**Recording Details: P016**

INT: Just to confirm, any information you give about yourself or in terms of people and their places will be kept confidential. Also any personal information you give will be kept in terms of data protection. If you want to stop at any point during the interview, just let me know, and you won’t need to answer any questions you don’t want to. But to start with a bit of scene-setting, would you be willing to give a brief overview of your role and the organisation you work for?

00:48

R: Yes. I work for [name of organisation], which is in [part of] Wales. And I work as [job title]. Simply, that’s a job to bring people and children of all ages together. This is the only job of its kind in Britain. But of course the job is developing and the hope is that more local governments will get such jobs in the years to come.

01:21

But back now, in March 2020... Obviously my job entails working face to face with people, so I had much fewer projects going ahead, so I got more and more different responsibilities and one of those was working on the digital agenda. Of course, as an intergenerational co-ordinator, challenging loneliness and isolation is a big part of the work. So one way of doing that was by working on this agenda.

01:57

INT: Thanks. That’s very interesting to hear. Can you talk also about the work your organisation does with older people?

02:06

R: Yes. Specific to bridging the generations, we arrange projects for older people to do things jointly with children and young people. The benefits associated with this type of work are very obvious in research papers and also different work in recent years. I also have completed research work – Master of Research - looking at the benefits and also looking at the challenges and obstacles. And specifically, the work can tackle loneliness, tackle isolation, but also that special relationship that develops and that understanding, without being forced somehow is very special. So that’s the type of work we’re doing. We’re doing this to a great extent to tackle loneliness. But then if we discuss [name of organisation] further, they have lots of different support for older people. If we just look at our team, we’re a very small team in [name of organisation], but I work with bridging the generations, which supports older people. We have [name], who’s the manager of [name of organisation], which supports people living with dementia and their carers. We then have \*\*03:41\*\* and other members of staff working to support unpaid carers. And we also have members of staff supporting mental health, which also has older people coming in there. And I also, since September, have been working on the ageing society agenda, slash age-friendly society, and my role, it’s likely, will change in the coming months to go from bridging generations to that as bridging generations comes under that anyway. So we’re doing a lot of work specifically since September with ageing societies. And during the last months, we’ve distributed £25,000 in small grants to groups across [name of city] to get older people back out into the community and to challenge the loneliness that has come as a result of the pandemic. Yes, we’re continuing with those grants too, so before Christmas we’d have a lot of events. Covid does make it a lot more... a lot more difficult than it would be otherwise. But what we see at the moment is that a lot of these older people want to do things and just do them in the safest way possible. So they want to be able to go out to the community hall and play whist or something, they just want to do it in a safe way. So yes, the [name of organisation] itself does a lot more than that, but that’s an overview of the provision our team provides older people.

05:23

INT: It’s a lot of work by a small team. And a lot of good work, too. So, am I right that there’s more focus in terms of the work with older people and preventing loneliness perhaps, is that different to the work you do with other people, with other things?

R: Yes, so although preventing loneliness comes under bridging generations and is one way of offering that, the workload has changed since September and I’m taking much more work on ageing society. So yes, last February, a draft was released and then in September they released the ageing society strategy in Wales. And so since then I’ve been working with the different departments across [name of organisation] to see how we can ensure we provide the requirements. But also, yes, I’ve been working with [name of city] community contacts, which is.. we have a community contact in five areas of [name of city] which are specifically for supporting older people in those areas – to connect them with different groups and so on. So I’ve been working very closely with them while distributing the grants and while ensuring there are opportunities across [name of city] for older people at the moment.

06:48

INT: Thank you very much. That gives a useful background. I’m going to go on now to ask questions more about the role of digital specifically to prevent loneliness. So if you think back to the early days of the Coronavirus pandemic, what type of conversations were happening in your organisations about how digital technology could be used to prevent or reduce loneliness?

