**Recording Details: P014**

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

R[[2]](#footnote-2): I work for [name of organisation], but they house the role. The role is that of a [job title], and a [job title] is a unique way of working that originated in [name of country] over 30 years ago. It’s a model of working in a strength-based, person-centred way, that ultimately seeks to walk alongside people and identify their vision of a good life, and support them to achieve that.

At this moment in time, I’m standing in for the [job title], so supporting the running of the team, but my main employment is as a [job title], and that’s a place-based area specific role, and I happen to have the [name of area].

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

R: We get what we call introductions, because we’re very precious – for want of a better word, about language, so people aren’t referred to us, people are introduced to us. We go along without badges, or a specific dress sense, and meet people as human to human in a setting of their choosing, which could be their home, or in a local café, or in the community. We then work with these individuals on a one-to-one basis. 60 percent of our time is spent on a one-to-one basis, 20 percent is on community capacity building, then 20 percent of our time’s taken up on admin and these kind of things, meetings.

Int: Do you work with other populations than just older adults?

R: Yep, we work from cradle to grave, so anybody can be introduced to local area co-ordination, and we receive introductions from everything from schools – whether it’s around the children or the parents, GP surgeries for patients, social services for people perhaps who don’t quite fall into the category requiring a care provision, mental health workers, health in general, elected representatives. Sometimes some of the best introductions we have are from people themselves. Because we’re community-based we have what we call bumping stops within communities, so we’re often to be seen in cafes, or community centres, and people will come up to us and say, “Alright, someone’s told me about me and the work you do, can we have a chat?” Then we’ll progress, get to know them.

With us, the important thing is the conversation and the relationship. We get to know the person, we get to know their situation, we work to build trust, we work to understand what is going on around them, then try to understand and see their vision of a good life. There’s no time limits on our work, we dip in and dip out of people’s lives as necessary. A very simple analogy is we are afforded the luxury and the privilege of being invited into people’s lives, and a little bit like a car journey, they’re the driver and we’re occasionally afforded the luxury and privilege of sitting in the back seat from time to time on their journey of life.

Int: Fantastic, that’s a great metaphor. How much focus would you say is there on preventing loneliness and social isolation within these introductions you have?

R: I would say that is a large part of why the role exists. It’s about social connection, finding meaningful opportunities, supporting people on their general health and wellbeing. An inordinate number of studies have shown that social isolation is detrimental to physical and mental health and overall wellbeing. It’s certainly not the only reason people introduce us, but a large part of our work is combating and mitigating isolation.

For a number of reasons it could be someone’s relocated an area, someone that’s had a relationship breakdown, someone who’s simply lost their job or had a health upset in their lives. Funnily enough this week we liaised with the Traumatic Brain Injury Service in [name of hospital]. People who have head injuries for example, or stroke, medical incident, that’s life changing and can leave people very lonely and isolated. By virtue of a medical condition could easily lose their home, their relationships, their income, so a lot of our work is spent on re-connecting people to community, to meaningful activities, and to possibly volunteering work. Building a life I would say.

Int: So do you link those people to other existing organisations within your community?

R: At times yes. We’re afforded the opportunity to facilitate and catalyse natural introductions that would happen. Say for example if you were standing in a queue in Tesco and you were having a chat to someone, and you suddenly hit it off and they said, “Oh, do you fancy a cuppa and a catch up after this?” and suddenly a friendship will develop. Or you went to a gym and you bumped in to someone, or you went to somewhere and you see someone regularly, and you suddenly find you’ve got something in common.

We can actually utilise such methods. We make sure that the introduction is appropriate, but by way of example, I have been introduced to people with similar interests previously, singing, and said, “Well you know, there’s a little group of gals [sounds like 0:06:44.3] together with a bit of music at a certain time, do you fancy coming along?” I’d say that to both of them individually, meet them there, introduce them there, and then how that relationship progresses is entirely up to them.

