**Recording Details: P013**

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): Yeah. So my name is [xxxx]. I’m [job title] of [name of organisation]. We are a regional organisation that support people with a sensory loss and actually wider people with a disability in [area of] Wales. Our core clients are people with a hearing loss, although we do have services specifically for people with a visual impairment and for PAM [sounds like 00:00:38] disability equipment advice and information. We have been established for [several decades]. We started off when there was a change in the unitary authorities of [area of] Wales and deaf people felt that their needs would get lost in the mix so, actually, we are an organisation that was built by our core customer. Does that work?

Int: That’s perfect. Very interesting. Could you tell me about the work that your organisation does specifically with older people?

R: The majority of people who are older will have an acquired hearing loss. They are the biggest group that we work with. We have information advice services. We have accessible health services which is supporting people with a hearing loss to deal with their own medical appointments. We also have something called [name of project] which is supporting people to live better with an acquired hearing loss later in life. That will be sign posting, it’s befriending. It’s information around technologies that can be used to help them stay independent within their own home.

Int: How does your work with older people differ with your work with other populations?

R: We tend to find that younger people are quite mobile phone savvy, video calling savvy, sending text messages. Quite happy to turn a computer on. Not all of them, I’m not generalising here because we do come across older people who are extremely digitally included. The majority of people though, because we’re also in quite a rural area where internet speeds are not very good so we do find that they are quite hesitant to try new things with regards to technology. So whereas we can go in to an older person and we can put something on their phone which means when their phone rings a little pager will vibrant or a light will flash. They don’t see that as technology, quite happy to use that. The minute we pull out a tablet and they go, “Oh, no, I don’t want one of them.”

So that’s where it’s different. Whereas when we do go and see younger people and we’ll say, “You can control this. You can get this new hearing aid that you can control off a smartphone and you can attach it to a smartphone,” that’s all fine. With older people they tend to be more reticent and they like more, I suppose, things they can touch and see as opposed to this all works wirelessly and it goes to the cloud. So that’s the biggest difference that we see.

Int: How much focus is there on preventing loneliness and social isolation within your organisation?

R: So our [name of project] is specifically aimed at those people for whom a hearing loss is causing the beginning of that isolation because what happens is when someone has a hearing loss they start to withdraw from society so pre-pandemic they may have gone fishing with a friend, they may have been part of a book club. They may have just liked to go to the pub on a Friday and a Saturday. As communication becomes an issue they do tend to withdraw. Part of our [name of project] is befriending. It’s two-pronged. We have [name of project] which is very much one to one. It may be that we visit somebody, send them a letter. We’ve brought back pen pals. It may be we give them a call. If they are tech savvy, we’ll do a video call with them.

Then there’s also [name of project] and that’s to encourage people to get back out into the community. It could be just going with them and sitting in a café for a little while so they can get that usual thing of when you live in a village you go and sit in the café and suddenly everyone you know is in the café. Or even some things like taking them back and going with them back to groups and things like that and using technologies to help them communicate so making sure room loops are working so that when they do go to these clubs they can hear what’s being said. So very much around that technology and things like that about getting people back into their community.

Int: That’s fantastic. If you could think back to the early days of covid-19 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: The biggest impact we had when covid started, the local deaf group would meet in our office. They have a coffee morning every week which was where the older deaf community would come together and they’d sit, have a cup of coffee, have a chat in their own language because they were all BSL users, so communication wasn’t an issue and everything was fine.

We had to close shop like everyone else and it was how we could facilitate those people still meeting and so we did some work with the committee around using video calling because obviously that happened and Zoom was very, very popular already amongst some deaf people because they use video technologies to communicate with each other. It was how we could utilise that to be more inclusive so that [inaudible 00:07:09] Tuesday morning would actually sit in their own homes and have their cup of tea with their friend and still have a conversation with them through sign language.

Actually, that continued. So when lockdown was eased and community centres were able to open what we did then was that we actually facilitated the deaf club being back in the office but we had a big screen on the wall and we made sure that the Zoom account was open so that people who didn’t feel confident to actually come back face to face could still join in with the coffee morning.

Int: You were saying that some individuals were already using Zoom as a way to communicate. Was your organisation using it before Covid as well?

R: We were. We were using Zoom at that time, Teams. Because we have staff here, there and everywhere, so we have outreach workers and we would have team meetings and we would use initially Teams but then we discovered that when you have that many people on that Teams was a little bit jerky so we looked around and we’d found Zoom and we were already using that for staff meetings.

Int: The change from pre-covid to after covid was just an increase in the use of video software, yeah?