R: It varied from project to project. With my project, I didn’t try to take too many digital projects. And the main reason for that was the matter of safeguarding that arose with DBS and every older person would have to have a DBS because we would be connecting them with someone under 18. So it raised a lot of challenges and we... It was perhaps something scared older people to present them something digital anyway without mentioning something like a DBS, so we didn’t go down that route with that work. But, for example, [name of organisation] very early started holding all their sessions online. And they did this by lending tablets or devices to older people who were already members. And then gave the support over the phone and so on for them to able to get on to do that. But they soon became aware that was a lot of work and they were only a very small team, so they couldn’t support a large number of people because very often it meant being on the phone with the individual for some time before the session started to make sure they felt comfortable enough to join. So they was a limit on how much support they could offer. But they have by now supported lots to go online. But, yes, so at the start, we just did that and started discussing, but we also had a lot of work going on directories, where we gave a one-stop-shop for the support available with the pandemic. But we soon realised we had to give a phone number as well because the people who really needed the support, the older people in society, were not able to reach the information. And then back in August 2020, we started to think seriously that there were lots of different groups and departments in the [name of organisation and city] all with the same aim of supporting more people to go online and so on. And perhaps wanting to do but not knowing how to start. So we started a group – [name of group]. That group included [organisation] staff but also representatives from third sector groups across [name of city]. We also had [name of groups] I don’t remember their names. We had representatives from them as well, so they were able to help us get access to devices as well as needed. So we started establishing that and also learning what we really needed. So what we then did was we worked with a group with an independent information technology advisor, [name], to create a handbook in Welsh and English and then training online which is on YouTube to access whenever anyone needs it. We worked on them because we understood many care staff perhaps didn’t know themselves how to provide the support. So we were still in a period where we couldn’t go to people’s houses to give the support. And perhaps family could but perhaps they wouldn’t have the confidence themselves. And also care staff themselves were worried they couldn’t teach people how to connect with their families. So we did the handbook and this training so that more people could be more confident to teach people to go online. About the same time, the [name of organisation] itself received a lot of devices through grants and then those were then distributed through the community contacts and we worked with the different groups and so on to ensure needs were being met and that people were able to not only receive a device, but also get the information they wanted then, but often to find out who around them was able to provide the support because as Covid was still a concern, it was easier to find if there was a family member or someone in their bubble anyway able to go there and give the support. So, yes, we did the training and that handbook. By now, we still share those with people. One thing that’s great about that training is that they also discuss accessibility on the devices. So that’s something I wouldn’t be familiar with because I’ve never had to look at accessibility on a device. But very often, with older people, it means you can make the text larger or you can change from which side the sound comes in the device. Things I still don’t understand. But we can give these handbooks with this information to people who really could support people. And then, yes that group meets much less now because it was more something we wanted to give information and so on. But we still use it as a kind of mailing list where we can, any information we think is useful for people in the group, we share in the hope they can provide the support. Also the demand for devices has fallen by now as well because I think everyone who was interested has perhaps taken that step a few months ago. But we have been able to provide that support. I think that’s what was most important because I think having access to a device without cost was something so easy during 2021 especially because it was as if everyone was offering devices free of charge. But I think the most important thing was making sure people knew how to use them after receiving them.

13:52

INT: Thanks for that. It just shows how much extreme change has been in the past couple of years, when you look back. So it was interesting hearing that. You’ve talked a bit already, but what did you and your colleagues see as the main advantages and disadvantages of using the technology for the reasons you’ve described already?

14:19

R:

In terms of advantages, obviously being in touch with family and friends is a very big one. Although people can still phone people, it wasn’t the same. It was that they wanted to see each other and especially the grandmothers and grandfathers who had great grandchildren or young grandchildren. It was very important for them to be able to either Facetime or video call or be able to share photos and videos with each other by email. So we saw that as a reason for many to contact us individually in order to get in touch through the web. But, for example, there’s one lady who received a device back in September and she now can talk regularly with family in Spain. Although they phoned anyway, she can now have a regular video call with them in Spain. And that’s just one example of the small difference it can make. Another advantage is, for example, [name of organisation], they had regular classes and it was a lifeline not only for the individuals who attended but also the carers because they either had that break they needed while they were at the class or they had support from the staff as well. So that has enabled them to regain access to that service. There are many people who live with dementia, for example. You know routine is so important and going to the [name of organisation] was part of that routine, that habit. So it’s important that they can do that, even though it can be quite scary doing it in a completely different way. In the end, they were able to rejoin as they wanted. I don’t know if you’ve seen the video of Swan Lake by [name of organisation], but they did a production online with [name of organisation], where their members and some [name of organisation] staff did a kind of dance to celebrate reconnecting. And I think that shows the strength of technology because they’re all on little screens doing the same dance and you see everyone moving, so that’s amazing. I’ll share the link with you after.