We consider this role a skilled generalist role, because there’s an element of coaching, motivation, counselling, advocacy, direct work, it’s pretty endless really. By getting to know people, knowing them in their circumstances, you have a good understanding of them and what is a good fit. Of course if you’re doing that with a number of people, the fits just shine like a light really, and you create the circumstances where these can then come together, and if it works, that’s great, and if it doesn’t there’s no pressure, we move on to something else. But I have to say, in many, many occasions it works, and it’s lovely. It’s quite emotional to tell you the truth, it’s almost like magic, it’s really difficult to explain.

Int: Intangible?

R: Yeah, and after this funnily enough, if I remember I’ll send you a little story that I shared recently. We evidence our work with the true stories, because as you say, it is quite intangible, so whereas historically it’s bean counters tend to make decisions don’t they? You’ve got a situation and you’ve got a quantifiable output, so how many people you’ve seen, for how long, how long you’ve worked with them, what were the results? It just doesn’t fit our way of working, because for example, I’ve worked with someone for five years, not constantly and every week, but initially quite intensely, I’ll tell you the story. There was an older gentleman, he’d been married for over 60 years, his wife had sadly advanced dementia and was placed into a nursing home. He was absolutely distraught, and practically suicidal. He went to see the doctor, he wasn’t coping, he was given some anti-depressants and he was in a real slump.

I was introduced to him by the doctor, went along, had a chat with him. Through meetings with tears and cups of tea, understood the situation, understood the loss, explained to him a different way of thinking about dementia – and I’m sure you know this, but with dementia a very simple explanation is you’ve got two bookcases. The one on the left is your emotions and that’s rock solid, so you’ve got happiness and sadness and anxiety and all these things. That’s rock solid, that doesn’t move. On the right you’ve got your memories, with the newest ones on the top, and that’s really rocky. So the new ones fall off, and you’ve got the old ones so you can remember how to use a gas cooker and light a candle, depending on how far back you go! But people put electric kettle on a gas ring, because the notion of electric’s gone. These older memories are rock solid.

The point I was alluding to is if you take someone out for an ice-cream and give them a nice time, they’re in a lovely, happy, relaxed state, but they might not even know why, because that memory’s gone already. The value is in doing that to keep them in a good state, and when I explained that to him, again he burst in to tears and could see a value then, because he couldn’t understand the value in visiting his wife, who just didn’t recognise him anymore. To explain to him that his presence and doing nice things with her would relieve her anxiousness and her upset and her inner-struggles, it was like a cathartic release for him. He continued then to visit her, had value in that. It turned out he wrote wonderful poetry, had a connection [sounds like 0:11:36.3] with a publisher, he had a book published of his poetry, continued to write poetry and they were five years on.

He’s actually in hospital at this moment in time, his wife sadly passed away around this time last year and his health is deteriorating, however he is 86. He’s had five productive years where he’s engaged with his family, he’s had a book published, he’s come along to community events, he’s a bit of a local celebrity, he’s given a poetry recital in front of an audience. That wasn’t a possibility five years ago when he was in tears and actively thinking of ending his own life. That’s [inaudible 0:12:21.1] often always the case, but who else could have done that? Anybody could, but nobody does, and that’s where we sit.

Int: That’s fascinating and touching work you guys do. It sounds like a lot of it is face-to-face contingent. If you think back to the early days of COVID-19, what sorts of conversations were had in your organisation about how digital technology could be used to prevent loneliness and social isolation?

R: Interesting, this is why I was interested in the survey. Prior to COVID hitting, I had identified a number of older males within the community who were certainly taking up a lot of my time. Our job is not to create a dependency, because there’s only one of us, so it’s very much a conduit to a life, the doorway to friendships, community. I was working with a number of men, who all had something in common, so I simply invited them all to a café on a Friday morning, and jokingly called it the 11 o’clock club, and they started coming along, and it just by word of mouth just grew and grew and grew, to the point that I think we had way over a dozen coming on a Friday morning to the café, having a coffee and a catch up and a laugh. What started out as two or three people meeting for half an hour, has become a whole Friday morning until even half past one, two o’clock. Just people dipping in and dipping out as they want, and catching up. The poet I spoke to would drop in.

