**Recording Details: P017**

Int[[1]](#footnote-1): Just to start us off just some background questions about your role and the organisation that you work for. Could you just give a brief overview of what you do and who you work for?

R[[2]](#footnote-2): I’m [job title and name of organisation]. It’s funded by the Welsh Government through the [name of fund] I think it is. The job is to provide information and support to over 50s within my area. It’s a small village called [name of village]. There’s about 19 of us in [name of city] so we cover all the different villages.

Int: Who is it that you work for?

R: I work for [name of organisation] and [name of council] oversees it. They have commissioners from [name of council]. Before I did this job, I was a trained nurse and a health visitor so as I’ve retired, I’ve gone on to do two days in this job.

Int: I’m guessing that it’s just you that’s doing this role for [name of organisation].

R: Yes.

Int: You said there were …

R: There in other villages in [name of city] as community agents.

Int: Would you say that you have colleagues?

R: I’d say yes. We haven’t been able to meet face to face very much during the pandemic but we do have Zoom meetings and I have met them a couple of times so if you run into an issue, you can contact people who’ve been doing the job a bit longer.

Int: You said that your role is providing information and support to over 50s. Could you tell me a bit more about what that entailed?

R: Some of the job involved signposting people to other services. Some part of the role is visiting elderly, vulnerable people in their homes and the other part of it is setting up groups where there’s gaps within the provision of whatever is in the village. I’ve set up walking football, a walking group, a Zoom coffee morning and a dementia support group. Those are my groups.

I think particularly during the pandemic I have visited more people who were shielding or were scared to go out. So I’ve visited quite a lot of people in their nineties. It varies and I get referrals from social care, community councillors. I get self-referrals, neighbours, police. As you’re in the job the role grows really as people get to know you’re there.

Int: So you’ve been doing home visits during the pandemic.

R: We had a brief time where we had to stop. I think after Christmas last year with the second lockdown we stopped for about six weeks and that was quite difficult because you were telephoning people but it wasn’t quite the same.

Int: In your role how much focus is there on preventing loneliness and isolation?

R: I think it’s quite a big part of the role. I think a lot of the role is that. Even the group work, it’s about getting healthy but it’s also about meeting other people so I’d say about 90% of the role.

Int: In your experience when you think about the different types of older people that you work with, who is most affected by loneliness, would you say?

R: People that live on their own. People who had to shield. People who are carers. They may have another person in the house but that person might have dementia. People who have been very active socially seemed to really struggle because maybe they were a widow and their way of coping was going out to lots of groups and when they stopped, they felt really at sea. They didn’t know how to fill their time.

Int: So people who before the pandemic were very active struggled more.

R: Yeah, I would say, and the very elderly who had been used to people visiting them and then nobody was visiting them at all. Housebound.

Int: Going back to the early days of the pandemic, what sort of conservations were had with colleagues in the community council and the council about how you might use or how digital technologies could be used?

R: Well, one suggestion was to set something up on Zoom, a weekly coffee morning which is still running actually, because at least people could connect online then. [Name of council] also provided some tablets to be used to decrease loneliness amongst the elderly. So, the idea was I think we had three each that we would go up and set tablets up for people which it was assumed that you would be able to do that. I’m lucky because my husband is very good so he helped me but there was the option to give out a tablet to people so they could connect online. Also, if people didn’t know how to contact their families on FaceTime you could help them to set up FaceTime and things like that so they could speak to people. The downside of that, well there’s two really, A, some people haven’t got any way of doing that and, B, you get the comment, “I’m too old to learn something new like that. I can’t do it,” and just point-blank refuse to do it.

Int: I’m going to pick up on a couple of things that you said there. With the devices, the tablets, how did you decide who would get those or how was that managed?

R: I put it out on my Facebook page to say, “Does anybody want one?” One of the community councillors live next to a 92-year-old gentleman who wanted to join the Zoom coffee morning because he was completely isolated. He didn’t go out at all. We gave him one and his neighbour, he still does it now, goes round and puts it on for him because he’s 93. He comes on and he absolutely loves it. It’s the highlight of his week he says because he still doesn’t go out. Particularly during the first and second lockdowns he didn’t see anybody, so that was him.

I’ve still got one here. Another lady wanted it. What did she want it for? I think it was to go on FaceTime with her niece but then we discovered when I took it round that the SIM card only lasted for a few weeks and she wasn’t going to be able to afford to replace it so that was a bit of a barrier really. She gave it me back in the end because she said she couldn’t work it.