R: It was. Then we also, as I said with our befriending service, is that we had to look at what we could do that way and rather than use technology what we did was took a step back and we started the letter writing. We bought tablets, we bought mobile phones that we could loan to people through the pandemic so that we could do digital inclusion work with them. They could text message and things. Nothing took off like the letter writing thing did.

Int: What did you and your colleagues think were the pros and cons of using technology to prevent loneliness at the beginning of this conversation?

R: The technology worked really, really well for people who were happy to engage with it. A bit like anything. We were very reliant on people, their friends and family being able to set things up for them because we weren’t able to go out and do that for them. We created some how to guides on how to use Skype and Zoom and WhatsApp and all of these. We created lots and lots of materials that were accessible to people for them to have a look at. We were quite reliant on there being somebody at the other end to help set that up.

The pandemic, I think, for those people who were already digitally excluded, they unfortunately moved further away because whereas they may have been able to go to their library and someone in the library would have helped them on the laptops in the library, computers in the library, suddenly they had nowhere else to go. It’s a bit like our service, we can’t phone somebody who can’t use a phone when the reason we need to phone them is that they can’t use a phone. So if people were digitally excluded, we couldn’t use digital methods to contact them to teach them how to use the digital methods that they needed to use for us to contact them.

Int: A vicious circle.

R: It is a vicious circle and then added to that is we may have been able to phone somebody and take them through step by step but if we’re using technologies because they can’t hear on the phone then we’ve got another hurdle in the way. So the people who were able to engage with technologies, fine. We would text, they’d text us. We’d video call. They’d video call each other. People were able to set up little groups and they’d have their Friday night quizzes and things, but for those people who were digitally excluded it was very, very difficult to do anything, hence the “Let’s go back to old fashioned pen and paper.” Which in a way is a technology, isn’t it? A pen is a piece of technology it’s just something that you don’t plug in.

Int: It’s true. Is there any tech that you’ve previously tried that hadn’t worked?

R: Not really. The stuff that we’ve used has been quite tried and tested with our customer base and with our colleagues, to be fair. We haven’t downloaded or bought a piece of kit and suddenly found actually it’s a waste of time, other than of course those tablets and mobile phones that older people just didn’t want to interact with, but that’s more hardware than a new piece of technology.

Int: You’ve already discussed this a bit but can you tell me in some more detail the main ways digital technology was used in your organisation to address social isolation, so what was done, why, with whom, how often?

R: We facilitated the deaf club on a weekly basis. You usually get about between eight and 12 people who would regularly meet through Zoom there and it was just an opportunity for people to have a chat, share information. Talk about issues that they had because of covid. Ask each other the questions. Ask us questions. All of our services were accessible through video calling, through text messaging, through email, through making a phone call. Anything that didn’t mean they came to our front door we had things in place for people to be able to contact us. That was done on a daily basis.

We had a bespoke covid information and advice service that answered over 1000 calls in something like the first 10 months of the pandemic. That was people contacting us, us contacting people to check they were okay but mostly people contacting us because they had concerns about whether they were allowed to go out, who they could see when they could go out. When it went to you could have a support bubble, we explained what a support bubble was for people. We have a media team.

We have a filming suite here and we utilised that to make videos to show people, to explain to people what they could do so that people were aware that actually you can meet one of your friends now. Six of you can go out and meet and have a cup of tea, that sort of thing. Those videos were viewed over 58,000 times. Now, there’s not 58,000 British Sign Language users living in [area of] Wales. There’s probably not 58,000 people with a hearing loss living in [area of] Wales. So they had a much wider reach than we were expecting.

That was some technologies that we utilised. That’s really it. Because of the nature of our customers, we had already set up a lot of the remote access anyway for profoundly deaf people. Someone who lives effectively 30 miles away, it could take an hour and a half for someone to go 30 miles in [area of] Wales so there’s no way someone who lives 30 miles away who’s got one letter is going to traipse all the way over here to see us so we already had a lot of digital inclusion and remote access to the services anyway.

I suppose it was just expanding that so looking at different platforms. I mean pre-pandemic I don’t think I’d ever heard of Signal but now everyone seems to be using Signal for one reason or another. There’s lots of different things like that. So it wasn’t huge changes for us it was just, I think, the amount of people who were actually utilising it that changed for us. I’m not sure that actually answered your question at all.

Int: No, you did. You gave me lots of details so it’s exactly what I need. Would you say that overall you achieved your goal of reducing loneliness and social isolation?

R: I think we did. I think during the pandemic there was that concern that people who were already isolated would become even more isolated. So when you’ve got a group of people who could only communicate with a very small other group of people, so people who use British Sign Language couldn’t really converse with neighbours, people turning up to deliver their food from Asda, absolutely no communication at all. So for them it was vital that they had someone that they could talk to in their chosen language that they could understand what was being said. Whether it was me telling them what the stripes on the floor of Tesco was for to make sure you were staying two meters away or whether they were phoning to go, “Oh my goodness, it’s pouring here today.”