It was working really well. Come the pandemic it had to stop, so the consideration was it was of such value to people, and they benefited through it, could we do it virtually? So I engaged with [name] actually, one of the educators from [name of organisation], and they afforded us a platform where we could virtually put a coffee morning on. And that’s what we did. Some people didn’t have access to IT equipment, so it was a case of sourcing IT equipment, and rapidly upskilling them that they could utilise that, or making for one person who didn’t have internet, just making a room available where he could come by himself and access a laptop and set that up for him. It was a huge success. It ran right through lockdown, people kept connected.

The model worked so well, we tried it out in other areas as well, and it was a success. That was relevant and useful, there isn’t anybody who will say virtual or IT is as good as in person – I’d be very surprised, but it’s convenient, it’s like us now, if we’ve had to travel to see each other it’d have taken a day just to do this. Everyone can see the benefits, but it’s not human is it? As a stop gap it’s great, but I think people are really looking forward to going back to the in-person meeting.

Int: When you were discussing implementing this technology – it sounds like it was a video conferencing platform that you used for the coffee morning? What did you think were the pros and cons of using technology? I know you said lack of human contact as a con, but is there anything else that comes to mind?

R: Yeah, very much so. The mental and physical aptitude of the older generation to use information technology. A huge barrier. A lot do not have broadband, internet connection, a lot simply do not have the laptop or the tablet, or a smart phone, so the lack of equipment to actually do it. I’m way older than you, I grew up pre-computers. Not pre their invention! But pre their commonplace use, so when I left school – my sister was two years younger than me, I think it was her year was the first to have computer science as a subject. There were no computers in school when I was in school. Oh my goodness, looking back to it, I’ve worked now for over 40 years, I think the first mobile phone I ever had in work was in something like 1995? At that time I was on the cutting edge of national law enforcement, it was 1995 before we had a mobile phone. The generation we’re talking to – I’m [over 50 years old], are 30 years older than me again, so the clunkiness I sometimes find with computers and information technology, you can imagine when perhaps your sight isn’t as good as it was, your hearing isn’t as good as it was, your manual dexterity to operate it isn’t as good as it was, your capacity to understand simple functions and menus to go through, because they simply don’t have either the speed of thought or the short term memory to navigate through a menu.

You’ve got the physical barriers, the not owning and the not having, and then you’ve got the person capacity barriers to not being able to and not familiar with. Some simply don’t want, they’re frightened of it, they miss the old days when life was simpler, they’d rather do things in person, they’d rather do things over the phone. I have to say, even at my age I’ll text my children or anybody and keep in touch, given them a call, but I don’t think to video call them. I don’t think to, because yes, we use Teams now, and that’s more and more, but very often in work I will e-mail as opposed to video call, when a quick video call would suffice and save time.

You’re of a generation you’ve grown up with technology, so it’s natural, and I think there’s a speed of thought. I look at my children, and they whip through screens – I haven’t even seen the screen! And they’re already five ahead and I’m thinking of the one they’ve just seen. There is that inherent divide between I think the ones who were brought up digitally, and the ones who weren’t, and the ones who have the capacity to learn and adapt, and the ones who’ve got reduced capacity to learn and adapt, and then a reduced functioning capacity, which exacerbates things.

Int: Do you have other examples of ways digital technology was used in your organisation to reduce loneliness – apart from the coffee morning and the video conferencing?

R: Texting. There were occasionally some video calls, but less of. Oh, food shopping, supporting people to do some food shopping online. The surgery went over to online prescriptions, so people could order prescriptions online rather than going in person or ringing. It’s creeping in slowly I think with things. And social media of course was quite big, to capture volunteers, so people were interested in supporting the community, disseminating information around the pandemic and what was happening, and co-ordinating community response to need. Social media as well was useful, but again, only for the ones who are connected.

We all think social media is the answer, but the very people who are connected on social media often haven’t got the need – because they’re already connected on social media! So it tends to suggest, not always of course, but they’ve got the financial ability to have social media, which means they’ve got the technology and the ability to pay for it, they’ve got the intelligence and the educational savvy to operate it, which often suggests they’re managing in other ways as well. It’s not always the case, but the ones who really aren’t managing are the ones who aren’t on social media, and those are the ones often that we need to try and get in touch with.