That was a barrier that if you haven’t got wi-fi because some of them haven’t because they haven’t got a computer or a laptop, they couldn’t really afford to be paying £15 for a SIM card when they’re on pension credits. Another community council actually paid for the SIM cards but mine wouldn’t.

Int: You’ve talked about a few of the different things that were done with technology but in the early days when I guess everyone was looking at what was coming or adjusting to the new reality that we were in in the lockdown and stuff, can you remember when you were discussing this with colleagues what you were considering when you were thinking about using technology?

R: Just really considering how we could connect people really and alleviate loneliness and social isolation. Another agent set up a Zoom coffee morning and she said it was working well so I went on hers to see how it worked and then that helped me to set mine up. What else did we discuss? Just the fact that the loneliness was really affecting peoples’ mental health because I suppose it’s something we take for granted, but just having people to talk to face to face, once it went, they were just completely on their own and the days were long. The second lockdown I think was particularly difficult because it was December, January, February, wasn’t it? Dark nights and horrible weather and some people just couldn’t cope with it.

Int: When you’re having those sorts of conversations in the early days or thinking about how technology might be used with the people that you work with what did you and colleagues think were the pros and cons of using technology in this way?

R: I think the cons were that people didn’t access the internet at all or didn’t have a device which they could. Another con was that I think I said to you before, they were unwilling to learn a new skill. There were a lot that were, really elderly, just couldn’t. I don’t think they could cope with it really, to be honest. They would struggle to do anything online. On the plus side there were people that were very keen to learn and we had access to classes for them if they wanted to do a digital course.

There were people who had never used it before who after a couple of weeks mastered it. Zoom is not that difficult once you’ve done it a few times, is it? Said, “Oh, I never thought I’d be able to do that,” and I think it gave them confidence about going online and doing other things. I might have to spend a bit of time with them in the beginning setting up Zoom for them and what have you but once they got a link through on an email and just pressed it, they were fine. I mean I knew nothing about Zoom. I don’t think any of us did really before the pandemic. Everybody always says to me, “Oh, you’re an expert on it.” I was like, “Well, just trial and error, isn’t it? You just learn as you go along.”

Int: It sounds like there was a real range.

R: There was.

Int: The people that it worked for do you think there was anything common to those people?

R: I think they were the sort of people who did go out a lot and join a lot of groups. I think the ones who didn’t embrace it were the really older ones, the 90-year-olds. As they said to me, they couldn’t do anything because everything had to be done online because face to face contacts, like if they had to contact the Department of Work and Pensions or anything it was all done online and they just really struggled with it because they just couldn’t get their heads round how the computer worked. So I think the ones who really embraced it were the ones who were maybe a little bit younger. I am generalising now because there are one or two in their 90s who were quite good on the internet but they were generally younger, in their 70s sort of age group who were used to trying new things.

Int: Okay, that’s interesting. I don’t want to put words in your mouth but it sounds to me like you were saying that the people who it tended to work for were people who had already been quite sociable.

R: Mmm.

Int: Would it then follow that the people that it didn’t work so well for were already?

R: Yeah, possibly. I think there were others, like the one I was just telling you about, the 93-year-old man who never used it who did enjoy it but needed help. He doesn’t go to any groups or anything. He doesn’t go anywhere really. So they were a bit of a mix but I’d say generally, yes. Generally, I’d say they were the more sociable type of person.

Int: If you think overall about how technology is being used, [inaudible 00:13:40] in technology since the pandemic, do you think it’s been a success?

R: I think it has, yeah. It’s been a lifeline to some people.

Int: What does success mean in this context?

R: It means people have been able to contact each other through a different medium than they’ve been used to and it also means they become more proficient online and more confident about doing other things online as well.

Int: For the people who did engage with the technology, what do you think their motivation was to do so and to keep engaging?

R: Well, to be able to talk to other people and, also, they made new friends. Some of the groups have gone on to meet in person. Our Zoom group which is still on Zoom has been out three times and the people that were on it didn’t know each other before so they’ve actually made new social contacts. I think it was just to relieve the monotony in the beginning as well because every day was the same.

Int: So the Zoom coffee morning group that you were talking about, they’ve met in person since.

