**Recording Details:** P009

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

R[[2]](#footnote-2): All of them?

Int: Yes!

R: I’m a member of [name of council] which is the watchdog so to speak of the [name of board]. Each [name of board] in Wales has their own watchdog which is a group that oversees what the [name of board] are providing, collects the information from the public regarding whether their treatment and facilities that the [name of board] provide are suitable for the people.

We collect information, we reach out to the public, we ask the public to contact us with problems and we take problems back to the [name of board] and regular discussions with the chair of the [name of board] and various clinicians, just to make sure that they are dealing with problems in a proper manner.

So that’s basically my role, we used to go into hospitals and clinics to speak to patients, obviously we can’t do that anymore so the role has changed vastly but we’re still basically, sort of collecting information from the public, talking on an almost daily basis with the [name of board] to make sure that it’s a two-way thing.

My other role is I’m on [a committee for disability]. We meet on a bi-monthly basis with different disability organisations throughout [name of city]. I sit on that in my role as [name of title] but also as an interest in disability issues within the county. Then we thrash out things that are going on for disabled people and get the right people into the meetings to discuss how we move on with those problems. So it’s quite involved!

I also help to run a craft group for older adults and some of them have dementia and different health problems, mostly our people are sent to us by social prescribers as having some specific problem and need and group where they can feel part of. So that’s basically me! Plus I’m an old lady myself so I have that perspective as well!

Int: Could you tell me about the work all your organisations do with older people specifically?

R: You want specifically the problems that we’re finding for those who are not understanding technology or not interested in technology, is that the sort of …?

Int: Those who are lonely and then we’re going to see how technology was used.

R: Loneliness, obviously, through the last two years has been horrendous, not necessarily people are lonely because they live alone but often, they are lonely because they can’t identify with their own groups, with their own peers, [inaudible 00:03:54] peer groups in the younger age group but you don’t often hear it for older people and it’s just as important, that they speak and interact with people of their own age and interests, that’s something that’s often forgotten, I think.

Those who are older probably have health issues or mobility issues as well which exacerbates the problem. I understand that because I’ve got arthritis and I like to walk, I like to get out there after a day on the computer, nothing better than going to the beach. So I understand on the days that I can’t do it, just how isolating that is and how it pulls your heart whole health down, everything goes wrong, your mental health, your physical health, so I can really identify with those people who have mobility issues as well as loneliness, that’s a big problem, a huge problem.

And then a lot of those that have dementia and other mental health issues, yes they can connect sometimes via technology but mostly they don’t, those kind of people don’t because they can’t cope with it or they’re afraid of it. So yes, a huge problem and it’s been worse obviously over the last two years.

Int: How does the organisations you work for, the committee on disability and the craft group, how do you help older adults through that?

R: Through the [council], we have tried always to reach out, we do an awful lot online which is essential to reach the majority of people. We’re also very well aware that, not all of us, some people in the organisation on the [name of board] are still not cognoscente of the fact that many people are being left out, those without technology are being left out; I am very aware of it.

We try and reach out to them, we try and post things through doors of where we know people are alone and not getting out, we all know our local community and we post, what goes out on our website is turned into a news sheet and that goes through doors.

Also, we aren’t supposed to put our own personal numbers on, there’s an office number but there’s nobody in the office anymore so even that’s gone wrong, so quite often a lot of us do put our own personal number on at the moment, which we get inundated with calls, yes but hey, it’s part of what you do, it just needs to be done at the moment. You can’t stick to rules always because people are still being left out, the rules don’t cover everything, you know? So although we’re not supposed to do it, we often do.

The disability issues, a lot of our people that we deal with are isolated, they’re housebound because of their disabilities. That’s always difficult, we’re not reaching out to them, we’re missing an awful lot of people, I’m quite aware of it. We get together, we talk, we deal with problems, we reach out to people as much as we can but we’re also quite aware that it’s the tip of the iceberg, it’s very frustrating, it’s very worrying but it is what it is, we can’t reach everybody.

With the craft group, again some of them, one or two of them live with family so family have technology obviously and that makes it easier to contact them. Some live alone, one of two with dementia rely on again, a personal visit from us because it’s the only way, you can’t do things any other way, you can’t send them a letter because they lose it or they can’t read it, they can’t understand it. They don’t use computers, the only thing is we have to get in the car and physically go and see them. We’re quite aware, very, very aware, it worries me in particular that we’re missing an awful lot of people.