Int: Would you say that overall you achieved your goal of reducing loneliness by using technology during the pandemic?

R: No. I think it mitigated on occasion some of the issues, but I would say no. I think technology is far less user-friendly for people who have difficulties with technology. For example, if there was – and arguably with Alexa now and smart TVs as these things are moving, albeit the difficulty and the costs and the set up. If you think of a simple tablet that was voice-controlled and you could switch on, and operate it from that, like we see in futuristic films where there’s suddenly a person on the wall, and I’m talking to a person on the wall because I’ve just called you up or something, you can see the value in that with someone who is struggling. A lot of people haven’t got the hand dexterity, they’ve got arthritis, they haven’t got the vision capacity to see screens, unless they’re 65 inches big. I think technology lets down the lesser able, because of its usability, in my humble opinion.

Int: For those who actually did engage with the technology, what you do think was their motivation to do so, and to keep engaging with it?

R: Because by virtue of the 11 o’clock club I think the relationship was already there and they wanted to maintain that relationship. I think that was a big driver, not to lose that beacon of light really I suppose. A lot of people I work with, the 11 o’clock club on a Friday is a high point in their lives, and sometimes we forget. I don’t know what your life is now, but I should imagine at your age and what you’re doing, you’ve got a busy life. If your life was sat in that room, seven days a week, with no conversation with anybody, but one day a week you could gather with a few like-minded friends and have a chat, and feel understood and have a laugh, that would be huge.

A lot of these people we work with are actually prisoners in their own home. Albeit not physically, but because they’ve got a lack of mobility or they’ve stopped driving, or the transport situation across the country now is pretty dire, the physical capacity to go out and about, the emotional and mental capacity to engage and strike up new friendships or feel of worth, a lot of that has gone which creates loneliness and isolation. These physical things that people can access easily, in person, human touch, we forget how important that is. If you haven’t had a hug from someone in a while, it’s a bit sad. We forget that, don’t we? We live in an age where, “Oh, mustn’t touch!” But actually it’s lovely to have a hug, isn’t it? I’d go along to these groups and the older women, they’d all come up and give me a kiss, pre-COVID. How lovely is that? I go to see my gran. My gran’s 106 and she lives in a nursing home now, I’m going to pop to see her. Even thought it’s COVID I’ll hold her hand and just give her a hug, because who else does? It’s huge, isn’t it? I think we forget the value of these, so as much as IT is a useful tool – and it is, nobody can get away from it, speed of communication, it doesn’t replace the human touch, another human presence.

Int: Yeah, I agree, it’s completely different. You’ve mentioned groups of people who engage with technology, those who are left out of it. Have you witnessed any who started using technology, but then stopped? And if so, do you know why they stopped?

R: There’s one person in particular, and I think it was just because it was just all too much. He springs to mind, and even my mum. My mum is going to be 80 this year, and she’s, “I’ve used computers in work.” She retired 20 years ago! “I don’t want anything to do with them now.” And she’d rather my sister do her online shopping for her, and me do the shopping for her, than actually do it herself. I think there is an element isn’t there, of as we get older – and I don’t know if you know this, forgive me if you do, but dementia’s very often diagnosed way later than it started. So there’s a decline in cognitive function way before diagnosis, and people say, “Oh you know, it’s quite normal to forget things, I’m sure you forget things now?” I’m actually a brain injury survivor, so I’ve got an excuse for forgetting things, but aside from that, everybody forgets things. Dementia isn’t only memory loss, and people always say, “It’s just memory loss.” No it isn’t, it’s the slow death of the brain. All things go, and there’s no rhyme or reason as to what goes.

The point I’m getting at is, sometimes the ability to thrive, the motivation is destroyed or reduced, so people are unmotivated. I don’t know if any studies – I’m sure they have been, what’s linked to depression and isolation, and they’re intrinsically linked, of course they are, a stimulated brain is a more active brain. The point I’m getting at that it’s just too much for some people. The effort sometimes to live, is enough effort in itself. To get up in the morning, to make a cup of tea, to struggle through the day, that’s enough in itself. Their energy levels have dropped.

