**Recording Details: P002**

Int[[1]](#footnote-1): And the organisation that you work for.

R[[2]](#footnote-2): Well I am the [name of title and organisation], which has now been running for seven years supported by [name of group] which is a charity group that are linked with supported housing and domestic abuse initially. My role has been to promote and support the development of [name of organisation] across Wales obviously with [certain part of] Wales being my patch. We started in 2014 with a team of four, and then added another development officer for [another part of] Wales because basically of the size of population. And then temporarily for the last three years via [name of grant] we’ve had two what we call wellbeing advocates to try and support some of the guys that we work with.

And basically we’re following what was initiated in [name of country] about 20 years ago. The idea of [name of organisation] being a place where originally older guys who were perhaps retired or redundant or with time on their hands wanted to get together. Maybe work on projects, maybe just get the social aspects of it after not really dealing with missing the camaraderie of work or what have you, or just having the time on their hands. Or through bereavement obviously as well. So that’s how we started.

Int: Great, that’s really interesting, thank you. That was a great overview of everything. So you mentioned there about the camaraderie and getting people together. So how much focus is there on preventing loneliness and isolation specifically?

R: They were our by-words at the beginning of this project. It was combatting loneliness and social isolation in older men. And we particularly picked that demographic because there wasn’t anything for older men at the time. And also we actually were quoting that as being an epidemic that was hitting us, and this is obviously pre-COVID. But we were really aware that there was a big issue with older men who were not dealing with isolation and loneliness very well. Not dealing with it as well as perhaps older women, although that’s a slight generalisation. But we targeted this group because there wasn’t really anything for them apart from going to football, playing golf, going to the pub. And we realised that these were people who had life experiences and skills that they could share and maybe even pass on.

And so basically using the models that we’d communicated with in [name of country] and then at the beginning of the project in [name of country], there’s a very big [name of organisation] movement in [name of country]. We realised that there was nothing in Wales. So we started with two groups in Wales in [date], and realised that what we wanted was for every community who could would have a [name of organisation] for the guys in its community. It did slightly morph into the fact that initially we were looking at 50/55 plus, and then basically the guys in the [subgroup of the organisation] once we were talking to groups across Wales were saying “well that doesn’t make sense, what happens if you’re 49 or whatever?” So it became more of a generic men. It is still mostly older men but we decided not to be exclusive.

Int: So you’ve got the strict criteria as such.

R: No, they came up with “well 18 you’re supposed to be a grownup so we’ll go from there”. And 18 means that you don’t have to worry about DBS checking in the same way. So we went with that. And some [subgroups of this organisation] have some young men attend and most [subgroups of this organisation] are as you’d experience them.

Int: And so what’s maybe an example of an activity that might go on in one of the [name of organisation] sessions?

R: Well there’s the traditional model which you’d expect, which is your grandfather’s father’s [place] at the end of the garden on the allotment where they tinker and do things. That’s the first thing that people think of, is they see a lot of twinkly eyed white haired old men fixing stuff and a lot of that does go on. There are some groups that have managed to access premises with a little workshop and they do stuff. They fix stuff sometimes. It’s not “oh here we are, send us all your broken stuff”. Somebody will say “can you do this bench?” And they’ll go “yeah, we’ll do that”. Essentially what they will say is that [that place is for] the men. So although we’re saddled with the word [word contains name of organisation], it is the group that has become important. And so their days, if they’re lucky they do a couple of days a week, most just do one day a week, are basically very much about turning up, putting the kettle on, which we always say is the most important piece of kit in [this organisation].

Kind of putting the world to rights sometimes, but also investigating different projects. So yes we have some that have workshops. We also have some that have basically set up community gardens and taken a vacant patch of land, and basically put planters in and grown stuff. So every single [subgroup of this organisation] is very different. It ideally reflects its community. So in [a certain part of] Wales we’ve got a lot of valley [subgroup of this organisation] where there’s been a strong say mining or steelworks community. [Another part of] Wales is slightly different because 20% of the population are very much coastal towns. You’ve got quite a few retirees, you’ve got people who’ve come over from England. So you’ve got a real mish mash.

Int: So you mentioned briefly about COVID there, and one of the things that we’re interested in then is if you think back to when that first lockdown was happening at the start of the pandemic, what sorts of conversations were being had on the organisational side of things about how technology might be needed to be used for this loneliness and isolation instead of what you would normally be doing?

