing identifies dangerous patterns - like references to self-harm - within seconds, guiding the responder to act quickly.

Volunteers with superpowers

The platform acts like a co-pilot, suggesting prompts and strategies based on what's worked across millions of conversations.

Data that drives sector insights

Anonymised trends in mental health crises inform policy, prevention strategies, and even public health alerts.

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Healthify, United States

A platform that integrates social needs referrals into healthcare systems, and helps staff navigate the complexity.

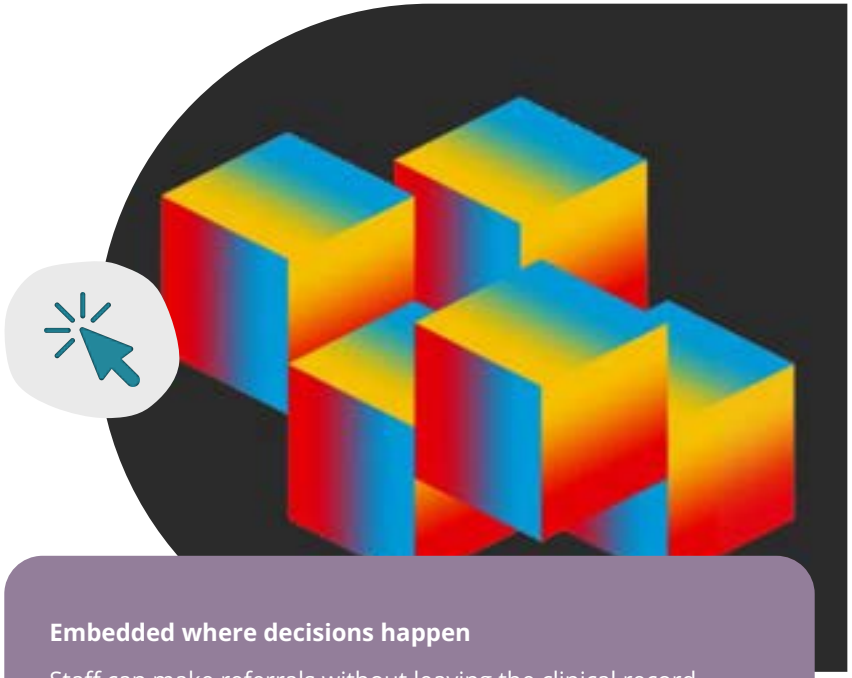
Healthify is designed to close the loop between healthcare and the social services that people actually need to stay well, like housing, food, and financial support. For frontline staff like caseworkers, nurses, or discharge planners, it offers an integrated digital platform that makes screening for social needs seamless, and referring people to local services frictionless.

Instead of relying on sticky notes, staff memory, or outdated pamphlets, Healthify gives workers access to a curated, continually updated database of community organisations, complete with service availability, eligibility criteria, and referral mechanisms.

It integrates directly into electronic medical records and care workflows, so workers don't need to switch platforms or duplicate work. Referrals can be tracked end-to-end - offering real accountability and closing the loop.

In many organisations, Healthify also helps leadership identify service gaps and shape partnerships based on real demand. For overburdened workers, it offers practical relief. For clients, it means timely, reliable access to wraparound support.

In essence, Healthify enhances frontline staff with the information, connectivity, and system-level visibility they need to support people more holistically.



Embedded where decisions happen

Staff can make referrals without leaving the clinical record, eliminating workflow disruptions.

From handoffs to accountability

Every referral is tracked, offering confirmation, follow-up, and measurable closure rates.

A living map of community support

Constant updates ensure information on local providers stays accurate, relevant, and easy to act on.

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Allegheny Family Screening Tool, United States

A predictive analytics tool that supports child protection decision-making with transparent, data-informed insights.

The Allegheny Family Screening Tool is one of the most closely watched examples of AI in social services - not because it replaces workers, but because of how it supports them.

Used by child protection screeners in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, the tool assesses the risk associated with incoming child maltreatment reports. It draws from a large but local dataset, including past interactions with social services, housing instability, criminal records, and more, to generate a risk score. That score doesn't make decisions but acts as a signal to help screeners prioritise cases for further investigation.

Crucially, the tool was designed with input from the community and includes strict protocols for oversight, transparency, and explainability. Workers retain full discretion and can override the tool's recommendations.

Over time, the system has led to more consistent decisions, reduced bias, and earlier interventions in high-risk cases. It's also sparked important conversations about the ethical use of data in human services.

By making risk assessment more systematic, but still centred on professional judgment, the Allegheny model shows how data science can serve as a safety net for frontline workers making life-altering decisions under pressure.

Decision support, not automation

The tool augments rather than replaces human judgment, making it a guide - not a gatekeeper.

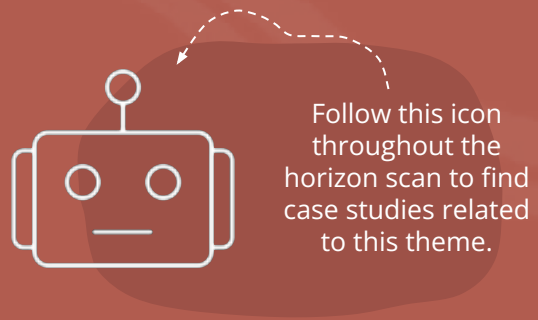
Built with the community, not for it

Public input shaped the tool's development, building trust and ensuring relevance to local context.

Auditable and adjustable

Regular reviews ensure the algorithm remains fair, transparent, and open to correction as new insights emerge.

Robot supports



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Floreo, United States

A virtual reality platform using interactive avatars to help neurodivergent learners build social and life skills.

