**Recording Details:** P010

Int[[1]](#footnote-1): … a brief overview of your role and the organisation that you work for?

R[[2]](#footnote-2): I work with [name of organisation] which really, the long name is the [longer name of organisation] but we’re going as the [name of organisation] and we’re working across the [name of city and area] Wales, in [name of county].

I’m the [job title] for the [name of project] which is a befriending and support project for older people in the area, particularly those who are vulnerable and we’re working very much within the COVID19 situation. Many of our older people are vulnerable, isolated and we’re trying to mitigate that through all sorts of activities like we provide a weekly hot meal, but it’s unique in the sense that we phone the older people up, they get their hot meals delivered, just to find out how they are and what meal do they want, do they still want a meal and I’m managing a team of volunteers which are drawn from the local community, many of whom are older themselves and they actually deliver the meals, so they’re linked into the community, they know the vulnerable people and they know of any issues.

We also give out food boxes and we’re developing a programme of activities to try to get the older people out of their houses and some of those are inter-generational, so it’s quite a big project, there’s a lot going on.

Int: It sounds like there’s loads going on. So that part of phoning up and providing the hot meals, is that the befriending service or is that something separate?

R: It’s part of the befriending service but we also have volunteers who do telephone befriending and actually visit people in their houses, if the older people are okay with that, some of them aren’t and we’ve found that a lot of older people are still very, very scared to leave their homes and very scared to see people, so it’s a mixture of telephone befriending and face to face befriending, maybe taking people out.

Int: My next question was about the focus was about the focus on loneliness and isolation, it sounds like that’s a really big focus for your organisation. The focus on preventing that feeling of isolation and loneliness, is that something that’s always been there for you or is that since COVID?

R: Well, I’ve only been in this job for nine months, I came down from [name of city] to take it up but I have worked in Wales previously and I was working in older people services and I found that loneliness and isolation as a massive problem, long before COVID.

I think COVID’s highlighted it but it’s always been there and what concerns me is some of the community organisations can’t manage without funding and there’s been a lot of COVID funding to combat loneliness and isolation, what worries me is the funders don’t see it as a long term issue and they really need to look at it as a long term issue.

It’s going to be worse post COVID because it’s a lot of anxiety, mental health issues, people have lost their spouses, in [name of area] it’s a problem because given the geography, there are rows and rows of terraced houses up mountains and not much … so it’s difficult to get out if you don’t have transport. There’s a whole raft of issues there around loneliness and isolation.

Int: It’s something that we’re talking to people from all over Wales and the geographical thing is quite interesting because there definitely seems to be those pockets where you're isolated anyway geographically, so within that to be socially isolated sounds like it’s really quite a challenge.

R: Yes, it is. I’ve worked in rural areas, the last area I came from was like a 14 house village in [name of city], very much an older population, the nearest shop was 17 miles away but in that small setting, people really supported each other. Whereas in a larger urban conurbation, I think people can get lost.

Int: So that’s an interesting side to it, sometimes that community sense is stronger when it’s a small area. You mentioned about COVID, just thinking back to the early days of COVID, you’ve not been in this role so long so you’ve probably had a few waves of lockdowns or not lockdowns, we’ve had all different, what sorts of things are you aware of that your organisation was thinking about in terms of how technology would need to be used because of the pandemic?

R: Again, I wasn’t around during that time but from where I was before and I did try and it wasn’t working, but I was very much involved in volunteering and I was [job title] of a small community hub in a tiny rural area, but we found that video links and Facetime were really important for some people, those who had family and access to technology but not everyone does and some of the older, older people, in their 80s and 90s, just have nothing, they don’t even have a mobile phone.

Int: I was going to ask you which groups within the older people that you work with are more where the technology is more of a challenge, it sounds like that age is relevant. And so is that something that you found, they already don’t have the technology and then they’re not interested in having it? Or is it something that they just are not able to have? What’s going on there?

R: Let me just think about this because we connected with Age Connect Cymru, Age UK in setting up digital inclusion workshops at a centre, we’ve got a really nice little centre and we offered lists to older people who wanted to come and learn about how to do Facebook and order shopping online and things like that, and we thought we would be inundated, we offered lists for people to come and there was very little take-up.

We’re trying to find out why, some of the reason was because they’re scared to come out but they didn’t want anyone in the house, some of it was because they didn’t have the technology anyway so they weren’t interested and they didn’t have anybody, and they could do their online shopping over the phone on a landline. So it was a whole mixture of reasons why. And yet there were some people who have had all the technology and are quite comfortable using it.