R: Exactly, this flew in the face of exactly what we’d been basically promoting. What we promoted was get out of your house, come along to your local community centre, [name of organisation], wherever it is you’re meeting. That was the ingredient that actually helps the wellbeing and the mental health of guys, is actually the physical conversation and being there. Their health and wellbeing develops almost by osmosis. In fact one of the guys in the [organisation] has basically come up with health by stealth, which is once that becomes part of their routine we’ve noticed a massive improvement in different people’s mental health, especially if they’ve suffered a bereavement and lost a wife or partner. So when COVID restrictions came into place we were panicking to be honest. Because my job is to go out, it’s wonderful.

My job is to travel round [part of] Wales, talk to groups, do presentations, support them with maybe little grant applications, dialogue with people about getting a room or some premises. Because there is also the aspect of the [name of organisation] that they get is their den if you like. If you go back to making dens in woods it becomes their space. So whether it’s a wooden [place] or a container or a shop front that becomes their space. And suddenly they’re not encouraged to go to that space. So we as an organisation basically quickly, because I’m in [part of] Wales and the rest of my team are in [another part of] Wales. So even before COVID meeting was always mid-way. We’d all meet mid-way. And obviously that’s the geography of Wales. To travel on a train from [part of] Wales you have to go into [name of city] and down to [name of city], and driving isn’t much better.

So we quickly adopted Zooms and Team meetings for the actual team of us so that we could probably be in touch more than we were before. And then we basically communicated this to as many groups as we could. We were worried because we are talking more than most about older guys. And what was really encouraging was that independent of us because of the bonded relationships that they’d built up, some of them did set up WhatsApp groups or Facetime groups or did their own Zoom meetings. So there was a massive breath of relief when we knew that they were keeping in touch. It’s all very different. So basically what’s happened over the last year is you get a core within each group that will have adopted the technology and will be happy to do this. I’m a member of a WhatsApp group with a group on [name of city] and they use it every morning.

Every morning it’s “morning [name]” “morning [name]”, and then a talk about the day’s doings and what’s happened and football. And then obviously earlier this year they were allowed to physically meet so it was “are you going on Monday, I’ll give you a lift” kind of thing. And it actually was only about a third of the actual group, but for them the WhatsApp has been a lifeline. They’ve said this. Other groups have done Zooms and Facetime, which has been more frustrating for a lot of them. We as an organisation basically set up some Zoom presentations. So via our website and via our Facebook page one of my colleagues basically took it onboard to organise every two weeks a Zoom presentation where we would get a guest speaker.

And we would have someone talking about the history of Wales, or we had the youngest clog maker in Britain, and that was on for an hour or two and we would send out the invites. Bearing in mind that we are accessing hundreds of guys the actual pick-up was awful. I think the most we ever had was about 24 people. It was a mixture of the guys don’t want to use technology. Some of them that had smartphones, they just didn’t want to go through that process and do it on their phone, and we had the same ones turning up. So towards the end we actually folded it, put it to sleep for a short while a few months ago because we were actually able to physically get out and start meeting. So it’s dormant at the moment. It’s a possibility of coming up and basically all the talks we have put out on our Facebook so people can access it if they want.

But what we really noticed is that we were hitting maybe 20% of our guys, and we were beginning to talk to [a digitally focused organisation]. We were funded for the first six years by [name of funder] and now we have a different funding group. So we did talk about “should we try and get a big [subgroup of the organisation] load of tablets and train the guys on how to do it?” But it became apparent that they just didn’t want to. So we weathered the storm of last year, we kept our profile, and what we did was we did an online newsletter that we could email to people. And then we also got a hard copy. So as soon as possible I went out and delivered a load of hard copy newsletters to maybe the [subgroup of organisation] leader or the main point of contact. Some of the more able leaders would download it and print it off for their people.

But the same as a national group some of the guys say in your local [subgroup of the organisation] would say “look, I’m only talking to half a dozen guys, I will phone every single one of them or I will get phone calls every week from them”. “And even though we’ll have a Zoom not all of them want to do that”. Whether that is a generational thing I’m not sure. Having done a load of Zooms, a load of Teams meetings and even these Streamyard things I find it quite stressful. All the jokes about your microphone’s not on or we can’t see you or your connection, I find that just an added stress. And as the demographic I work with, there’s always some guys who are quite old but have embraced the technology really well. And we were getting to the point where we were about to think “right, we need to do this with [name of a digital-specific organisation]”. We’d talked to the north and south. And then they relaxed the restrictions and that was when the guys just started to want to get back together. Even if they were just meeting in a park they would do that.

Int: So it sounds like, and correct me I’m wrong, so there was a mix in that COVID, that initial time that you were aware that maybe things might need to be done, and that things might need to be put in place to support the groups. But there was this sense of a lot of spontaneous stuff happening within the groups themselves and they were maintaining themselves by their own communications, is that right?

