**Recording Details: P007**

Int[[1]](#footnote-1): The organisation that you work for.

R[[2]](#footnote-2): The organisation that I work for is the [name of organisation], which is basically part of the [name] in Wales underneath the [name]. So we work with the health board and the council, and we help organisations improve people’s lives, third sector organisations. As part of that we’ve got a befriending service which supports people over the age of 50 who are lonely, isolated and vulnerable in any way. It’s a befriending service. My role came about because of the pandemic when I was appointed to be a [job title] to improve connection basically and reduce social isolation through the use of technology. And that post came into being in October last year.

Int: Perfect, well my next question was going to be about how much focus is there on preventing loneliness and isolation, but it sounds like that’s exactly what you’re employed for. So your job only came about as part of the pandemic then.

R: Yeah, the befriending service existed. It’s existed for years and it existed before the pandemic. But before the pandemic the befriending service was a face to face service. They ran groups that people could go out to, like a coffee morning or lunches, knit and natter groups, Men’s Sheds, all of that kind of thing. It was all in person and our clients had befrienders who went to see them, and had chats and visits. So it was very much a face to face friendship, companionship, reducing loneliness and isolation in person. But obviously when the pandemic hit in March 2020 none of that was possible, it couldn’t continue. So all of a sudden you had a lot of people who were not able to access that service anymore. So the first thing that happened was that the service went to telephone befriending.

So a lot of people got phone calls instead of their face to face. But we realised that another way of reaching out to people would be through technology to have digital befrienders, to enable people to access Zoom or Google Meet to join groups online. So there a lot of people who were missing out. So my role was basically brought in to set that service up.

Int: So the use of the telephone was the first instant response, and obviously things happened so quickly didn’t they? So when you then started to look at the more technology side of it and what other options there were, you mentioned then about Zoom and Google and things like that. So what were some of the main ways that you found different types of hardware or software that were successful for you to put out there?

R: That was really difficult because there was a huge shortage. We couldn’t get any hardware at all. I know our library service had 100 iPads actually on order but it was delayed and they couldn’t get them. So actually we couldn’t do anything with helping people access new hardware. We had to work with the people who already had access to digital services. Which was a shame really because we could have reached so many more people if we could have got our hands on iPads or something that was available for people. But we didn’t, so that was a bit of a restriction really.

Int: And so then being left with the people who did have something already in place. Obviously we’re looking at older adults and those who are more lonely and isolated as well. But was there particular groups of people that you could notice already had the technology in place?

R: Some people did. I don’t know if there was any similarities between them. The majority of them were female. We only had one male who accessed the groups, and it seemed to be females predominantly who came and joined us, which is the only thing I can really say that we noticed. Some of them had family that could help them, some of them didn’t. So it was just luck of the draw. And we tried to reach out to everybody really just to see whether they wanted to come to the service. But the take-up was quite small, it was quite a low take-up.

Int: Why do you think that was then?

R: I don’t know if it was resistance to change. People not wanting to do that. People wanting things as it used to be. People being a bit dubious about technology and safety online as well. I think that was a concern. And actually it was a really steep learning curve and it was interesting to experience it ourselves. I think there was a nervousness as well about going online and a fear of the unknown. If you walk into a room in a face to face situation you can slide in unannounced. You can gauge the feel of the place and just slip in and find your feet a bit. But when you’re going onto an online meeting you’re there and it’s instant, and if you mess up everybody sees straightaway. And I think there was a lot of fear and uncertainty around that as well, which people didn’t like to say I don’t think.

I don’t think anybody came out and said that directly, but I think that was probably an issue as well. And I think people weren’t sure how to use the technology, and it was just lots of things like that. And it was just trying to overcome that and almost hand-holding through the process of joining and getting people to join, which took a lot more work than we thought it would actually.

Int: I was just going to ask, so on that what kinds of things were you doing, what strategies did you have to help people overcome some of those fears or worries?

R: Well the plan was, part of the project was to recruit digital befrienders, to train digital befrienders who would then buddy up with people and help them through the process. But obviously those people couldn’t go out and meet people in person to talk them through the process or to show them how to do things. So they already had to have some tech savviness basically already. And sometimes it has hard to recruit people to do that as well because we found that because of the demographics of the volunteers as well some of them weren’t very confident, and some of them weren’t sure about showing people. I think they were saying “what if I show them how to do something and they got it wrong, or what if I didn’t know something?” We put some training on.

We worked closely with [a digitally focused organisation] and did a six week training course training people how to be digital companions and how to support people. And a lot of that was about confidence as well and confidence building. But even at the end of that process there were still people “oh I don’t know, I don’t know if I can do it, I don’t know if I’ve got the confidence”. “What if I don’t know something?” I just said “it’s not about knowing everything, in fact if you don’t know something and you can work through it with the person that you’re working with, it’s a learning curve for both of you and it shows them that you don’t have to know everything”. “And if things go wrong it’s easily fixed”. “It’s better to be able to do that almost, rather than to be someone who’s really tech savvy and really slick and knows what to do”.

