

# Avert > HIV >

Empowering people  
through knowledge >

ANNUAL REPORT  
2023-24

## From knowledge to action





“

When I got there [on the Chatbot], I saw that I could ask whatever question I wanted or had. I could ask it, especially the questions I could not ask the people around me. I feared judgment so much, but on this platform, I can also ask about those topics I would be shy about. I learnt a lot.

Female chatbot user, Young Africa Live, South Africa

“

Working with the *Boost* application has helped us a lot because it gives me confidence in assisting my clients on a daily basis. For example, if I come across a challenging question, I will reply to the application so that it guides me.

Nyasha Kadirire, OPHID Community Outreach Agent using *Boost*, Zimbabwe

# 2023-24 Progress at a glance

“

It's really taught me things I didn't really know about sex. I love it, thank you. I AM IN THE KNOW!!!

Be in the *KNOW* web user, Zambia

## FROM KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION



Over

23

MILLION PEOPLE

in sub-Saharan Africa empowered through knowledge across all projects

Nearly

13

MILLION ENGAGEMENTS

with Avert content across our project portfolio



Nearly

154

THOUSAND

community health workers' and peer educators' knowledge and confidence increased in sub-Saharan Africa

Information resources for primary HIV and sexual health practitioners viewed over

163

THOUSAND TIMES



HOW OUR REACH IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA HAS GROWN OVER THE STRATEGY PERIOD

2021-22

7.8  
MILLION

2022-23

13  
MILLION

2023-24

23  
MILLION



# Message from the Chair and CEO



“

Sexual health and HIV awareness are crucial topics that need accurate and accessible information. Your post serves as a valuable resource for getting the facts straight and promoting awareness. It's essential to break the stigma surrounding these issues and encourage open conversations to foster a safer and healthier society. Keep providing valuable content that helps educate and empower individuals. Kudos to your efforts!

LinkedIn user

**This annual report marks the final year of our *From Knowledge to Action* strategic framework that has guided our work over the last four years. It's been an incredible period in Avert's 38-year history and we're proud of our efforts and contributions to close the HIV and sexual health knowledge gap.**



**Sarah Hand**  
Chief Executive Officer



**Professor Simon Forrest**  
Chair of the Board of Trustees

Health knowledge and health literacy really do matter. There is clear evidence that increasing health literacy improves individuals' knowledge, confidence and ability to self-care, as well as increasing engagement with and uptake of available health services, improving overall health outcomes. However, despite HIV being around for more than 40 years there are many who still lack access to essential information. Targeted HIV information that resonates, builds personal agency, self-efficacy, and the ability to self-care and make informed decisions, continues to be undervalued and face underinvestment. This is a failure that continues to impact and undermine the wider HIV response.

During the last four years Avert has reached millions of people with engaging, action-oriented content on HIV and sexual health. We have helped people become more informed and confident about their health choices, as well as feel listened to and not alone. Every day we receive feedback from people who have engaged with our content and who feel driven to share how much it has impacted and helped them.

Progress is being made in the global HIV response, but it is fragile in many countries and several critical global indicators are off track. In 2022 we saw the biggest drop in new HIV infections since the late 1980s but with 1.2 million new infections still occurring that year, we are a long way short of the 2025 target of fewer than 370,000 new infections annually.\* A sobering fact remains that every week 4,000 adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa are still acquiring HIV. Health literacy matters and is a human right for everyone, including these young girls. We can no longer afford to ignore the role health literacy plays as the foundation for a stronger, more effective HIV response.

Over the last year we have continued to invest in and strengthen our two high impact products *Boost* and *Be in the KNOW*, as well as using our expertise to support new digital communications innovations by partner organisations in South Africa and Mozambique focused on young people. Our focus throughout this strategic period has been on reaching three connected audiences critical to bringing about lasting change in the HIV response. These are individual health seekers, community health workers (CHWs), and the front-line primary practitioners providing care in communities.

Across *Boost* and *Be in the KNOW* we are providing health information and resources that can be used to inform, build confidence, counter misinformation and break down stigma. Over the last year alone we have reached over 13 million people in sub-Saharan Africa. In partnership with national

NGO OPHID in Zimbabwe, *Boost* has been rolled out to 464 CHWs who are using it to support their daily client interactions, ensuring accurate information on a range of health issues is shared with confidence. Four more organisations and hundreds more CHWs are now in the process of adopting *Boost*.

Avert remains committed to using the power of digital to advance sexual health literacy and empowering marginalized communities to make informed choices about their sexual health and wellbeing. It is essential there are sustainable, high quality sexual health information providers, particularly African-led, that can support a pleasure-focused, behaviour change-led approach to improving sexual health literacy, and supporting improved health outcomes. As a small but highly effective organisation, we are extremely proud of the contribution we have made to these goals and of our plans in the year ahead to ensure the sustainability of our work in the hands of locally led African organisations (*see pages 26-27 for more detail of our new strategy*).

None of our work would be possible without the commitment and passion of our dedicated staff team, Board of Trustees, donors and partners. We are specifically grateful to PATA (Paediatric – Adolescent Treatment Africa) and OPHID (Organisation for Public Health Interventions and Development) Zimbabwe for their partnership that has allowed us to host Avert staff recruited from South Africa and Zimbabwe.

\* The path that ends AIDS, UNAIDS, 2023.



# Vision, mission and values



## WHO WE ARE

Avert uses digital communications to build health literacy on HIV and sexual health. With over 30 years' experience, we are a trusted provider of accessible, accurate and actionable content and resources that support informed choices. Our work supports global efforts to end AIDS and achieve the Sustainable Development Goal for health. Every year, we engage with millions of individuals, community health workers and primary health practitioners living in areas of greatest need. We use our understanding of HIV and sexual health, our expertise in digital marketing, communications and behaviour change, and our network of partnerships to increase their knowledge, skills and confidence, and their ability to act.

## OUR VISION

A world with no new HIV infections, where people make empowered sexual health choices, and where those living with HIV do so with dignity, good health and equality.

## OUR MISSION

To increase health literacy on HIV and sexual health, among those most affected in areas of greatest need, in order to reduce new infections and improve health and well being.

## OUR VALUES

We believe in every person's right to health and to the information that enables them to make informed choices around sexual health. The following values inform our work:

- **EVIDENCE-BASED.** We are committed to providing reliable, accurate, and high-quality information on HIV and sexual health. We use the latest evidence to inform our content and programmatic priorities.
- **RESPONSIVE.** We adapt our approach to respond to changing trends in the HIV epidemic and in how our target audiences access and consume information.
- **TRUSTWORTHY.** We have more than 30 years' experience of working in the HIV response. We are recognised and accredited as a provider of accurate and reliable information.
- **CREATIVE.** We understand the power of new approaches to bring about change. We focus on solutions and think creatively to continually improve our work and bring new insights to the sector.
- **PEOPLE-ORIENTED.** We put people at the centre of what we do and how we do it – supporting, valuing, engaging and involving them. We aim to be accessible, inclusive and friendly in everything we do.
- **COLLABORATIVE.** We believe that by working in partnership we can pool skills and resources, share learning, and have greater impact.
- **SEX-POSITIVE.** We believe in a sex-positive approach to sexual health and rights that recognises and celebrates sexual pleasure and sexual diversity, prioritises personal agency, and is free of judgment.



