**Recording Details: P004**

R[[1]](#footnote-1): I work for [name of organisation] and I’m [work title], which my kind of area that I focus on, there’s five or six different areas that my teams work on, for the purpose of this interview it will probably be more highlighted and focused on the digital support that we provide as well, so we’ve got a digital support team established working across the city, but I also [work within] our adult learning team, [work within] our volunteering provision that we provide as well, and a team that is called [name of team] but what they do is they support individuals who work for [name of organisation] upskill in some capacity. But I work in a wider team or I’ve worked within [advice] service, which primarily supports individuals who are living in the [name of city] area move back into employment. Predominantly the customers that we engage with on that side of our services are in poverty in some situation, they’re either looking to find employment, upskill to find more employment opportunities, or look to just develop their skillset in readiness for when they are looking to move back into employment.

Int[[2]](#footnote-2): Within that then, how many of those people that you’re working with often are older adults, would you say?

R: So, the way the team is split, our digital support team predominantly, I don’t know, you’re from Bath, aren’t you? Yeah, so in the [name of city] area we have [a certain area] which is predominantly very low in poverty, ethnically diverse and stuff like that, but our digital team, over the last year or so we’ve really focused on working in [another area of the city], which is primarily for an older demographic of individuals. So, of course tackling social isolation, older individuals who have been shielding in some capacity and who may be cut off from their normal kind of activities, is what we targeted way back when we started to reshape the team. But additionally, like our employability teams are split into, so we have a team that supports 16-24 year olds and a team that supports 25 plus as well. And then we have drop in facilities, sorry, my phone’s going like mad back there and I don’t know why. We have a team that supports individuals just dropping in on our facilities. The demographic is quite wide and varied though, I wouldn’t say we have a specific targeted over 55 kind of team. We do work, and I don’t know if you’ll be interviewing anyone, we do have [another service] that support people who are generally of a, they do support a wider demographic than this but they do support individuals who are over 55 and socially isolated as well, which is managed by one of our colleagues in the local authority as well. So, we do try and work in partnership with their team as well.

Int: OK, so you were saying there about targeting the different areas and the people within that with the slightly different issues. So, how much generally then is the focus on preventing loneliness and social isolation in everything that’s happening?

R: It is a focus and it’s been a key focus, but at the same time, all individuals have become a bit of a key focus, so ensuring that we are trying to support people who do need the support essentially, but that was one thing that we weren’t, one thing, that’s a terrible way of describing it, that is one area that we weren’t really primarily focused on prior to the pandemic, but obviously the course and the realities of individuals, I think in [name of city] 8000 people were advised to shield at the onset of the pandemic, which meant that they weren’t accessing our support, so I was kind of repurposed to helping out with a food parcel delivery service for people who were shielding, but then we also started developing a tablet gifting scheme [sounds like 04:01] for individuals as well, trying to buy data for individuals, and then trying to somehow, in some way, develop people’s digital skills from distance, which proved fairly difficult. Obviously over the last year or so we have been able to get back out in the community and raise our profile in some capacity, but yeah, it became a much more significant focus for our service area. Traditionally we would support anybody who was in poverty more than anybody who was socially isolated, but then with the way the team has expanded and the focuses have changed, it has become a priority for us.

Int: Yeah, that makes sense, so it was hand in hand with the pandemic response as well that that came about?

R: 100%, yeah, yeah.

Int: You mentioned then about you had a tablet gifting scheme and there was internet access. Can you just tell me a bit more then about the digital stuff that was going on, the kind of things that happened in response to the pandemic?