R: That’s right. Because I was involved in setting a lot of them up, I have this fatherly sense of responsibility and I worry about them. And I’m thinking “how are these guys who are in isolated areas going to cope?” And then when they just got in touch and went “it’s okay, we’ve got a little WhatsApp group” or “we’re doing a Facetime on Thursday if you can join us”. There was a massive sense of relief because we could see the work we’d done over six years disappearing. We could see all that going to pot. It’s a crucial community based thing that was valuable and we could see “we’re going to lose a lot of these groups”. Because for us it’s what we do as a job we thought “well these guys are only doing this one or two days a week, are they going to continue it?” And the fact that I would say 90% of them have in some form, they’ve taken on that mantle of “we’re going to look out for our guys”.

And so the WhatsApp has been amazing really, I think has been probably the best for those people with the right phones. Emails obviously for those people that do their emails, although we are learning that a lot of guys only check their emails once a week. Because a lot of them are retired so it’s a different focus. So we were scared that they would hunker down over the lockdown. We have had some guys who’ve not turned up and not gone back to their local [subgroup of the organisation], but generally the majority of them have and they’re keen to resume. So they’re positive about it.

Int: And do you have a sense, the ones that perhaps did drop away from it or didn’t stay engaged, do you have a sense of maybe what kinds of people they were?

R: Well I think some of the most isolated ones with that. So we have some chaps where their involvement with their [subgroup of the organisation] has been a massive benefit because they’ve been bereaved and because they’re on their own. So we have had incidents of guys perhaps ending up drinking too much. This is obviously pre-COVID when we were doing the [subgroup of the organisation], and just struggling. And then when they’ve been involved in their group that has been a lifeline to them because it’s actually the people they talk to. If you’re only talking to the postman occasionally, and this was the case before COVID that we had people who would only go to the shops once, talk to the postman and they were sitting at home and their television was their best friend. We were dealing with that six years ago, seven years ago.

So my fear was that this pandemic and the restrictions were really going to turn a lot of people off. The ones that have struggled have some level of vulnerability as well. So it’s those that are really isolated, absolutely on their own, but also those that have got maybe an underlying health issue or a partner has, and they’ve shielded and they’ve got used to shielding.

Int: So it’s perhaps even almost a bit of a vicious circle I suppose in the ones that are perhaps the most isolated have then found it more difficult for those reasons to actually engage and keep that going. And so in terms of the technology side of it, I know you’ve said the WhatsApp is probably the main thing, but are you aware of any other things that have been trialled that didn’t work or there was any issues with in terms of the technology itself or the devices, anything like that?

R: I think as I said the Zoom things were really frustrating because you have to take a code. You get the code, you get your link, you miss one digit or one lower case. These guys just want to switch something on and it happens. Because when you make a phone call you put the number in and you speak to the person. And I think both myself and my admin colleague did your questionnaire, and we phoned each other up afterwards and he said to me “so the last bit about which technology worked best for us, what did you say?” And I went “the phone”. And he went “yeah, I said that”. I’ve got daughters who are Twittering and doing everything all the time, and they’ve probably got a USB port on top of their arm somewhere. But the older people, they want to talk to people.

So it’s really easy to talk on the phone because you’re focusing on the voice and the conversation. We’ve noticed when they were doing the Zooms they were really nervous because they could see themselves, they weren’t quite happy to then mute or blank themselves because they thought it was rude. So they’re not going to go “look, there’s my name but you can’t see me” because they thought that was a rude thing to do. At the same time they weren’t happy with “well you need this certain light, and you need to sit here, and you need to get the camera on your laptop or on your computer facing this, and if you can plug in your headphones”. They were like “I just want to talk to somebody”. That’s where our wellbeing advocates have basically over the last few months changed their workload so that they actually basically do phone befriending.

So they’ve worked with various organisations North and South Wales particularly to do with older people. And basically through the [name of organisation] they’ve basically picked up the slack with older men. And they’ve found out that those conversations that they’re having every week are a lifeline for a lot of these guys to talk about. Irrespective of whether they’re having an issue with their housing or stuff. And I’ve also noticed that this year particularly emails, people are a lot tardier in answering emails. You’re almost staring at your screen going “did those get sent?” “I need to check whether I sent those”. “Why haven’t all of those 20 people that I’ve just emailed responded?” And you realise that people are being selective. That comes into the technology side. They’ll do a tier system. I was talking to one chap who lives quite isolated and his television is on straightaway in the morning. He has got a laptop so that’s fine, and then it’s a phone call. He doesn’t want anything else.