Hello I have been in connection with Avert or the KNOW (Be in the KNOW) since 2004 at about age 16. I wanna say big thank you to the website. I consider Avert as a family but I don't want to stop and still want to know more!

*Be in the KNOW Facebook user*

I'm a HIV positive MSM. I could easily resonate with the ideas shared. And I found bigger hope. Thanks. I love you guys.

*Be in the KNOW web user, Nigeria*



“

Am learning so much on this page.  
Continue giving us more talks about different  
things, many of us are learning from you!

*Be in the KNOW web user, Malawi*

# Our strategy

## From knowledge to action

### THE WAY WE WORK

We develop and promote HIV and sexual health content and resources that are accurate, accessible, useful, and actionable. In doing this:

- We use learning and evidence from health literacy, behaviour change and digital marketing research and practice to inform our content and approach.
- We work through partnerships, as the best way to create high quality, sustainable programmes.
- We use our understanding of technology to prioritise inclusive digital approaches, and our knowledge of the context to create realistic solutions.
- We prioritise user-centred design principles, working with users to develop products that effectively meet their needs.



“

This awesome and it's unblinded  
me. I wasn't aware of many  
things as I have never done sex.

*Be in the KNOW web user, South Africa*

I am a sexual reproductive  
health and rights practitioner  
and this will inform my  
education sessions even more.

*Be in the KNOW web user, Eswatini*

Our 2021-24 strategy set  
out the following ambitions  
for our work:

1

#### STRATEGIC RESPONSE

Increase the HIV and sexual health-related knowledge, skills and confidence of those most at risk of HIV and poor sexual health, and those living with HIV.

We will:

- develop and share targeted digital HIV and sexual health communications.

#### OUTCOME

The people we reach have gained up-to-date knowledge, skills and confidence to make informed choices to support their own and others' sexual health.

#### RESULT

The people we reach take informed action to support their own and others' sexual health, reducing HIV and other sexual health infections, and improving physical and mental health among those living with HIV.

2

Expand and deepen the knowledge, skills and confidence of educators and advocates working on local responses to HIV and sexual health.

We will:

- develop and share accessible digital knowledge and information resources for educators and advocates.

Targeted educators and advocates have gained up-to-date knowledge, skills and confidence to support quality engagement with their clients or target groups.

Educators and advocates are effective at their roles, improving the sexual health of the local population.

3

Support evidence-based practice among primary HIV and sexual health practitioners.

We will:

- develop and share evidence-based good practice information and resources for practitioners.

Targeted practitioners have gained up-to-date knowledge of evidence-based approaches to support local HIV and sexual health responses.

Practitioners adopt evidence-based approaches, improving the relevance of primary HIV and sexual health responses.



# Our work in action

Our programmes in 2023-24 continued to focus on increasing health literacy among individual advice seekers, community health workers/peer educators, and frontline health practitioners across sub-Saharan Africa. Working in partnership with organisations across the region, our local, national and regional projects built the knowledge, confidence and skills of millions of people.



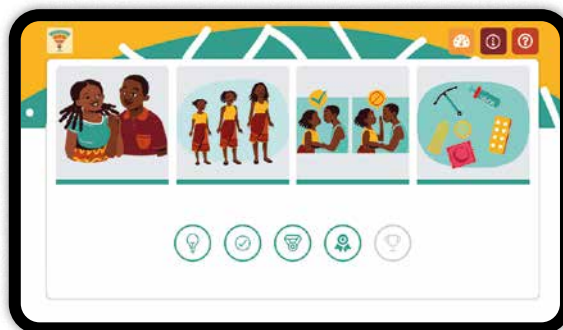
## YOUNG AFRICA LIVE



Enabling young people across South Africa to gain knowledge and confidence around their sexuality, relationships, sexual and reproductive health, and mental health

- chatbot and social media users

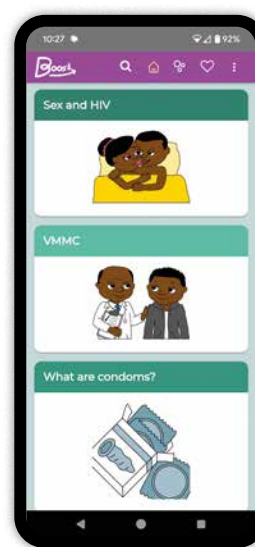
## YAYA



Engaging out-of-school, low literacy girls in Mozambique through a digital life skills and sexual health resource

- life skills app users

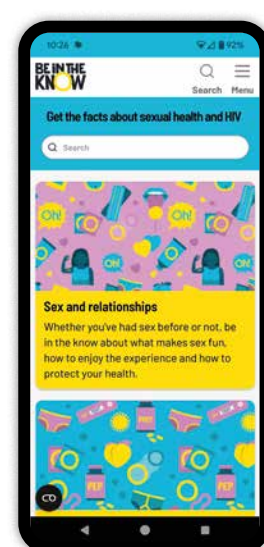
## BOOST



A digital job aide giving community health workers the up-to-date information and resources they need on HIV, sexual health, mental health and more

- website, chatbot, and native app users
- OPHID Community Outreach Agents for screening and referral
- Boost ambassadors

## BE IN THE KNOW



A digital brand offering trusted, evidence-based content on sex and sexual health

- website and social media users
- ▶ new social media content creators
- user engagement groups (includes focus group discussions, UX session participants, community reviewers, country focal points and youth photography models)