It has to be a holistic approach. A lot of the time I meet people and I say when we’re having a chat, “What do you do about cooking?” and they’re, “Oh, I cook and I do things,” “Oh OK, what do you have for breakfast then?” “Oh tea and toast.” “Ah right, OK, so what’re you having for dinner?” “Oh, I’ll have biscuit now and a cup of tea.” “Oh OK, so what do you have for tea then?” “Oh, I’ll have tea and toast.” And you suddenly realise that they’re actually living on tea and toast, or tea and biscuits. That is going to reduce their mental capacity, their physical capacity, their mood, which in turn reduces the will. They’re isolated as well, so it’s not one size fits all or one fix.

That’s where we often come in, I call it the keepers of life, if people are eating right, sleeping right, exercising within their capacity, got a stable roof over their heads, got income coming in to fund that life, then you can do something with that person if they want.

Int: It all interacts.

R: It all interacts, it’s all intrinsically linked. To give someone IT and connect them up, but they’re eating toast and tea, it’s got to come before that hasn’t it? I suppose that’s where we sit, is in the whole person approach as to how can we support this person to be stronger, more connected, feel of worth the time [sounds like 0:31:53.0]. And supporting their whole being.

Int: If service users had any technical problems, was your organisation able to provide any support for that?

R: Yeah, and interestingly, that’s a really good point. We call people, people. Not service users! Because they’re people. Don’t think that’s a criticism, but I wouldn’t want to be called a service user. Do you see what I mean?

Int: I get what you’re saying.

R: I have used services, it’s funny, isn’t it? The people we work with, yes, we’ve had some really good support from the council. The [name of project] team happy to pick up, talk through people. Because we are place based, I’ve got connections within the community to have people go along and give them a hand to get the computer up and running, or things up and running. That’s something we consciously look to support with solutions for.

Int: One thing we know is that sometimes what can be a barrier for some older adults, is the fear of using technology, either due to not wanting to break, or afraid of internet scams and things like that. Is that an issue for some of the older adults you worked with?

R: Yes, without a doubt.

Int: How did you help them overcome these fears?

R: Previously we’ve done some scams awareness training. I think it was HSBC and our own [officers]. We give a little bit of training and input on scams awareness, and we delivered that to groups locally. For example pre-pandemic, just in my area, there was about 50 older adults going to [place] on a Monday afternoon. We had a presentation there. We’ve got about 50 much the same adults going to an exercise falls prevention class on a Tuesday afternoon, delivery there. We’ve got [name of lunch club], where again, around 50 – not always the same 50. U3A – University of Third Age. There’s about four large groups of older adults within the areas I serve.

Prior to the pandemic we had various speakers in, just trying to promote a little bit of confidence around IT and making them aware of scams. Other than individual chats - and we would post and circle it, where we were aware of scams during COVID, there was no specific one-to-one intervention on that subject. Am I answering expansive enough, or too much for you? Is this OK for you?

Int: This is perfect, you’re giving a lot of examples and answering my questions, it’s lovely, it’s exactly what we need. You mentioned some positives and negative effects of using digital technology to address loneliness and social isolation, were there any unexpected ones that you hadn’t thought about when installing it?

R: I would say on occasion the fear and a refusal to try. You’d think, “Well you know go on, give it a go then, just see what happens.” We had the opportunity via the [name of organisation] for Voluntary Services for funded smart phones that we could give to members of the community who weren’t digitally connected. You’d think the offer of a free smart phone for at least a year, would be a good offer. If I said, “You can have this for free, for a year, and you haven’t got to do anything. Every month you’ll have a code just to pop in, and that’ll top it up and that’s it.” The amount of no’s were surprising to me.