R: Yeah, so we [inaudible 05:02] to some of our grant funding, again internally and externally applying for opportunities, we created an accessible tablet gifting scheme for individuals who met a certain criteria, people who were socially isolated or unable to access, shielding, people in poverty, looking to get back into work, there was a wide criteria to it. So, I don’t want to just say that we were targeting socially isolated people but again that was something that we incorporated within this. Prior to the pandemic I don’t think we would have ever considered anybody socially isolated. So, yeah, there was a simple application form, we run a bit of a publicity campaign, I think we posted it on our social media pages, or [name of organisation] social media pages, and the uptake instantly was through the roof, which was good but again, I don’t want to describe it as such but it may have been the wrong kind of client group, because our promotion was via social media, now anybody, most individuals who would have seen it on social media would have had some sort of, might not have been isolated. So, we did have to kind of re-examine how we were doing that, so we worked with our key partners, third sector organisations in the local area to try and support individuals who were the key demographic, who were isolated. We contacted community groups and our anchor organisations [sounds like 06:25] as well and our mutual aid groups that were established during the pandemic as well to see if we could promote it that way rather than just saying, ‘Look, here we go, everyone can apply’, we were trying to link in with the partners who were offering tablet gifting schemes, such as colleges, if there was an 18 year old who did want to apply, so we were trying to signpost to other services where applicable, and again, just try and support the key demographic, which was, to be honest, the gap in provision where we found or certainly I found or our team found in terms of people who weren’t able to access tablet gifting schemes were people who were socially isolated, generally, so that was the kind of area that we did focus on pretty much from the outset. And it’s still going on, we are still providing the tablet gifting scheme as well.

Int: What about the internet access, is that something that people had already or needed help with?

R: No. So, again, a lot of people needed help with internet access, so we provided three month data and then again trying to access different pots of funding for people who didn’t have a telephone line or didn’t have internet access in their home because, again, it may be standard for all of us to just jump on and you have a phone line and you set up your internet access, but a lot of people weren’t aware of that sort of stuff. So, yeah, we did have to purchase that and then again of course three months down the line that would cause a few other complications, so we were looking for solutions for that as well, which kind of have been rectified as well, we are trying to work with a lot of other organisations who are maybe able to access funding that we’re unable to do so. The challenge then again was to ensure that individuals were able to A, know how to use the tablet rather than it just growing dust, and then understanding how to use Teams and Zoom and stuff like that. So, we were providing a telephone service on the onset because our teams aren’t home visiting teams, so we were providing a telephone service. And there’s two things that I say I can’t train or teach anyone, I can’t teach anyone how to speak English or write English because you don’t remember how you learn it, and the same with a computer, I grew up around a computer, so that brought a different set of challenges for the team. So, we did have to reshape how we were delivering, what the expectations of the team were for the first up until, probably up util the end of last summer really. Well, maybe not actually, a little bit longer, probably up until the start of spring this year where the team really started to change in terms of when we were back out in community facilities. We were trying to link in or refer individuals to other organisations who could take on visits, which would not just ease it on us, I don’t want to describe it that way, but the individual was also getting very frustrated with like, when you say, ‘Press this button’, I could tell you, it’s easy, it’s easy for me to press that button, but at the same time it’s not so much for somebody who has been digitally excluded all their lives, essentially.

Int: Yeah, and it’s a specific thing all of its own, isn’t it, and I think that comes to light quite quickly it sounds like. So, the uptake that you had, the people that were engaging with the tablet gifting and the internet access and that ongoing support, were there particular people, and I know we’re sort of specifically looking at older adults, but maybe within that, certain types of people, certain groups that were more engaging, or …?

R: Certainly clients or our services in the north of the city have been much better accessed by an older demographic of individuals, which is what we wanted, but I wouldn’t say that there has been some disparity in terms of individuals who are engaging ourselves, they come from all walks of life, they’re from different ethnic backgrounds, they’re from religious backgrounds, different age groups. There hasn’t been one specific area that I would say has been more widely accessed. Again, like I said, we have specifically targeted, not specifically, I shouldn’t say that, we did try to target older individuals, which probably has meant we have had an older group engage with us in some capacity, but that’s because of the additional work we put in rather than saying it’s been accessed by X group.

Int: Just thinking back then to when it was the very start of the lockdowns and everything was happening, it sounds like you put a lot in place relatively quickly to get all that going, but what were the kinds of conversations that were happening on your organisation’s side of it about how this might go, the pros and cons, what might happen, what were you thinking of?

