**Recording Details:** P008

Int[[1]](#footnote-1): To start, could you please give a brief overview of your role and the organisation that you work for?

R[[2]](#footnote-2): I’m [job title] of a charity called [name of organisation], before the pandemic, we would be a charity that goes into care homes, community spaces, libraries and hubs, singing with the elderly, not always just the elderly, adults with learning difficulties as well, trying to alleviate isolation and loneliness through the joy of music and singing.

Int: Could you tell me about the work that your organisation does with older people specifically?

R: With older people specifically, I’m going to talk in two sections, one is to do with my online work which is obviously relevant to what we’re talking about and obviously, the whole setup originally of the charity and what its reasoning was.

The idea is to try and help to alleviate loneliness and isolation in older people, the music and the singing is really the catalyst to bring people together, we’re not a choir, we’re definitely not a charity that is seen to be harmonising or anything like that, it’s really just the act of coming in the room and singing and sharing a common interest with older people. So music that they’re very familiar with and a chance of them to get to meet old friends and new friends, so that’s the real remit, to get people out of the front door and to come to a familiar social setting and to feel comfortable and engaged for an hour.

Int: How does this work differ, the work with the older adults, from the work with the other populations, you said people with learning difficulties, do you work differently?

R: We work in a lot of different ways, we have some sessions that we call “closed sessions” where we go into a centre say for example, day centre, with specifically adults with learning difficulties and also people with dementia. The difference is that some people don’t really feel the need or can’t access the book that we provide, so it’s very much more of a, with adults with learning difficulties often just dancing, movement and things like that, it’s not so much the singing. That’s the main difference.

But also, we have a lot of groups that are integrated, we don’t close our doors off to anyone, we don’t say it’s only for older people, it’s only for people with learning difficulties, what we do is say it’s open and inclusive to everybody. Often, we find that a lot of people take adults with learning difficulties under their wing and they will form a friendship and that’s the sort of lovely thing that organically happens within our sessions.

Int: So you said there’s a big focus on preventing loneliness and social isolation, from what you've seen, which groups do you think are most affected by this?

R: I think because historically, a lot of older people will talk to you about their emotions and how they feel, we often get a lot of feedback from them directly saying, “I was bereaved, I didn’t have any friends and I came here and everything’s changed”, and those lovely stories that we hear of people and their lives changing drastically after using our [name of organisation] sessions is very humbling to us. But it is definitely evidence that those are the sorts of things that happen so it’s often bereaved people that have lost a very close member of their family, that reach out to [name of organisation] to come and use our facilities.

Often, it’s somebody cajoling a friend to say, “Look, you should come to this” and they’ll say, “I can’t sing” and we’ll say, “that really is irrelevant, it’s not about that”. So very often, I would say it’s the older population that benefit the most.

Int: If you think back to the early days of COVID19, what sorts of conversations were had in your organisation about how digital technology could or should be used to prevent loneliness and social isolation?

R: This is a really interesting question for us because my colleague and I, my colleague’s a lot younger than me and is more tech savvy, we sat in the car on the phone, I remember the conversation and it was basically, “What on earth are we going to do? These people are going to be stuck in their homes with very little to keep them occupied” and we know for certain that isolation and loneliness has a detrimental mental health effect.

So we just said, “We’ve got to do something”, so we started to cobble together a very basic, almost Facebook singing session that a lot of the younger people would forward on or share with their oldest family members, to which extent, it grew and grew to now, we have a really nice streamlined, effective, twice a week singing session for older people with the lyrics coming up for them in big print, and we go straight into smart TVs in care homes and community centres so that people can enjoy that.

We also offer things like one to one sessions, for example, we have a lady with learning difficulties, she’ll have a one to one Zoom session with us, a shorter session but her one favourite song so that she can actually access that as well, so we’ve tried to be really creative and gosh, it’s been a steep learning curve for an older people like myself to learn all the technology but it really has been beneficial and I’m amazed by how many older people have been able to use technology, it’s actually a real eye opener, so very positive.

Int: So you had a conversation with your colleague, did you have a choice on what or how technology was going to be used or was there some type of mandation from high above?