People had that opportunity to contact us and I think for some of our members we were the only people they talked to on a weekly basis. So I do think that we achieved our aims, however, for all of that we do know that there were plenty of other people who unfortunately didn’t have that opportunity.

Int: Do you think it was more successful at reducing loneliness and social isolation for some groups compared to others?

R: As I said before, very much so. People who were already digitally included, people who were quite happy to use a mobile phone, whether that was for video calling or text messaging, people who were quite happy to send an email, I think for them it worked really well. For those people who found technology quite frightening or they lived somewhere where there was no mobile signal at all and where effectively they were still on some form of dial up because the internet speeds were so bad, I think for them it didn’t work particularly well. I go back to hence we used the technology of a pen.

Int: So just here you briefly mentioned some people might have been frightened so we know that one issue usually as a barrier for some older adults is the fear of using technology, either due to not wanting to break it or scared of scams, things like that. So it sounds like it might have been an issue for some older adults you work with and so was there anything to help overcome these fears?

R: Well, [name] who was our [name of project] advisor was really good because obviously a lot of technologies that we used were to enable people to, so for example, putting an amplifier on the phone, giving them a new phone that had amplification on it, making sure they knew the phone was ringing. [Name] was very, very good at putting people at ease when it came to using stuff like that. She would phone the neighbours. She’d phone children. She’d phone the carers. Through them was then able to get the phone set up and then have a conversation. Sometimes the first time in years that someone with a hearing loss has picked the phone up and had a conversation with somebody. I’ve lost my train of thought. What was the question?

Int: The fear of using technology.

R: The fear, yeah. So for them and the technologies that we put in like that they’re quite robust, they look robust. Whereas if you’re talking about someone suddenly using a mobile phone, a smartphone or a laptop or a tablet, it’s quite flimsy. It feels like it would break quite easily. So for them when we were introducing things like that there was that hesitancy, there was that little bit of fear and I think some people will never get over that until the time we can go and sit there and drop it on the floor and pick it up and go, “Look, it still works.” I suppose it depends on the technology that we’re talking about. Some of it, I think we can get over that fear by simply saying, “If it breaks social services will give you a new one,” as opposed to, “If it breaks you have to pay £200.” It’s like anything, isn’t it? If there are no consequences, you’ll feel much more confident about trying something out.

Int: That’s very true. Were there any service users that you saw that tried to use any type of technology you were suggesting but then stopped?

R: Yeah, so we did have a couple that at the beginning we would talk about, strangely enough, text messaging and using a mobile phone and to start with would use that, that wasn’t a problem. Then I think for a myriad of reasons suddenly decided that the mobile phone wasn’t working properly. The mobile phone was working properly it’s just that they had forgotten how to use it and then as we were talking to them it transpired that actually they were losing some of their capability and their understanding. They went back to effectively using a laptop which is something that they could do but only to use Skype. We went from emailing and text messaging where they could take a picture of their letter they didn’t understand or they’d send us photographs to suddenly going back to them using Skype and holding a letter up and doing this so we could sort of see what it says.

That was quite difficult and quite distressing for both us and for them actually, although to this day they still believe that the issue was with the mobile phone, which is fine. If it’s quite settling for them then that’s fine. That was the only one really. Everyone else who had a little bit of knowledge, they seemed quite happy to carry on. To be fair, using Zoom, what have you, they’re actually quite straightforward if you don’t touch any of the settings. So it’s click on that blue line there and you’re automatically in the meeting. We were quite fortunate it was just that one person and I don’t think that was anything to do with the pandemic. I think maybe it sped things up but I think that was something else.

Int: If your service users encountered any technical problems, what kind of support was provided? I know you said there was a YouTube video to help install the thing. Could they reach you?

R: Yeah, but also they could give us a call and we would run through things with them, that wasn’t a problem. I think [name] spent hours upon hours upon hours talking people through setting up new phones, new doorbells, how to turn things on and off. We were quite reachable by other means.

Int: What effect did using technology in this way have on you and your colleagues and the work you do?

R: Well, to start with, we were able to continue to do our work. The pandemic hit and everything was able to continue, including our [name of project] that unfortunately started on April 1st. Just as we were going into lockdown is just when that new project was starting, but we managed to do everything that we needed to do. We were able to all work from home and yet still feel like we were connected. So we’d be sitting at our desks with Teams running on another screen and all of a sudden somebody would go, “Oh my God, did you see so and so last night?” So our colleagues were still able to have those general chit chat conversations while we were working. It meant that we were able to help more people. So, as I said, 58,000 views of our videos when we thought maybe 50 people might get something out of them. We were able to reach more people in less time which meant that effectively that pressure of, “Oh my God, we’re under covid,” it didn’t really impact on our jobs. We were able to just be colleagues.