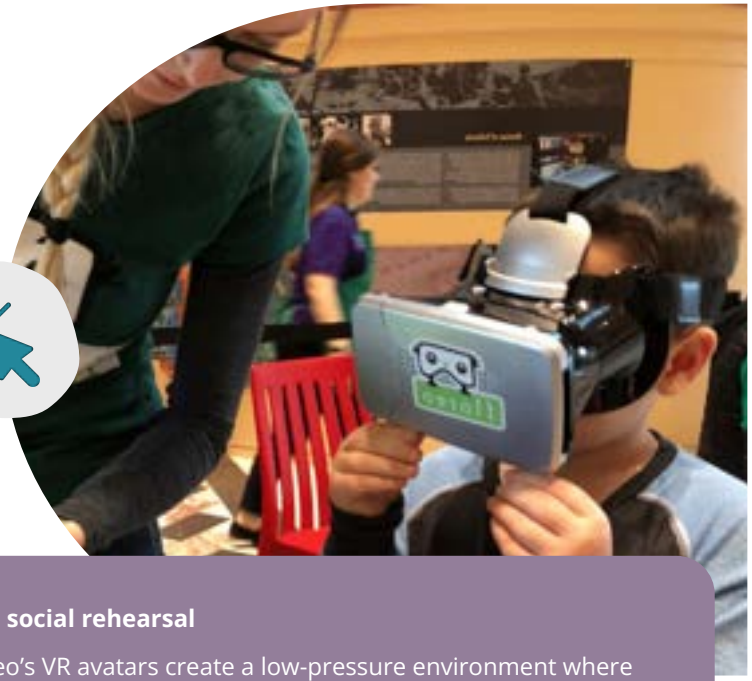
Floreo is a VR-based learning platform designed to support neurodivergent individuals, especially children on the autism spectrum, in developing social, communication, and safety skills through immersive, guided practice.

Learners engage with realistic scenarios and friendly virtual avatars in a headset environment, while a coach or parent follows along on a tablet. This real-time pairing allows facilitators to pause, replay, or reinforce moments as needed.

Scenarios range from crossing the street safely to making a new friend at school - everyday situations that can be challenging to navigate but are essential to independence.

What makes Floreo powerful is how it uses virtual “robot” guides to simulate human interactions in a safe, low-pressure setting. The technology lowers sensory stress and removes the unpredictability of real-world trial-and-error. Clinicians and educators have embraced it for its measurable skill gains and the ability to personalise learning to each child.

By automating role-play scenarios and providing data-driven progress tracking, Floreo shows how robot-supported learning can complement human instruction - and open up new possibilities for accessible, scalable neurodiverse education.



Safe social rehearsal

Floreo’s VR avatars create a low-pressure environment where neurodivergent learners can safely practice everyday social interactions before facing them in real life.

Co-piloted learning

A connected tablet allows therapists or caregivers to guide, pause, and reinforce VR sessions in real time, deepening the learning experience.

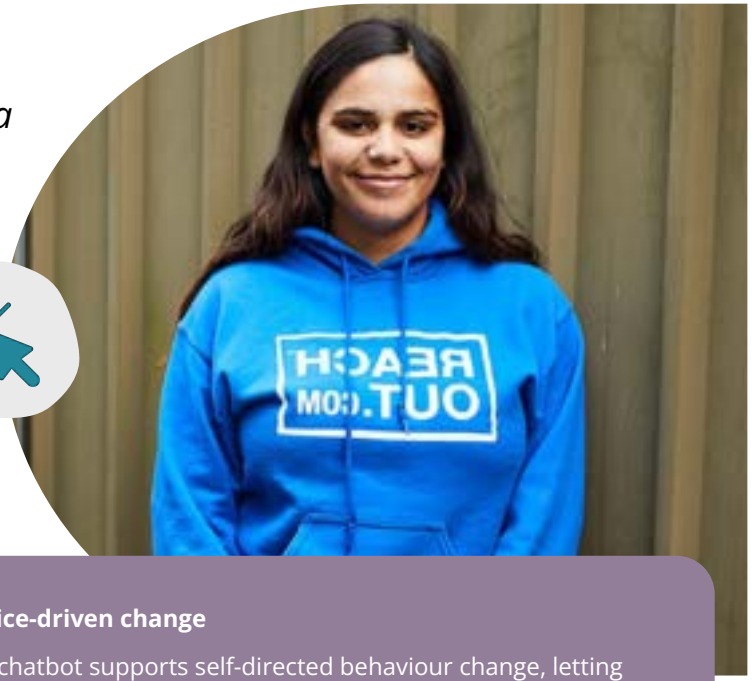
Evidence-backed outcomes

Clinical trials and pilot programs show that Floreo builds measurable improvements in communication, attention, and real-world confidence among children with autism.

ThirdStory

Take a Break, Reach Out Australia

A chatbot that helps young people set healthy boundaries with social media - on their own terms.



ReachOut's Take a Break chatbot tackles one of the most pressing challenges for young people today: finding balance with technology. Rather than taking a top-down approach to digital wellbeing, this tool puts the power in young people's hands.

Through an informal, conversational interface, the chatbot asks users how they're feeling about their social media use and what they'd like to change, then guides them through tailored plans for taking a short break from platforms like Instagram or TikTok.

Unlike traditional filters or bans, Take a Break respects autonomy and uses behavioural insights to nudge users toward more mindful choices. The chatbot suggests small, achievable actions like turning off notifications, moving apps off the home screen, or scheduling app-free times. It also checks in along the way, helping users reflect on how the break is going.

Because it speaks in the language of its audience - non-judgmental, curious, and supportive - it has high engagement rates and strong uptake among teens and young adults. By using conversational AI to prompt reflection and build self-regulation, Take a Break offers a fresh model for digital health promotion that feels personal, not prescriptive.

Choice-driven change

The chatbot supports self-directed behaviour change, letting young people set their own boundaries with social media instead of imposing blanket limits or external restrictions.

Behavioural nudges that stick

It uses tested behavioural science techniques - like small habit shifts and consistent follow-ups - to help users build sustainable digital wellbeing practices.

Youth voice at the centre

Co-designed with young people, every aspect of the chatbot, from language to structure, reflects authentic youth insights and real-life use patterns.