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

R: Obviously, that conversation was had. I think a lot of the top organisations if you like, the [name of board] and the county council, they automatically assume that everybody’s going to do everything online and there’s people like me and others like me that say, “no, you can’t assume that, you have got to realise that not everybody’s online for various reasons”, maybe they don’t want to be, maybe they physically can’t, maybe they feel stupid and don’t want to open themselves up to ridicule – as they feel it – because they can’t cope with anything. So we have these conversations.

Unfortunately, two years on, those conversations are still going on because just recently, we’ve had the booster and we’ve had COVID passes and I have been dealing with numerous people on a one to one basis that can’t access any of these and they don't know what’s going on, and they don't know how to get where they want to be. Those conversations that we had in the beginning two years ago are still happening, now it hasn’t really improved an awful lot, unfortunately.

Int: So there are conversations about like providing access to technology or technological skills, I suppose?

R: It can happen. The [name of board] have given out tablets, they have given some instruction. What they’re not understanding is to give a tablet and basic instructions to somebody who has no understanding of technology at all, you're really opening a can of worms for those people, they’re getting quite upset, they’re getting quite stressed and in case they mess something up, they can’t do it and they feel stupid. It’s not easy.

It’s good to provide an iPad and to provide the technology, to provide the training rather but for an awful lot of older people and dementia people, because they can’t grasp it or they’re afraid of it or for many reasons, they won’t do it because they feel stupid. You do hear, they hear of things going wrong like with the bank and people conning them and they're frightened of it, they’re really terrified of doing it and they just throw their hands up and say, “I don’t want to do this”, and you can’t force people to do it.

Giving them a laptop or giving them an iPad and giving them basic – and I do say basic – because that’s all you can do at a distance, basic skills, it really isn't always, sometimes it maybe the answer but the majority of times I find it isn't the answer because they’re too afraid.

Int: In your opinion, what do you think could be done to help overcome these fears?

R: The only way and it is difficult is personal health, personal supervision, one to one which at the moment is very, well the last two years, it’s been very difficult but if we want older people to really embrace this, we need to be aware that we have to hold them by the hand and physically be there as a friend to say, “you can do this and I’ll be with you every step of the way and I will help you”, you can’t just give them the stuff and say, “there you are, I’ve shown you how to logon, I’ve shown you how to open it up, it’s all yours”, that’s not enough.

It’s too scary, it’s like asking me to go into NASA and launch a spaceship, to them it’s exactly that, you might as well say something like that to them because it’s something they’ve never done, never had training, they’ve never even seen a computer or switched one on and if you give them basic training, you may tell them once, the next time they switch it on, if they haven’t done it for a day or so, they’re back to square one, it really doesn’t work.

Int: When you’re having these conversations about using tech and how to use it and when not to use, what were some of the pros that were discussed in those conversations?

R: Not many, to be honest because I find we’re still battling with those who do do it on a daily basis, to make them understand how difficult it is for those who don’t and two years on, that same conversation is still happening.

Int: Prior to COVID, had your organisations used any technology with older adults before or did they just occur?

R: No, that’s occurred because we have to do it. With the [name of board], the [name of council], we were going out into situations, health situations, GP surgeries, hospitals, clinics, care homes, we were going out to talk to people on a one to one basis and you sit there and you listen to what they have to say, you jot a few things down and take it back in a meeting and discuss it.

There was no need of the technology then, we were really thrown in the deep end, the office itself and the [name of board] was thrown in the deep end because they weren’t used to doing any of this so meetings and Zoom calls, it was not something we’d all done and we had to learn.

I’d never done Zoom calls, I’ve used a computer for years and I’d never done a Zoom call in my life, didn’t even know what it was and all of a sudden, you're chatting to this and you think, “ah, what shall I do? I don’t understand this, I’m not going face to face with somebody I don’t know”, and we had to do it but it was not an issue before then, we had never done it.

Int: Can you give me some more details of the main ways you use technology in your organisation? It could be phones or computers, anything to address loneliness and social isolation?