But in terms of disadvantages, one disadvantage – perhaps it’s not a disadvantage of the technology itself – but the feeling some older people had that they had to do this though they didn’t want to. So they felt this was the only solution they had though they didn’t want to do it. And many were concerned, having heard a few scare stories about the internet and the internet also sounds like something so big. It is huge, but it sounds like something beyond. And that’s enough to scare people. We had very many people who were lonely but they just didn’t want to go online. But what we saw then is some then changed their minds as time went by. So perhaps not a disadvantage of technology, but yes, it’s just that idea that scares people. But, yes, I can’t think of a disadvantage.

17:54

Another advantage with technology, we saw, was – and [name of organisation] have done this as well – was being able to do things that are accessible 24 hours a day. Whereas before there would be a set time for the project or whatever and if you couldn’t be there or weren’t available, you couldn’t join in. But now with so much emphasis and everything going on technology, even if you miss a live session, you can usually get access to a version later on in your own time.

18:29

INT: Of course. And did you decide to use the technology, or not in some instances, because of those advantages or did the advantages tend to become apparent after you started using the technology?

R: A bit of both, to be honest. Obviously, we needed to reach the people and connect with them during a period when we were apart and the technology was one very obvious way of doing that. But, yes, you know with... When someone felt uncomfortable, nobody would push them, but we just thought.. For example, I had a penpal scheme. It sounds so cheesy, but what it was simply, is I had over 130 older people and over 130 children writing letters back and forth to each other. And that’s still going today and many of the people who are a part of it have noted that they don’t want technology support. They wanted a way of communicating but not by technology. So with that scheme, it’s just one example of... technology’s not the answer to everything. And I think that’s sometimes something people forget. People think, ‘Oh, I offer it online. I offer this service now online.’ Well, I think that hybrid or whatever we’re going to call it is more important because, yes, it needs to be online, but also we have to remember the many people who are not online and who do not want to be online. It’s this ‘digital exclusion’ business – that it doesn’t reach everyone. And while it is great, I’m in this generation that’s grown up with it and think it’s brilliant, but it’s not for everyone and we have to respect that and remember that. So, yes, we’ve been making sure we have provision and support for those who aren’t online as well. And I think that’s just as important, perhaps more important at times.

20:39

INT: Yes, that makes complete sense. I’ll come back to that as well, in terms of you foreseeing the use of technology in the future. Before discussing that, I had some questions to ask about how you felt things went, compared to the intention. You’ve mentioned the main ways you use technology... I should first check, were there any examples you wanted to add before I ask about how you think they went or...

R: I don’t think.

INT: OK, you’re putting your hand on...

R: Not that I’m... Perhaps there was something after, but I’m blank at the minute, sorry.

INT: No, no, no. That’s fine. I’ve enjoyed hearing about what you’ve been doing. So, taking those into consideration, generally do you think you succeeded in your aim, or do you consider what you did a success?

21:30

R: Sorry, I have thought of one other project.

INT: Yes?

R: Sorry.

INT: No, it’s fine.

R: We’ve also played a part in a national project – [name of project]. That was a project that started in August 2020. Put simply, the project was to make videos showing what to expect when visiting or re-visiting places because a lot of places look different to how they were before the pandemic. And we heard from talking with many people that they hadn’t been even to their local shops since before the lockdown because of that fear. So we’ve worked with lots of businesses in [name of city] and [name] is the doctor’s name, Dr [name] is leading in the field in Wales. It’s a project that is also the [name of project], which gets that support. So yes, we’ve taken part in that as well and put simply, it’s little things like I went to Specsavers to do a video and just the process of walking through and what to expect – perhaps it could be... Before you could just walk straight in and that was it, but now you had to wait by the door until someone came to you. And then you only sat in the chairs where there were no stickers on them and things like that. So we took part in that project as well. And we’re still taking part to some extent in that project. But we do feel by now that the changes are coming so frequently it needs more than someone doing it on top of their usual work to be able to fulfil it. We’ve still got the original videos up, but at the moment it’s hard to know what will come next in terms of rules. Many places have kept a one-way system in place, so we have videos showing that. But on the other hand, you have shops like supermarkets which have just removed every single rule, and they’re very similar to how they were before Covid. So that as well is technology we’ve kind of taken part in. But, to look at the other side, we had to print these as leaflets as well because many people who were concerned were people who wanted the support visually on paper rather than on a tablet as they didn’t have access to one. But we are aware of some people who’ve been watching the videos before going to places and many of them have been of use to them as well.

