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R[[1]](#footnote-1): … which is [name of organisation], and it’s a [type of organisation]. So, our organisation encourages volunteering and support for third sector organisations in terms of funding, structure, research and any support that we can offer our third sector colleagues really in [name of city]. So, my project then is connected communities, which has grown over the last five years from having a team of community connectors that support individuals to connect them to information and advice, activities, we’ve now expanded the team so we’ve got a connector for children and families and a connector for dementia supported communities.

At the start of Covid when we suddenly realised that we had to work from home and our community work had to change and our approach to how engaged with people had to change, we added digital to the roles. So, all the connectors swiftly went onto offering support to individuals at a time when our third sector colleagues were offering a range of digital activities that would usually happen in a face to face community hall type event, we quickly thought we’ve got to be able to support people here who haven’t got the technology, haven’t got the knowledge, haven’t got broadband, haven’t got equipment to be able to take advantage of what was available online.

So, looking for funding, we approached our GP clusters who had some funding and really liked the idea that we were able to combine activities and services with also new technology and new advances in how people could approach and contact their GP. So, through the funding we were able to invest in purchasing some tablets, some broadband My WiFi boxes, and so through encouraging individuals, some who had never used a digital tablet before, and bearing in mind the difficulties of getting somebody who’s never used a tablet before, getting the tablet delivered to them, social distancing and also helping with instructions via WhatsApp, via the telephone wasn’t an easy process. But we got there with a lot of people, a lot of people who had never accessed digital before, and so we were able to connect people really to a whole range of local activities and services, but also the health benefits as well, so being able to use things like e-consult, for instance, having their prescriptions reordered online, and being able to speak to their consultants through Zoom as well, and WhatsApp has been a huge transformation for a lot of people.

Int: Wow, OK, that sounds really good.

R: So, that was basically in a nutshell. We also had a strong partnership with our local authority and the health board, so we had support from them. And also, we realised that we didn’t have a digital strategy in [name of city], so we also worked with our partners to look at a digital provider forum of organisations that could provide digital support. We also looked at then how we could support communities with a community kit, so we accessed some funding to be able to loan community kit out to village halls, community groups, so that they could also encourage people to go online. And some of this was done at the very start of Covid when we were isolated, but also coming out into small bubbles, we were able to look at some outside activities, some village hall activities where people were social distanced but keeping in line with the regulations of open windows and keeping distance and things like that.

Int: Wow, thank you, that’s a brilliant summary of everything you’ve done, that’s fab. So, just to go back on a couple of those bits, the digital side of things, if I understand correctly, wasn’t really there before, and then when Covid hit that became the real focus?

R: Yeah.

Int: And so, you said about the health link within that, that that was where the GP side of it was able to bring it into play, but how much then was the focus on loneliness and social isolation within that as well?

R: That was the big thing. For some, carers for instance, who were very isolated and lonely, suddenly digital was able to transform their caring duties. Whereas perhaps they felt really isolated before Covid, suddenly they were able to access a range of activities and also have peer support, mentor support from individuals that were carers themselves. So, for some people it opened up a whole new world for people. Individuals themselves were able to feel part of a group, we set up craft groups as well through the connector project so people could get together, sharing a shared hobby and interest and get together online. So, all of that made people less isolated, perhaps less depressed, improved their wellbeing. So, yeah, it had a huge impact.

Int: You said then about the carers, that’s obviously a key group that it was really, really beneficial for. And so, within the other people that were engaging and that took it on and attended things, what other kinds of groups of people was it positive for?

R: I think older people who perhaps had transport issues or maybe couldn’t get to perhaps some events that, you know, like an art group. Instead of having to get on a bus and travel to [name of town], which is the main town in [name of city], they could take part from the comfort of their home. So, it meant if they had a mobility problem or if they had a transport issue, say they didn’t drive anymore and maybe didn’t have the confidence to use a bus, then it meant that they were still able to take part. So, people who had Covid or people who were isolating, it meant that they could still be involved and still feel a part of a group.

Int: And so I suppose the flipside to that then, were you aware of particular groups of people who didn’t engage or who found it more difficult to engage with the digital side?

R: Yeah, there’s certainly access issues, accessibility, people with hearing or sight loss. I think to be fair, I think that cohort of people were severely overlooked in a range of services at the start of Covid. We would normally have a leaflet that would be perhaps easy read, it would be a certain font size, all that went out the window really with Covid because we weren’t distributing, we weren’t out in the community distributing information to people. So, because it went online, people really didn’t have access or knew how to access it, so I think that cohort of people who had sensory loss, it certainly impacted on them.