ThirdStory

DoNotPay, United States

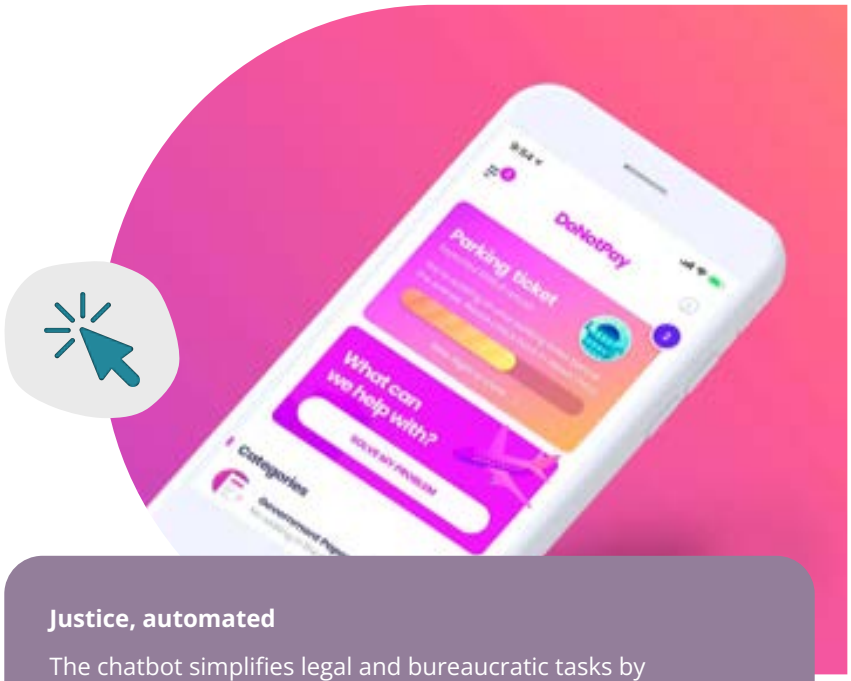
An AI-powered chatbot that helps people take on bureaucracy, from fines to legal claims, without a lawyer.

DoNotPay calls itself “the world’s first robot lawyer,” and while it doesn’t replace actual attorneys, it does help level the legal playing field. Through a simple chatbot interface, users can contest parking tickets, request refunds, unsubscribe from unwanted services, file complaints, and even navigate visa applications.

The system generates documents, scripts, or letters based on users' answers to a few guided questions - removing the jargon and stress of legal and bureaucratic processes.

What sets DoNotPay apart is how it automates access to justice at scale. It uses natural language processing and templates trained on real case data to walk users through complex systems with surprising ease. For people who can’t afford legal help - or who simply give up in the face of confusing paperwork - this tool provides a sense of empowerment.

While its coverage is currently limited to the U.S. and U.K., DoNotPay is rapidly expanding and pushing governments and corporations to become more accountable. It’s a striking example of how chatbot technologies can provide meaningful support in navigating power imbalances and red tape.



Justice, automated

The chatbot simplifies legal and bureaucratic tasks by generating customised letters, appeals, and claims based on a user’s plain-language input.

Mass-market legal empowerment

By automating complex processes, DoNotPay gives people without legal knowledge or money the tools to challenge injustice and assert their rights.

A system-level disruptor

Its wide-scale use pressures institutions to simplify outdated systems, making services clearer and more navigable for everyone - not just chatbot users.

Theme 3: **Harnessing crowds and peers**

These innovations use the power of many - whether through lived experience or collective action - to transform how social support is designed and delivered. By unlocking the wisdom of peers and the energy of communities, they offer more responsive, empathetic, and scalable solutions to complex social challenges.

We have further divided this into 2 sub-themes:

Peer-to-peer supports: *Sometimes the best help comes from people who've been there. These platforms connect individuals through shared experience, creating networks of trust, empathy, and lived wisdom.*

Harnessing the crowd: *These technologies tap into collective energy - activating communities to co-design solutions, volunteer support, or report real-time data. It's crowd-sourced care, creativity, and change.*

Peer-to-peer supports

Follow this icon throughout the horizon scan to find case studies related to this theme.

ThirdStory

Kiind Families Network, Australia

A digital network that connects parents and carers of children with disability for trusted peer support.

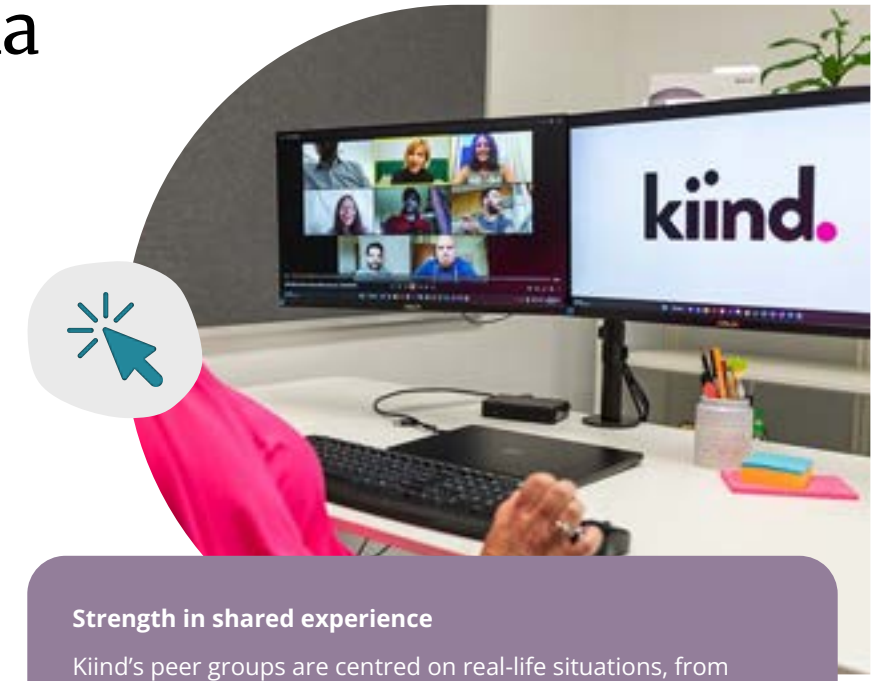
Kiind is an online platform designed to ease the isolation many carers face, especially those raising children with disabilities.

Rather than offering top-down information or professional advice, Kiind creates a space where lived experience leads - connecting families who truly "get it."

Parents and carers can join topic-based groups, ask questions, and share stories, navigating complex service systems together with empathy and firsthand knowledge.

The platform also partners with trusted organisations to ensure that the information shared remains safe, respectful, and aligned with evidence-based practice.

By valuing lived wisdom and making it easy to access, Kiind recognises carers not just as service recipients, but as experts in their own right. It fills a vital gap in the social service ecosystem: the emotional and practical support that only peers can provide.



Strength in shared experience

Kiind's peer groups are centred on real-life situations, from school transitions to navigating the NDIS, making advice more relatable and emotionally resonant.

Co-designed with carers

Built with deep input from families, the platform reflects their values, needs, and digital habits, ensuring strong engagement and trust.