Over  
**87%**  
found the website useful

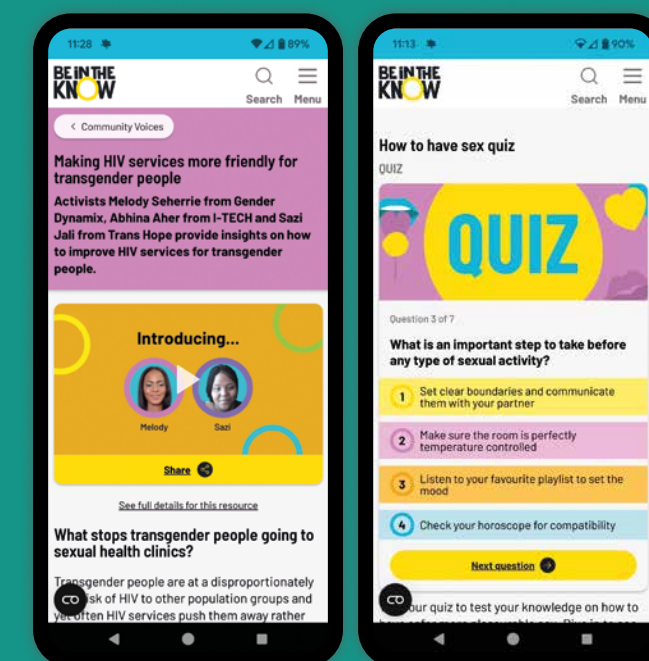


Over  
**878**  
THOUSAND VIEWS  
of video content

Over  
**320**  
THOUSAND ENGAGED  
WEBSITE USERS  
in sub-Saharan Africa



# Be in the KNOW



**Be in the KNOW offers fresh, sex-positive content for young people, mainly across sub-Saharan Africa, and the community health workers and practitioners who support them. Be in the KNOW exists to increase young people's knowledge, confidence and ability to make informed choices. The brand's content is stigma-free, sex-positive, and designed to help individuals understand, discuss and take action to protect their sexual health.**

In its second year, the *Be in the KNOW* brand empowered over 13 million people across sub-Saharan Africa with knowledge. There were nearly 4 million engagements with its sexual health education content on social media and over 323,000 engaged web users. The brand continued to act as an essential regional 'overlay' to other national sources of information, filling gaps, reinforcing positive behaviours, and providing independent, evidence-based content for individual advice seekers, educators and frontline health practitioners not available elsewhere. This included pleasure-positive blogs, videos, quizzes, discussion starters and more – providing advice and information in fun and interactive ways that often engaged young people in their sexual health for the first time.

As well as increasing reach and engagement, key priorities for the year included supporting young people's ability to self-care, countering misinformation, prioritising pleasure-inclusive sexual health, and giving a platform to marginalised voices and reflecting real lives.

Our sexual health basics video series put this pleasure approach into practice showing the exciting, steamy, and sometimes silly, realities of sex. The reception to these taboo-busting videos has been incredible with the series reaching over 2.16 million people on launch, gaining 1 million engagements across Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, and topping over 130,670 engaged video views.\*

\* Where more than half the video is watched.

Meanwhile through our series of community voices and firsthand blogs we reflected the voices of the LGBTQI+ communities as well as the opinions, experiences and perspectives of those health practitioners and community health workers on the frontline of the HIV response. We supported young people's self-care through content on digital literacy, mental health, and HIV prevention options such as PrEP, as well as a range of content addressing myths and misinformation around masturbation, foreplay, lube, stigma and self-stigma, and much more.

Content developed to support young people to have more confidence to talk to their doctor reached over 5 million young people on Facebook and Instagram, with over a million post engagements, and 1,600 shares. Comments on social media such as "I so much love this advice thank you" (Facebook user) and "These are such great tips! 🙌" (Instagram user) were typical of our audience responses.

Human centered design and co-creation remained at the core of our approach (see pages 14 & 15), driving the success of the brand and increasing our impact. Nearly 9 in 10 users said they were more likely to take an action as a result of interacting with the brand's content, 91% had learned something new, and nearly 7 in 10 said their attitudes to sexual health had changed.

“

**Thank you for all the information that you share. Very informative and beneficial I actually use most of it to disseminate health related topics. Am a nurse by profession here in Zambia and passionate about health education, health promotion and prevention.**

*Be in the KNOW user, Zambia*

**It increases my self-confidence on how to discuss what I want while intimate with my husband.**

*Be in the KNOW web user, Nigeria*

**Thank you very much. I am getting knowledge everyday.**

*Be in the KNOW Facebook user*

**Encourage me for a test and not be afraid!**

*Be in the KNOW web user, Kenya*



**4**  
MILLION  
ENGAGEMENTS  
with social content



**13**  
MILLION PEOPLE  
empowered through knowledge  
in sub-Saharan Africa





“

**Now I can jerk off and not feel like a terrible person, thanks for this information.**

*Be in the KNOW web user, Nigeria*

**The information was very helpful, educational and raises awareness to a lot of stigmatized issues in communities. Quite elaborate in definition and advice in short forms offered.**

*Be in the KNOW web user, Botswana*

**It's useful because it helps me to understand more about being in a relationship and how to be open to your partner. Whatever you want to tell him you can do it without being scared.**

*Be in the KNOW web user, Zambia*

# Co-creating with our users

**Over the past year we continued to engage, observe and co-create with *Be in the KNOW* users so we understood their challenges and delivered content and tools to address them.**

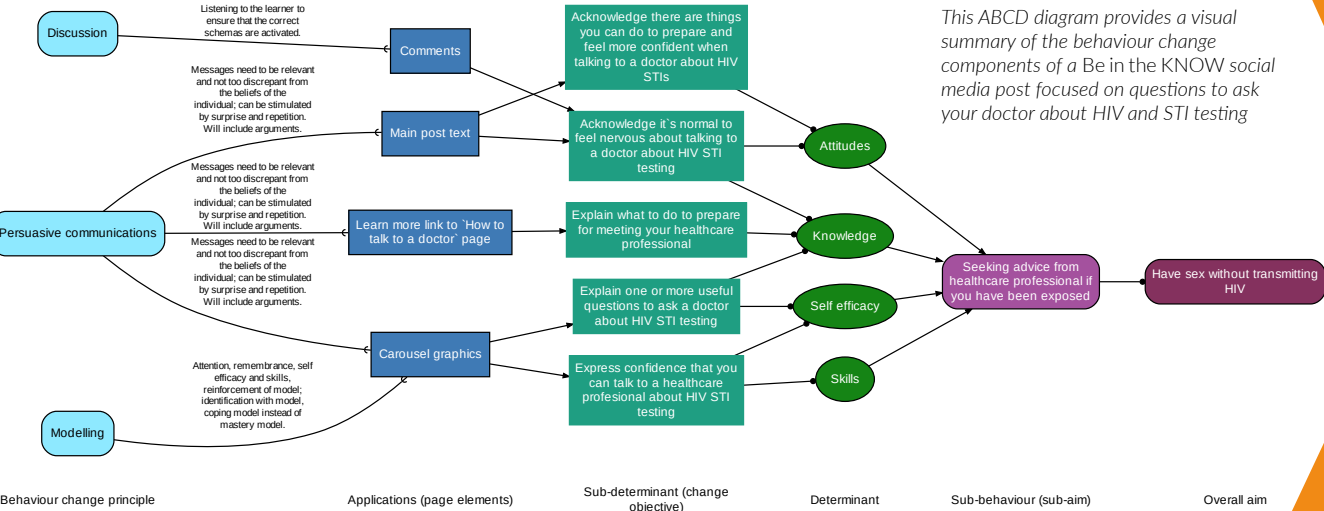
We carried out a range of *Be in the KNOW* user engagement activities this year including focus group discussions with young women, trans people and key population representatives, as well as with community health workers in Kenya, Zambia and Zimbabwe. We used WhatsApp groups for discussions and ongoing feedback, carried out 1-1 user experience (UX) sessions in person and online, and engaged with expert MSM and trans community activists as co-creators and expert reviewers. We also carried out regular polls on social media and analysed user comments to keep our understanding of their priorities and concerns up to date.