Int: Yeah, and like you say, it’s almost a vicious circle because even if you want them to be engaged, the restrictions meant it was so difficult to actually get things out, wasn’t it?

R: Yeah.

Int: And so, when you were thinking back to when that first realisation was happening and the restrictions were in place and they were thinking, ooh, what kind of conversations were being had in your organisation about what can be done and what might be pros and cons be before it was rolled out?

R: Well, the other thing as well is the team had never offered digital training themselves. So, although they were very capable of doing a range of different platforms, well saying that, none of us had actually used Zoom before Covid, so we were learning ourselves, so we went from using perhaps Skype occasionally or WhatsApp, we went on to be quite proficient in the end on using Zoom and Teams and the other things that we could use. So, there was a big learning curve for the staff, the connectors to consider themselves as being able to share their knowledge with others, so they upskilled themselves and took part in as many pre-Zoom sessions that they could. So, they attended things like how to engage with people online, how to offer support to people regarding accessibility, and they did a range of different courses and whatever they could lay their hands on really, they did. So, that was the first thing to acknowledge, that we had to upskill the staff.

We were lucky in that our organisation had prepared us for being agile workers, so we all had tablets, we all had mobile phones, we all had laptops, so we were equipped with equipment to work from home. And so then we realised we were in that position that we were able to work from home, but a lot of people, a lot of organisations weren’t. So, that was when we realised that there needed to be some support out there now for organisations that hadn’t got a digital strategy in place, hadn’t equipped their volunteers or staff with equipment, which is where the community loan then came from, and then individuals then, because obviously we would normally see people face to face, part of our conversation, our guided conversation, our what matters conversation with individuals asked the question then, are you digitally active, have you got broadband. And so, we started asking those questions which then enabled us then to build up a picture of how many people actually were isolated because they didn’t have the equipment. So, then we thought, well, we’ve got to do something about this, which is when we started to look for funding.

Int: Yeah, that’s really interesting, so you actually were able to identify people through those conversations that you were routinely having. And so, what was the statistics like, what were the amounts of people who were digitally included already?

R: It was about 80% didn’t have access to a smartphone or a tablet or had broadband. That was the biggest one, was because we live in a rural area, a lot of people didn’t have good broadband. And so, by giving people the mobile box, it meant they could move it around the house, if you like, so they could perhaps have the box upstairs which enabled them to have broadband access. And it was a learning curve for all of us really because some areas were better at receiving broadband than others, so we had to face with the rurality of [name of city] as well as people never having a need to access data from their homes. Usually perhaps many people would go into a library and have access to equipment and broadband there. Well of course when the libraries shut, they didn’t have that, a lot of people would use a village hall and use the broadband there, and of course with lockdown that wasn’t possible. So, yeah, about 80% of our individuals didn’t have broadband or equipment to access.

Int: And so, when you were having those, I guess after those conversations then the suggestions would come from your side about why don’t we do this, why don’t we try this. What were some of the, if you were met with people who were maybe a bit resistant or maybe weren’t keen to engage with the digital side, what were some of those reasons, what was going on for those people? Or maybe you didn’t have any.

R: Yeah, there was the typical one that everybody says, I’m too old to start now. Also, surprisingly enough, it was family members that were not very encouraging. We came across a lot of family members who were worried that they would be perhaps scammed and they didn’t want their parents or grandparents to perhaps have access to technology in case, they were frightened that they might be scammed because they wouldn’t be aware of what could happen. A lot of family members had skills but they didn’t have the patience to share with others, so that was quite frustrating.

But for a lot of people they just gave it a go, and for some people it did transform their lives. And it wasn’t so much about, we were able to set up an email address for each of the tablets that we loaned out, but that wasn’t so much for them to be sending emails, receiving emails, it was more for them so that we could monitor the tablets to ensure that they were located where they should be and that they were switched on, or we could just monitor whether they were being used. So, things like using the camera for instance, just something simple like that was an eye opener for a lot of people. So, we gave them tasks to do, things like if you go for a walk, take your tablet with you, walk to the end of the road and take a picture of anything red or anything yellow, and it just then encouraged people to get out the house to do something, so it encouraged mobility, it encouraged them to just look around, and just gave them a lovely feeling of wellbeing really.