Bridges to formal support

While peer-driven, Kiind integrates with service systems, helping families connect with professionals when needed - never replacing, but enriching, formal care.

ThirdStory

Togetherall, United Kingdom

A moderated peer support platform where people experiencing mental health challenges can connect, share, and heal together.

Togetherall is a digital mental health community where users support each other anonymously in a safe, structured environment.

It blends the power of peer connection with professional oversight: all forums are moderated by licensed clinicians who ensure that conversations remain supportive, respectful, and within safe boundaries.

Users can post about their struggles, offer encouragement to others, and access resources - all without needing to disclose their identity or fit into a diagnostic box.

The platform is especially valuable for people who may be hesitant to seek formal help, or who are navigating waiting lists or systemic barriers.

Togetherall doesn't replace clinical care - it supplements it with something services often can't provide: a sense of solidarity, normalcy, and non-judgmental listening from people who've been there too.

24/7 peer community

Users can access round-the-clock support, connecting with others from around the world who are facing similar mental health challenges.

Clinically safe by design

All activity is monitored by trained professionals, striking a balance between openness and safety in peer-led spaces.

Bridging isolation

The anonymity of the platform lowers the barrier to entry, especially for those afraid of stigma, while still offering meaningful connection and guidance.

ThirdStory

Miracle Messages, United States

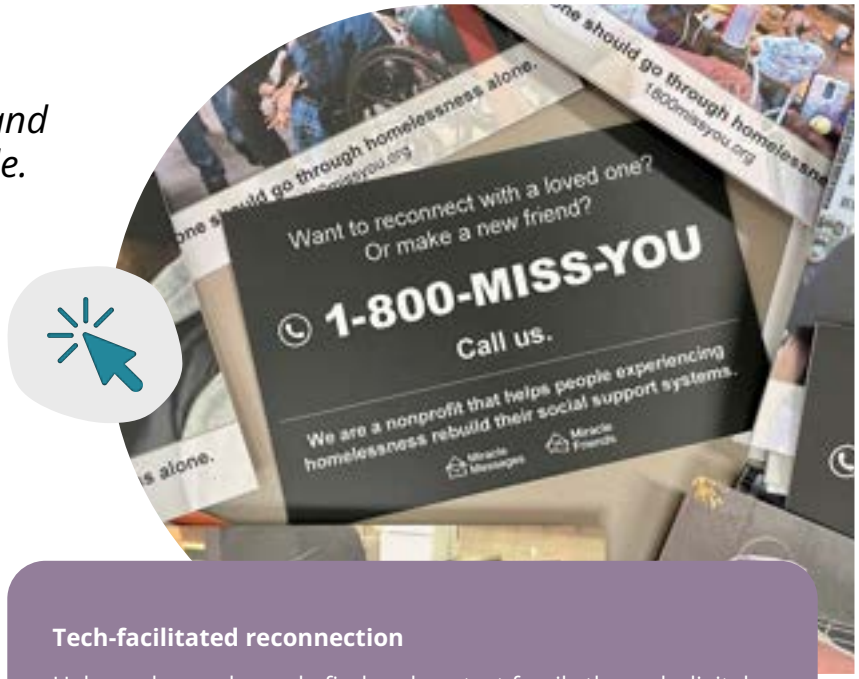
A digital reconnection platform that uses peer support, storytelling, and volunteer outreach to end relational poverty among unhoused people.

Miracle Messages is a US-based nonprofit using technology to address homelessness through human connection.

At the heart of the model is a digital storytelling platform where unhoused individuals record personal messages in hopes of reconnecting with family or friends. These messages are distributed through a network of volunteers and online platforms, often resulting in reunifications that lead to housing or emotional healing.

The initiative also includes “Phone Buddies” - trained volunteers who call or text their matched participant regularly, providing conversation, companionship, and support. The innovation lies in combining peer-based social infrastructure with lightweight tech - SMS, basic apps, and recorded audio - to build relational trust.

Unlike traditional case management, Miracle Messages begins by addressing the deep isolation that often underpins homelessness. It’s low-tech but high-impact, showing how peer networks and digital empathy can change lives and support systems from the inside out.



Tech-facilitated reconnection

Helps unhoused people find and contact family through digital messaging and volunteer coordination.

Phone Buddies for peer support

Volunteers provide ongoing connection and stability through weekly calls and messages.

Relational-first model

Recognises that connection is as critical as housing, and uses tech to repair and rebuild social bonds.

Harnessing the crowd

Follow this icon throughout the horizon scan to find case studies related to this theme.

ThirdStory

e-NABLE, Global

A global volunteer network using 3D printing to build and deliver prosthetic hands for children - at zero cost.

e-NABLE is a global grassroots movement turning open-source 3D printing into a life-changing service for children in need of prosthetic limbs. Volunteers, ranging from engineers and students to hobbyists, use freely available digital blueprints to design, print, and assemble functional mechanical hands, then gift them to kids around the world.

By bypassing traditional manufacturing and medical systems, the network radically reduces the cost of assistive devices while unlocking creativity and personalisation. Each prosthetic can be tailored in size, colour, and even theme which transforms what could be a medicalised product into a symbol of empowerment.

e-NABLE operates entirely on goodwill and coordination, linking thousands of makers with families in need through an online community. This model doesn't just improve access to prosthetics - it rewrites the rules of who gets to innovate in health and care, and how.

By enabling everyday people to become designers, makers, and changers of lives, e-NABLE offers a bold new vision of what collective compassion can achieve with the right tech.

Open-source for equity

e-NABLE's prosthetic designs are publicly available, enabling free access and customisation anywhere in the world without patents or profit.

Powered by volunteers

Tens of thousands of individuals contribute their time, skills, and tools to bring engineering into the hands of everyday changemakers.

Customisable joy

Kids choose colours, logos, and superhero themes, turning a prosthetic into a source of pride and identity - not just a medical aid.

ThirdStory

GiveSafe, United States

An app that enables people to give directly to unhoused individuals through Bluetooth beacons and digital wallets.

GiveSafe is a street-level innovation that bridges digital tools with human compassion to change how we support people experiencing homelessness.

Each unhoused individual carries a small Bluetooth beacon, which pings nearby smartphones that have the GiveSafe app. When a passerby receives the notification, they can read a short story about the person and choose to make a direct donation, which goes into a secure digital wallet. These funds can be redeemed at local partner stores for essentials or used for services like housing or job applications.