R: What happened was our boss saw what we were trying to do, we got some funding from various organisations to help us which was incredible. We had a guy that came into do the lyrics for us because we knew how important it was for people to read as they’re singing. We had a lot of help and input from lots of other organisations and I think that all those sorts of things helped us to empower older people to use our, they knew that it was going to be a worthwhile hour if they could access it somehow, so they were getting family members and for example, community coordinators were helping groups, going into their homes in full PPE and setting up their computers for them so they could access the weekly [name of organisation] session because they didn’t want to miss it. Sometimes, they’d know their friends were watching as well, it was an online community feel about it and still is very much so.

Int: When you were discussing the use of Zoom or whatnot, what do you think were the pros and cons of using technology to prevent loneliness?

R: I think the pros outweigh the cons, definitely because I was very fearful of using Zoom, I used to feel that if I was using Zoom, I wasn’t concentrating on what my real job was which was to engage older people, to communicate with them in a very positive manner, I was worried that would be put to the side, where I’d be concentrating on, “Have I taken mute off?” and those sorts of things.

But I think that with a great support of colleagues and things like that, we all worked together very well, it was a very positive thing and the feedback we get via emails are very positive. We’re very reactive now so if somebody says, “I really liked that session last week”, we’ll email them back and say, “What songs would you like?” So the following week, it’ll be “here’s a little shout out for so and so” and it makes them feel, some of the feedback’s been they feel like they’re in a session, even though they’re sitting their lounge, “they’re talking to me”, I’ll go “Hi [name], how are you? What are you up to?” and that’s the sort of feel where as fabricated as it is, it’s good to have a little feeling of, “wow, this is actually a real [name of organisation] session”.

Int: Feels more personal to be able to call out and shout out.

R: Yes, exactly.

Int: When you decided to use tech, was access to hardware and software discussed or data security?

R: Yes, quite a few of my colleagues went on various courses to learn all the different bits and pieces, I can’t honestly say that that was me, I was very much the one who was going, “keep on delivering the [name of organisation] sessions”. We had the software and the hardware and we were able to access stuff, we had to go up in quality with all our recording equipment and things like that, that had to be improved because initially it was just on a phone and standing there holding it, so we had to get a lot of equipment in and we had to talk about GDPR, obviously as a charity we have to be very aware of that and sometimes, we do things like online Zoom sessions within a bigger group so for example, in [name of city], we do a lot with independent living and things like that and so we wouldn’t access these, we couldn’t see the people that we were talking to, we couldn’t see into their homes, they could only see us, so there was a lot of caution around security for older people as well.

Int: You said you bought some equipment, what did you buy and how did you go about figuring out what you needed? Was it trial and error? Or how did it go?

R: The charity has worked with a sort of tech guy over the years that has done different filming I think for them, on a bigger scale. So we contacted him and asked him to help us completely with our charity and what we do and we got some funding in for that, specifically for that and he advised us about what equipment we would need. We needed to get a tripod, a decent phone for filming, computers that we were able to upload more swiftly where each, because we do two sessions a week, it’s quite a high turnover. And as I say, we had to have training for Zoom and things like that so yes, equipment wise, we had to go up a notch, we couldn’t get away with what we had, we couldn’t botch it anymore really!

Int: Had you tried any tech previously with older adults that hadn’t worked?

R: No, this is the interesting thing because our job previously had always just been to go into these community hubs and libraries and just to work with them, with books in your hands and nobody had ever discussed or got to grips with technology.

But incredibly, amazed at how many people are responding to us online and they’re on You Tube, they’re saying, “we had such a great session with you, can we play this next week?” and honestly, I genuinely think it’s been a bit of a lifeline for people, not everybody because I spoke to a lady yesterday on the phone and she said, “No, I only have a landline, I can’t watch you online” and then I start to think more about how we can help those people that are really, really isolated, so we’ve got a little CD together of the songs that [name of colleague], my colleague and I do the sessions and [name of colleague] has created a CD of music and so our next process is to actually manually send these CDs to people that have absolutely no internet access and aren’t really able to do it or don’t want to, that feel again a part of the charity’s, we’re here, we’re singing with you, we’re joining in with you.

So we’ve got to think this year, to really think about some of those people that are not accessing anything and there are people out there. My example is my mum’s 87 and she’s the WhatsApp guru and it’s great, “I watched the session last week”. It’s fantastic because I think she would never have done that and I know that’s the example we’re using, is people that can genuinely now – and they're quick off the mark – they know what they’re doing, it’s incredible, so it’s a lesson to me because they are teaching me something! If they can do it, I have to do it.