So, we tended to use the five ways to wellbeing as our base for encouraging people to use technology, so taking notice, listening to music, keeping active, YouTube was fantastic in a way of getting people to maybe take part in yoga classes, so look at gardening programmes, that type of thing. Borrow Box was another one that we encouraged people to use so that they could use the library to borrow books to read. Games was a good one to encourage people to use techniques, so word searches encouraged people to learn how to swipe and to tap. A lot of older people found it difficult with their index finger, and I don’t know whether that’s because the skin is drier, but they found it difficult to tap and swipe, so we found by using games like jigsaws and word search that enabled people to learn those skills. So, we learnt a lot really from setting up the project.

Int: That’s interesting you were saying about that sometimes it’s the family members that sometimes were a little bit resistant, and I suppose it makes this sort of sense of a vicious circle with some of the people who were perhaps isolated from their family, or everybody was to an extent, but that that might be a key reason that they might want to have the technology to maybe do video calls and things, but then perhaps if the family are not so engaged it’s quite difficult then. So, did you have some of those situations where the technology was primarily for contact with family and that was something that was being promoted?

R: Yeah. Yeah, a lot of family living away, they were then then able to join through WhatsApp and Facebook, and it did enable people to contact and have those family conversations and gatherings. And new babies could be introduced to the older families, and yeah, contact with family was really important.

Int: Yeah, and so that sense as well that you were saying, because I was going to ask about that, about the fear of scams and internet and that kind of security, so you said that was quite often coming from the family again. Was that coming from the older adults themselves as well?

R: I think because they were ignorant of what could happen, so we did go through some of the issues really and the safety of being careful online, online safety. So, we did go through that with them, and for most people we didn’t go through using emails with people because for them, it wasn’t needed, it wasn’t something they wanted. They didn’t want to use the tablet for online shopping, for instance. For some they did, but others then it was just a case of using applications they needed an email address for but they weren’t going to be using emails for online shopping, which I think is the biggest threat, isn’t it, for scams.

Int: Again when you were saying that you were able to provide the WiFI and the access to internet for people who didn’t have it already, I know that it’s quite interesting you say about the rural area, so the geographical side of things, because we’re talking to people from all over Wales and it’s an interesting point about the actual area where you’re based being quite relevant in not only how people can access the internet, but then on top of that, presumably how isolated or lonely they might have been or might be anyway. So, did you find that there was any differences in who was more keen or maybe who had more success in terms of whether they were more rural or nearer to the towns?

R: No, we had people who were very isolated in rural areas as well as we had people, loneliness, you can be lonely living in a sheltered housing, can’t you, if you don’t see anybody, and that was the thing, I think, people were … Oh excuse me, I’ve got a cough. Bear with me a second, I’m just going to get a drink.

Int: No worries.

R: Sorry about that, something went down the wrong way, I think.

Int: Don’t worry, I’m the same at the moment.

R: We have people in sheltered housing and residential homes who, although seeing people every day, felt very isolated from their families and friends. And I think that was a big thing as well with residential homes, staff didn’t have the time but also didn’t have the skills to help people. And one of the things that I’ve suggested throughout [name of city] digital work is that staff have to be digitally enabled to help others. Now, I don’t think it’s a good way for the workforce to not be able to help people to be digitally active, and I think it’s really important for residential homes, looking at the future, that all staff can help people, not just with physical mobility and things like that, I think they need to include digital in their work.

Int: Yeah, and like you say, the residential situation with not being able to have visitors, it’s a massive impact, massive change for people, and you can see going forward, even now we’re in a bit of a funny time, aren’t we, but to have that there as an alternative that they could just do a remote visit and that that could be set up as part of it, you can see that that would be really beneficial.

R: Yeah.

Int: And I suppose if it’s something that people were more able to do and it was just quite accessible then it would become a little bit more normal, wouldn’t it, and the clients themselves would be more likely to get on board.

R: Yeah. I mean, when you think about it, I think it was quite sad really that people all could have had digital conversations with their families, they could have been taken into a lovely private room, they could have had a big screen with their family members on, and I just think that was such a missed opportunity for residential homes.

Int: Yeah, it’s something about the lessons learned, isn’t it, for if it was to ever happen again, I suppose.

R: Yeah.

Int: And when people were, I’m just thinking you said about was it the tablets and the internet access were the main hardware that you were giving out?

R: Yeah.