Int: That’s lovely. So you’ve mentioned some positive and negative effects of using digital technology to address loneliness. Were there any that were unexpected positive and unexpected negative effects that you hadn’t foreseen?

R: I suppose positives were the people that we didn’t really expect to take to the technology to just take to the technology. That was really nice. All of a sudden you’d get this call from someone and you’d think, “We’ve not spoken to you in probably two years before the pandemic, you’ve not been here, and suddenly, oh my God, there you are.” So it was nice to see some of our old faces. Some had moved away. Some were busy. But actually it did give an opportunity for someone to go, “Oh, I’m just going to give [xxxx] a call.” So that was nice in the fact that our scope increased. Our scope, our reach, how people could reach us. We weren’t quite so insular as we had been before so that was lovely.

Negatively, we were reachable. That sounds a little bit fully but it became constant. So you’d walk into the office in the morning and the mobile phone would be red hot and there’d be 30 or 40 messages on it because people are texting through the night because they can text through the night now. So it was a bit like this, but hey, it’s not a negative to be busy unless you’re the person who has to do all the work which is not me anymore so I’m quite happy.

Int: In your survey response you said that you anticipate the balance of face to face and remote support your organisation provides in the future to be an equal balance of both and so why do you think you’ve decided to go with a blended approach?

R: Because I think again, I mean number one it’s good for the environment. We’re not having to send somebody an hour and a half down the road to deal with something to send them an hour and a half back again. Our interpreting service, lots of people now are used to using interpreters via a screen, so I foresee that’s going to continue. For example, for a medical appointment if someone’s going for a flu jab, they don’t need to have an interpreter booked for a three-hour session for someone who’s going to walk in, get jabbed and get out again. Whereas what they can do is have their mobile phone, the interpreter is signing what’s being said, they have their jab, they go, they turn it off. So I foresee the interpreting being very different. There will always be call for face to face interpreting, always. Specifically with some of the more in depth medical appointments. But for your general community interpreting, I foresee that being very much people used to seeing an interpreter on the screen now.

I think with some of those short-term interventions, so have a drop in session, I think that will always be face to face. People like to have an appointment. They like to come in. The coffee morning will continue to be face to face but with that digital option as well, which also means again that people who live far away can now contribute to that coffee morning as well. I just think that that blended approach, there will always be those people who need face to face interaction but I do think it’s going to be more settled. I do think it’s going to be a 50/50 split. If anything, it may tip over more to be digital and less face to face. People are less confident at going out now. I think it’s just a question of wait and see what happens but I do think it’s going to be maybe half and half. I don’t think we’ll ever stop using digital technologies and things like that. That will continue forever.

Int: What do you think would be needed to make using this blended approach successful for your service users in your organisation?

R: I think once things are more settled people feel better about it, I think. I know there was a time when everyone was offering digital inclusion including the people who come and clean your bins. Everyone and their brother was offering digital inclusion but there were still those people for whom being excluded was just the norm. I’ve said before, there are areas of [part of] Wales where you can’t get a mobile signal. There are areas of [part of] Wales where the internet connection is rubbish.

I do think there needs to be some one-to-one digital inclusion maybe hidden or something else because sometimes I think digital inclusion, even the name can put people off. Maybe it’s one of those things whereby when our at home advisor goes out to talk to some of these very isolated people who’ve got hearing loss is finding a way of then following that up with some digital inclusion but there has to be a buy in from them and I think sometimes that’s the barrier. The barrier is, “I don’t trust technology so I’m quite happy here. I’m quite happy being by myself.” So it’s how you, or how we find a way of getting round that.

Int: Do you plan to do any type of formal evaluation of loneliness of your service users and the technology they’re using?

R: We don’t have any plans to do anything formal like that, no.

Int: If I may ask, how come?

R: Just because I think it’s something that we’ve not really thought about. We obviously have our [name of project], digital technologies, depending on what you mean by digital technologies. So if you’re talking about smartphones and laptops and tablets, what have you, not so much. If you’re talking about the technologies that we go in and put in that maybe are things like making the phone louder through a digital hearing aid, if it’s a TV streamer then, yes, we do always follow those up because our [name of project] is evaluated externally, evaluated by [name of evaluating company] and they will be looking at that. So specifically that project will be but our other projects will not be.

[END]

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