R: Please don’t quote me on this, I know it’s being recorded but a lot of the processes, I find as a [work title], not disappeared but things became easier because there was a need to get things established fairly quickly. And like I said earlier, I didn’t get repurposed as such but I went to drop off some laptops to a building and the next thing I know, the next eight weeks I’m talking about food and distributing to like X households per day sort of thing. Things just happened in that nature, teams did react quickly, and I think the organisation was very proactive in terms of setting things up. And I’m not trying to blow my own trumpet but we set up our [name of project] page, some making for donations, we were contacting everybody who was shielding, we had loads of staff just calling everybody, we had our food distribution stuff set up. Of course, the more digital support that we were providing took a little bit longer to set up because it was priority by priority, but I do think it was a very quick turnaround from [the end of] March to [the beginning of April], so much had been done in such a short span of time. And it was just people, I think a lot of people were pitching in rather than, we had a lot of people disappear at the same time, and think, I get to work from home for god knows how long, but at the same time there was a real kind of togetherness as well.

Int: And so, there was the bits that you were trying technology wise, and was there anything you were trying that wasn’t working or that you started to roll out or you thought about trying that didn’t work so well or you didn’t see the benefit?

R: We did a load of, I don’t want to describe it as digital training but we did a lot of online kind of training sessions, and what we found was the attendance on those was not very good to be honest, because again, it’s our demographic and our individuals and our support services are traditionally for individuals who can’t access digital equipment, so replicating it, it just meant that people weren’t attending as regularly. But fortunately, because we were an essential service, we came out of that fairly quickly, from like last August we were able to return to some sort of face-to-face delivery. But that is the one thing that I would say, is our digital attendance sessions for our kind of publicised services just weren’t great. And there’s still, to an extent, certain elements of our digital support services, digital services or courses aren’t well attended now, because again, it’s easy for something else to come up, it’s easy for you not to join an online session, whereas if you’re face to face there’s that, I don’t want to describe it as professionalism but more of a courteous effort to attend a session, essentially.

Int: That’s interesting to bring up. So, do you think then when there was the rolling out of digital stuff to combat the issues that have been created, but then it almost creates a vicious circle, would you say, of that then people wouldn’t engage?

R: Yeah, and it’s an absolute irony because, like I said, we traditionally do support people who are digitally excluded. The only way we could publicise information was digitally. The only way we could engage people was over the phone or via Teams, stuff like that. It was an irony, it was one that we couldn’t get around but we had to try and be proactive in some capacity as well, so we were trying to different things, again when we could we were trying to book rooms and use facilities that we have access to in our hubs so we could have the social distancing and a customer would be on a laptop in one room and so we had ordered the Chrome Books and a member of staff would be in another room so they could provide the service that way. So, they were at least in the same building, that they could have that kind of communication, but again, we had to ensure we were keeping staff and customers safe as well, so that would be more in the case of, I don’t want to describe it as an emergency, but something that required that sort of appointment. But yeah, it was a cycle. And I still laugh about it now because pretty much all we’d do is promote stuff digitally. We’re doing [inaudible 15:31] radio ads, but the traditional footfall that we used to access in our community facilities had disappeared tenfold, so we still have to try and do something, but I know we’re not going to reach our key demographic.

Int: So, the people that you did feel were engaged and they did take up things and they did come along to things or log on however it looked, what do you think that was about for them? What made it easier for them or what made it more likely they would join in? Who were those people?

R: Not a plethora of reasons but some people who were a little bit more active, some people who were a bit frustrated by the pandemic and wanted to reengage with the community groups. People who were socially isolated and who were cut off were accessing our provision as well. And then again it was just a lot of people who were just ready to get back out there. And again, I still think that of course Covid hasn’t gone anywhere, with Omicron and that version, it was people who felt a little bit comfortable engaging rather than people, I’m trying to watch my words here who say people who felt a little bit more comfortable living with Covid, because it’s not that as such, but people who were ready to reengage in some capacity because they were either challenged mental health, they were ready, they were physically prohibited from going out and they needed to do something, people who were actively seeking in the job market and wanted to take opportunities that were available at that time or still are at this time were the kind of individuals who were engaging with us, essentially. We weren’t having anyone really mandated, we don’t have anyone mandated to us, we’re not a mandatory service in any way, but we do have a lot of referrals from [name organisation] and other organisations as well, but none of that was really happening so people who were engaging with us wanted to engage with us. But yeah, they were the main reasons, that readiness to get reengaged in some capacity.

Int: And so, you mentioned about some of the support needing to be provided with the technology side of it, so what kinds of things were things that went wrong or things that you needed to, because I know that’s something that places have, it’s all very well putting the service in place, but then you also need something to kind of, what happens when it goes wrong, what happens when it breaks, and all of that.