R: Phones, yes, phones are a big necessity for all of us but you can’t see people’s reactions and they can’t see you, you're just a voice. It’s limiting, essential but limited.

You can’t see somebody that’s suffering from depression on the other end of the phone unless they physically talk about it, which often they don’t but when you're face to face with somebody, you see depression in people’s eyes, it’s a whole different thing. So yes, we always use the phone to contact people.

Now, where do I go with this? Now we use technology, Zoom calls, Skype sometimes, it’s still limited to those who want to do it and can do it.

Int: For those who are engaging with it and who seem to be doing it, is it successful for them?

R: Yes, for some people it’s amazing. I’m not knocking it totally, for some people, many people, it’s been an absolute life line, they can actually see a friendly face and chat and often, it leads to other things as well, if they’re near you, you may meet up and go for a walk out in the fresh air, once you've seen them and they’ve chatted and you know you have a rapport, which you can’t have on the telephone, you don’t have that rapport on the telephone. With technology, with Skype and Zoom, you do.

Often, you can meet up with people and go for a little walk with them, that makes a big difference to their life and it gives you more contact with them, so that’s worked in many ways, that’s been amazing.

Int: So those who did engage, what do you think was their motivation to do so and to keep engaging?

R: Their motivation to actually start using technology?

Int: Yes.

R: The ones who started it, desperation most of them because there was no other way and they had to sort of throw themselves into it. We have people on the committees that I sit on, members of the [name of council] who don’t, some of them are professional people, they don’t like Zoom calls, they don’t like doing their meetings on Zoom, they hate it and they can’t wait to get back meeting face to face.

I’m happy with it, it’s great, I don’t have to travel anywhere, I can sit in my house and chat to somebody, fine and it’s great because we have found that we get more members of the [name of board], managers, top dogs if you like, in meetings whereas before your meeting could be in [name of city] and they've got to come from [name of city], travel to [name of city], go back again, they’re busy people and they didn’t always find the time to do that so you could, sometimes we could not get these clinicians and managers to come to a meeting. But now, they take a 10 minute out of their day to do a Zoom call so we talk to them an awful lot more than we used to, so that’s a big plus.

But that’s on the professional side of it, when you're talking about older people and the isolation, a lot of it hasn’t improved. There’s been organisations such as Age Cymru, Age UK, different organisations have undertook training for people but they have got to have that start of, they’ve got to have a bit of knowledge before they can undertake any training because the training is done on the computer or the phone. It isn't a one to one in their home so they’ve got to have a bit of understanding, a bit of savvy with technology before they can even start the training.

I’ve had training to, everything was on my computer, my filing system on my computer was horrendous because so much info was coming in and I was not having time to process it properly, and I just could not sort it out. So I had online training and they helped me sort out my files, devise a better system for me so that I could cope with it, that was great for me and it helped me with my work but you have to have that groundwork first before you can begin to have a computer course with any of these organisations.

Int: Do you think using technology was more successful at reducing loneliness for certain groups of older people compared to others? Could you see a difference between groups?

R: Those that already could use a computer but only used it perhaps tinker about, play around, perhaps order something online, those kind of people, once they’d got into Zoom calls and face to face meetings, they progressed very quickly to really enjoying that process and their wellbeing improved and they gained confidence. To gain confidence, you improve your feeling of wellbeing and your self-worth goes up 100-fold, which is wonderful.

I understand that feeling because I’ve been there, done that and I can identify with that but again, as they were only talking about people who are so afraid of it and don’t want to do whatever we [inaudible 00:21:19] , those are the ones being left out and I don't know how we can get to those.

Int: And did you see any individuals who started engaging and then stopped?

R: In the hospitals, yes, I can’t think of anything [inaudible 00:21:40] in people’s homes, personally but in the hospitals, some people were given tablets on wards, they were given a basic training how to do it so they could contact their family because earlier in the pandemic, we couldn’t even see family.

They did it as long as somebody was with them, like a member of staff was with them, they were comfortable but because of staffing shortages, because of difficulties on wards, they aren’t the people to do this so they just gave up. So those that started with good intent gave up because there was no supervision and they weren’t happy, so that ended badly really.