24:29

INT: That sounds like a job and a half to keep up, completely updated. That sounds like a really useful service.

R: It was awful because we’d done the Morrisons video and I remember, I obviously shop there anywhere, so we’d done the video and it had been up for a week and I went to Morrisons and I was like, ‘Oh, my God, it’s nothing like it’. So I just deleted the video and I sent them an email, and they just went, “Well, I’m really sorry. Things are going to change weekly, we assume.” And I was like, ‘OK, right’. Yes, I think the idea was great, but perhaps it’s impossible at the time without having a full-time staff member to be able to give the full support.

INT: Yes, that’s very understandable. So to go back to...

R: Sorry.

25:18

INT: No, no, not at all. These questions are more about where you thought the success was greater or less. So do you think you succeeded in your aim, the aim in terms of using digital technology to mitigate isolation during the pandemic?

25:36

R: Yes. So from my personal stand point, my role was to co-ordinate the encouragement group and then from that the online training and handbook came and, rather than creating a training handbook for the individuals receiving the device, for people to be able to give their support. And I think that’s been very successful because all the county’s care home staff have received the training handbook. And even if it only means they are able to give support to people who live in care homes, I think it’s important to remember, although someone lives in a care home, they still can be just as lonely.

26:21

R: We had a grandmother living in a care home – additional care. But she was stuck in her room because of the way they were working. So she was just as lonely as someone living somewhere else. So I think that’s been a big success – that that provision and support has been given – because at the beginning, we wondered ‘Where can we get devices?’ ‘We need this many. We need devices. We need devices.’ But then soon we saw there were devices available everywhere. But we didn’t have the support available and perhaps we also weren’t able, although we could give the support over the phone, because of the pandemic rules and working rules, we weren’t able to go to people’s homes. So by having the support to give to whoever was able to be there, I think that was a huge success. And the hope is... we’ve done the handbook and the training for Apple and Android, but we’ve only used Android to be honest to distribute it. And the main reason for that is because those are the devices that have been available to us. We have the Apple one ready to go, but nobody has asked for it yet. So, yes, the Android one I think has been very worthwhile.

27:44

INT: Thanks. And, do you think... We’re you more successful, perhaps not isolation, with some groups compared to others, do you think?

R: I don’t know. It’s hard to say that. But also it’s hard to know whether it’s the technology that’s lessened the loneliness because very often the individuals who’ve been receiving this support with us through the technology are receiving other support provision from us as well. But from looking at the lady who was able to make contact with family in Spain, she’s one example for certain where it did help reduce loneliness. And perhaps, not as much just loneliness, I think in terms of [name of organisation], they’ve done a lot of research, so I hope they’ll talk with you as well. They’ll have the evidence for you. But I think also not only loneliness in terms of feeling they were by themselves, but feeling, especially with the carers with dementia, they’ve been able to set up a group to support carers. And it’s an opportunity for people to talk about different problems and understand, ‘I’m not by myself with this’. So different to loneliness, that feeling of loneliness, but that loneliness of not having anyone who understands them or understands the challenges they face from day to day. But yes, I think... I don’t know with groups, I’m sorry. I really don’t.

INT: No, no, no problem.

R: So, I’ll try not to answer it.

29:27

INT: No, it was interesting hearing about that distinction between what kind of loneliness can be relevant to people. Along that line somewhat, of those who did use or who engaged with the technology, what do you think they’re main motivation was for doing so and then to continue using it, if they did?

29:48

R: Yes. If we’re talking about the individuals who’ve contacted through the community contacts, many of those wanted to make contact with family. That was the main reason for most of them. But we also had some with an interest in getting connected because they wanted to shop online or wanted to use different services which are available online. But yes... That’s what perhaps made them continue as well because once they understand and see how accessible it is to be able to contact family and so on. But then with [name of organisation] it’s different again because they’ve taken the technology specifically to get access to a service. And to the specific service they were using often before the pandemic as well. So, yes... I think it depends. Community contacts, they were individuals coming forward wanting to get in touch with family or get access to something like online shopping, but with [name of organisation], they wanted access specifically to what [name of organisation] had.