Unlike conventional giving, this model is built around dignity, transparency, and accountability - empowering people to tell their stories and access help in a safe, cashless way.

The app also collects anonymised data that provides insights into local patterns of need, helping inform better community responses.

By merging the best of fintech, storytelling, and social care, GiveSafe reimagines what it means to give in public space - making each interaction more personal, informed, and effective.

Human stories, not just needs:

GiveSafe's storytelling feature fosters empathy and restores dignity, allowing people to be seen as individuals, not statistics.

Cashless, safe support

Digital wallets prevent theft and misuse while encouraging constructive spending, such as groceries, ID documents, or transport.

Data for systems change

The app's usage patterns help charities and policymakers identify trends, adjust support, and better target interventions.

ThirdStory

Welcome Connect, United States

A platform that matches U.S. sponsors with refugees seeking safe resettlement - based on shared values and goals.

Welcome Connect is a purpose-built digital platform turning policy into practice by connecting refugees with American sponsors under new U.S. private resettlement laws.

Rather than matching through bureaucracy, it offers a more humane and participatory process: refugees and potential sponsors create detailed profiles, engage in messaging, and form connections based on shared values, language, or goals.

The platform provides built-in translation tools, privacy protections, and coaching supports to guide both parties through the legal, emotional, and logistical steps of resettlement.

More than just a matchmaking tool, Welcome Connect is a structured pipeline that enables citizen participation in global humanitarian efforts - safely and at scale. It combines tech with trust, allowing everyday people to be active participants in the resettlement journey. By decentralising the support model, it unlocks new capacity for refugee support, rooted in empathy and personal choice.

Values-based matching

Sponsors and refugees connect through mutual interests - making relationships more sustainable and resettlement experiences more successful.

Structured, not ad hoc

With translation, coaching, and templates built in, the platform avoids the pitfalls of informal efforts while retaining personal connection.

Turning policy into action

Welcome Connect translates legislative frameworks into digital infrastructure that empowers community participation in refugee resettlement.

Theme 4: **Data-driven systems change**

Technological innovation is giving social services powerful new tools to understand what's working, what's needed, and where to act. By analysing data at scale and embedding AI into decision-making, these solutions help services become more responsive, transparent, and fair - turning complexity into clarity and insight into action.

We have further divided this into 3 sub-themes:

Big data and systems response: *By connecting vast amounts of information across services, these tools unlock patterns, measure impact, and help systems respond better.*

Civic participation: *These platforms give people a voice in shaping the systems they live in by making democracy digital, and direct.*

Backstage AI: *Invisible but powerful, these AI systems work behind the scenes - filtering applications, spotting risk, and helping organisations operate with more intelligence and less friction.*

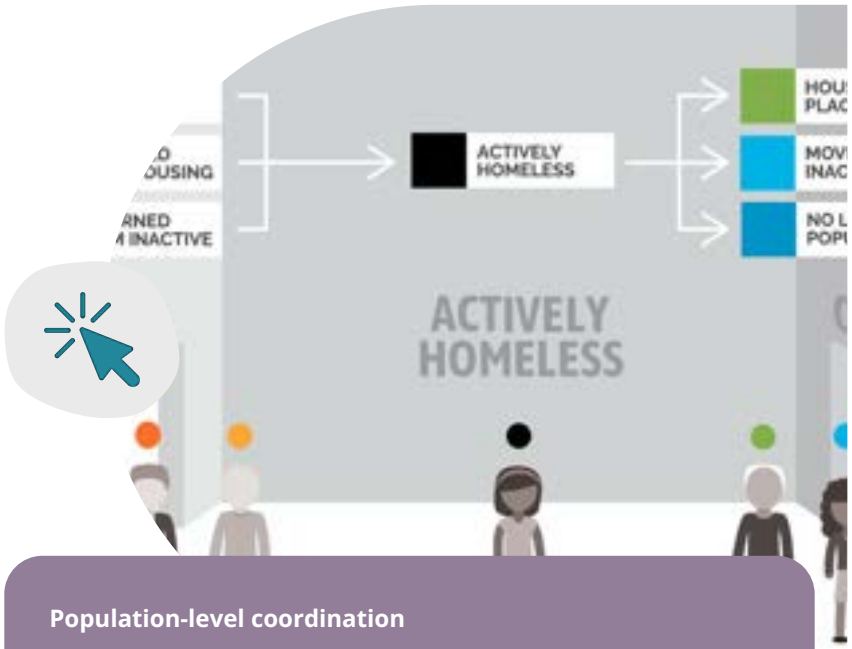
Big data and systems response

Follow this icon throughout the horizon scan to find case studies related to this theme.

ThirdStory

By Name List, Global

Real-time tracking to end homelessness, one person at a time.



The By Name List is a transformative data tool that allows communities to maintain a real-time, continually updated list of every individual experiencing homelessness.

Unlike traditional, static census snapshots, this living dataset enables service providers to coordinate outreach, target support, and measure change at the population level. The list records key personal data points, such as housing history, health needs, and service touchpoints - allowing for strategic case conferencing and rapid housing placement.

At scale, aggregated data from local lists offers critical insights into system-wide patterns: where bottlenecks occur, which populations are underserved, and what interventions are effective.

Driven by the Built for Zero movement in the U.S., the By Name List has helped more than a dozen cities measurably end chronic or veteran homelessness.

By making individual needs visible within a shared, dynamic infrastructure, it has shifted homelessness services from fragmented aid to collective impact - demonstrating how smart data can drive systems-level change.

Population-level coordination

The list helps communities treat homelessness as a solvable systems issue, not just a service challenge - by tracking progress in real time across all known individuals.

Data as accountability

The approach builds a culture of transparency and shared responsibility across agencies, as progress (or stalling) is tracked openly and continuously.

Proven impact

Communities using the model have recorded sustained reductions in homelessness, including functional zero for veterans in some regions.