R: Yeah, and that was the kind of thing that we did discuss. So, even though we were awarding it, we couldn’t arrange a tablet loan scheme with all of our [technology] infrastructure that we’ve got in place, which is why we went for the tablet gifting scheme and we did put the onus on the customer where there was an agreement that they would sign that if anything did happen in the case that it would be their responsibility. We would try and support where possible, but it was an agreement that the customer would have to sign alongside us if anything did happen.

Like I said, one of the other key issues was that data access after a certain period of time, which was I think one in four, one in five customers would return to us in some capacity just to have that conversation. We have had a couple of tablets, not as many as I thought, but there have ben a few that have been damaged. We did also have our adult learning team are successful in terms of a laptop loan scheme and our Welsh government supported our communities for work teams with a laptop loan scheme as well. There have been some difficulties there trying to get some laptops back in some capacity as well, so they’re the kind of difficulties that we have faced really.

Int: And especially when things are happening at scale and in a hurry as well, it’s tricky.

R: Yeah, but they were expected challenges as well. We knew that we weren’t going to get 100% of our laptops back. We knew 100% of the tablets weren’t going to remain fit for purpose for god knows how long sort of stuff as well. But it doesn’t make it any easier when those conversations are happening.

Int: I’m understanding from the way you’re saying it that the scheme was there in place say for the tablets, and so people would hear about it and then come to you rather than, was it also something that came up as an offer maybe if they were contacted about something else and you also would offer it as an option that they may not have heard about otherwise?

R: Yeah, yeah, so it was promoted and like I said, we were working with a lot of our partners to promote the opportunities as well. And we were calling everybody who was on the shielding list and we would again say, I wasn’t really involved in that side of stuff but I think there were three or four key questions, so there was, do you need help with any food or shopping, medication, are you socially isolated, which would then lead onto a conversation about digital equipment, so there was that raising of the awareness of the support that we can provide.

Int: And I just wonder in that then, it may not have been yourself that was having those conversations, but if that was being offered and suggested to use technology, what some of the responses were for people who thought, oh no, that’s not for me, or what that might have been about.

R: At that time I wasn’t really involved. I could tell you a little bit about the conversations that I traditionally have, and people are afraid here, people who haven’t used digital equipment are afraid of digital equipment because it’s a whole different ball game. It is like learning a whole new language, it is very challenging to establish those skills and people will put confidence skills [sounds like 21:07], I don’t need to use a computer, why do I need to use a computer, I’ve got this, my daughter does everything for me, my son does everything for me. And those conversations are still continuing with certain individuals but we’re trying to highlight, look, it’s taking the pressure off your daughter, it’s look at what you can do for yourself, you don’t need to go to the bank every single week while Covid is still rife. We’re trying to highlight the things that you can do digitally to ensure your own safety as well but I will also say there’s much more people wanting to develop their digital skills as well and gain an understanding of how to use a laptop tablet, this sort of thing. But even to myself, I only use a laptop for work, I have my phone, I don’t have any other digital equipment, I don’t need to use anything else, essentially, so I kind of understand it and appreciate it as well. And like I’ve used iPhone for 12 years, if you put a Samsung in my hand, I’m going to throw it back at you because I don’t know how to use it, so I appreciate the way that some customers do feel at times as well.

Int: Yeah, and it’s interesting because we know that there’s this barrier around almost a fear of the technology and not wanting to break it, and there’s also this element of internet scams and security and that, and I think it sounds like is that something then that was coming up for people?

R: Yeah, sorry, I should have said, that was something that was really highlighted more recently as we’ve continued to develop our services. The amount of people who are wary of online safety, so we are trying to develop courses, not accredited courses, to make people aware of how to make sure their equipment is safe, not teaching people about cookies and that sort of language but making them aware of how to put passcodes on, when to click a link and when not to click a link, making sure about how to use internet banking in a safe kind of manner as well. So, that was something that was really highlighted. Like you said, it was the fear of using digital equipment but the element of people not feeling safe doing stuff online was, I didn’t realise how large of a concern that was for people. I knew it was but I’d say it’s the second or third or fourth most reason that we have people saying why they don’t want to use digital equipment. And people think Facebook and those kind of scams and data being ripped off, quite rightly, I’m the same, I never accept any sort of recording mechanism, I try not to anyway, I’ll close the page sort of stuff. So, it is being highlighted.