Int: And so I suppose the phone then is one that’s stayed the same throughout isn’t it? Whereas the other bits of technology that have been brought in or are more new and using for different reasons, whereas the phone is that constant isn’t it?

R: Yeah absolutely. And also WhatsApp is quite good because they treat it like a text. I WhatsApp my colleague and we talk using the phone with a camera. These guys don’t use their cameras, they just use the WhatsApp in its text format. They’ll do that and it’s great with spelling mistakes. Some of them just text like they speak which is wonderful. But it’s that immediacy, I don’t know whether it’s an old blokey thing but they do do that. The Zooms that I’ve talked to people about, you get a core of maybe half a dozen people in an organisation, in a group, who regularly meet up on Zoom. Any more than half a dozen they really feel not comfortable. Even though there should be more because obviously there’s more members in the [subgroup of the organisation], but most of them eventually honed it down to about half a dozen that would do it regularly.

Int: And do you know then I suppose the flip side of what I was asking before, but then what other perhaps characteristics or similarities of those people that do continue to do it, or are the ones that want to do it?

R: They are a bit more confident, a bit more techy. Tend to be ones that have - and this is going to be a broad minded answer but bear with me - engineer types, guys that are interested in the lathes and the equipment and have got experience of working in maybe larger organisations. Because we have a demographic that most of the guys in [name of organisation] they haven’t got a big pension. We don’t deal with a lot of people who are massively comfortably affluent. These are guys who have worked all their lives, they’ve got their pension. Obviously there are a few anomalies and especially with ex-service guys who’ve got their pension and their service pension. But generally most of the guys are working guys. And so they’ve not had to embrace loads of technology.

I’ve got somebody I’m thinking about who’s worked in technology, worked for aerospace. He wears one of those iWatches that tells him his body core temperature every five minutes. He’s got a phone that he’ll just talk into and say “let me know when this is happening”. Him and his core are fine. But then there are other groups where it’s that confidence, it’s that extra learning thing that they have to do. They’ve retired so they’ve learned all the skills that they’re going to learn, which some of them are massive. And it’s interesting because the patron of the [name of organisation] is a professor at [name of university]. And he wrote two books about the [name of organisation] movement, and the first one was called [name of book]. And that was about the fact that you turn up at a [subgroup of the organisation] that has equipment and you’ll have people that have been using that equipment all their life. But you might have somebody that’s come from say the hotel trade and they don’t know how to.

So they’re sharing their skills, and within that group the guy who’s been used to working in a hotel and is good with people, he will be the guy that is having meetings and talking about funding. Whereas you’ve got the other guys who know how all the equipment works and all the safety, and they can bash a set of shelves together. So you’ve got a mix of experiences through their working lives, and it tends to be the guys that are more confident who’ve been probably dealing with more people, and this is a big generalisation because you’ll get individuals who are just ace. But the ones I’ve noticed who are accessing more of the media tend to fall into that category.

Int: That does make sense. And so I suppose is there scope within your organisation or the representatives within each local one that they could do anything to help people to engage?

R: We have had some people. We got to the doorstep of that as to whether we should get a load of tablets and then go round. And it was “should we just get a load, shall we get one for each [place]?” We’ve gone from two [places] in [date] to nearer 70 in Wales. Some of them fallen off obviously but it’s not really because of COVID. And the idea was “should we get one say tablet for each [subgroup of the organisation]?” Maybe, but then it was like “how is that going to work with the wifi, using a dongle or something?” The good [places], established [places], some of them already have a computer there set up in a little office. But it’s getting the old bloke who has got one of these old brick phones, a Motorola or something, and his philosophy is “I’ve got a mobile phone, it’s for emergencies if I break down because I’ve got a landline”. “I have got a computer but I just use it for emails and doing things on Google”.

So there’s a bit of resistance to having a smartphone, because we have had these discussions. “No, I don’t want one of those”. And also the cost implications. Now I’ve seen in the back of Sunday supplements targeted at older people simple phones with great big buttons and stuff. Something like that. I think it’s the fact that they have to go through so many stages to make the thing accessible. I had a discussion with one guy who was so frustrated because he actually doesn’t even have wifi. He has a landline, a television and he has a mobile phone and they changed his ability to top it up. It was a pay as you go, and he was really upset because he’d got into the habit of knowing how to top it up. You could either buy a little card or you could do it on the phone, and then the provider changed and he was going to have to go into a shop and that was awful.