Int: And so, what were some of the technical problems, technical difficulties that came about? Did you have to deal with any of that?

R: Yeah, just switching something on and off. Plugging something in to keep it charged up. Yeah, just basic things which I think the on off one was the biggest one because people just didn’t realise where the on off buttons were, they didn’t know that they would have to charge it up. So, those simple things for people with no technology in the house was one of the biggest things.

Int: Would they phone up the service and then it would be for your colleagues to …?

R: Yeah, they would ring up and they would say, ‘There’s something wrong, the battery’s gone flat’, and then because we had a system where we could tell when it was switched on and when it was switched off, and then we could see that it hadn’t been switched on for a couple of days, and then they would say, ‘Yeah, well it hasn’t worked for a couple of days because there’s something wrong with it’. So, then we would say, ‘Well, have you switched it on with the charger?’ and the charger would still be in the box and they hadn’t realised that they’d have to charge it up. So, things like that happened a lot.

Int: Just thinking then about when you were saying that you had the sort of groups that were running digitally that would have been happening in person before, what was the uptake in terms of numbers of what you would have had previously face to face, to the people who then carried on digitally and were keen to do it?

R: We didn’t have a digital project before Covid, we relied on organisations like [digitally based organisation] to do that piece of work, so digital wasn’t on our radar at all. It was only through Covid really that we suddenly thought, actually we need to step up the game now and do something. So, we didn’t have any online classes before. In January now we’re planning to go out in communities, hopefully, and one of the things we’re going to be doing is looking at digital activities in partnership with some of our other organisations. We’ve got housing organisations that have got wellbeing budgets, they’ve got access to digital as well, so we need to really get out there now and push the digital agenda.

Int: Do you foresee there being particular groups or particular areas of people that you might need to work on more with that, that might need a bit more encouragement or more persuasion?

R: Yeah, I think it will be older people. I think people with learning difficulties as well, we’ve supported some people older and people with learning difficulties who would normally attend a day centre, those services are changing so it’s how do we manage those people to be part of groups and activities moving forward to prevent loneliness and isolation. Yeah, so it’s going to be about how do we manage those people who would normally attend a day centre to get back out in the communities. So, yeah, it’s going to be using all sorts of ways of connecting with volunteers, encouraging volunteer recruitment of people with digital skills so that we can make sure that every community has access to digital.

Int: And that’s interesting because that is what you’re reliant on as well the volunteers to have the ability and the skills to then be able to provide it onwards, isn’t it, so it’s a little bit of a team.

R: Yeah.

Int: That’s obviously something you’re going to be focusing on in the new year, so going forward, I’m asking people this question and it’s a bit difficult because we are feeling a sense of things might change again, but the balance of face to face versus digital, what do you think that looks like then in the future now?

R: For some people we’ll be able to access people through things like WhatsApp. I think online meetings will perhaps happen over Zoom. But what we really need to have is that face to face approach which can give us that balance then of face to face instruction, encouragement, getting people online with then the mix then of being able to connect those people with others from across the county rather than whereas normally we would keep people within their own communities connected, with digital you can connect with anybody anywhere, can’t you. So, I think we will see a balance really and a mix of connecting people with one another online and face to face.

Int: That’s interesting and it sounds like there’s that bit of being able to do the face to face in the early stages to get everything set up and perhaps get that confidence is quite vital for what comes later. And I guess that’s the bit that we didn’t have with the pandemic, there wasn’t that chance.

R: No.

Int: And it’s going back to that, so I guess when you think forward it’s nice to think maybe we could put that in place and have it a bit more organised.

R: Yeah.

Int: You’ve mentioned quite a few things about the feedback you’ve had from individuals and from the volunteers and how things have gone, but have you done any kind of formal evaluation of how the role out of the different digital projects has gone?