Int: And when people would say that and your staff would be saying, ‘But what about this’, and saying the benefits, does that work, can you get people on board?

R: Yeah, so again, I don’t mean this in a disrespectful manner to any of the customers that we’re engaging with, but the concerns that they have about online safety they won’t be engaging in any kind of manner that would, the things that they’re discussing, if you know what I mean. So, we try and say, look, the more things that you need to be concerned about is putting a passcode on your tablet, so we do have those conversations with individuals. Like I said, a lot of it is brought up and led by the customer, I was in one of our buildings the other day and I was just overhearing a member of the team supporting a customer who was saying, ‘Look, I want to do my shopping online with Tesco but I don’t want to save my banking details’, but they were doing it through the internet so we downloaded the app for them, made it secure, made sure that they were aware. So, it is trying to find the alternatives is what we try and do. We haven’t got a book, we haven’t got a handbook to say, right, this is as staff what you need to do, our service is much more client led.

Int: Yeah, that makes sense, it’s almost a balance between what the customer might be saying they’re worried about perhaps isn’t relevant for what they’re probably doing anyway, so it’s maybe trying to explain that and meet in the middle.

R: Yeah, 100%, and like I said, I don’t want to speak disrespectfully of the customers that we work with, but like I said, a lot of the safety issues that they may hear about would be, like I said, like clicking the emails, spam emails to hide from individuals, yeah, it’s just little stuff like that, it’s always the worst case scenario. And again, we relate to the customers, like I’ve told customers about how I’ve had my account frauded and stuff like that, and that reassuring kind of nature for individuals as well, because it can happen to anyone, even if you haven’t got a digital footprint, your information is all still online, if you’re registered to vote in some capacity as well.

Int: Yeah, it’s the balance between the benefit, helping us, but we need to not worry too much about some things that might stop us. It’s a difficult one to manage. So, you said about some of the examples there like people being able to set things up online and do their online shopping. So, what are some of the examples of the successes that you know where people have really engaged and it’s gone well for them?

R: A lot of community groups went online in some capacity, so that was the main thing, helping people get set up to join their friends, neighbourhoods or communication groups in some sort of manner. Like I said, I do [work within] our adult learning team as well so a lot of people to try and join and develop their skills to the same capacity as well. Our local hubs established a community inclusion team, so they were doing like virtual gardening clubs or friends and neighbour groups for language skills and development, stuff like that. We work with our friends and neighbour group in [name of city] as well. Just about really getting people engaged back in the community, through the winter, through last winter anyway more so was the highlight that I would say. But again, that was again a little bit of a focus, it was removing that socially isolated barrier, essentially.

Int: And so, that was mostly things that would have been running face to face but they were moved online?

R: Yes, yeah, so again it was that helping people transition from that face to face to online kind of learning, community groups, facility, anything like that. This is a story that sticks in my mind. We had a lady who came to one of drop in facilities and she had a tablet but she didn’t really know how to use it, so she wanted to find out more. And she lives in one of the more affluent areas in [name of city] but what she was saying was every Sunday there was the church that she used to attend, that went online, but she used to come to the library, not open on a Sunday, and sit outside, just so she could connect to the Wi-Fi. She had Wi-Fi in her home, she didn’t know how to connect to it or anything like that, and there was no real support network, so it was about, like I said, it’s just a story that sticks in my mind because I think of this old lady sat outside the hub on a rainy day with her church group, which is the kind of thing that we were trying to avoid doing.

Int: There must be so many examples when you start to really think about it. And I suppose there’s something interesting around the people who are isolated, and when you say she might have had no support network or not close by, with the pandemic that exposed that for people more than we would have maybe known about before. And so, with the digital side of things, do you know if there’s a difference there with people who have support in place, maybe they’ve got family involved who can help them set things up, but then perhaps they’re the people who are a little bit less isolated, so then versus the other people who don’t have that around them. Is that a different provision or is it …?