He was upset that he was going to have to go into a different shop because they’d changed the provider. And this is his rescue phone. You can text him and if the car breaks down kind of thing. And so I found a massive resistance among some people. And also the ones that really don’t want wifi, they just feel it’s another thing. So there is a mixture and I’d say it falls probably about 80/20 against the technology. Again that is a generalisation and that’s just from individual conversations I’ve had. Because it’s changed, a lot of people had old computers and then laptops, and then smartphones came out. And smartphones really throw people. Because you’ve got that amount of power in your hand and you can do anything. And they want things to be easier. I know they are easier.

Int: It’s easy when you know isn’t it, whereas when it’s new it’s different. When you were saying there about it can do everything, is there a sense of fear there maybe? We know that that is there for older people sometimes, that fear of the technology and internet scams, or not wanting to break something. Is there that for these people do you think?

R: There is that definitely. Our wellbeing advocates are both [previous job title] actually. They’re brilliant. Unfortunately we don’t have them forever. So they’ve put out a lot of information about internet scams. As I’m talking to you I’m picturing different chaps that I know throughout [part of] Wales. Even the WhatsApp groups will say “oh it looks like someone’s tried to scam me”. And they are massively scared of somebody, it’s not “oh they’ve taken my savings and I’m skint”. It’s nothing to do with that. It’s the fact that somebody can access their bank accounts and their hard earned pensions. And so there is a fear. It’s a bit like having smart metres as well. There’s a lot of resistance against having smart stuff. So the guys that embrace technology have got cameras in their cars and on their doorbells and they’re happy to have something that opens their curtains.

They are the minority in a huge form. The majority of the guys, it’s too much hard work I think. The thing is they’ll accept a mobile phone that you press the button and it pings on and you dial or text. It’s dead simple. Some of them will go the next step and go “oh you can take photographs with it”. “Oh I’ve got photographs here of stuff I’ve made”. But then the communication aspect of it. Whenever in the past I’ve had presentations and you’ve got a room full of people eating biscuits and having coffee and you’ve done your presentation about it, and you ask questions or there’s interaction. You’ll get some people that will not say anything. They’re like the kids in the classroom at the back. You’ll get the people that are confident enough to speak in a public place, and you’ll get the people that will have a question but get nervous when everybody turns round to stare at them.

That’s what they feel about Zoom or one of those platforms where you can see everybody talking. They get so self-conscious, because they’re used to eye to eye direct talk or as we call it in the [name of organisation] movement shoulder to shoulder. So you actually don’t have to talk directly to someone about any issues, but you can resolve those by chatting while you’re doing something. But if you actually look at people on a Zoom they’re very self-conscious. There’s always the “oh the cat’s come in or this has happened”. But it’s seeing themselves on screen. And then realising that they can see what they’re saying and listen to themselves. There’s a lot of self-consciousness. Even people who are slightly more confident, if they’ve not got experiences of addressing a group of people, suddenly they’re addressing a group of people.

Int: And it’s interesting what you were saying there. There’s almost a sense of then that Zoom environment is almost opposite to the [name of organisation] approach in that being just more next to each other, and it’s a little bit more informal. So being thrown into that Zoom context it sounds like that’s really contrasting with what they might be used to and what it’s about.

R: It is, it’s very anxiety making. And I’m doing it, I’ve got a Zoom meeting and I’m getting a bit anxious. I was due to do a presentation yesterday as an induction and there was a PowerPoint and here’s the link. And I was so chuffed when it got cancelled. And also because you’re watching yourself play with your beard or scratch your ear or your glasses have slipped or the camera has taken your gaze slightly and it’s so distracting. Whereas if you’re talking somebody you’ve got the nuances. And even talking on the phone you get the tone of voice, you get the pause. And I’ve found that with a landline it’s great because you get a good solid connection, but sometimes with a mobile you’re going “no you”, “no go on, it’s okay”. And that’s what they find about Zoom. You get that slight delay.

So it’s hard. I think if we had an ideal situation, and if we could have got funding we’d have rolled out workshops. Well we wouldn’t, we’d have got [a digitally focused organisation} to do it because they know far better. I think normally when we’ve pre-COVID had a presentation or a workshop the guys will go to it as part of their [subgroup of the organisation] when they wouldn’t go to it as an individual. So that would be the key maybe, and also there is a cost implication for a lot of guys.

Int: I suppose the thing with COVID is when it popped up it was under that blanket of the restrictions. So that ideal situation perhaps of embedding the technology within a normal [subgroup of the organisation] situation was just not possible. So it was too late I suppose to then just go back and do it wasn’t it?