Int: Why are those people more able to be engaged with the technology? What’s led them to be in that position?

R: First of all, they’re interested and they have family and friends who can support them in this, but there’s a lot of people out there who don’t have anybody.

Int: It’s interesting because it sounds like people with family and people involved in their life have more access to things to stop them from being isolated, whereas the people who are more isolated to begin with would benefit from those things but don’t have them or aren’t being supported to do them.

R: That’s right, yeah and it’s through lockdown, there was online training, there was all sorts of things going on, it was the [inaudible 00:09:08] and whatever and some people linked into that and others just weren’t interested and others just couldn’t because they didn’t know about it.

Int: What kinds of things were you doing to try to engage people in those digital things during lockdown? What were the strategies you were using to reach out to people and get them involved?

R: From our organisation’s point of view, I don't think we were doing very much, it was just recently because we didn’t have the capacity. Apparently, the organisation was just about to close because there was no money and lockdown and a couple of staff were just about to be made redundant, one was working once day a week just to keep the centre open and then suddenly, they got this COVID funding to keep it going because there’s a kitchen and whatever, so there was a lot of emphasis on providing the hot meals.

Before I came, they were providing 50 Christmas lunches and that was about it but the money also came through to [inaudible 00:10:26] coordinator to get together a [name of project], so I brought the capacity to the organisation and within nine months, we’re doing the hot meals, we’ve got together a team of 35 volunteers and 20 of those are over 60. We’ve got the digital inclusion project going and that’s a drop-in so it’s still going, any time they can drop in and whatever, we’re working with other organisations, we’ve got bits in now to look at how we can move the technology forward.

But I think technology doesn’t replace human contact does it? And I think we’re focusing more on human contact now rather than the technology.

Int: When you were in the times where you were reliant on the more technology side of it and you couldn’t do things face to face, was it primarily the telephone that you were using to talk to people?

R: Yes.

Int: Can you tell me a bit about how that went in terms of accessing people on the phone?

R: It went really well, we’re still doing it because the hot meals service has grown from 50 Christmas lunches to now providing well over 130-150 meals once a week and we’re getting a lot of feedback, written feedback, verbal feedback that this has been a lifeline for them, that weekly telephone call but also the human contact because the volunteers deliver the meals and go to the doorstep.

Int: So the phone call is prior to the meal coming but it sounds like they’re getting value from the phone call anyway in itself.

R: That’s right and first of all, I was making phone calls so that led me into the community because being new here, but now we’ve got volunteers and all the volunteers live in the community so it’s really becoming quite sustainable and the fact that it’s a community support in its own community, for those older people.

Int: It sounds like quite good numbers to work with, definitely.

When people have engaged with that set up with the meals and the telephone calls and the befriending, which kinds of people are those? Are there differences? Different groups within those people?

R: Well, obviously they’re all older people, there’s a group of people who are single, who’ve lost spouses previously or just recently and so they have different needs. There’s housebound who can’t get out which is why the befriending is so crucial and there are other groups who, you know, have their friends who aren’t really linked into technology but they phone each other and I’m finding now that as we’re putting on activities and offering events and things, that they’re coming out in little groups. But we are providing transport which is important if people aren’t mobile. Then there’s others who are quite linked in with families, living away or nearby who are well linked into technology, who are doing their online shopping and Facetiming and whatever.

Int: With those, when you’re aware of people that are using those extra bits of technology like the video calls and things, is that something that your organisation then has helped them and supported them with as well, or is it mostly coming from family, that support?

R: It’s mostly coming from family but we have supported people in that and there was one lady whose family live further away, she had a mobile phone which wasn’t very efficient so we worked with Social Services to get her a laptop or tablet and visited her and showed her how to use it, and she’s using it now and she’s really happy.

Int: We’re really interested in those stories because it’s interesting to know about the different kinds of people who have tried technology and it’s gone well and they’ve carried on, or some people who’ve tried it and it’s not gone so well or they’ve not kept it up. Have you had any examples of that, where it’s not gone so well?

R: I don't think so. There was one lady coming here who didn’t know how to use a mobile phone for online shopping, we showed her how to do that and she hasn’t been back so I’m assuming it went well, we don't know but I think what we need to do is keep in touch with her now to see how it’s going.

Int: You mentioned about the digital inclusion drop-in, what kinds of things are people coming in with? Is it mostly online shopping and connections or are they coming in with IT problems?

R: Well no, they’re basically wanting to know how to use their mobile phones! How they can get better use out of it, we have volunteers who are quite clued up, we have some young volunteers as well from the local school who have come in and shown what to do.