They did try but they weren’t comfortable and we don’t have the kind of staffing that can be on wards helping people with talking to their loved ones on the computer, it’s just not going to work.

Int: So for the support provided, it was either by people working on wards and do you think friends and family were helping?

R: They couldn’t go into the hospitals so it was just the staff on the wards which, you can imagine, with the best will in the world, they don’t have time to spend with a patient, their physical needs, medical needs far outweigh sitting with them on a computer talking to their family, that’s a nice addition if you have time to do it but we find as staff shortages get worse, there’s just no time for that.

Int: And for the older adults living at home, do you think they had support from certain people?

R: No, I don’t actually, some had the support of their close family or friends that, if they were in a bubble with somebody, they would come in occasionally and help them, advise them and show them what to do but I often find with older people who are not technology savvy, somebody can sit and show you something and go through it for an hour, when they’ve gone and you try and do it yourself, it’s a whole different ball game.

We found people who’d say, “my son has shown me how to do it, I can do this” but when they actually come to, like today talking to you now, I do know how to do it but it all went wrong and I had to relog into Zoom, change my password and start all over again. If you're not technology savvy, that’s enough to just throw you and say, “the hell with it, I’m not going to bother, I can’t do this.”

So when it goes wrong and when it’s difficult and they don't know what they’re doing then it’s no good having somebody just come in occasionally to help, people just give up.

Int: What effect did using technology to prevent loneliness do you think had on you and your colleagues and the work you do?

R: Very frustrated, we’d like to do a lot more, we’re quite aware that people are slipping through the net, we think we’ve done all we can, there may be other things that we can do but I don't know, we’ve spent hours and hours in meetings thinking how we can reach the people that we know are out there, that are lonely, that are isolated, we know they’re there, it’s not easy to get to them, not at the moment. I don't know the answer to that, we’re constantly trying to devise new ways but you're very limited.

In another generation, in another 20 years, this won’t be a problem because all those oldies will be gone and everybody will have had training from school and feel a lot more comfortable, but they are there now and they deserve to be helped and we find, I feel specifically, that they are not being included in a lot of things, it’s frightening, it worries me a lot, it’s one thing that I’m really concerned about and I’m banging my fist on the table so many times. In fact, when I go to meetings, they wait for me to say something about this very subject!

You’re not including party who don’t have technology, how do you expect them to know what you're talking about now? You've just discussed something, you're putting it online for those that are online, how do you expect the others to do it? They think, “she’s here again, she’s on the old hobby horse again”, it’s something I am so aware of and it really upsets me, that they don't think about it.

You’ll have grown up with technology, when you think “I’ll do something”, you do it on the computer, it goes out there. It takes people sometimes a long time to realise that there are other people out there that are just not getting this.

I don't know what the answer is, we’ve gone round in circles. I go knocking on doors in my neighbourhood where I know people who are alone, where I know they haven’t got technology, to see if I can help them, that’s great but it’s a drop in the ocean, something more needs to be done and I don't know the answer, I wish I did.

Int: You've discussed a couple throughout this whole conversation but what do you think were some unexpected positive and negative effects that were found after implementing technology?

R: Positive effects? I do think after all the discussions post COVID, throughout COVID, all the discussions with the [name of board], with the county councils, I think we have made them aware that they need to do this multidisciplinary, whatever they need to do, it has to be multidisciplinary, it doesn’t have to be a message on the internet and I think we have, I think we’ve finally got through there, they are trying but they don’t see another way sometimes, I can see that they can’t see another way of doing it.

I would think that at one time, you'd read the paper, you'd buy the paper and read everything that was going on locally or nationally, people don’t buy newspapers anymore, especially those who can’t get out for medical reasons, they can’t get out and buy a newspaper so they don’t get it that way.

I think we should spend more money, this my feeling and I have said it in meetings, on delivering things through people’s front doors. We do it when there’s an election and they want your vote. We do it for national things that we need everybody to know, your voting slip is posted through your door, it used to be, again that is online but we should spend more time and money on delivery through doors, then you reach everybody.

Int: When you're talking about delivering things, do you mean information as well?

R: Yes, I think all the information that people need, COVID awareness should not have been just online or via the television screen, it should have been posted in people’s doors like where you go for your injections, where you go for your boosters, how you get a COVID pass, it should all be coming through every single door so that no matter whether you're on technology or not, you're still included in what’s going on.