R: Definite hindsight thing. If we’d have known. But we do things in the past, things like prostate cancer awareness, triple A, which we’ve got guys to have checks on aortic aneurisms and even bowel cancer checks. And because we can deliver it through the [name of organisation] model we can actually reach guys who won’t do it through their GP. So that would be the slight crack in the door to future getting hold of them. We’re going into another odd phase now. Obviously in Wales I think most of the guys feel that they’ve been quite sensibly supported. We still have to wear masks on public transport, in shops, they have restricted their activities many of them. And the opening of their [subgroup of the organisation] in about May when we got the green light was a massive lifeline to many of them.

So whether we get through to the other side of this. It’s one of those things that you think “right okay, if we could give everybody a very basic smartphone that was really simple, that had a really simple way of accessing it”. And especially to those guys that don’t have wifi because I suspect there’s a resistance because of their age. It’s a bit like my grandmother who was born in the 1880s couldn’t understand electricity at all. She thought it would come out of the sockets. If there was a general initiative to say “right, we’re going to give every older person a really simple Dobro phone that has these things on it”. It’s a bit like having a panic button isn’t it? But you see the other thing is that they pick up on the idea that they’re going to lose their landlines and everything’s going to be wifi. If you’ve got a panic button and it’s not going to work like that. They pick up on these things that are relevant to older people. Because as you get older, trust me, you get achy and bits don’t work as well.

Int: So it’s weighing up what you’re comfortable with and what might be of benefit but what you’re prepared to actually explore I suppose isn’t it?

R: Yeah, but the contrast is interesting, is how many of them have Netflix or Amazon. So they’ll have a satellite dish. And you’re thinking “well if you do that”. So I think it’s always how you initiate this kind of idea.

Int: And I suppose then because I think it asked this in the survey as well about looking forward, and you were just talking there about lessons learned and thinking about the future. Obviously the model is face to face and that’s what it’s based on, and you had remote things that did pop up a little bit later. But what do you see in the future in terms of is there a place for that technology side of it to continue regardless of COVID and anything like that?

R: I think it’s another weapon in our armour. We’ve talked about this, my team. Essentially our goal is to get people meeting face to face because that is the positive energy. It’s really hard when someone says “I’ve come to this meeting because I’m lonely and I don’t see anybody”. That is a really hard thing (a) to confess to, but (b) to understand. And what you find is that the guys understand that. They’re not all touchy feely don’t get me wrong, there’s still that blokiness of “right, we’ll put the kettle on and do this”. But there is a myriad of different facets to it. When we started we said “right, we’ll do a website”. We got a website designed, and then it was “right, we’ll do a Facebook”. And I’m like “oh okay, Facebook, I get that”. Then it’s Twitter, and I’m like “well I don’t do Twitter” but some of my team do Twitter.

And then the next thing “well we don’t do TikTok” but that could be the next thing. And then we have a YouTube channel because a lot of other [subgroup of the organisation] in other parts of the world have that. So YouTube is useful for learning things like how to use a piece of equipment. So we have that to promote what we’re doing. So for me this very quick experience of things like Microsoft Teams and Zoom and Streamyard has been really interesting. And it’s there as another string to the bow, but it doesn’t replace the key tenants of what we do.

Int: That completely makes sense.

R: The only example is I’ve got a guy who is a fantastic wood turner, and so as well as being involved in this local group he is involved in a wood turning group. And in that role he’s always looking on YouTube for different things to do and things to make. But his wood turning is a bit separate to his involvement in his [name of organisation] because that’s more of a social aspect. So he’s more than capable to see the benefits of being able to go on YouTube and learn how to do almost anything. I think it’s a question of educating. It’s re-learning. Some people feel they’ve been topped up as much as they’re going to be when they’re 70, and some people have a different approach. And I think for us it would be another string to the bow. It’s just a question of delivery.

Int: Do you think there would be any plans from the organisation side of it around evaluating the use of technology or how it’s been going or what might be useful?

R: We can’t do that, we don’t have enough team members, and we’ve actually lost a couple who’ve moved on and our funding is always fluid. So we wouldn’t have the ability. What I’m talking to you about is as a representative of my team of four that were seven and will probably be two in the New Year actually. The general consensus of working with [places of their organisation] across Wales, and obviously I represent from the tip of [name of city] down to about [name of other city], and then my other colleagues obviously deal with the [name of region] which is 80% of the population of Wales. I deal with some of the more hilly bits. And there are slight differentiations there as well because [part of] Wales, the [name of region] has three cities. You’ve got [name of the three cities].