Int: One thing we know is a barrier for some older people is a fear of using technology, not wanting to break things or being afraid of scams and fraud, has that come up with the older adults you work with?

R: The scam thing, yeah, definitely, people are wary about scams and I think there’s been a couple of times when someone’s been in touch with our receptionist, “I’ve just got this email, what do you think?”, so generally, yeah, there have been scams.

Int: Do you think that’s putting some people off from getting involved with the technology?

R: Yeah, absolutely because when we have spoken with people about upgrading their mobile phones, they’re not interested, “there’s so many scams going on”.

Int: You’ve not been there pre COVID but it sounds like you were more focused on the face to face and you're focusing on face to face going forward as well, offering that face to face connection but do you think there’s a place for technology as well within your organisation’s service going forward?

R: Absolutely, which is why we started the digital inclusion workshops and I think what we need to do is get some sort of survey out to find out how some of the older people, we know most of the isolated ones now, about how they feel about technology and what do they need and maybe you could help us do that!

Int: It’s something I was going to ask because we’re interested in how people are evaluating things and getting feedback and you've mentioned you’ve had some really good feedback from people, verbal feedback, so is that more just through the conversations that you're having and meeting people? Have you done any kind of formal evaluation yet of how things have gone?

R: Not necessarily with technology but we did a survey, one of my first jobs when I came in, there’d been one done pre COVID about what activities the older people would like to see and what the challenges were to participation. I thought really, we need one now during COVID and I know things are easing up but there’s still that anxiety there and so we did it online, no we didn’t do it online, we sent out paper copies, we telephone people and we got about 70 replies and it was interesting to see what activities they wanted, but digital inclusion didn’t come up at all in that.

But there were lots of challenges about loneliness and isolation, pre COVID it was pretty low on the agenda but post COVID, the recent one we did, it was very higher so that lack of transport, mobility problems, having nobody to go with and so I think maybe we could put another little survey out because that one was well subscribed to, about digital inclusion.

Int: Because it does sound like that perhaps the pandemic situation has almost shone a light on that sense of isolation, but then there’s been such a drive with the technology because all people were able to do was use the phone or use technology, so perhaps now those two things might come together and it sounds like your organisation is already doing a lot, it’s just seeing how to get people engaged isn't it?

R: Yeah, but there are lots of challenges there you see because in our area, there’s a lot of poverty, fuel poverty and food poverty which we’re addressing with our partners and I think getting mobile phones and laptops are a really low priority in terms of what people need, it’s a bit like [inaudible 00:21:47].

To get lonely, isolated people out into the centre to learn about technology because we don’t have the capacity to go and work with each one individually in their homes, if they would allow us in their homes, we need transport, we need a hook to get them here and there isn't the funding available either, you need volunteer expenses, you need to help with transport costs, maybe even to provide the equipment.

We are working with some very vulnerable people whose priority is heating the house and putting food on the table.

Int: Where it brings in that issue is let alone the devices but then having internet access and data and things like that, is another level.

R: Absolutely, yeah and I haven’t really seen much from the government about supporting people to do this. It was quite interesting because I spent two years in [different continent] way back in the early 2000s, working on sustainable tourism projects with communities and the government at that time were saying, “we will have mobile phones in every community in [name of country]” but the problem was, it’s all right having a mobile phone but there just wasn’t the infrastructure and so much poverty and deprivation, and that’s what we are seeing here, you know?

I think having, if you've got nobody to communicate with, if you don’t have family and friends, what use is technology? You wouldn’t have the human contact for a phone.

Int: It’s so true and it’s that thing that then coming back to the pandemic is what really did bring that because people couldn’t have those face to face interactions, so if you had no technology and you weren’t able to go anywhere then that was it.

I’m just wondering if you're aware of maybe the people who you're not able to reach? Is there a sense of that unmet need that people maybe isolated, that you haven’t been able to get to in one way or another?

R: I’m sure there are. We’ve got really good networks and it’s really important to have them so we’re not working in isolation, we’re working with the local authority, all the different departments, particularly with social work. We’re working with other community groups that are really embedded in the community and know that the smaller areas, we’re getting referrals from them too. In fact, we’re getting so many referrals now, it’s great.

But there are people out there who are so isolated, we just don't know about them.

Int: And you can only do so much and it sounds like you say, you’ve got good numbers and you're getting more and that sounds really positive.