All of this ensured our content covered the things our audience needs to know about, in ways that are useful and reflects their experience. An example of this is our sexual health basics series. These animated videos explain a range of sexual health topics in a clear and easy-to-digest way via conversations between friends and couples. They are aimed at young people in sub-Saharan Africa, and designed to be empowering, sex-positive and fun. With over 1 million engagements and 130,000 engaged video views we think they succeeded!

The videos work because they reflect how young people talk and act. We held online discussions with groups of young people to understand how they talk about sex, relationships, and sexual health. Then we got detailed feedback on the video scripts to ensure the language, messaging and storylines genuinely connected with our audiences. As a result, the videos make people smile, whether it's at Maani getting out his funk-town playlist to put Zuzu in the mood, or PBae and Inno imagining sex as a major league sport as they nervously discuss performance anxiety. The videos don't talk down to young people – they look them straight in the eye and say, 'we see you, we know what things are like for you, and here is what you need to be in the know about'.

Seeing comments on our social channels like "I always rush here to watch your videos while nodding my head, saying ahan ahan..." feels so encouraging because we know the videos are hitting the proverbial g-spot, delivering sex-positive, pleasure-focused sexual health information exactly as they are designed to do. And at Avert, there's nothing we find more satisfying than that.





# Understanding health learning journeys

Building on innovative approaches used by researchers at the University of Maastricht, this year we took forward a novel behaviour change approach to better understand the behavioural aims and actions of our *Be in the KNOW* audience, and to test, learn, and improve the brand.

“Gilead is pleased to have supported Avert to continue to build and improve the *Be in the KNOW* brand, ensuring it is providing audiences with the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to take action.

Manica Lall, Gilead Sciences

The social media training was useful to me. I learnt how to harness technology and social media in my advocacy journey. I now know how to interact as a professional when using social media.

Social media training participant, Harare

The first phase of the project carried out a theoretical analysis of the behavioural aims of *Be in the KNOW*, using the acyclical behaviour change diagram (ABCD) method. This approach breaks down the intervention into component parts, mapping the behaviour change methods used and how these link through to the ultimate behaviour changes sought (for example, testing for HIV, or having enjoyable sex without STIs and unplanned pregnancies).

The output of this approach was a set of ABCD diagrams which visualised the intended aims of representative content (see example, top left). The process aided systematically thinking through the different behavioural components of specific *Be in the KNOW* content. We examined which behaviour change methods *Be in the KNOW* channels are using, whether these have been correctly applied and could be improved, and whether there are other methods that could be relevant to shift behavioural determinants.

Avert’s work is underpinned by behaviour change theory, and this process provided an opportunity to think in more detail about how we are using behaviour change approaches across the brand. The process identified gaps and inconsistencies between behavioural aims and actual user behaviour – highlighting things that are missing, areas where we could make improvements, and additional behaviour change methods that would be relevant and useful for us to think about using in future content, page design and functionality.

“Avert was the first endorser of the Pleasure Principles, leading the way for over 40 other organisations in the SRHR space. We are impressed how they now reach their large audiences with sexy, fun, pleasure filled content – to maximise their sexual health impact.

Anne Philpott, Founder and Co-Director, Pleasure Project

It have given me much courage to get treated before it’s too late.

Be in the KNOW web user, Zambia

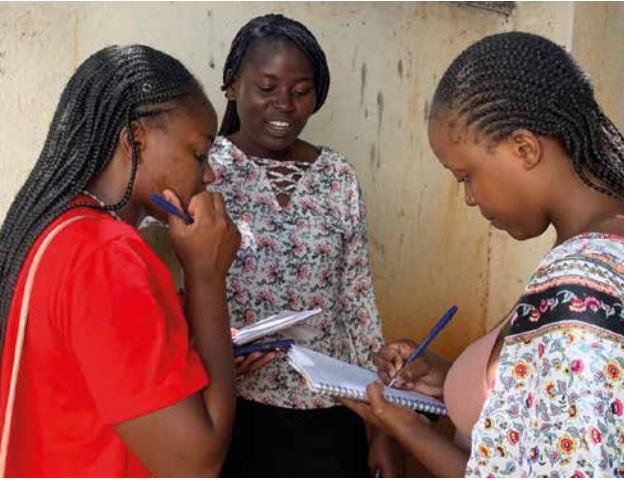


## CHAMPIONS FOR CHANGE

Social media content is increasingly dominated by short ‘influencer’ style video content. In response we brought 14 young people together in Harare, Zimbabwe to provide them training on how to generate the type of health content that they want to see on social media, and that is most useful and appealing to other young people like them. The aim was new youth-focused content that engages and informs young people about HIV and sexual health.

In March 2024, a training workshop took place facilitated by a local consultant. It was designed to strengthen participants’ content creation skills and encourage a critical approach to information, particularly concerning sexual health. Throughout the training participants engaged in discussion on topics including social media platforms, online communities, dealing with negative comments online, censorship, personal branding, intellectual property, and digital citizenship. They also gained practical experience in editing and content creation using Canva software.

The group will now be supported to develop new content, with participants encouraged to share their content and get feedback and suggestions from their peers, alongside expert advice from Avert staff and the social media training consultant. The best content produced by the new champions will be amplified via Avert’s *Be in the KNOW* social media channels.



Workshop social media champions develop ideas for new content in Harare.



“

Working with Avert to scale *Boost* has meant our partners can better support their community volunteers. This is a sound development and investment decision.

Ella Nwaokolo, ViiV Healthcare Positive Action Programme

# Boost

**Boost is a digital job aide for community health workers and peer educators (CHWs) in sub-Saharan Africa. As people's first point of contact with the health system, CHWs need access to up-to-date and accurate information in order to play an effective role supporting their communities' sexual health. Boost enhances their knowledge, skills and confidence, ensuring they share accurate and actionable HIV, SRH, and other primary health information with their communities. This in turn builds community trust in their roles and increases the agency of community members to make informed health choices.**

The *Boost* ecosystem includes several complementary parts – an open access website and native app, a *Boost* WhatsApp chatbot, and an enhanced Android app with screening and referral tools being used by our partner OPHID in Zimbabwe. Each of these parts has played a role in developing our scale strategy for *Boost*, providing evidence and learning, and supporting continuous iteration and improvement.