The problem is it’s unfamiliar, so it becomes suspicious, the fact that it’s unfamiliar. Yes there’s probably in the back of the mind the worry of scams or what could go wrong – which you often find with older adults with IT, “If I push that button I’ll break it.” Just the fear of causing a problem. A little bit of people just become sadly disabled, or disenabled. They just don’t want, and it’s far easier to have someone else do it for them, and having worked with a lot of older people, sometimes that is the real barrier, they don’t want to change. There’s a lack of appetite to change. Not all, I wouldn’t make such a sweeping statement for everybody, but very often there’s a lack of appetite to change, a lack of appetite to learn new things, it’s frightening, it’s scary, they’ve heard some things about it which they’re not too sure of, so leave well alone just in case.

By way of example, we’ve got an older woman living in the town, early 90s, 92 or 3, probably 4 by now, no heating. Last year was found on the floor and the temperate inside the house was something like two degrees I think. Refused, absolutely refuses support or to put heating on, or financially able to put heating on, just won’t spend the money. Offered a phone, the phone it’s an ongoing challenge, it’s been given, been given back, given, given back! Some quite difficult situations, which require some real gentle management. As it is there’s some volunteers working around this woman and doing some amazing, amazing things.

It’s a tough one as a society, how do we help people who perhaps need the help but don’t recognise it themselves? This the rub, it often falls in the Social Service and Wellbeing Act Wales, where people are entitled to voice, choice and control, and so they should be. They should certainly have that, but there’s that fine line between do we go in and judge, which isn’t person-centred and shouldn’t be done, but if you go and see someone who’s – as I have worked with previously, literally elderly, a gentlemen in his 90s, blind, actually blind, catheterised, living in a shack [sounds like 0:39:56.8]. How’s that OK? But at what point do you say, “Well you can’t live like that either?” That’s a choice, has capacity, is at war with the world and wants to do that. How do you then best support them? The answer very often is just bit by bit, and wherever you can.

Int: It’s true they have to be willing to accept the help, you can’t force it on them.

R: And who are we to judge? You live a certain way and I live a certain way, and maybe how I live wouldn’t suit you and vice versa. It’s a real difficult one, isn’t it? Where is the, “It’s not OK?” There’s certain situations if you think about, that we would remove children from the situation because we’d say it’s not OK, and yet older adults can stay in there, in similar circumstances. It’s a real tough one, isn’t it?

Int: It’s a tricky balance! In your survey response you said that you anticipated the balance of face-to-face and remote support in your organisation to be mostly face-to-face in the future? Why have you not decided to go with a blend of face-to-face and remote?

R: Because from my experience at least, there’s nothing that can replace human contact, for the very reasons we’ve said. The nuances of conversation, of human interaction, the understanding that someone’s actually interested in you, that they’re physically looking you in the eye when they’re talking to you. That actual presence is a far warmer, more human connection I think. Because we work so much with that, anything less is a dilution perhaps of how we work, and I think I can say would most certainly dilute our results.

We’ve looked at things like telephone trees [sounds like 0:42:17.5], it’s looking for the best possible outcome for each situation. If you’ve got someone for example, who is housebound, well it’s quite possible that human connection physically, is far more difficult. Whereas you could have two people housebound, and you could connect them digitally or by telephone, and they could have a relationship, which might not be as good as physically present, but it could be the next best thing. There I see some of the value in supporting our workers, is where it’s the next best thing. Just as a side, what we don’t condone I suppose, or encourage, is befriending, because if you think about it, how demeaning is that, to have to pay to have friends? It’s something not right about it, isn’t it, if you think about it? A befriending service, with the best will in the world, and as lovely as it is, it actually sort of says that I haven’t got any friends and I want someone to be my professional friend. Isn’t it better to try and instigate natural friendships that create a relationship of equity, of sharing, of mutual respect, who can support each other? Which has got longevity because very often a befriending service and then they get a different job, that’s a friendly professional, isn’t it? It’s not a friend.

Int: Yeah, you want long-term connections.

R: Yeah, so I think that’s where we constantly are looking, is what we can do to support meaningful changes in people’s lives.

Int: Fantastic, thank you for your answers. [section removed for confidentiality] Perfect, thank you very much. I hope you have a lovely day.

R: And you, tata now.

Int: Bye.

[CLOSE]

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