And I was doing that remotely as well. It’s not like I could see them to instil that confidence. So it was all remote and you just lose something remotely in supporting people. So we had a small handful of people. We were lucky that the [name of university] came onboard with their second years. They were doing a health and social care course, so they needed to do their placements. But because they couldn’t do their placements in person they had to find a remote way of doing it. So we had a small handful of them who were confident and tech savvy, maybe a bit younger than our other volunteers, and they made a big difference. They came online and really helped people, so that was good. Those were some of the challenges that we faced with it.

Int: It’s interesting isn’t it, because what you’re saying, the response to provide the service for the older adults, but then needing to actually put the work in with the volunteers in the first place as well. It’s a bit of a chain reaction isn’t it I suppose?

R: Yeah, it’s a lot to set up from scratch as well and to help people. But we did it, and we did help a small handful of people, and we did have some digital befrienders. And we worked with local groups and we worked with national groups to Wales as well, and we ran some really successful sessions and people got a lot from them. By the summer we were having regular attendees, a small number of regular attendees at our groups who really found the benefit of connecting online and coming to them.

Int: So was that the main way that technology was being used then, it was putting the groups online? Was that the main service?

R: Yeah, that’s how it evolved. The idea was to actually use the befrienders to support people to access technology and become more confident. But it was also that we could create online groups for people to come and join. We had regular coffee mornings, we had regular lunches, bring your own lunch and we all had our lunch and shared things. What else did we do? There’s an organisation called [name of organisation] and we did [name]. We did online dance sessions. And we joined in with a group called [name] and we did a last Christmas singalong last year, and that was really well received. So we did lots of different things. And knit and natter, we had a knit and natter group, and we called it yarn and yatter so it stood out from other knit and natter groups. We also did an online art class for people as well. We just tried everything, just tried as many things as possible to get people onboard.

Int: It sounds like a great range. And so you said then some of the uptake was a bit of a struggle. So what were the numbers like compared to what you would have had in the more face to face times?

R: A lot lower I think. I wasn’t with the group when they were doing face to face, but I think their events would be fully subscribed. They would have a lunch and it would be full. So we had maybe a maximum of 12 people maybe for one of our sessions and a regular group of about five or six.

Int: And so with the regular people that came along to more things and came quite often, what do you think was the motivation behind that, to keep engaging for those people?

R: They were lonely. They were housebound some of them. Not all of them but a couple of them were pretty much housebound. One of them had underlying health issues so she couldn’t get out very much. Both of them actually couldn’t get out very much. So it was their only way of connecting. I think it was loneliness that motivated people to keep connected. They just really found that benefit of seeing people and talking to people. It was that regular interaction and knowing that people were going to be there. It was as close to normal as it could be really.

Int: It just goes to show that it was obviously really beneficial for those people to be able to access that. And so obviously there was a struggle with getting people to join in the first place if they didn’t have the hardware and things. But people that perhaps did come but then maybe dropped out or dropped off, what do you think was going on behind that? Was there any reasons that you were aware of why people might start engaging and then think “oh actually that’s not for me”?

R: I think it was quite popular during the winter months when we were all locked down and we couldn’t do anything else. And then when we started to be able to be more relaxed and released people stopped coming because they wanted to get out and they wanted to see people. So that tailed things off. It’s like herding cats in a way as well, Zoom etiquette. Sometimes some people would talk a lot and dominate a conversation, and some people would get left out a little bit. It’s just taking that skill level to actually integrate everybody and keep everybody connected. It’s easy to feel disconnected online isn’t it, more than in person? Because you can smile at someone if you’re in a room together, that body language. It’s easier to connect, there’s different ways to communicate in person than there is online.

But if you’re in an online session and you feel that you’re being overlooked or ignored it’s quite difficult to reassure someone and cut across that conversation. So I think that was maybe an issue. I think maybe our lone man felt a bit maybe left out a little bit because he was the only man. And I think people were scared. With things like the art class “oh I’m not an artist”. “You’re not supposed to be an artist, it’s not meant to be for people who are accomplished artists”. So it’s that confidence I think. It’s people’s self-confidence and I think maybe the pandemic has actually affected people’s self-confidence a lot more as well. So you’ve got that on top of normal levels of lack of confidence.

Int: That’s a really interesting point isn’t it? Because the remote situations are quite an intense way and there’s a lot lost in the communication isn’t there? So despite your best efforts it’s not always going to replicate that for people. So were you aware of if service users encountered any technical problems or any technical difficulties, were you able to give support? What happened with that?