Over the past year, the reach of *Boost* continued to grow across East and Southern Africa, with over 115,000 new self-motivated users of the web version across the region, bringing the cumulative total since launch to over 174,800 users. Over 38,000 conversations were also started on the *BoostBot* (*Boost*'s own pilot chatbot). Nine new content units were added on engaging with different groups in the community, as well as content on female genital schistosomiasis (FGS), expanding *Boost*'s content offer. All content was also made available in Shona and Ndebele, the two main languages in Zimbabwe, to increase accessibility.



Over

# 115

THOUSAND

self-motivated *Boost* users across sub-Saharan Africa



Over

# 224

THOUSAND

HIV, STI and mental health screenings carried out using *Boost* in Zimbabwe



# 38

THOUSAND

conversations on *BoostBot*

Over the year we also gained valuable learning from *Boost*'s integration into the work of 464 Community Outreach Agents (COAs) within our partner OPHID's wider PEPFAR programme in Zimbabwe (see box out).

As part of our work to scale *Boost* we engaged with over 20 organisations across the region learning about their CHWs' needs and how *Boost* can support their work. We also engaged *Boost* ambassadors in Kenya and Malawi to get local, personal feedback from users on its value. As a result, by the end of the financial year we had started to move ahead scaling up *Boost* to four new organisations in Zimbabwe, as part of a wider partnership with ViiV Positive Action to support access to digital tools amongst its grantees while avoiding duplication of effort. This will expand *Boost* to hundreds of new users.

## BOOST INTEGRATION INTO OPHID'S PEPFAR PROGRAMME

In Zimbabwe, *Boost* continued to be an integrated part of national NGO OPHID's PEPFAR programme, supporting the knowledge and confidence of its Community Outreach Agents (COAs), and helping them increase screenings and referrals among young people across the nine programme districts predominantly in the south of the country.

Over 224,435 screenings were carried out by COAs using *Boost*'s simple, intuitive screening tools available in Shona, Ndebele and English. This led to over 93,200 referrals of young people to HIV, STI and mental health services in their area, with health facility data showing an increase in HIV self-tests, facility HIV tests, and STI service uptake in those districts.

Topline findings from the project's endline survey also indicate improved knowledge and awareness, and increased confidence among *Boost* users.

- 97% said they were equipped with the HIV testing and STI information they needed.
- 97% agreed that *Boost* is helpful in providing health knowledge.
- 90% said *Boost* gives them confidence to do their daily routine duties.
- 87% said *Boost* helps them interact with young people in their communities.

This highlights *Boost*'s effectiveness in supporting CHWs' confidence and effectiveness, and improving service uptake and community health.





### A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

"When the Boost application came in, it was a life saver for us," says Ellen Nhambura, one of OPHID's Community Outreach Agent Coordinators based in Chitungwiza. "Why do I say so? Because when you're out there in the community you need to communicate, to deliver correct information to the client... Boost has helped to incorporate youth - they had been feeling left out."

"With Boost it's fun, it's light, it's engaging," she continues. "We now feel that we know more. We have been boosted in our knowledge, in our understanding of health areas... Now we have the information correct, as the Ministry of Health expects of [us]."

Asked about the single greatest change from Boost, Ellen says: "now it's just your phone in your pocket and you are easy to go and distribute the knowledge!"



I am not trained technically like the nurses to give out health information but thanks to Boost trainings as a Boost COA, I am going to speak eloquently and respond with confidence on all health topics I will be asked about by my fellow peers, using my pocket friend the Boost application.

21-year-old female Boost COA, St Mary's clinic, Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe

### THE CHALLENGE OF CENSORSHIP

A key challenge across our programmes has been the increasing censorship of sex-positive health education content by Meta, leading to increasing numbers of social media ad campaigns being rejected. Meta consistently misunderstands the purpose of this content, deeming it 'adult content'. Meta's specific criteria banning sex positive content in many areas makes effective sexual health education challenging. Cuts to staffing at Meta and other social media platforms has compounded this issue with appeals against content rejections taking longer and making direct access to staff in these situations harder. We have seen this censorship across Avert's digital work, and across other social media platforms like Google and YouTube. This seems likely to remain a challenge going forward across the sector.



### BUILDING LIFE SKILLS

Yaya (Big Sister) is a digital life skills app targeted at out of school adolescent girls. It was developed by Avert for the EAGLE project in Mozambique, a literacy and life skills programme being implemented by VSO. Yaya provides a flexible, home-based learning solution, in local languages, using low-cost Android tablets.

During the year the Ndau and Sena language versions of Yaya continued to be rolled out in the Eagle project, reaching approximately 600 girls. Yaya was also featured in a UNICEF podcast highlighting the co-creation process we undertook and how this supported the app's acceptance in the girls' communities.