R: They have, yeah. We had a strawberry tea for them in the summer which we combined with a place where some of them lived which there’s a home but there’s bungalows at the back which are rented out so we had a strawberry tea there. Everybody came from there plus the Zoom coffee morning and they really enjoyed that. Then we’ve had a Christmas meal out as well because I had a grant for the strawberry tea and I had a bit of money left over. I paid for both. Not me personally but [name of council] have paid for both which they liked because they didn’t have to pay.

Int: How many people came?

R: I’d say the height of the pandemic there was 10, sometimes 12. Now it’s down to six. I keep saying, “Shall we stop it now?” “No, no, we like it. We like to meet up.” They say particularly they want to meet up with a gentleman who can’t get out I was telling you about in his 90s because apart from his one friend who also comes on Zoom, he’s a councillor, he doesn’t see anybody. They do it for him, they say.

Int: If there were people who tried using technology and then stopped, you have mentioned at least one person, do you know why they stopped?

R: Some people stopped because things opened up so they were back to going out again so they didn’t need it anymore. Some people like that lady stopped because they couldn’t master the tablet and they couldn’t afford the SIM card so cost came into it. I think there’s an assumption that everybody has got wi-fi these days but they haven’t. Some people said it’s not the same as meeting people, which it isn’t, is it? They try it and see if they liked it but when they did try it it didn’t really replace the face-to-face contact.

Int: You’ve kind of mentioned the people who tapered off when restrictions eased and the people who felt it wasn’t a substitute for face-to-face interaction, and then the ones that stopped for other reasons such as not being to master the technology or the costs of being online. What do you think could be done to help people like that continue?

R: I think the ones with the cost it would be good if it was some sort of fund for people who are on benefits or pension credits to access within [name of council] because there seems to be a lot of money for some things. What was the other bit of the question, sorry?

Int: Well, I suppose the other thing you mentioned was people who just weren’t able to master the technology.

R: I mean, ideally, they could have gone on a course but there were no courses at the time, were there, face to face? The only courses were online and because they didn’t like the online or didn’t feel confident, they didn’t feel confident enough to do a course so it was a bit of a chicken and an egg thing. One of the community agents does run digital introduction courses to tablets and what have you so he was quite useful, but, again, they were online.

I don’t know what the answer is really. Now you could go probably to a course, well maybe you couldn’t at the moment because we’ve got restrictions again, haven’t we? Before these current restrictions you could go to the adult learning college and do a six-week course. For some people that would be better because they relate more to somebody coming in and teaching them and doing it online. In fact, one of the agents who you might speak to, she’s had the digital adult learning college facilitators come into her coffee morning and done some introductory sessions so that’s another way of getting round it if they go into a group that’s already in existence.

Int: That’s a really good suggestion. I’m interested because you described that there were some people who needed a bit of help with getting their heads around it but then I’m guessing that it was you who helped them.

R: Yes.

Int: For those people the support that you provided was enough to help them.

R: It was enough to get them on and then talk them through when they couldn’t get the audio to work or the video to work or they could only see one person. That’s the other thing, isn’t it? So, yeah, it was usually me. There wasn’t anybody else, unless it was their son or daughter who had maybe set them up on it sometime.

Int: So that worked for some people but then there were people that you tried to help to get online but they …

R: They couldn’t grasp it or were unwilling to grasp it. They wouldn’t try even.

Int: Why do you think that was?

R: I think it’s because people feel they’re a certain age and they didn’t grow up learning about computers and so they can’t do it. It’s like a mental block really. Whereas I think possibly they could but they’re very worried about they’re going to get scammed, which is understandable, isn’t it? There have been a lot more scamming, so they do worry about that and they don’t want to touch the computer in case that happens. Also, when the computer wants to update, that throws them. They can’t just go on to Zoom because the computer suddenly says it needs to do six updates and they don’t know what to do.

Int: With the scam thing, because this is something we’ve been aware of, what do you think could be done to help people overcome those fears?

R: I think it’s just education really, isn’t it? Talking about what form the scam could take because I think older people tend to think, “Oh, if I get a text or an email from the tax office it’s from the tax office,” so it’s just to make them aware how clever criminals can be and not to answer anything. Never to give their bank details. I think it’s just reiterating it. A lot of them are aware of it, I think, but there are a few. Some of the scams are so sophisticated that they don’t realise it is a scam so it’s talking it through with them. I had, it wasn’t really online so maybe it’s not relevant, but I had somebody that nearly got scammed out of £10,000 by somebody that called round and offered to do some work for them. It was only that they told a neighbour that they realised it was a scam. They can be a little bit gullible at times I think and take people as being genuine when you or I might think, “That doesn’t sound right.” I’m not saying it could never happen because they say even people who are good on computers can get scammed sometimes, can’t they? They’re more likely to, I think, because if the bank gets in contact with them, they think it’s the bank.