Everybody’s got a front door, a door to their flat, their house, wherever they live, a caravan, they’ve still got a door, you should be able to have things posted through your door with all this information on. I know it’s expensive but we do it if we need to for other reasons and in Wales, we waste an awful lot of money on doing everything bilingually and half of that paper goes in the bin because people don’t want it bilingual, they either want Welsh or they want English, the money we’re wasting on that is colossal. That angers me when they say they haven’t got the money to do postal drops for people who aren’t on technology or people who are disabled or sick, the money’s being spent in the wrong place, I think the only way at the moment – this isn't going to go on forever, maybe only as long as the people who have never had a computer in their life are still alive.

For now, I think we ought to think more about these people and include them - and disabled people – we have lots of rules about disability and inclusivity but it really isn't happening.

Int: In your survey response, you said you anticipate the balance of face to face and remote work to be mostly remote actually, how do you think that’s going to work?

R: For the foreseeable future, obviously, some of our people would like a mixture, they would like to have face to face and then computer links for those who don’t want to come to the meetings physically or can’t come to the meetings physically, technologically that’s more difficult and I’m not sure even our organisation is able to provide that because we’ve been feeling our way all through this.

We’ve got better at it but a mixture of face to face and technology at meetings is a little more complicated, so I don't know whether that is something that’s going to happen but for the moment, we are sticking, we’ve all decided, the council and the [name of board] have decided that remote meetings are the way for now.

Some of our people have just stayed away, they don’t want to do it, which is their choice, it’s up to them, it’s a shame but it is what it is, it’s difficult times, it’s very difficult times, you can’t force people to go to meetings if they don’t feel comfortable, you can’t force meetings.

I don’t drive, I use public transport or I walk everywhere, I’m not happy using public transport at the moment because not everybody wears a facemask, so I’m happy the way things are at the moment, some are not, you can’t please everybody, we’ve just got to do our best in a difficult situation.

Int: What kind of help could be given or what do you need to be able to make remote working better or the mix of remote and face to face working?

R: More help, I would think, from organisations that can train us into this dual fuel way of meeting, equipment as well is often expensive and hard to come by. If we went into face to face meetings, some of the rooms that we use, it wouldn’t be our own office because it’s too small, it wouldn’t be safe, it would have to be a community room, that doesn’t lend itself to dual type of meeting, you'd have to have a screen, speakers, they’re just huge community rooms that we hire sometimes for meetings and I don't think a dual way of working would work in that aspect, neither do most of our managers and directors.

They are sticking with the way we are at the moment because moving forward to a dual way of working is going to be mostly and more difficult, and they don’t have the time or equipment to do it to be honest, shoestring budgets as usual!

Int: Do you plan to do any type of formal evaluation of loneliness and social isolation of your service users and the use of technology?

R: We have been doing that, we have been doing surveys for quite a while now, there are surveys gone out, if you're interested, I can send you things like that, the survey that we have sent out?

Int: What kind of questions does it ask overall?

R: Questions are, “Would you be happy to use technology?”, “Do you have access to technology?”, “Do you have any help, if you wanted to do it, would you be able to have a family member or somebody help you, to teach you how to do it?”, yes, some people have come back and said, “I’ll try because I can see this is going on a long time and I need to up my game and I’d like to” and they’ve got family members.

I think more and more people have come on board over the last two years, if this had gone on for six months, we wouldn’t have seen a change but I think because it’s gone on for two years now, we have seen more and more people try and more and more families try and get their elderly relatives onto computers because that’s the only way they can talk to them. So it has improved but there is still the big factor that we’re missing out.

We have done surveys by post, things in newspapers but we don’t find newspapers very good, again most of them are online aren’t they, they don’t seem to want to help us very much. We’ve battled an awful lot, there’s only one newspaper which I think is in [name of city]? Down west anyway, they work with the [name] very well and all that we put online or through doors, they will put in the newspaper as well but they’re the only one, nobody else is interested in doing it and I don't know why that is, we don’t seem to have a very good rapport with newspapers.

Int: Do you get a lot of responses back from your surveys?