# Spotlights



# Young Africa Live

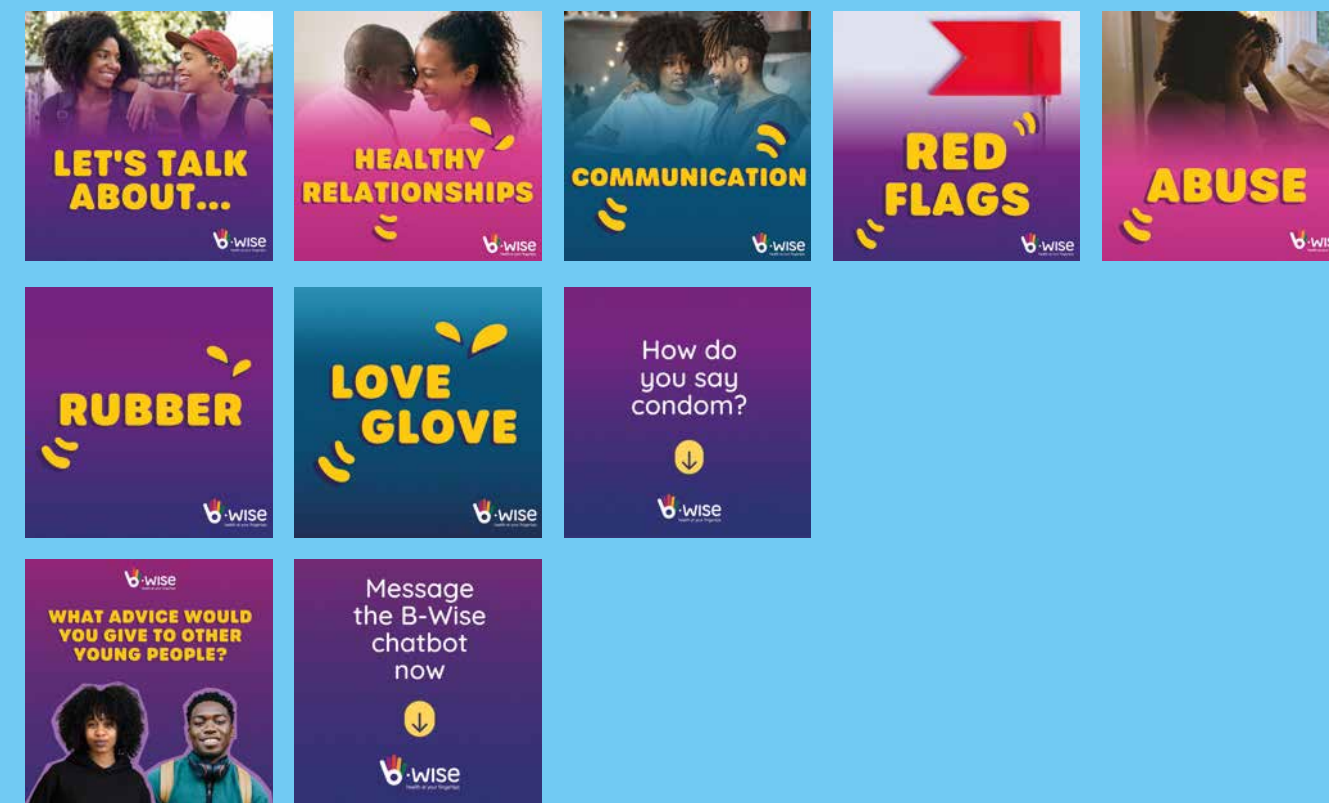


Piloted in South Africa since early 2023, *Young Africa Live* uses a WhatsApp chatbot, Facebook and Instagram to reach young people in South Africa with clear, trustworthy, and engaging content to help them make informed choices to improve their sexual and mental health. Avert has been the content and social media marketing partner in the project, which is led by Reach Digital Health, with investment from the Elton John AIDS Foundation, and implemented in partnership with the South African national department of health's sexual health brand B-Wise.

Young people tend to be less informed about key health topics and have poorer linkages to and retention within services than their adult counterparts. They are also disproportionately impacted by HIV and STIs. Over the past year *Young Africa Live* has aimed to challenge this using both a WhatsApp chatbot and discussions on Facebook and Instagram to build young South Africans knowledge and confidence.

Within just nine months, over 100,000 conversations were started on the chatbot, providing trustworthy and judgement-free content, empowering informed decisions, and linking to wider services. Content on the chatbot covered a broad range of issues including sex, pregnancy and birth control, relationships, HIV, STIs, mental health, accessing services, gender and sexuality, and body issues. Sex and pleasure-focused content was most accessed on the chatbot, and also what got young people's attention on social media. However, shame and stigma around sex, and concerning attitudes to mental health, were evident in user discussions.

Encouragingly, results from endline surveys show that 73% of respondents thought the chatbot content was well related to their sexual needs, 82% said the content was interesting, and 88% said the content was useful for managing their sexual and reproductive health and relationship needs.



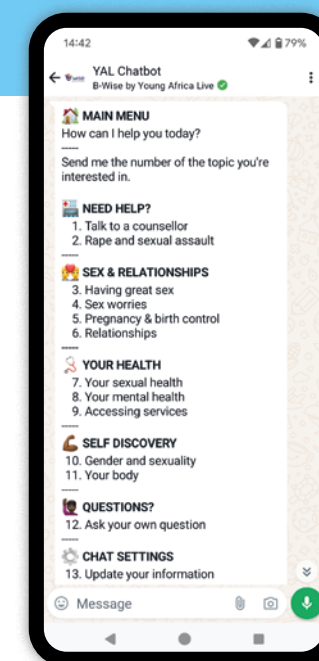
There were also nearly 9 million engagements with the social media content developed and marketed by Avert on *Young Africa Live*/B-Wise's Facebook and Instagram channels. This social media marketing also recruited nearly all 100,000 users to the chatbot.

These results have shown that Facebook is a cost-effective way to recruit large numbers of users to a chatbot, and also an effective tool to reach and engage large numbers of young people in South Africa. Endline data showed over three quarters of Facebook members strongly agreed that the posts were informative, interesting, and pertinent to their sexual health needs, and over half of those surveyed were visiting the Facebook page weekly or monthly, showing a strong base of engagement.

Overall surveyed participants reported that the platform increased their knowledge on a range of areas, and increased intentions around condom use, HIV testing frequency and family planning. The chatbot or the Facebook page was also cited as the primary contribution to their changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour.

A key success of the project was the improvements in confidence of young people to speak about sex, intimacy, mental health and other issues with their peers and partners. This confidence is critical to improving quality of life, resilience, self-efficacy, and wider self-care, whether or not it is linked to specific behaviour change or service uptake.

9  
MILLION  
social media  
engagements



Over  
100  
THOUSAND CHATBOT  
USERS

88%  
said content was useful



“

Our joint webinar with Avert was a great opportunity to share the positive impact *Boost* is having on our programming and how *Boost* can be integrated to support health worker confidence, better client interactions, and relevant referrals.

Dr Tinashe Chinyanga, Executive Director, OPHID

# Connecting, learning and sharing

Core to our approach is working in partnership with like-minded organisations to exchange expertise and ideas that add value to each other's activities. Throughout this strategic period, we engaged with a broad range of organisations across the health literacy, HIV, sexual health, digital, and behaviour change sectors to support collaboration, avoid duplication, and enhance our wider understanding and effectiveness. We also worked hard to share the evidence and learning generated through our own work at conferences and through other networks and events.

A few highlights of this work include:

- We presented abstracts on ***Boost***, ***Be in the KNOW***, our **Pleasure inclusive approach**, and our **Yaya app** at the **INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON AIDS AND STIS IN AFRICA – ICASA**. At a key plenary session, Dr Karen Webb from our partner OPHID had the opportunity to present the findings from their integration of the *Boost* job aide for CHWs into their wider programmes. Dr Webb shared how *Boost* and its screening tools are supporting more effective and timely referrals to health facilities, providing a clear example of how digital tools can support CHWs' roles and improve health in the community.
- The **Female Genital Schistosomiasis Integration Group (FIG)** aims to raise aware of this highly prevalent neglected tropical disease and the need to integrate FGS into wider SRHR programmes. As active members of FIG we joined a **panel discussion** at **ICASA** sharing how we have used *Boost* to raise awareness of FGS with community volunteers and build their confidence to communicate to women at risk.



- We **published regular blogs** on Avert.info sharing the approaches we use to support our work and our results. Articles included: our approach to **co-creation** and how giving users the opportunity to direct content can increase engagement; on using the evidence that supports a **pleasure inclusive approach** across our content and the results that can be achieved; and on taking a novel **behaviour change approach** to better understand our audiences' behavioural aims and actions.
- In October 2023 we were delighted to deliver **KNOWLEDGE FIRST, a joint webinar with OPHID** that examined how digital tools can support and enhance the work of CHWs. Hosted by Dr Lennie Bazira, Policy Director of the Community Health Impact Coalition (CHIC), the webinar had over 90 attendees. Panel members from Zimbabwe, Kenya, the US and the UK discussed the benefits of digital tools to support the knowledge and confidence of CHWs and peer educators, as well as the challenges of ensuring access and rolling out digital tools in low-resource settings. OPHID's *Boost* Project Manager Privillage Charashika, shared how they integrated *Boost* into their central programming to ensure a genuine, value driven approach to their CHWs. Dr Bazira made a plea for the role of CHWs not to be underestimated, nor their ability to use digital tools, and stressed the need to ensure programmes resource them financially for the work they do.