Int: Did you have people actually say to you that they were scared of being scammed?

R: Yes, a few.

Int: That was why they didn’t …?

R: They’ll avoid the laptop altogether, yeah. A lot of them have got something in the house but they’re scared to use it.

Int: How did this sort of technology use change or what affect did it have on the work that you do as a community agent?

R: It’s difficult for me to say because I started in April 2020 but talking to the other girls the work went very much from being face to face to online or on the phone so for me it’s actually stopped me doing what I wanted to do because I’d got plans about things I wanted to set up and I couldn’t do it so I had to rethink how my work was going to pan out really. Because I couldn’t visit, I had to think about doing something online.

As I say, I’ll have been in the job two years this April but I feel like I’ve only been a year in the job properly because the first year it wasn’t a normal year. Even when it came to the summer you still couldn’t set a group up because there were restrictions on numbers and a lot of the pensioner groups and that that I would have gone into introduce myself weren’t running. I had to completely rethink my role if you like for that time. I must say, I enjoy it more when I can get out and about and meet people. That’s just me. I think it’s my nursing background. I’m used to being out meeting people all day so almost being online was like foreign territory to me, as it was to a lot of people, wasn’t it?

Int: At what point was it, as you mentioned that initially you weren’t able to do home visits and then that changed, what sort of …?

R: Well, ours changed because they said that as long as we checked the person was happy for us to go, we wore masks and we did hand sanitising. At that time, you couldn’t do a lateral flow because they didn’t come in then, then we could do home visits. We found that we were picking up a lot of extras because social workers and support workers weren’t doing home visits so we were getting a lot more, because we were going in so we were picking up issues and we were holding them, if you like. We were having to do more. Our job is mainly to signpost other services but other services weren’t going in so it was quite difficult really.

Int: It just occurred to me to ask this but the support that you provided people with getting online and using technology to connect, on the whole were you providing that support in person or were you doing it on the phone or a mix?

R: I’m just trying to think back now. Generally, it was when I could go in face to face unless they’d got Zoom there because their relative had set it up for them and then I would talk it through on the phone with them at that time when we couldn’t go out and do any visits at all. With the tablet I just dropped it off at the person’s house when we’d set up and then rang the gentleman next door to tell him how to access it.

Int: How did you find supporting people over the phone?

R: Hard. I didn’t find it very easy at all because you can have your hands on the device and you can’t see them face to face so you don’t know what button they’re pressing, whereas if you can be with them at least you can say it’s this one or it’s that one.

Int: Have there been since the pandemic and you started using technology, have there been any unexpected positive effects of using technology to address loneliness and isolation?

R: I think it’s enabled people to make new friends. As I was saying, they have now met up in person, people that they didn’t know before and it’s enabled people to share information. That one, U3A, have you heard of that? It seems to be a big online group for over 60s and one or two were on it and they told us about it so they’ve sort of shared information. I think it’s time effective really as well. I could see 10 people in an hour on Zoom whereas it would probably take me a day and a half to see them all in person. What else? I think just enabling them to become confident as well on using technology which they wouldn’t have probably ever used if there hadn’t been a pandemic.

Int: With the first point that you made about enabling people to make new friends, so that was through the Zoom coffee morning people made new friends. If there hadn’t been a pandemic and you’d just done an in-person coffee morning would that not have had the same effect?

R: Possibly but I had one lady who was new to the area who didn’t know anybody and might not have accessed anything but because she’s met people online and they’ve told her about activities. She says I’m her angel. She’s nice. I just saw her one day when I was going to her neighbour, she was just moving in, and I said, “I’ll come and see you.” She’d moved from the [name of city] area and she didn’t know anybody. She’d lost her husband. I enabled her to meet people online and, also, she joined my walking group because she loves walking. So she’s met quite a lot of friends that she probably wouldn’t have met or she wouldn’t have even known where the coffee morning she now goes to in person would have met or may not have had the confidence to go on her own, perhaps. Whereas because she already knew people, she’d met online she could meet up with them and feel [inaudible 00:29:40] go and chat to them because she’s met them online. “Oh, I’m so and so, I’ve seen you online at the coffee mornings.”