R: Yes, quite a lot, it’s quite good. We have surveys on lots of different things, there’s one recently gone out on the maternity and birth and how people have found that experience and that has really returned a lot, that was really good.

One survey has gone out recently on GP access and how people, whether people can or cannot get appointments easily and how the doctors have been coping with attendances, and that was quite a good survey.

As you can imagine, a survey on technology and “Do you use technology?”, only comes back from those who do, it obviously doesn’t come back from those that don’t so you're still not finding out how many you're missing, we know they’re there.

Some of us live in towns, some of us live in rural areas so we all go out into our communities since we can’t go into hospitals, we’ve gone out more into our community and we all know there are people on our doorstep that are totally isolated, don’t see anybody, don’t use a computer, we all know they’re there but if you send a survey out, you only get that survey back from those who have seen it and the ones we put through doors get answered, the ones we put through technology get answered, how do you reach the others?

Int: A good question!

R: It is a good question, it’s a big question, throughout the three organisations that I work with, we have tried to address this and we’ve made some in-roads but we know there’s a big factor out there. I have had people knock on my door, “Can you get me a COVID pass? I don’t have a computer and I’d like to go out for a meal for Christmas with my friends”, they need a COVID pass. “I need my booster injection and I don't know how to get there because I don’t drive, so how can I get there?”, so I have badgered and I have sworn at and I have got very angry with the [name of board] for putting our booster station out where there isn't a bus service, and they haven’t put a bus on.

I got my MP, [name], on board and together we have bombarded them with questions and really harangued them and she’s helped enormously. Now they’ve put a bus on. So that worked but you've really got to sort of, “you’ve got to do this”, you know?

Those that didn’t have computers, how are they going to find the information of how to get there? “They can get a taxi”. No, they can’t get a taxi, you can’t always rely on a taxi. If you need to go for your booster in the morning or afternoon when schools are going in and out, you won’t get a taxi, they aren’t available, they’re all doing school runs, so it really limits the fact that when you get a taxi, you don’t have a car, there is no bus out there, how the hell do you go and get your booster?

If you're online, you can ask questions, you can send emails, I’ve sent about 10,000 emails to the [name of board] asking them, “How does this person do this? How does this person do that?” and eventually it’s come back and they’ve seen this isn't working and they have changed things. But I had to go to my MP and together, we have fought tooth and nail to get this bus put on. And now, if that bus isn't used fully, it will be taken off but they’re not telling people how to use it or where it goes or what time, only online. So if you're not online, you don't know that bus is there or what time it goes. You're back to square one, if the bus isn't used by those who need it, then they’ll take it off. Same old story, information is not getting out to everybody.

Int: Thank you very much, that was all my questions, it was very insightful to hear your perspective. [section removed for confidentiality, interviewer talks about the concept of loneliness and technology]

R: [sentence removed for confidentiality] It has helped in certain circumstances but I still don't think we’ve got it right and I think we’re missing an awful lot of people. The very fact that people’s mental health is poor at the moment, especially older people and very young people, I don't know why because they’re on technology, maybe the pressure on them is huge but older people have no access to any help if they’re experiencing mental difficulties, if they’re not on a computer and can talk to people, I don't know what the heck they’re doing, it terrifies me because we’re missing an awful lot.

I honestly think things through letterboxes should be compulsory, if it’s important enough to be online, for everybody to access, it’s important enough to stick a note through somebody’s door with the same information.

Int: [section removed for confidentiality, interviewer discusses the topic of reaching older adults]

R: You could talk to people like me, I use technology, I’m out there doing it but I speak to neighbours who don’t have technology, don’t have computers, wouldn’t the foggiest idea and don’t really want to because they’re scared of it. I talk to these people all the time and if they have a problem or need to know something, they’ll come and ask me to find out on the internet. It’s only through me that they will do it.

We need to be aware and I keep saying this to everybody, the [name of board], the council, the MPs, I talk to them all! I’ve spoken to [name], all the time I am battering on about “You're missing people out, what are you going to do about it?”, from their perspective, the screen in there in front of them, they won’t see it because what they want to put out there, they do on computers. They’re not seeing it and it frustrates the hell out of me, to be honest!

Int: [section removed for confidentiality] Thank you.

[CLOSE]

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