- Throughout the year we continued as active participants in several learning exchange and network platforms, including the **SELF-CARE TRAILBLAZER GROUP** where we had an article published; **#GEN-END-IT COALITION** where we supported a strategy review; and **CHIC** where we shared the work we are doing developing *Boost* as a sustainable, adaptable job-aide for CHWs.
- Avert's work was featured in a series of **UNICEF PODCASTS, 'HIV REIMAGINED: CONVERSATIONS FOR CHANGE'**. In 'Apps, Bots, and Chats: innovations in health tech' two of OPHID's Community Outreach Agents using Avert's ***Boost* app** in Zimbabwe talked about how the app has changed the way they work and interact with their clients. A second episode, 'A youth takeover! Healthcare designed for the next generation', featured Avert's **Yaya life skills app**, developed by Avert for VSO's Eagle project for use by low literacy girls in Mozambique.





# A bold new strategic direction



In a constantly changing environment, business as usual will not secure the future sustainability of our flagship products *Be in the KNOW* and *Boost*. As a result our new strategy focuses on transitioning these products to organisations located in Africa who are best placed to ensure they continue to thrive and engage millions more people each year.

2021-24 has been a highly successful strategic period for Avert. Over this time we have secured over £2 million in grants, allowing us to build and grow *Boost* and *Be in the KNOW* and to use our expertise to support programmes in South Africa and Mozambique. We have effectively contributed to building HIV and sexual health literacy, staying adaptable and nimble in a fast-changing operational environment.

Understanding this changing environment has been a key factor informing our new strategic direction. The global aid architecture, and specifically that which supports global health and HIV, is changing as it stays responsive to new epidemiological and demographic data. The sector is also reflecting on and re-examining its policies and approaches to aid, development and financing, aiming to ensure efforts do not reinforce a colonial, top-down 'Western saviour' ideology, but instead foster solidarity, local ownership, leadership, and lasting positive change for all citizens. Donors who support civil society work are increasingly looking to support locally run organisations that work towards shared national goals. Avert, like many international NGOs, has needed to examine our ongoing purpose, our value add, and the sustainability of our funding strategies.

Despite our relative success in raising new funds over the last four years – including a 36% success rate on over £1.8 million in grant funding applications in the past year – like many NGOs we have found it increasingly hard to get the return on our fundraising investment needed to secure the future sustainability of our core products. Increased competition for reduced funding opportunities means a realistic view of future fundraising investment return is needed.



## ONGOING NEED

The evidence and need for our work remain, so we feel it is essential that Avert considers a new strategy that uses an informed understanding of the donor environment and localisation agenda to secure the future of the products we have built so they can continue to benefit those who need them.

After consulting with external sector leaders and extensive deliberation of options throughout 2023, the Board of Trustees, with senior staff support agreed a new strategy in November 2023 to pursue a well-planned and fully funded transition of our flagship products, *Be in the KNOW* and *Boost* to African-led organisations who share our values and for whom these products will add value, have a strong strategic fit, and offer new opportunity.

This approach not only maximises the impact of Avert's work and secures a long-term legacy for the products, but also fosters true local ownership and leadership. We believe that transitioning the products to locally run organisations will open up new funding opportunities that are not accessible to Avert. We value the localisation agenda and want to be active participants in progressive change and feel strongly that this bold and exciting direction reflects the values and ethos that have guided Avert for the last 38 years.



ViiV Healthcare is pleased to support Avert's proactive localisation strategy. This will ensure the continued delivery of the high-quality, impactful HIV and sexual health information Avert has built up, by an organisation who shares Avert's values and is rooted in the communities it serves.

Shaun Mellors, ViiV Healthcare

Vitol Foundation supports Avert's new strategic direction as a forward-looking response to changes in the sector. We are pleased to work alongside Avert to ensure the transition of its work to new local partners is a success.

Sarah Jeffery, Vitol Foundation

## PROGRESS TO DATE

Our resources and energies are now focused on two areas: the effective delivery of our existing donor-funded programmes which run until December 2024, and the new transition plan. We will no longer spend time on new business development work and as a result restructured staffing in December 2023. The transition plan runs from January to December 2024, during which time we will agree on the new takeover partners, mentor and support these partners, and carry out the legal work related to the transfer of IP and other financial assets, all to ensure a successful and well executed handover.

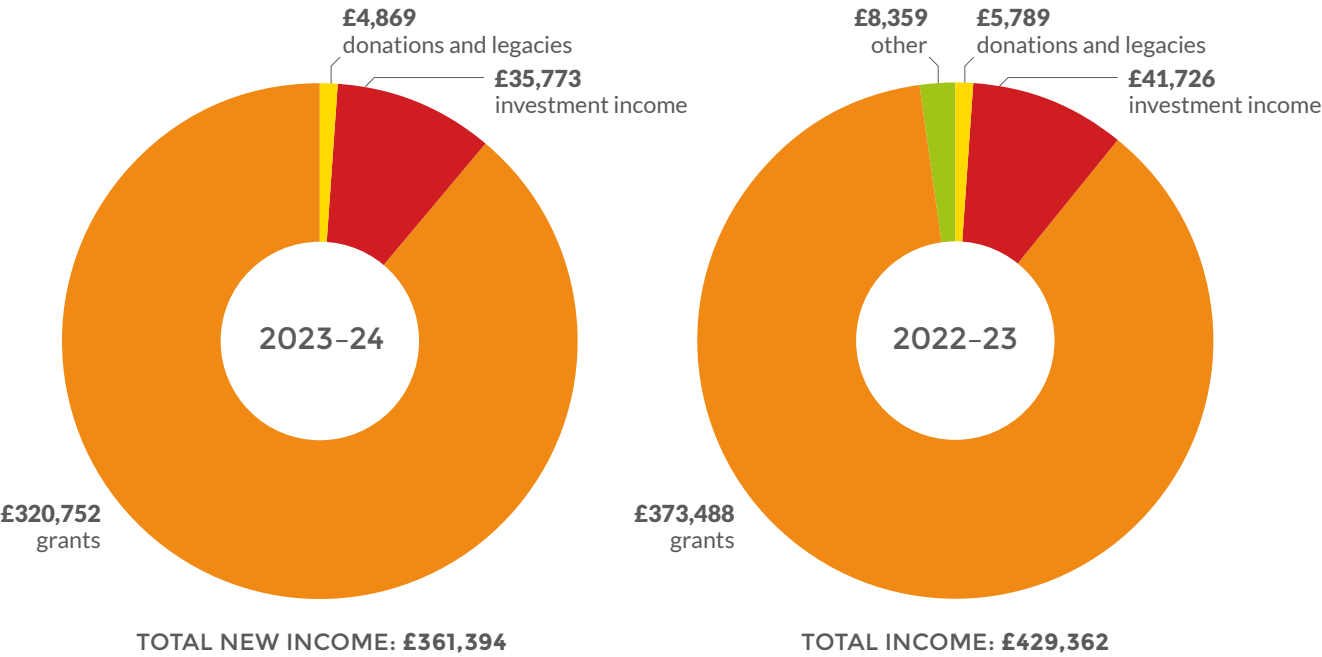
We have received very strong support from our donors and partners on our transition plans. Both *Be in the KNOW* and *Boost* are in very good health, making this the ideal time for them to be handed over to new owners. Scoping for transition partners started in January along with efforts to raise funding that would go with the brands to the new takeover partners to support their short to medium terms costs until they find new local funding opportunities. Following discussions with a number of organisations based in East and Southern Africa, we are confident that new takeover partners, and initial funding, will be secured for both products.