30:59

INT: Thanks, that makes sense. And a question to the contrast, in a way. Were there any users that tried to use the technology before stopping? And if so, do you know why they stopped and what if anything could have helped those people to continue to engage with the service through the technology?

31:18

R: Personally, I don’t, or I don’t have that evidence, sorry.

INT: No, no problem at all.

31:28

INT: I’ll ask this in case, but I assume because it’s on the same theme that there may not be an answer either. If a user had any technological difficulties, what support was given if any?

R: What we did was we... the community connectors gave their phone number – their work phone numbers, obviously – and then if any problems arose, they were able to phone them to have a conversation with them, to be able to talk through that. But I think one problem that arose perhaps before receiving the device or what we did is we would give a device with a SIM card or something like a hotspot and very often, we’d say ‘this is for you to trial it. It doesn’t mean we’re going to take it away from you, but just so we know where we stand because if you don’t use it... And so on.’ But then what a lot of community connectors found is they also had people contacting them saying, ‘Oh, I don’t want to rent. I want to buy.’ So they were then asking for, rather than having a device, asking about advice what device to buy, what device is most user-friendly, what device... and so on. But also the broadband business. That also caused concern for a lot of people. And how to get support in order to have the right broadband. And we had a meeting with some of the [name of organisation] staff because broadband is something very expensive, especially for someone on a pension. And I don’t – this is a personal view, perhaps, not a professional opinion, but again it goes hand in hand with what I do at work – but I do think there should be free broadband for older people who want to have access to the internet because you could argue in a few years it’ll be as essential as water and... Maybe not free, but cheaper and that there’s support there to get it in the home because we were seeing that – some older people saying, ‘Oh yes, I want a device, I want a device.’ but not understanding they needed broadband as well as a device, saying ‘Oh, I’ve got a phone line.’ and not understanding the additional complications. So, yes, that was additional support we were giving perhaps in addition to giving a device. But this initial advice and perhaps there’s no perfect answer either, with that advice either, with what you give.

34:22

INT: That again makes sense in terms of how much support is needed to get it to work. The next question... You’ve talked a bit about this already, but just in case you have more to add... One issue we know is an obstacle for some older people, as you’ve mentioned already, is a fear of using technology either because they don’t want to break devices or because of things like scams on the net. Was that a problem for the older people you’re working with them, and if so what, if anything, were you able to help overcome or avoid these fears?

35:00

R: Yes. The scams I think was one concern. Unfortunately scams take place already over the phone and the fear that it’s going to happen again. With that, we just had to persuade people not to click on anything suspicious. But then when you get a Zoom invitation to something, that’s full of links. It looks scary enough. One piece of advice in the training we had from [name] was to simplify Zoom invitations so that they became familiar what to expect when they had a Zoom invitation – an invitation to our events – so they then knew, ‘Oh, that look... That’s how that looks. But that looks totally different, so I’d better not click on it.’ The community contact also said, ‘Call if you’re suspicious of anything.’ It’s better that they check before clicking than just clicking. So there were many concerns about that. And I think also that people’s families worry about that. Worrying, ‘Oh, no, I don’t want Gran or Mam to get a tablet. What if she clicks the wrong thing or something?’ But I think we have to remember if they only use it to call, share videos and so on, then bank details aren’t going to be near the device. So make sure these personal details just weren’t input at all either. But certainly, it was a concern with families, but it was also a concern with some individuals as well. But it meant some weren’t interested in taking part at all. But others with interest but perhaps more careful with it. But one thing we had as a suggestion as well in the training by [name] was to set the device up for them. So to make sure – to ask them in advance – if we couldn’t be with them – to ask them, ‘what kind of apps do you want on it?’ And then suggest that people then buy the voucher card, say £20 for Google Play or whatever, and then they had something. You know Ancestry.com and so on can cost. So they didn’t feel like they had to give any card details on the device if they want access to anything extra. So, yes, just that advice to be honest, in distributing, but it was still a concern – the scams and losing money and things like that.