R: Yeah, and that was a learning curve for us as well. Using technology yourself is one thing, and being able to access a Zoom meeting yourself is one thing. Then trying to support somebody and talk someone through who has got very little digital skill is quite difficult. Trying to explain “look to the bottom left hand side of your screen, it’s the thing that looks like an ice cream”. Just trying to put it into layman’s terms. It really makes you think, and it’s a different skill to be able to show somebody else what to do to be able to do it yourself. And I think the other thing that none of us realised was that we’re all using different platforms. Not platforms but we’re always using different hardware. So Zoom on a laptop looks different to Zoom on an iPad, looks different to Zoom on a phone. You don’t see the same things, and you’re trying to explain to somebody “go to this or go to that” but it’s not actually there because they’re on something else.

And whether the operating system is a Mac or Windows is very different as well. So there were a lot of challenges. But we were able to support, and even things like joining Zoom. People were getting confused at first. “What do I need to type in, do I need to pass code in?” We didn’t do it with pass codes just to make it as simple as possible. We had to have people register to join up to join an event which gave us that security level, but we didn’t have any pass codes or anything just to make it easy for people.

Int: To remove an extra layer of complication isn’t it?

R: Yeah, on the phone trying to talk people through, and just making sure that you’ve got the staff resources. So whilst you’re trying to support somebody to join a group, to get online, the rest of the group isn’t falling apart because you’re not there. So you’ve got to have at least two members of staff; one to keep the group going and one to support the group. It’s a lot more coordination than you’d think. You can’t just throw a group and expect it to happen. There’s a lot of thinking behind that. But we did manage to support people to join online, we got people through.

Int: And I guess it’s that thing with thinking back as well when things have been put in place so quickly there was bound to be teething problems and trial and error at the beginning because there wasn’t that preparation before. There just hadn’t been the time had there?

R: And people get put off easily if something doesn’t work. Not everybody has got that tenacity to stick with things. “Oh it’s not worked, that’s it, I’m not doing it”. It’s like pulling teeth almost. I think there was a lot of that and people saying “oh it’s not working”. Just trying to encourage people to stick with it.

Int: So I know you’ve said there was a struggle initially with them accessing new hardware, was there anything you found around internet access and whether people already had that in place, or whether that was a challenge for some people in terms of whether maybe it was affordable or something that they could have in their house?

R: I think there was probably issues for some people. But obviously the people we worked with did have access and did have their own Wi-Fi already. But I’m pretty confident that there’s a lot of people who didn’t have Wi-Fi, who didn’t have broadband, who didn’t have any access, who could have benefited but didn’t. Our county is one of the most rural counties and one of the biggest counties with probably the worst broadband coverage in Wales. And I think that’s a thing that needs to be addressed with people. So I’m pretty sure there’s a whole cohort of people that we missed that we could have supported.

Int: And so as time went on then was there anything else that you could have done to put in place in terms of that hardware, or did it not come through in terms of the funding?

R: No.

Int: It’s so difficult isn’t it, and I think there was obviously such competition as well at the same time for different funding and different resources.

R: There just wasn’t. It’s come through now. The library now has 100 iPads all with software installed already, all with digital access from the lead librarian. All can be taken out on a user’s library card and loaned. So it’s all there now, it’s in place now so there’s that option now that we can do it. So that’s really good. But it was meant to be in place by Easter this year, and it would have made such a big difference. We were working closely with the library, we trained up some of their staff to be able to become companions. Obviously people couldn’t go into libraries because of lockdown, and actually even when lockdown was eased there’s still a lot of people, especially older people who were still quite nervous. So they wouldn’t have gone to the library because they thought it’s not safe. That’s been so deeply embedded in people’s consciousness that things aren’t safe.

Int: And the restrictions is one thing, but then how people actually want to be is another thing. You can’t just rely on the rules. So I suppose on that you were obviously completely face to face before and then had to go completely virtual. But how do you see things, I guess the last part of this year has probably been a bit of a different time and now things feel like they’re changing again. How do you see things going forward?

R: I’m not with the service anymore. I’m still part of the organisation but not part of that particular project. It’s continuing, the digital project is continuing, and I think there’ll be a blend of in-person stuff and online. I think it’ll be a mix of the two. I think to try and do hybrid events would be too difficult and I think we’d miss people. I think you wouldn’t be able to give people the right amount of attention if you went to hybrid. You’d be concentrating on people in person but then you’d miss people on the camera, or you’d be concentrating on the camera and you’d miss people in person. So I think whilst we can there’ll probably be a mix of online groups and in-person groups. But obviously if we go into lockdown again after Christmas it’ll be online again.

Int: It’s a bit of a confusing time isn’t it, not knowing how things are going to look. It sounds like you had some bits of feedback along the way from people and you were obviously aware of how things were going and things could be tweaked. But what were some of the positive effects that people found and some of the success stories that you came across?