Int: Roughly, what do you think is the proportion of people who couldn’t have access to these online sessions and to whom you're going to be sending CDs, that might have been left behind from the lack of tech?

R: This is a really new area, it’s something we’ve only started talking about in the last couple of days and I think that I’m trying to get underneath who these people are. Again, we’ve got issues with addresses, what information we have, if they phone me and say, “When’s [name of organisation] coming back?” and I can say to them, “Look, we do have a CD, if you're really out of touch, would you like one?”, then that will be the way we work.

Statistically, I don’t have yet any information about that but I kind of know there’s a good 25% that have dropped off and sadly, a couple of months ago, I did a one to one Zoom session for a lady who has dementia and when I started to do it with her, I realised that she used to be in one of our sessions and her mental health had really deteriorated since the last time we saw her, and she didn’t know who I was. But we accessed her via the hospital [name of organisation], we got access to singing with her and that again in itself was wonderful, she didn’t know us but she knew the songs which was wonderful. Just got to find them!

Int: That’s what’s hardest, to find those who maybe more isolated without the tech.

Are there any service users who tried using the technology, who tried joining those Zoom sessions that then stopped?

R: I don't think so, what’s happened is there’s been a lovely unseen support network, if somebody’s tried to use it, they’ve then got back to somebody such as a community coordinator something and said, “I’m having trouble” and then they’ve been helped. I don't know of anybody who’s actually used it and then stopped using it, most people that have got on board with it have actually stuck with it and actually got onto other sessions, they’ll do a singing session, then some exercise session or there’s another lovely one which is supporting memories, there’s a lovely link there, so people will go and do a few and make it part of their day, I suppose.

Int: In the care homes, who was setting up the live streaming on the TV, was it the people who worked there?

R: Yeah, definitely the carers, they’re so progressive, they were fantastic because a lot of the time we do care homes, we just don’t do care homes but we do them and I’ve always found that the carers are the ones who are dancing in the aisles first anyway, and they love it because they know that the people that are living there will have an hour of complete fun and it’s okay to get up and move if you want to, you don’t just have to stay in the chair, the music that we have is really upbeat, lively music, it’s not depressing, it’s the Beatles, Abba, Cliff Richard, everybody wants to get up and move so that in itself in the care homes is a real plus because it gives the carers of full on entertainment and we do stream straight to them, and we can do independent ones just for the care homes. We can even say, “It’s so and so’s birthday today, happy birthday to you, what are you doing today?”, if we’re having a Zoom session, it’s very much an ongoing conversation rather than just them sitting and listening to us.

Int: How often would you say you do some independent sessions, one to one?

R: Christmas time is really busy, always is, so we did about 12 sessions over Christmas but usually in the month, about four or five. Again, looking to build that up because mask wearing and restrictions are still in Wales and [name of organisation] aren’t going back any time soon, so we need to ensure that we’re doing more – and actually, that’s exactly what we’re working on this week, touching care homes, getting into care homes that are near to the sessions that have previously run, so that they can have a little taste of what we’re up to and then if they want to and they’re able to, they can actually move into a face to face group when we go back, so yeah, that’s the work we’re doing at the moment.

Int: One issue we know to usually be a barrier for some older adults is that the fear of using technology, either due to not wanting to break devices or being afraid of internet scams or things like that, was that an issue for the older adults you worked with?

R: What was really useful for us if we had a lot of people such as, there was one in [name of city] and he was running an operation that they were giving older people free tablets and helping them to have really basic, “just click this button and do this and you can watch this”, and I think we had a lot of people on the coalface doing a lot of those different things, I think I said community coordinators, things like that, which was really helpful.

So that was in itself really good but I think for us, what we were seeing was our online sessions were very clear, “just click on this because it’s really simple”, you just go to our website and you click on this link and it all just comes up so there’s really nothing much to do, and I think once people had done it once and knew it was only twice a week at 11 o clock, they would just sit down and go, “Have I just got to click that button and then it will all come up?”, there didn’t seem to be too much of a worry.

We didn’t get feedback that there were. Feedback was great because it would be things like, “can you make the letters on the book a little bit bigger because we couldn’t read it”, maybe they were looking at it on a small screen or something, “Can the sound be altered?”, so we’d work with the sound, we changed, “Is that better? Does it sound better this way?”, so yeah, I think everybody that had wanted to express things, were able to do that and it worked quite well.