37:50

INT: Thanks. So you’re doing many positive things to avoid those fears. What effect did using this technology in this way have on you and your colleagues and the work you do?

R: It was positive in terms of being able to reach people. Again, in terms of my viewpoint, I was coordinating more than offering the services face-to-face online. But I am aware that [name of organisation] have seen it as very positive because they’ve been able to make that important connection with their members. Yes, the positives I’d say on the whole, but you can also argue that it’s tiring. I do know like if I’ve had a day when I’ve been attending some of the events online and then been in meetings for myself and then doing work on my laptop, it is very tiring and you feel that you’re perhaps not getting that break that you need from devices. So from a staff’s perspective, it can also be tiring as well.

39:08

INT: Yes, certainly. And on that theme, there are only a couple of questions left, so I hope you’ll have a break between this and whatever’s bound to be next on your calendar.

R: I’ve got a meeting at 11, so..

INT: Yes. Just two questions to go. Thank you for taking part already. The penultimate one. Were there any unexpected positive or negative effects from using digital technology to mitigate loneliness?

R: I don’t know. Nothing in particular in terms of my work. But I think it is important to note from the perspective that people can still be lonely with access to the internet and connection through the internet. My research shows the most lonely age is the age between 18 and 35 age or between 24 and 35 years old. [name] from [university name] would... She’s done a great deal of research on loneliness and such things, so she could answer that. But the most lonely age is that and then the second most lonely age is over 75 years old. And the younger age group has access to technology. So although it can alleviate loneliness, I don’t think it’s always the perfect answer either because people can still be lonely. Exactly as someone can still be lonely in a room full of people, you know. But, yes. That’s the only thing perhaps I’d... It’s not something unexpected or anything but yes, note that perhaps.

40:54

INT: Yes, that makes complete sense like the nuance in terms of it not being a fix-all or silver bullet.

R: No.

41:00

INT: And the last question. So in your answers in the questionnaire you said you foresee over the next months there’ll be an equal balance between face-to-face support and, you know, the remote support your institution provides. Why is it a combination of face-to-face and remote that you’ve chosen or decided on in terms of looking to the future?

R: Unfortunately at the time, I hadn’t foreseen Omicron coming either. But I think the pandemic is going to change the way we support and work for ever perhaps. I know that sounds completely cheesy, but I think it will because I just think how silly we were sometimes holding events that were only available to people within driving distance or walking distance. When now we can hold things that are open to many more people by doing it online. So I do think the online is going to stay. We have been trialling hybrid meetings. And, yes, trialling, I’d say because we’ve no way understood how to best work them. And those are with staff. So there’s very much work needed to understand how to take advantage of and get the best of both worlds, but I do think that everything has changed a lot and I think it is the best way forward for us now – to understand. Some people are still going to need that technological support. And some people wanting to do face-to-face, we have to ensure the support is available in the two ways. Perhaps 50:50 isn’t correct. Perhaps it would be more 70:30 – 70% face-to-face and 30% by technology. But saying that, I think we’re going to stay something like what we are now for a while as well. So we are limited in terms of what we can do face-to-face for a while, I think.

43:22

INT: Thanks. I feel for you in terms of Omicron scuppering any kind of...

R: I... I’d been... I’ve been one of those positive people, like, ‘right.’. I don’t remember, in September 2020, ‘Ideal, I’ll start this.’ No. Then in September 2021, ‘Great’. And now it’s January 2022 and we’re here again. I must be naive.

43:48

INT: No, it’s worth trying to be positive. I’m sure everyone you work with appreciates that. Just to say thank you very very much for completing the questionnaire and especially for the time you’ve given for the interview. We really appreciate your input in terms of research. Just in terms of the project in general, interviews are taking place through January and February and then the research team will write that all up.

It’s a project between the Wales Centre for Public Policy and Bath University. But if you’re interested in being kept in the loop in terms of when the research is published, we can do that if you’re interested, but only if you want to hear that it’s out.

44:40

R: Well, yes, let me know because as you know, we are working now with eight domains of the World Health Organisation, and the contact and communication is an important part of that, so this clearly plays an important part.

INT: Well, thanks again. I hope you get a bit of a break before the meeting...

R: I’m just going to walk up and down, just to stretch my lets.

INT: Good idea. Lovely meeting you too.

INT: Thanks.