R: I think one lady said “thank you for these sessions, they’ve been a lifeline to us”. If that’s provided a lifeline then that success for me means everything. I think people made friends online that they hadn’t done before. They met new people and struck up their own connections and set up their own Zoom calls and chatted. Some of the new befrienders that we paired with people formed a really strong bond and good connection, and that went well as well and actually made a difference to people. There was a lot of fun and laughter with the [name], the online dance sessions, which were surprisingly good fun. They were really good fun and people really enjoyed them. We had themed sessions so that was good.

I think it just opened people’s horizons a little bit as well because we had people who weren’t necessarily close geographically who met, who wouldn’t have otherwise done so. So that was good. I think they were all positives.

Int: And that’s interesting then, so within that people went off and made their own groups and their own friendships as well, which is really lovely.

R: Yeah, and I think they actually developed skills as well. They developed the skills and confidence which was good, and some of them even got smart speakers. Some of them even took the plunge and went for smart speakers. We had a session where one of our staff members had their smart speaker and everyone was just transfixed by it. And one lady went off and got one, so once they got that taste for it it actually proved to be a really successful thing. Something that was really popular. So it’s just a shame we couldn’t reach more people but I’m hoping that the project will develop and it will reach more people. That more people will come onboard. Because even though it’s not a replacement for face to face, and it should never be a replacement for face to face, it is something that complements face to face and provides us an alternative when we can’t do that.

Int: And it provides an alternative I suppose like you were saying for people when it’s a rural area or different reasons that maybe that particular week it might suit them better or something isn’t it?

R: Yeah, because of our locality as well and because of the people that we work with, it would be something really beneficial for a lot of the people that we work with going forward regardless of pandemic. Because some people are housebound, some people can’t get out to groups. This is a good way of connecting people and working together.

Int: Definitely, and so in terms of obviously again you’ve got the examples there of things that have gone well, but was there any formal evaluation of how using technology had gone across the service?

R: No, we had a lot of disruption with the service so we didn’t actually do any formal review. And it’s only been going for a year so we’ll only actually be at that review process now anyway. I don’t think it’s been carried out yet.

Int: And are there plans to do that do you think in a more formal way, or is it just mainly picking up on the feedback here and there from people?

R: I think there will be, I think it will be part of our structure to do that, our reporting and monitoring structure.

Int: And so you said about the blend going forward, hopefully there’ll be both options. What we spoke about before, this fear around using technology and some people being fearful of internet fraud and scams. And we know that that’s an issue particularly for older people. And so is that something that you felt able to persuade people around or encourage them around, or was that not within your remit to do that?

R: No we did. I think because some of the people that were working with us as befrienders had those concerns as well. So we even did a bespoke session with [digitally focused organisation] on online safety. So we trained people on that, we had people attend. So we did address that.

Int: And did that work for people? I suppose it got the people staying engaged, or some people couldn’t be persuaded?

R: No, I think it worked really well. [name of digitally focused organisation], I can’t praise them highly enough. They’ve been absolutely brilliant. We worked really closely with them. So it worked well, and there’s a lot of resources on their site that people can access. There’s a code that we’ve got now because we’ve done the training, there’s a whole of data and resources that our befrienders can access and work through with people. So I think that’s something that can be built on.

Int: And so just when we were talking about the positive impacts that people had, and there was obviously various. The flip side to that, were there any unexpected negative consequences or effects that people had from using the technology do you think?

R: I think some people who had difficulties maybe went away, maybe that affected their confidence and self-esteem who didn’t come back. Maybe that is one of the downsides of it. But then because people go away you can’t actually work out why someone’s not attended. And I think maybe not being able to join as well would have upset some people if they’d struggled and couldn’t get on. Even if we’d tried to support them maybe put off. It’s like being offered a carrot isn’t it, you’ve had this dangled and you can join and then you can’t. So that is almost more disappointing than not having anything anyway. That promise of something that’s then taken away.

Int: And it’s like you were saying about that frustration of when something doesn’t work, and it is sometimes tempting to just think “oh right, well leave it then”. And then that creates a frustration that you don’t want to go back and change it, which is hard in those times when no one could come around and help, it’s really difficult. Well that’s pretty much all my questions. Thank you so much for all that information, that’s so helpful. Was there anything else you wanted to share or any examples or any stories or anything?

R: No, I think it’s just good to be able to share. The more that we can work on it and raise awareness and support people, it’s going to be beneficial isn’t it?

Int: Yeah definitely, and it’s really interesting talking to people from different areas across Wales as well, and how the different locations have experienced things particularly around the pandemic for sure [section removed for confidentiality reason]

R: That’s great, thank you, and good luck with your research, I hope it goes well.

Int: Thanks very much.

R: Take care, bye-bye, have a good Christmas.

Int: And you, bye.

[CLOSE]

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