Now I think for some people, yes, they would have just gone along to something but for other people it was the beginning of a bit of a journey to get to know people. She also got to know people that lived in the complex of bungalows where she lives which apparently is not that friendly and people don’t mix a lot. So through doing Zoom and having the strawberry tea she got to meet a lot of people. She knows everybody now.

Int: Wow, that’s really [inaudible 00:30:15]. I’m wondering actually if you’ve done anything to evaluate.

R: That’s a good question, [name], no, I haven’t really. Just word of mouth. I probably should do. One of them said for me to tell you that Zoom saved her life at the beginning of the pandemic. I was just talking to her before and I said I’ve got to go because I’m going on this, she said, “I don’t know what I would have done without it,” because she’s a widow. This is a different one. She was shielding at the beginning and she said, “I just wouldn’t have seen anybody or spoken to anybody all week if we hadn’t had that.” So, yeah, maybe I should do an evaluation.

Int: I’m just curious to know whether the people that have been using it had shared their views.

R: It’s all very positive and I think if they weren’t finding the benefit they wouldn’t on, would they? I’ve had another lady whose son said, “She’s desperate to come,” and he’s put her on and everything but she’s never come so I think well she obviously doesn’t really want to access it, does she? He thinks she should but she hasn’t. I said to him last week because he goes to the walking football, “Your mum hasn’t been on yet.” “Oh, I’ll get on to it.” It may just be that she’s not confident enough to do it, I don’t know. I’ve not met her.

Int: Have there been any unexpected negative effects?

R: We have one lady that comes on that tends to dominate it and she’s a little bit eccentric, shall we say? One or two of the group don’t like her. That’s difficult because she needs it as much as anybody else. I suppose it’s a little bit harder on Zoom to say nicely, “Can you let somebody else get a word in edgeways?” So we’ve had that. We had one who met somebody that she didn’t like so she didn’t come back, somebody that she knew from the village. You’re always going to get that, aren’t you? Negative is when they can’t get on as well and their connection is breaking up and they’re frustrated because they want to chat to people. That’s a bit negative, isn’t it? I can’t think of anything else off the top of my head.

Int: I had a quick look at the survey responses that you gave us.

R: I can’t remember what I wrote now it was that long ago.

Int: Don’t worry, I’m not going to test you.

R: When did I do that, was it October or something like that?

Int: Probably, yeah. November, maybe. One of the questions that was asked in a survey was what you thought the balance in the coming months would be of face to face versus remote support that you were going to provide in your role. I think that you said you’d anticipated that it’s going to be mostly face to face in the coming months.

R: I said that, yeah, but I still can’t stop them. They want to do it. They still want the Zoom as well. I know a lot of them do go out and do other things. They’ve made that little group of friends, they like meeting up and chatting. I’ve suggested that it moves on that one of the councillors could run it and, “Yeah, could do,” but he’s not really committed himself to it because, really, I feel like my role is to initiate it, set it up and move on, that’s what I feel because I only work 16 hours. If I can get them off in an hour and a quarter of my week every week, which I don’t mind, I enjoy it, but I just feel that he could run it as well as me really.

Int: Why have you decided that the focus of your work is going to be mostly face to face?

R: I think because I just want to be out there in the community. I feel like I’m having to keep people waiting because I’m doing Zoom things and although it was needed during the pandemic, I don’t think it is so much now. I think there is always going to be a place for it with people that are housebound. Apart from that one gentleman everybody else … well, one lady does just go out for a walk, so I suppose two out of the six do still need it but in my mind my job was to be in the community working face to face with people so that’s why. The thing is, covid hasn’t gone away, has it? We’re in a lockdown again now and then we’ll come out of it and there might be another one in a couple of months so there’s probably always going to be a need for something.

Int: What would you say are the main lessons you take from using technology during covid?

R: I think they should have provided us with some training before we started having to do it. It could have been online because there seemed to be an assumption that we knew what we were doing. I think another lesson is that it’s not for everybody. Some people were never going to embrace it, which again I can understand. I feel like that when you start with it yourself. When your generation has had it all the way through school but if you’re my age you’re generally self-taught, aren’t you? So if you’re not willing to learn or you feel you can’t then it’s not going to happen so that’s a negative from it as well, I think. Also, it doesn’t replace actually meeting somebody face to face.

Int: Okay. Well, that’s been really helpful, thank you.

[END]

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