We’ve got [name of city] and kind of [name of city] and there’s a difference. So what you’ve got in an urban area you’ve got more people on top of each other. You’ve got a more communicable society there. Whereas in some of the smaller towns it’s been a different role. Nonetheless really important but slightly different because they’ve not got access to as many say support groups. So we know that everything happens in [name of city], and because of the size of the population [in that part of Wales] you’ve got far more access to more social workers, Mind workers. Whereas up here they’re scattered and far trickier, and also the community groups. So it’s about getting the information out there which we tend to do via our website, Facebook and emails at the moment.

If we could have done a survey we really would, and that’s why myself and my colleagues joined yours because we thought it was massively important. But we realised that this actually is a string to the bow. It can’t replace what the chaps we work with need, but actually once they’ve realised it’s not as terrible and they could perhaps get more experience of it, it would be okay. But I think what happened to a lot of the older guys is they got into a certain routine over lockdown that was going to shops, going to the chemist, maybe going to the GP, going for a walk. And then this might be the one time they had a technology meeting was Zoom or Teams or stuff like that. And so it wasn’t high on their list.

Int: Just on that I suppose when you were saying before about the percentage of people that did keep engaged and did keep on and did use the technology side of it. What do you think was the motivation for those people? I know you talked about their confidence and perhaps that more practical aspect, but what do you think was going on there in terms of motivating them?

R: That’s easy, they were looking after their guys. These are people that we sometimes refer to as [name of organisation] leaders. They might be the sort of person that’s perhaps more confident in writing letters, putting in applications to [funder], dealing with emails. So they naturally may be the chair of the [name of organisation] or the secretary. It’s hard to explain this. The guys in the [subgroup of the organisation] care. One of the minor things is we care but we’re not carers. So they try and be as open as they possibly can to people joining the [name of organisation]. They welcome anybody. It’s very rare that they turn people away. So a lot of the [subgroup of the organisation] are run by the guys themselves. They’re not trained in OT or any kind of social work or mental health nursing. So they care, and they will bend over to try and accommodate somebody who maybe has mental health issues, maybe doesn’t deal very well with being with groups of people. But they’re keen to be inclusive. So it’s generally been somebody who’s been a hub if you like.

Int: So a sense of the responsibility that they feel for the others, and keeping that going. That’s really interesting. And that there’s that role perhaps in all of the groups or a lot of the groups and someone’s got that role it seems.

R: It’s very reflective of modern times. We don’t claim to be rocket scientists. We stole our concept or the concept of [name of organisation] was probably stolen from [name of organisation], which has been going for hundreds of years. It’s just worked out as a blokey kind of thing. But having said that we have now had a women’s group established and calling themselves [name of organisation]. And particularly in [part of] Wales there’s a group who set up something called [name of organisation]. And they’re working with a particular demographic of young people 14 to 20 something who have struggled with school. They follow the same tenants [sic] except they probably do more fun things with scooters. Definitely the [name of organisation] do a lot of virtual media games where they’ve got headsets and they’re communicating with a different group somewhere else.

Our guys aren’t going to do that. They might try it but they’re wanting a cup of tea and a Hob Nob and to have a good chat, and to maybe make a bird box or a bird table or fix a fence. The model is basically about supporting your community on your doorstep. People get the wrong idea of “oh it’s all men”. It’s not at all. Some [places] because they have a very small population don’t call themselves [name of organisation], they call themselves a Community [name of organisation] or [it] is named after the town that they’re in and it’s just [name of organisation]. And they’re there supporting isolated and vulnerable people whatever. And so it has mutated into this support. We did have one group on [name of city] that pre-COVID basically had the local year six children coming in to help the older guys with their tablets, and they helped them with planting vegetables and bulbs.

That’s where you’ve got the cross generational thing. But people go “oh it’s such a great concept”. It’s actually what you should be doing on your doorstep really. It’s that idea of your tribe is the people that live in your area, and the [name of organisation] aspect of it, this is just a space for men. Some groups do it brilliantly, they have a day for men and then a day for women, and then a mixed day. So that you know that you can do this. Then you get a lot of the guys who have abdicated responsibility of technology to their wives. So it’s a real mish mash and obviously because no one saw it coming in any shape or form, the technological side has still taken us by surprise. And although we’ve seen the benefits it hasn’t worked as well as we thought.

Int: It’s really interesting that you say the mixture of how it’s landed with different people and what the different reasons might be for that. And interesting as well about the sense of the different areas that you cover and almost the whole project is aimed at reducing the isolation, but some of the communities are actually more isolated anyway more geographically. So that’s another level to it isn’t it that you’re having to consider.