ThirdStory

KoBoToolbox, Global

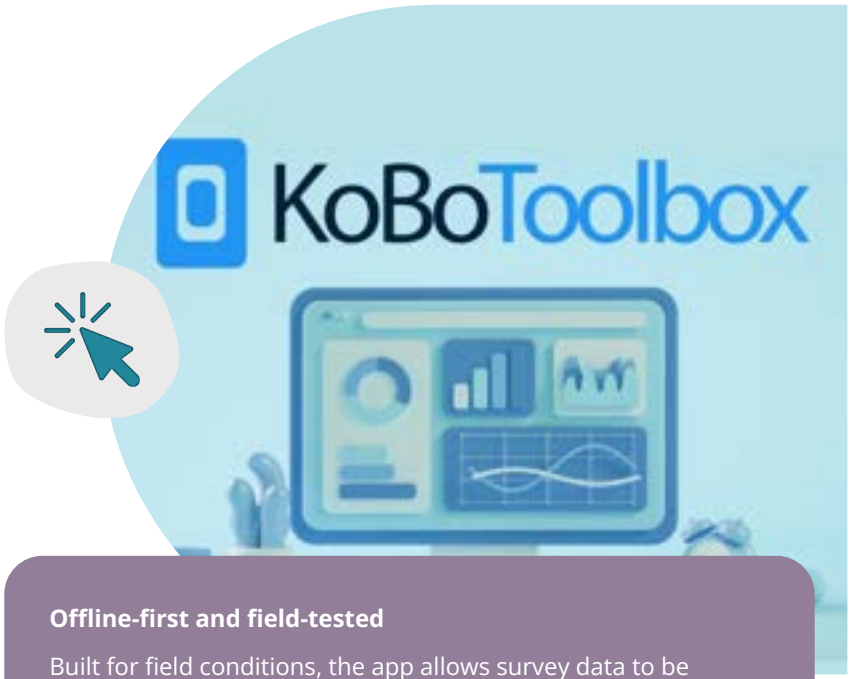
A field data collection platform that fuels system-wide learning and coordination in humanitarian crises.

KoBoToolbox is an open-source platform that enables the rapid, large-scale collection of structured data in humanitarian and development settings - often in regions with limited or no internet access.

Originally built for academic researchers, it has become a go-to tool for UN agencies, NGOs, and disaster response teams. Users can build surveys, capture GPS coordinates, attach media, and sync data once connectivity is restored.

But the real innovation lies in what happens next: collected data feeds into shared dashboards, analytics engines, and coordination tools that allow responders to see the bigger picture. Instead of duplicating efforts or relying on fragmented reports, actors can track trends across populations, identify coverage gaps, and allocate resources more effectively.

In effect, KoBoToolbox doesn't just collect data - it enables collective sensemaking and systems-level decision-making. In a field where time, accuracy, and scale are critical, it turns frontline insights into structural intelligence.



Offline-first and field-tested

Built for field conditions, the app allows survey data to be gathered without internet, syncing later, ensuring continuity in data flow from remote locations.

Interoperable and open-source

Data can be exported in multiple formats and integrated with dashboards, GIS, and analysis tools, fostering collaboration across agencies.

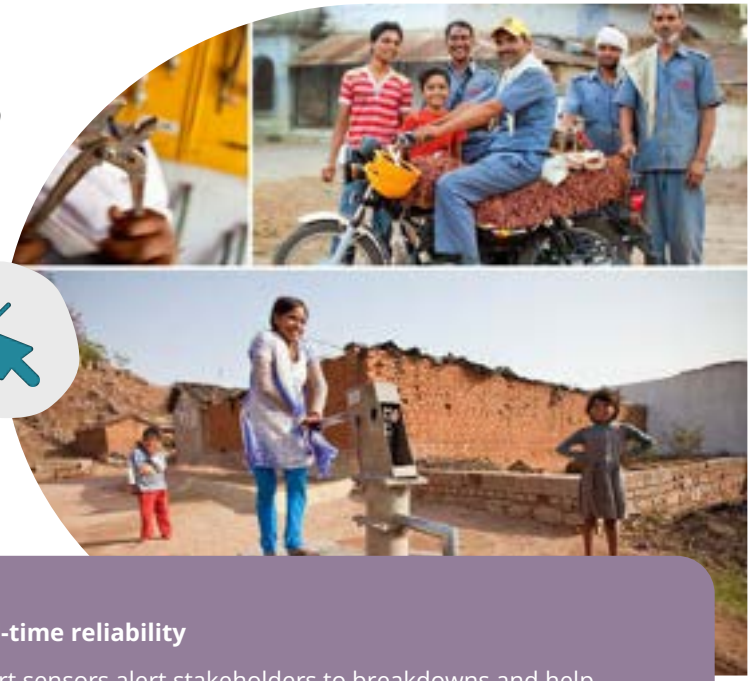
From inputs to impact

The platform supports systems-wide learning by converting frontline observations into actionable trends for strategic planning.

ThirdStory

Charity: Water, Global

Remote sensors are giving communities and funders real-time visibility into clean water systems, transforming how resources are managed and maintained.



Charity: Water is a nonprofit that uses real-time data and open dashboards to transform how water projects are funded, maintained, and held accountable.

Traditionally, donors would give once, unaware if their contributions made a long-term difference. But Charity: Water installs Internet of Things (IoT) sensors on water pumps in rural areas, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.

These devices transmit usage and performance data, which is fed into an open-access dashboard. Communities, NGOs, and funders can monitor functionality in real-time, flag maintenance needs, and see which projects are still delivering clean water years later.

More than a monitoring tool, the data serves as a powerful feedback loop - enabling evidence-based investment, improved infrastructure design, and predictive maintenance planning.

In an aid sector often plagued by opacity, Charity: Water's use of data builds trust, unlocks smarter systems change, and keeps human outcomes at the centre.

Real-time reliability

Smart sensors alert stakeholders to breakdowns and help schedule proactive maintenance - keeping water flowing.

Radical transparency

Every donation is linked to GPS coordinates and live data, letting donors see exactly where their money goes - and how long it lasts.

Smarter long-term investment

Usage data informs decisions on where to scale, where systems fail, and how to plan for sustainable infrastructure.

Civic participation

Follow this icon throughout the horizon scan to find case studies related to this theme.

ThirdStory

Ushahidi, Kenya

Crowd-powered crisis mapping that turns lived experience into live intelligence during emergencies.

Developed in Kenya during the 2008 post-election violence, Ushahidi is an open-source platform that collects, maps, and analyses crowd-sourced data to inform emergency response and civil society action.

Anyone can submit reports via SMS, web, or social media - on anything from violence and health outbreaks to infrastructure damage and corruption.

These inputs are geolocated, verified by moderators, and visualised on interactive maps in real time. The platform's data can then be used by responders, policymakers, and communities to understand what's happening on the ground - and coordinate accordingly.