Int: When you get feedback, is it at the end of a session? Or do they send an email, do they call you? How does that work?

R: Lots of different ways really, so you can access the singing session on You Tube, we’d have lots of comments on You Tube that way. I would have emails sent to me, very often I’d have a care home that would send an email and they’d say, “We loved the session, next month it’s so and so’s birthday, so and so’s anniversary” and I’d have a list and then we’d deliver that out, “[name], are you sitting in your chair? I can see you, happy birthday to you”, or something like that.

Feedback wise, we’d ask for general criticism comments, anything like that. We’ve not really done a formal questionnaire as such at this point but yeah, it would always be email or text or phone call, a lot of older people like to phone and have a chat about it, lots of different ways.

Int: What effect do you think using technology in this way had on you and your colleagues?

R: It’s forced me into the 21st Century! I bridge the gap, sometimes I do England and sometimes I do Wales, I’m Wales based but sometimes I nip over to England to have a look at what’s going on there, so currently I’m looking at different ways to deliver the face to face sessions in the future, which is projecting the words up onto the wall so that’s technology wise, that’s really interesting for us as a charity.

Yes, I saw my boss a couple of weeks ago, the first time I’d seen him for nearly two years because it’s all been Zoom meetings, I think it’s been incredible, it’s changed the way, I mean obviously there’s some terrible negative things to it but there are some really good positive things to it. It’s changed the way we work forever, for us, colleagues, it’s given us access, lots of care homes have come to us rather than us going out.

I had a conversation this morning with my colleague saying it’s really hard sometimes to get into a care home and speak to someone and say, “We’re not looking for anything, we just want to tell you, this free service is available and a lot of your residents might really like it”, but people, like the gatekeepers have a fear of us, “What do you want?”, and so it’s really hard to get through that.

But we found with the technology and they can just access online and have a look at one of our [name of organisation] live singing sessions, people are coming to us and saying, “We like what you're doing, how can we work with you?”, so in that respect it’s been incredibly useful, very much so.

Int: And now, it sounds like you're getting more comfortable with technology and that perhaps you're implementing it in face to face as well by having a projector showing something like that, so do you think you're more likely to implement technology even if it goes back to face to face?

R: Yes, definitely. One of the things we’re looking at is the potential to continue on the [name of organisation] live singing sessions online as well as face to face, we’ve realised that horrific weather, doctors appointments, extreme illness prevent people from coming to the group and they feel like they’re missing out. Sometimes, when we were face to face, someone might not be at a group for three or four months because they’ve been really unwell but now, we can say to them, “you can still go online and see us, you can still chat with us if you want to a request or for us to give you a shout out, we can do that”, so yes, 100% technology is a big, big way forward for us as a charity and we’ll be forever now, I think and like we say, about the screens and so that reduces the amount of equipment we have to carry around, we’d have to carry around 20 or 30 books sometimes to various sessions, now we take a little thing and a speaker and everything will be much easier. It will be a bit of a learning curve but I genuinely think it’s definitely going to be worth it.

Int: What do you think would be needed to make using both the face to face and remote delivery successful for both you and the service user?

R: The bottom line is for me personally, for people to be a little bit more open and ready to try something different because like I said, sometimes it’s the other organisations that are the gatekeepers to accessing some really, really fantastic stuff, to just take older people out of themselves for an hour, to be nostalgic about beautiful music that they loved when they were younger and to have some sort of dialogue about that. It’s precious, it’s really precious and for some people to say, “no, it’s not for us”, I feel frustrated because it actually is, it’s just such an easy thing and it’s so easy to access so I think for the charity, that’s the frustration and for the service users, I think in all honesty, a lot of people and the conversations I have on the phone is they want to be face to face, they miss, it’s a very physical session, there’s a lot of laughter, you cannot possibly create that online, I would love you come one day when we’re back face to face, it’s funny, it’s entertaining, there’s some real characters and it’s the highlight of their week, month, whatever and I think that’s the thing that people really do miss, it’s not so much the singing, it’s the conversations that are taking place while we’re singing and chatting.

Int: Do you think there are some unexpected positive effects to using digital technology, as well as some unexpected negative effects?