R: Things like buses. When you get older buses and people who aren’t driving. For me the joy of my job has been the opportunity to meet communities and see there are so many examples of “if only everybody could see what you’re doing in that community”. It’s fantastic, and you see people in their communities pulling together to support. That’s the key. It’s really hard if you’ve got a vibrant life, I’ve got children, dog, cats, but when you meet people who haven’t. The isolation and loneliness we were saying is worse than smoking. Everyone’s heard that one, but we were using that six or seven years ago. That the effect on our mental health from isolation and loneliness is crippling. The act of getting somebody over the threshold into a group, letting them sit at the back with a cup of tea and just absorb it, and seeing the difference.

The testimonies I’ve had from individuals about the effect of being involved in a particular group of [name of organisation] even if it’s a day a week on their life is greater than we anticipated. So we were really scared when the COVID thing came because it undid all our work. We were just grateful that some people within those little groups had the foresight to say “well I’ll show you how to do this on your phone [name], and we can do this every morning” or “I can help you set up your computer and we’ll just have a meeting”. And even though it isn’t the be all and end all it has saved a lot of people.

Int: That makes sense. We’re hoping as part of all of this to be able to talk to some older adults about their experiences as well, and I don’t know if it would be something that’s possible on your end, but we might be contacting you again separately just to see if there’s a way that there might be a possibility of helping us to recruit some people to talk to us about their experience. No pressure today about if that’s possible or not, but if we could drop you a line about it.

R: Absolutely, that’s easily done. We’ve had a lot people come to talk to our [subgroup of the organisation]. There’s a group in [name of city], [name of city] Opera, who are actually doing the [name of organisation] opera. They understand it. So a lot of our guys are very amenable to having a chat probably on the phone, but to explain what their experiences are. Because it’s for this movement, they might not have done it as an individual but they’re more likely to do it under the auspices of [name of organisation]. It’s one of those things that once you start doing it, it’s an odd title but we’re saddled with it. I did have a Zoom meeting about two months ago with representatives from the [list of four organisations and countries], and a chap from [name of country] who was saying “well we haven’t got an association but we’re actually bigger than Wales”.

So it’s a spreading movement if you like. And for a guy in his local firstly the sense of belonging is massive. Then the sense of camaraderie and somebody who is at the end of the phone. But then also the fact that they can belong to the Welsh [name of organisation] or there’s a UK [name of organisation], there’s a Scottish [name of organisation]. They can tap into all the different aspects of all these different groups, and what they make or what they bake or what they cook or what they do. So once you’ve got that sense of “well I have a feeling of belonging” that helps you deal with the other aspects of your life.

Int: Absolutely, it sounds brilliant and amazing for it to be so wide reaching as well, worldwide, it’s great.

R: I know.

Int: So thank you so much. That’s all of my questions. Was there anything else you wanted to share or mention or ask?

R: No, I meant to mention, just because we have a lot of carers, but that’s another conversation to have isn’t it? The situation that carers have found themselves in. So I’m just going to throw that in there that we have a lot of guys who are carers and their [subgroup of the organisation] day is their respite. But no, if you said “what’s your wish list?” If we could have national across the UK funding. Everyone’s aware that all the children in schools were getting laptops and tablets and stuff. I think they need to look at that for older people as well. I can’t remember what the name of those phones are that you see in the back of the supplements that do everything but are really big for your little bendy fingers. If there was the technology that could make a very simple smartphone that people could access this technology on I actually feel certain that we certainly in Wales could roll out the training. And then in the likelihood that we get another wave of something or another pandemic, people have access to more methods of communication.

Int: So it’s about learning isn’t it, and then trying to be more prepared. But you as an organisation having the support, resources, funding, etc, that goes with that to make it happen, and it’s not always possible overnight is it, and that’s actually what happened before.

R: Absolutely.

Int: And just when you mentioned then about carers, that carers population, were they people you felt that stayed more engaged over COVID or that maybe did drop away?

R: I would say the latter. If they were shielding. The lack of services from social services in communities that were in place pre-COVID have still not resumed. So the carers, and unpaid carers, have been more isolated than ever.

Int: And so the technology wasn’t enough or wasn’t suitable.

R: No, again it depends on the individual but generally because of their situation the carers were really left out.

Int: And it’s obviously an important part of the group that you have anyway, and you can see that would be all over as well, not just even the smaller communities definitely. Well thank you so much, you’ve given me so much information there that’s so helpful. It’s really been interesting talking to you. [information removed for confidentiality]

[CLOSE]

1. Interviewer [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Respondent [↑](#footnote-ref-2)