In natural disasters, conflicts, and political crises across over 160 countries, Ushahidi has helped fill information gaps left by official systems.

But more than a reporting tool, it represents a new model of collective intelligence - where citizen data is structured, scaled, and analysed to drive more responsive and inclusive systems.

Grassroots-driven intelligence

Anyone can contribute data - bypassing bureaucratic delays and making crisis mapping inclusive.

Visual, live data

The platform maps verified reports in real time, offering immediate insight into rapidly evolving situations.

Adaptable for many crises

From pandemics to protests, Ushahidi's flexible structure makes it a go-to for diverse emergency contexts.

ThirdStory

StreetLink, United Kingdom

A public reporting app connecting people sleeping rough with rapid local support.

StreetLink empowers the public to act when they see someone sleeping rough - connecting vulnerable individuals with local services before crisis deepens.

Through the app or website, users can send a quick report that includes location details and any visible health or safety concerns. These reports are then verified and passed on to outreach teams who respond on the ground.

While it may seem simple, StreetLink represents a profound shift: it treats the public as active agents in the social safety net, rather than passive observers.

It also provides data at scale about rough sleeping trends - helping local councils and services direct their outreach more effectively.

In a sector where early intervention saves lives, StreetLink turns collective concern into coordinated action, building a participatory model for homelessness response rooted in real-time community awareness.

Public eyes on the ground

Anyone can submit a report in under 30 seconds, allowing real-time alerts that help outreach workers respond faster and smarter.

Bridge between communities and services

StreetLink doesn't just collect data - it connects dots, linking public concern directly with professional outreach.

Insight at a system level

Aggregated reporting data helps councils spot geographic or seasonal spikes in rough sleeping and adapt policy accordingly.

ThirdStory

U-Report, Global

A free mobile polling tool amplifying youth voices to shape social change and policy.

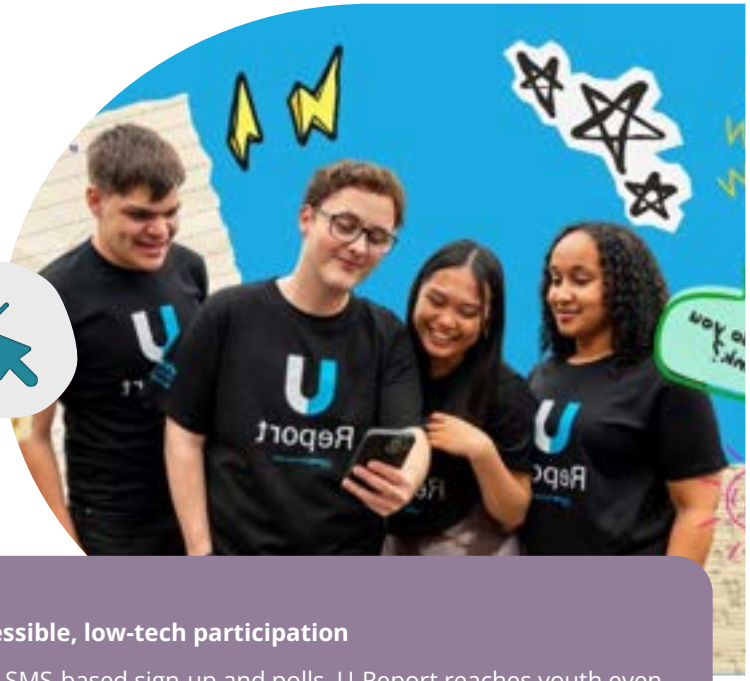
Developed by UNICEF, U-Report is a text-based polling platform that allows young people around the world to weigh in on social issues, share lived experiences, and influence decision-makers.

Youth opt in by SMS, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, or Viber, and receive weekly polls on everything from education access to gender violence to COVID-19 impacts.

Results are quickly aggregated and visualised, often prompting policy shifts or targeted interventions by governments and NGOs.

U-Report has over 28 million users across 95 countries, many of whom live in areas with limited internet access or civic infrastructure.

The platform turns the mobile phone - one of the few universal tools - into a channel for digital democracy. U-Report doesn't just ask questions; it listens, broadcasts, and connects youth voices to global systems of change.



Accessible, low-tech participation

With SMS-based sign-up and polls, U-Report reaches youth even in low-bandwidth or remote regions.

Fast feedback to real decisions

Data from polls has influenced national budgets, education policies, and emergency health responses.

Youth-led advocacy

Local ambassadors help drive engagement, ensuring that the platform isn't just for youth - but powered by them.

Backstage AI

Follow this icon throughout the horizon scan to find case studies related to this theme.

ThirdStory

Xapien, United Kingdom

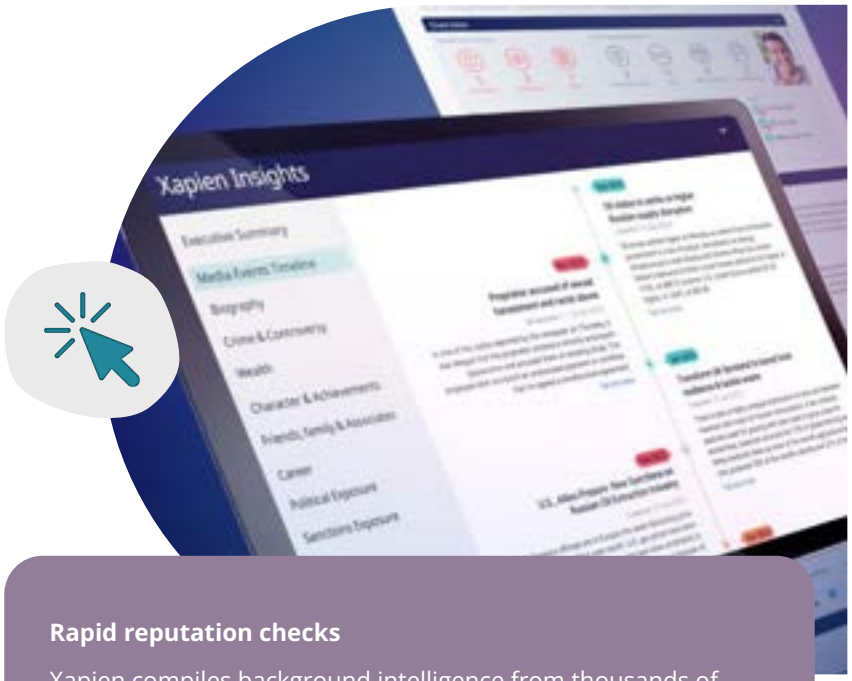
An AI research assistant that can help social purpose organisations move faster, act smarter, and spend more time on mission.