R: Absolutely, and the community [inaudible 00:25:24] and I think in the [name of area], there is a sense of community, I think people look out for each other because again, I’ve seen we’re getting referrals from Social Services and other agencies and organisations but we’re also getting referrals from neighbours, they’re a bit worried about so and so and family, my family who don’t live in the immediate vicinity who are phoning us up and emailing saying, “can you do something about my gran?” or whoever.

Int: There’s obviously good awareness of your organisation and people know to reach out which is great and will hopefully only continue going forward.

In the survey you completed for us, you said you quite often use social media and I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about how that’s used to access older people.

R: We use Facebook quite a lot, Facebook Messenger, we don’t get a lot of older people who are necessarily engaged in it but we are … we’ve got presence and other organisations’ pages who do target the older people.

We’ve got a website, we’ve got two interns from the [name of university] coming, who are looking at our social media technology, which is great, starting this month actually, for three months, so they’re going to be getting cracking on how to better reach through social media and website and whatever. That’s in progress.

Int: That’s really interesting because it’s another way of promoting things but it’s also being aware of who’s got access to seeing that as well.

R: Yeah, that’s right.

Int: You’ve mentioned a few positives but have you got any other kind of examples of positive effect that the use of technology has had in your organisation, whether that’s mostly with the phone or anything else?

R: I think it’s mostly with the phone and the digital inclusion drop-in, it’s not fantastically subscribed to but I think that’s something we can work on. So that’s been quite good and it’s also good working with [name of organisation] and their programme because they’re trying very hard to, have you been in touch with them?

Int: Yes, there might be something, we’ve covered a lot of different organisations from different places so we’re probably picking things up from different areas as well.

R: But our befriending is generally just done by phone and we do provide volunteers with a phone, they don’t use their own phone.

Int: The befriending, once it’s set up, does that continue regularly? It’s not for a set period of time?

R: No, it’s as long as it’s needed and as long as the volunteer is happy to do it. We also work for the Red Cross who have a befriending service but theirs is for a set period of time. Sometimes, if they have someone that needs to, because their aim is to get people out and in Wales, the regulations are really strict and it’s really impacting on us, so we’re working with them as well. But you’ve made me think, if the volunteers have got mobile phones and people they’re befriending have got mobile phones, maybe they can do Facetime or something like that.

Int: When you've got a smartphone, you’ve almost got a little computer there haven’t you?

R: I know and I don't think a lot of people realise, we found this through the digital inclusion, about how much they can do on their smartphone. Sometimes they’re really surprised.

Int: I think there’s something around people needing the support to use it, it’s been hard in the pandemic, I don't know if this something you’ve found and you've obviously got the digital inclusion now but when you couldn’t meet with people face to face, providing the support with technology over the phone is quite difficult to say, “click here” or “press that”.

R: Especially people who are older and maybe there’s a little bit of forgetfulness setting in, an older person like myself, I’m quite good with technology!

Int: When the restrictions have been reduced and you can have a bit more face to face access, hopefully that’s a good time to show people and provide that support.

R: Yes.

Int: It’s interesting that you're working with other organisations and you've got those partnerships set up as well because that sounds like that really strengthens what you're doing.

R: [Does not respond.]

Int: Sorry, I just lost you there.

R: This is another thing, if you don’t have a good internet setup, it’s frustrating.

Int: Especially if it’s when something is already going a bit wrong or not straightforward.

R: That’s right and I think the problem is you can rely too much on technology and if it doesn’t, if anything happens and it doesn’t work properly, you know, people get frustrated and upset.

Int: And you don’t want that to create a fear of doing it again, trying it again.

R: Absolutely, yeah.

Int: This is pretty much all my questions, was there anything else that you wanted to share or comment on in terms of how technology might be being used for loneliness and isolation?

R: I don't think so, I think technology really has its place and it’s got an important place but I don't think anything should be in place for physical contact, whether or not it’s a voice, phone or just the sense of that you've got a friend. Physical, social contact is important because we are social beings aren’t we?

Int: Yes, it’s always going to come back to that, it makes sense. [section removed for confidentiality]

R: Do you consider the telephone, the actual telephone to be technology as well?

Int: Yes, that’s fine because we’re thinking about how things have been used and particularly around the pandemic and once that face to face was not an option, anything then was a form of technology to be able to connect with people so yes, the telephone and anything else that you've got examples of is all fine, it’s all interesting for us.

R: I’ve got a blind lady who used telephone befriending, she doesn’t have good mobility, now we’re picking her up and bringing her to events, we’ve got some bingo going and got a volunteer who supported her but also, she’s got telephone befriending and it’s been a lifeline to her too.

[section removed for confidentiality]

[WRAP UP AND CLOSE]

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