# Financial summary

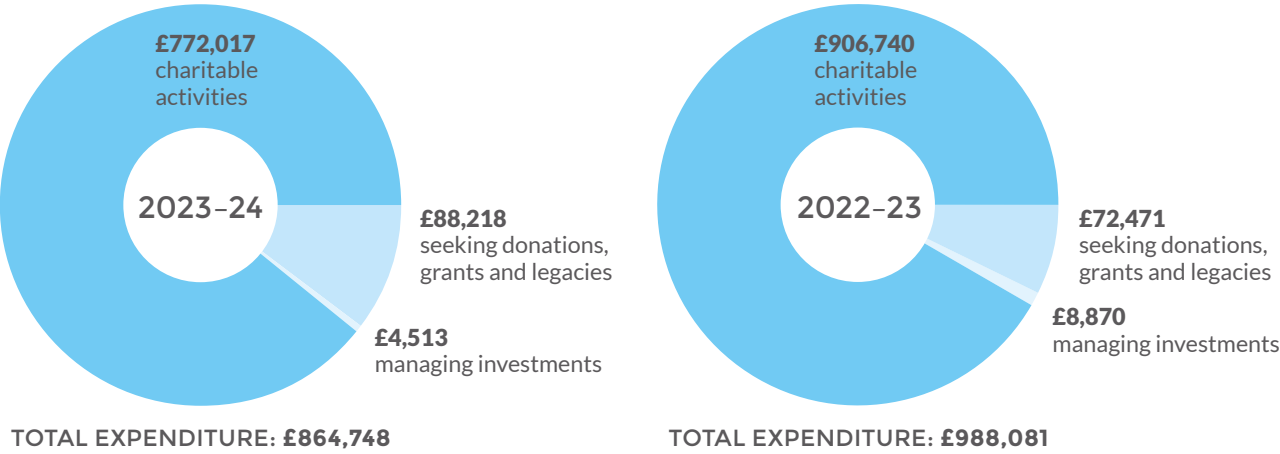


TOTAL INCOME FOR THE YEAR

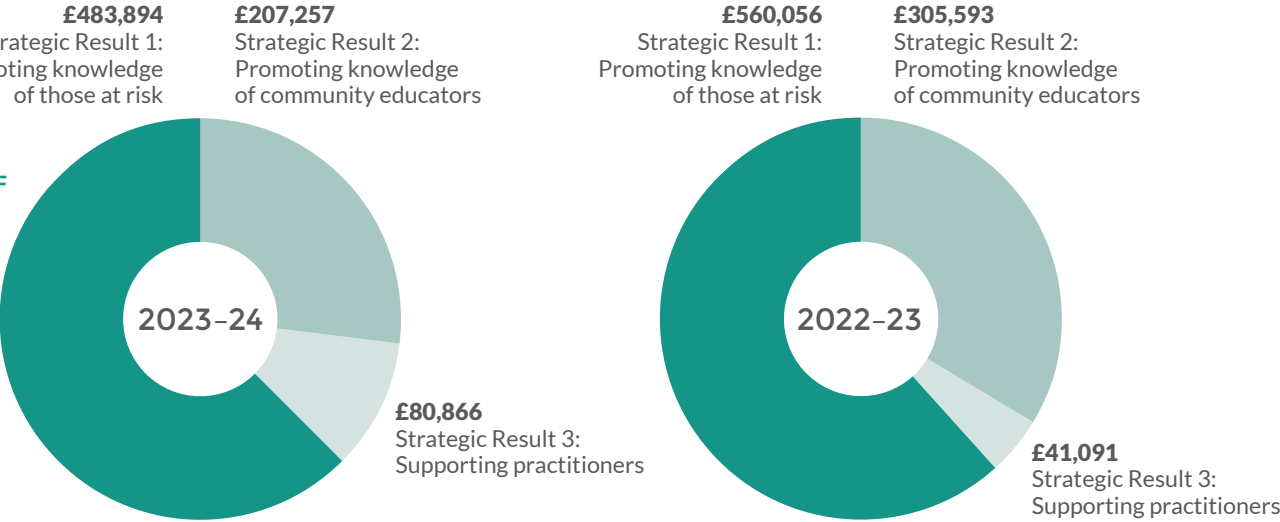


Avert would like to acknowledge and thank the following donors and other civil society organisations for their partnership and support in our strategy: Vitol Foundation, Mercury Phoenix Trust, Gilead Sciences, ViiV Healthcare, The Elton John AIDS Foundation, Risk Pool Fund and VSO, as well as the individual donors who continue to make invaluable contributions.

TOTAL EXPENDITURE FOR THE YEAR



BREAKDOWN OF EXPENDITURE AGAINST OUR CHARITABLE ACTIVITIES







# Organisational information

## TRUSTEES

Professor Simon Forrest (*Chair*)  
 Anna Becker  
 Emily Hughes  
 Carole Leach-Lemens  
 Andrew Walker  
 Max Cuvellier Giacomelli  
 Sam Avrett  
 (*resigned 2 November 2023*)  
 Carol Sherman

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Registered charity number 1074849  
 Registered company number  
 03716796

## COMPANY SECRETARY

Professor Simon Forrest

## BOARD SECRETARY

Kerry Pike (*resigned January 2024*)

## KEY MANAGEMENT PERSONNEL

Sarah Hand, *Chief Executive Officer (CEO)*  
 Simon Moore, *Director of Programmes & Digital Health Strategy*  
 Jon Edgell, *Director of Finance and Operations*

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## AUDITORS

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 Accountants  
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 Chichester PO19 1SY





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