R: Do you know what, it’s been a bit of a mixed bag. We’ve had a lot of people who have been supported by their family members with, individuals who have had tablets sent to them from their family, but their family don’t live in the local area, they live in like, I don’t know, 150 miles away. So, they’ve got this kit, don’t know what to do with it, so it just kind of sits there. But then we also have the individuals who are needing to apply for the kit. So, it does funnel up into the same level of support essentially as well. And of course, people who are socially isolated, again I think of traditional groups, feel like they’re irritating family members, especially if they’re dealing with daughters or sons who have young families and they’re facing their own issues. So, like I said, it does eventually come into the same kind of support mechanism, but the starting point does differ and vary, so we may need to do a little bit more with an individual who hasn’t got a tablet, but then we also need to convince this individual that its not just a tablet to sit in a store cupboard, this is all the sort of stuff that you can do with it as well.

Int: That’s an interesting point and I think it’s something that we know, especially with older people, about feeling like a burden or not wanting to bother people. And that again can be a risk of creating more isolation when actually there is stuff there, when there are people there that want to help.

R: 100%, but I think humans by nature are a little bit like that, but again, yes, certainly older people with their families and that sort of stuff, it is a conversation that we’ve had on many occasions or our team has had on many occasions as well, that kind of, look, if you ever need anything, we’re here, if you ever feel a burden. But we know it’s not the truth, well we hope it’s not the truth anyway in some capacity, but it’s not our place to have that conversation, we just reassure the support that we can provide ongoing, essentially.

Int: There’s also been a sense, I know when you’ve answered the survey as well, that the landline telephone or what probably on your end is mobile phone, but for the customer is a phone, it’s not technology as such in the digital moving forward that we’re thinking of, but do you find that that’s still been a big part of being able to talk to people and use the phone?

R: Yeah, for us, I’m just trying to think of it in two different ways, in terms of engaging customers it was vital for us because it was the only way that we could engage people. But the amount of individuals who are socially isolated that are still carrying around like an [inaudible 32:03] with them, it’s just a flip phone that you can’t do anything on other than call. But at the same time, some of our customers aren’t used to being on the phone for longer than 10, 15 minutes as well, so it was trying to change the mindset about that as well. So, yeah, a phone is, for some individuals or for most of the individuals that we’re engaging with, is at the cutting edge, like an iPhone would be at the cutting edge service, or whatever type of phone that you want to access, it would be considered cutting edge in some capacity. But it was vital for us to deliver services in some capacity.

Int: Yeah, and I suppose then it’s trying to persuade people perhaps if they want to get a phone that can do more things but then you’re bringing in those risks again and taking it perhaps a bit more wary.

R: Yeah, and [through my role] we just have to be careful of who we’re promoting and what we’re promoting as well, we do have to remain fair and equal to all providers as well. So, we do just try and highlight the additional stuff that they can do with what they’re carrying around rather than saying, right, this is what you need to go and get yourself, essentially. And that was an issue we had when we were procuring tablets as well, we just had to make sure that we did that all through our procurement framework as well.

Int: Yeah, and there’s something there, isn’t there, around the access to hardware and how it comes about, and I guess you could have some conversations with people where the customer wants something specific but that’s not what you’ve got.

R: Yeah, and there were difficult conversations as well, people would say, ‘I only want this’, and we’re like, look, we can’t do that but this is an alternative as well, and then if we couldn’t do it and they were adamant, we would try and signpost to maybe another organisation that does have a little bit more flexibility in terms of what they can offer and provide.

Int: You’ve obviously got quite a good sense of how things have gone and what’s the uptake and things, but has there been any formal evaluation going on or any feedback you’ve been gathering along the way?

R: We do try and gather feedback, nothing formal. We do compile stats, we do compile our service delivery, we do have exit questionnaires with individuals as well just to see how the service is going. We are obviously still concerned with the uptake of our provision, across the board, not just within our digital team, across all of our services, and where people actually are, because the numbers that we were engaging with and the numbers that we are now engaging with, it’s a dramatic decline. So, that is something that we’re always trying to evaluate, we’re trying to highlight stuff in different ways, we’re trying to think of the Covid guidelines when we are trying to promote events in some different kind of way, we are trying to do other stuff essentially in some sort of capacity, but it is a challenge, it is a challenge that we are trying to do and that comes from the evaluation. We do more informally, I look at our data rather than saying, ‘Right, Mrs. X has said this is what would be great, and then 15 other people have done so, so we haven’t quite reached that stage but I’m hoping that once we come out of this we’ll be able to look at stuff a little bit more formally. I think our digital department as such, and our housing community service is looking at producing something in the near future, I did have to provide some information to them, but I’m not too heavily involved in that. And that will be a little bit more focused around the infrastructure, around Wi-Fi connections rather than essentially front services.