Xapien uses natural language processing and machine learning to rapidly generate comprehensive background reports on individuals and organisations - sifting through news, public records, and online content in minutes.

It's built to support ethical decision-making across sectors, including philanthropy, finance, and education. In the social services space, it can be used to assess potential donors, vet service providers, or understand community partners - saving staff from hours of manual research while improving the accuracy and depth of insight.

What makes Xapien especially powerful is its ability to surface nuanced reputational risk, even across languages and jurisdictions, and present it in clear, human-readable summaries. It's AI that doesn't just automate - it interprets.

By handling the background work behind funding decisions or partner engagement, Xapien frees up human energy for deeper relationship-building and strategic action.



Rapid reputation checks

Xapien compiles background intelligence from thousands of sources, flagging risks and relevance in under 10 minutes.

Natural language understanding

Instead of keyword search, Xapien uses context-aware algorithms to identify tone, sentiment, and patterns across unstructured data.

AI-powered ethical safeguards

With deeper due diligence, organisations reduce reputational and compliance risks while improving transparency in social investment.

ThirdStory

Submittable, United States

A smart workflow platform that uses AI to streamline grantmaking, hiring, and application-based programs.

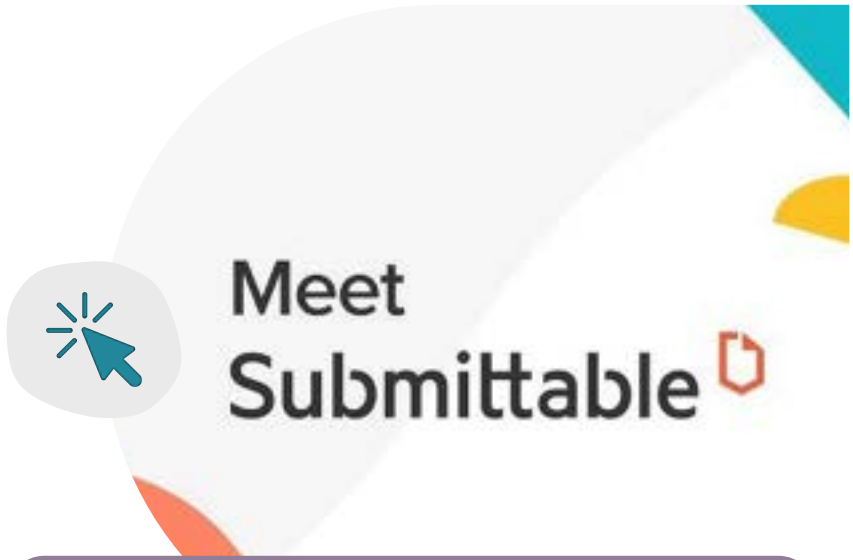
Submittable brings structure and intelligence to processes that are often manual and inconsistent - like funding applications, service enrolments, or hiring.

At its core, it's a submission management platform, but what sets it apart is its embedded AI. Submittable uses automation to triage applications, flag missing information, and even detect bias or disparities in outcomes over time.

For social service organisations, this means more equitable, efficient, and transparent processes - whether you're managing a housing waitlist or selecting grant recipients.

The platform also supports collaborative review workflows and real-time analytics, helping teams make quicker and more consistent decisions.

Submittable's AI is not about removing people from the process; it's about taking repetitive friction out of it. That means more time spent on outreach and impact, and less on admin.



Bias-aware filtering

Submittable's analytics reveal demographic patterns in submissions, helping organisations address unintended bias or systemic exclusion.

Automated eligibility checks

AI-powered forms validate data entry and check eligibility in real-time, reducing drop-off and rework.

Frictionless review workflows

Custom scoring and collaborative evaluation features make decision-making faster, clearer, and better documented.

ThirdStory

DataKind, Global

A global network of data scientists is helping charities harness AI and automation to amplify their social impact.

DataKind connects expert data scientists with social sector organisations to tackle tough challenges - from homelessness to food insecurity to crisis response.

Their model isn't just about handing over tech; it's about co-designing bespoke data and AI solutions that match the mission.

Projects have included predictive analytics for identifying at-risk families, natural language processing to categorise helpline calls, and machine learning models to optimise food bank distribution.

By working directly with frontline organisations, DataKind ensures the tools built are practical, ethical, and truly useful.

Their approach fills a critical gap: many nonprofits lack the capacity to harness data effectively, even when the potential is vast.

Through a mix of volunteerism, partnerships, and technical rigor, DataKind helps the sector leap ahead - without losing its heart. It's backstage AI, built with empathy.

Expertise on tap

DataKind mobilises thousands of volunteer data scientists to apply their skills in meaningful, socially impactful ways.

Mission-aligned machine learning

AI tools are designed alongside service providers, ensuring they solve real problems - not just optimise for data.

Ethical and equitable design

Each project follows responsible data use principles, balancing innovation with community accountability and inclusion.

ThirdStory

The future of technology in social services

The innovations captured in this horizon scan offer more than clever tools - they point to a deeper transformation underway in the social service sector. Technology is no longer just a back-office enabler; it's becoming a frontline ally, a guide for users, a translator of data, and a bridge between communities and systems. Done well, it can amplify human relationships rather than replace them, and make services more transparent, equitable, and effective.

But the path forward isn't just about scaling what works. It's about building with care - centering lived experience, safeguarding privacy, addressing digital inequality, and designing for the messiness of real life. As technologies evolve, so too must the sector's approach to innovation: collaborative, ethical, and relentlessly focused on impact.

The future of social services will not be built by technology alone - but it will be shaped by how we choose to use it and the partnerships we create. With the right vision, collaboration and investment, we can create systems that are not only more efficient, but more human - meeting people where they are, with the support they actually need.

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We want to see a world where communities are strong, and people achieve the lives they aspire to. We collaborate with communities, government and others to develop, grow and scale new possibilities.

With operations in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and the Caribbean, our approach is informed by two decades of partnerships and projects in local and international contexts.

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