R: I think probably the positive effects are that people, well I think mentioned it before is that people feel empowered to go and use it for other reasons as well, they may think “I can do this for [name of organisation] so what other groups are there that I can log onto and use?”, what other services are there, the potential is endless really, a lot of people I know have book clubs, reading clubs and things like that.

I think the negative is getting out, health and wellbeing is that it’s too easy and I don’t just speak for older people, I think our whole country, the world becomes more insular and you think you can conduct your life on a screen and fresh air and walking and nature and just being outdoors is as important as social interaction and I think that’s also, what we introduced about six months ago was twice a month, we do movement and music so we have our [name of organisation] songs on but also beautiful chair based movement, so that people are actually exercising as well, not just sitting on the sofa all day, they’re actually doing some exercises, so we bring in our kitchen chair and we do some stretching and things like that.

It’s not just me sitting there, we bring somebody in specifically who is trained to do that with older people in mind and with the right movements and the different muscle groups being used. But I think that might be the downside, technology can sometimes overwhelm us can’t it?

Int: So you have singing classes, you have singing and movement classes, are there other types of classes/sessions you also have?

R: We have Welsh speaking. The first Monday of every month, we have a Welsh speaking session and again, with the lyrics coming up and [name of colleague] has been running that since St David’s Day, we launched it at St David’s Day, she’s been going for almost a year, which met again with a good reception and she will take some of the real lovely classic folk songs, Welsh folk songs and do that.

We’ve also done some lovely Bollywood, before lockdown, our very last session was a Bollywood [name of organisation] session which was fantastic and so we invited [name] to continue doing those with us online, teaching dance movements through [name of organisation] as well, so we’ve tried very hard to be as creative as we possibly can be, so it’s not the same thing every week and each week we have a different theme, seasonal or something we’ve decided to challenge and look at, we try and keep it as fresh as possible.

Int: Since you're going to use a bit of tech still in the future because it hasn’t faded out yet, do you plan on having any formal evaluation or loneliness and social isolation of the service users and the technology they’re using?

R: It’s really interesting because just before lockdown, we did a survey and a university research project about loneliness and isolation, it was all done with our service users as in face to face, we didn’t know what was around the corner. But I think it’s probably a very good idea to look into that and find out who’s been using it, how it’s been accessed and whether it would be useful for them to continue because it’s useful for us to know if it’s worth us continuing with the online sessions. I’m sensing it really is but it would be useful, although a lot of older people do not like questionnaires! It has to be done but they just don’t want to fill them in and I have to sit with them and go, “come on, you've got to fill these in, we need your input”, that’s why I’m doing this with you, it’s so important to get information from people, people don’t have the time or they just don’t want to do it so it is important and we try and keep the questionnaires as short as possible and just to answer their questions but yeah, it would be really useful and I think we probably would.

Int: That was pretty much all of my questions so thank you very much for all the information. Is there anything else you'd like to share, another example or story that pops to mind?

R: I don't think so, I just think talking to you makes me remember, there were so many people, when we first started doing the online sessions, we had so many people coming out of the woodwork saying, “It’s me, I’m here, I’m online” and they were so excited about, “I can see you and it feels like you're in my lounge” and it kept us going because we were thinking, “are we just flogging a dead horse here? Is nobody watching? Is it going to be fruitful?” and then knowing that people were just saying, “I’ve got so and so to go online, she’s coming on tomorrow, she’s going to watch it as well” and I just think it did help at a very difficult time and I’m glad that we did it, and I want to carry on going just because of that, because you know someone out there is sitting there watching it and having a laugh and we never take ourselves seriously, that’s the other funny thing, it’s really quite a good laugh and I think people love that, quite happy to take the mick out of ourselves.

Int: Thank you very much. [section removed for confidentiality]

Int: When you said you have some people who try it once and they don’t want to do it anymore, do you know why they don’t want to?

R: It’s not that they don’t want to do [name of organisation] anymore, they don’t always want to participate in a, sometimes we ask for feedback or what they think or we want to use something they’ve said as a quote for us for funding, they do it a little bit and they just don’t want to do that part and I think because they’re probably just older and they want to enjoy what they’re enjoying, they don’t want to evidence it or think about why they’re enjoying it and that’s a hard thing for us because we’re going “Why did you enjoy it? Tell us more about it”, it’s difficult but sometimes people just go, “I just want to enjoy it and that’s it.”

Int: [section removed for confidentiality]

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