Int: I’m interested in decline then that you’ve had in uptake of the service generally. What is that about, is it just from the physical restrictions that have just led into then people dropping away from it, or is there something else going on?

R: Do you know what, it’s the million dollar question. And it is a challenge, like I said, our promotion is an issue and how we can promote, that is our biggest barrier. I do think people are still, quite rightly, afraid of Covid and accessing face to face services, unless it’s an essential delivery need. And again, services, like we’ve tried to adapt to what customers would like, and we are supporting customers who want the services that we deliver, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that we’re delivering the right services to the customers, because they’re not engaging in the numbers that they used to. But how we gather than intel again is still a problem. We did do a digital deprivation survey right back in June, but again, we could only promote virtually, we could only do it through the people that were engaged with our services, so it’s hard to quantify what that problem is. But like I say, it’s not just a problem that our digital team is facing, our employability teams are facing it, our community hubs the footfall has dropped off tremendously, it’s just we are trying things but we’re not finding the right solutions at the moment. Maybe this is the new world, we don’t know yet, so yeah, but again like I say, I would say it’s our promotion and the fact that Covid is still rife are probably the main two reasons.

Int: I know and I guess we can be aware of who might be lonely and who might be isolated, but it creates this issue of getting to them, and I think it feels like with the progress that’s been made with Covid then like now it almost goes backwards again and forwards and backwards and yeah, it’s not surprising people don’t know what to do.

R: Exactly, that’s right, and that is another problem, not a problem but again there is so much kind of, not mixed messaging but people don’t know what to do. I came into work yesterday, I was like, well that announcement on Sunday was predominantly England, does that change, like I’ve got a face to face delivery running across our teams, what does that mean? And then you’re expecting staff to kind of, yeah it is, it’s all up in the air, and that’s for people who are essential, like staff who are coming in are asking the questions, let alone somebody who doesn’t need to potentially access the service that day, not saying that they won’t need to or they don’t need to engage, they don’t want to engage digitally, but there is that, they do have that barrier of maybe waiting a week, maybe waiting a month until the communication does change in some capacity.

Int: Going forward then, it sounds like you’ve obviously picked up the face to face again recently, but now maybe we’re not sure. So, how do you see things going forward with the balance of face to face and digital provision?

R: It will vary. For our adult learning team we will continue like more blended learning in some capacity. Our digital team will return 99% will be face to face delivery because digital engagement for people digitally excluded doesn’t work. But then our employability teams, our volunteering teams, again there will be that flexibility of having that kind of support mechanism in some kind of way. Again, it’s still better to meet people face to face, but it’s highlighted that we don’t need to meet everybody face to face, solutions can be provided and in a much quicker manner in some capacity.

So, it will vary but predominantly we will return to more face-to-face delivery rather than digital because it’s just the nature of our client group.

Int: Yeah, you don’t want to exclude anybody more by having the option.

R: Yeah.

Int: That makes sense. Thank you, I’m pretty much coming to the end of the questions now but as you said, you’ve not been involved in a more formal evaluation so far and you said there’s some other teams probably doing that and you’ll look to do that in the future maybe a bit more, is there anything that you would be specifically looking for or anything that you would specifically want to evaluate with the service users or with the customers?

R: It would be the impact that our service had on them, and that would be the key question. But then it would also focus on whether or not when they started engaging with us, if the service met their needs or if they engaged with us for a different kind of reason initially. They would be the key main reasons, and then obviously what would you like to see us deliver moving forwards would be the three areas. It would be more about that delivery of services for our front facing teams, essentially, is the sort of areas I’d look at really.

[Information removed for confidentiality]

Int: No, it will be great, thank you. Was there anything else you wanted to share, any experiences or any other comments?

R: No, that was all really. Yeah, I think I covered everything that we could think of. Nothing really left outstanding from my point of view anyway.

Int: That’s great, thank you, you’ve been so helpful, it’s been really, really interesting to talk to you, some really interesting points there, definitely. Thank you for taking the time as well.

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