R: No, one of the things that we’re really poor at, I think, is demonstrating impact. So, although as I mentioned we’ve got an email address for every tablet, we have sent surveys and some of those surveys have come back and everybody has said how much better they’ve all felt from using a digital tablet and being able to connect with people. We’ve also used stories as a way to evaluate the project, so we use a technique called most significant change, which has been through our partnership with [name of university and doctor], and it’s a way of showing how change has been significant in their lives. We’ve collected quite a few stories, so for somebody who perhaps sat in a room all day, I’m just looking at one now, she sat in her room all day not talking much to anybody, including her husband and her son, due to her anxiety and depression. Her arthritis meant that she couldn’t get about easily, she couldn’t take part in things and the pain got her down. But once she got involved with an online group through [name of group], that helped her. She then was introduced to an online expected [name of craft group], so she got to meet other people, likeminded people, she then joined another group that offered five days a week of activity, including art, quizzes, photography walks, and then she also joined an online garden group to rekindle her love of gardening. So, all of that is put into a story, so it demonstrates really how the impact of introducing her to new people, ideas and possibilities, having a tablet has helped her to be more included, research new ideas and keep in touch with people more easily. So, it’s inspired her to challenge herself and do things she would never have to do before, and as she says in her own words, she’s keeping herself occupied and hopeful about the future and is making a comeback to life. So, all of those things are written in her own words because it’s her story.

Int: That’s amazing ways of getting people to feed it back. It’s interesting because I think you probably had this on the survey that you did, but we’re interested in getting some case study examples from people, so something like that would be amazing. We have a template but if you’ve got them already written, that’s perfect.

R: I have, yeah. I’ve got another one who, again a gentleman who was being seen by Mind. He obviously didn’t have a tablet because what he used to use was the library. So, he borrowed one of our tablets, he didn’t think he wanted to meet people online but he agreed to give it a go. So, he had an old school phone, no computer, so grateful to get the tablet to have a go and reconnect with people. He used Zoom for the first time, which he found an amazing experience, week by week he got more confident from interacting with people in the Zoom meetings, he joined an intergenerational course through Mind, talking to people with different ages. He met younger people who had difficult experiences, he covered courses like grief and death and how to deal with it, he felt at peace with difficult things that had happened to him, and then he found the camera and listening to music on the tablet, which helped him. And then he started using the camera outdoors, so he would go on walks and take photos. He then found a green area near to where he lived where it was very unkempt. So, he asked the council if he could cut the grass. He cut the grass and he cut it in a way that he left the letters NHS and H-O-P-E, and he looks after this area now. So, the photographs have been shared on Facebook, local authority have shared them because it makes people happy. So, the council now appreciate him doing it, he’s got involved now talking to the older councillors that are in his community, and he feels as if, as he says in his words, he’s changed the world in a small way. So, it’s all things like that.

Int: Oh, that’s lovely.

R: That’s somebody’s story and it’s just impact. Moving forward people have recognised that he did a little bit to clear an area that was unkempt and now it’s become a little bit of a focal point and a talking point for that community.

Int: Yeah, and the effect that that would have on any isolation and the involvement of the technology in that as well from having that access to so many other things.

R: Yeah.

Int: It’s brilliant, that’s amazing to have that feedback. Is this something then that you see continuing, gathering the stories and gathering that feedback, or have you got any other plans to get feedback?

R: Yeah, we use the stories because these stories are collected and then they’re given to a panel of commissioners, so they’re not just stories collected, shared and then left, they’re actually given to commissioners of services. So, if somebody is perhaps, he’s perhaps a commissioner of adult social care and really understanding what a story means to people and what that significant change is, it’s the small things that can make a big difference, so it perhaps gives them an idea really about what they can do and, when they’re commissioning services, to maybe consider the impact it makes to people and it has on people. So, that’s been good, so it’s been a good process really.

Int: Yeah, it’s a very effective, very impactful way of doing it, for sure, and there’s nothing, you can have numbers and lists, cant you, but there’s nothing like a story.

R: Exactly.

[section removed for confidentiality]

Int: Was there anything else you wanted to share or anything?

R: No, I don’t think so. There has been a launch, I noticed only yesterday on social media, I think it’s called [name of group]]. Yeah, I’ll send you the link. I saw that it was launched on Twitter yesterday. Hang on, let me just find it. I think I have to send you the link because it’s taking forever to come up. I think it’s [name], it’s a new project to look at digital in Wales. Yeah, [name] has just been launched to offer digital support to third sector, and it’s through the [name of organisation]. So, I think it’s partnership with [name] as well and [name], so it might be worth having a look at that.

Int: Yeah, brilliant, yeah. It sounds like there’s a lot going on all the time and I think over the last couple of years it’s just increased it massively as well, hasn’t it.

R: Yeah, yeah.

Int: Well, thank you very much, thank you very much for talking to me today.

R: No problem at all.

Int: if you’re able to send over those bits, that would be absolutely brilliant.

R: I will.

Int: Thank you so much.

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1. Respondent [↑](#footnote-ref-1)