

Connecting through Digital Technology

Ageing Better Conference 2018

Chaired by **Cassie Robinson**, Head of Digital Grants, Big Lottery Fund

With **Daniel Taylor** (Digital Inclusion Development Officer, Age UK Isle of Wight), **Sue McDermott** (Programme Manager, Ageing Well Torbay), **James Richardson** (Research Manager, Good Things Foundation) and **Ruby Chau** (Assistant Professor in Public & Social Policy, University of Nottingham).

Does it matter that 4.8 million people over the age of 55 are not online? Ageing Better seems to think it does, as nearly all our programmes have a digital strategy. In this session, we asked how – and if – becoming digitally connected helps to reduce loneliness and social isolation. What works to get people over 50 online, and what does the future look like for older people in terms of digital innovation?

Format: Panel members talked about their own experiences, followed by audience sharing experiences, posing questions and finding solutions.

The **Healthwatch Project** works with older people to access online GP appointment services in Torbay. As a result, older people have been inspired to use IT in other areas of their lives, including those who'd initially felt IT was not something they were interested in.

Informal drop-in delivery is found to work better than formal training sessions. GP surgeries see the benefits of people booking appointments and repeat prescriptions online and now host some of the drop-in sessions in Torbay. South West Ambulance service has also produced a guide and is helping people access this.

Age UK in the Isle of Wight is running a **digital inclusion project** as part of Ageing Better. This project has also found a more informal approach to delivery works better with older people. It's critical to take things slowly, rather than prescribing a set of fixed learning activities which can lead to drop-out. It's also helpful to use analogies to explain IT in a more familiar context. Developing confidence is key to motivation and success with this client group.

The digital team worked with Sainsbury's Nectar scheme to help make it inclusive for older people without IT skills, which has led to Nectar trialling the same support in Wales. Other projects looking at how technology can improve the lives of older people and increase independence include: webcams for carers, wearable technology to improve health & wellbeing awareness and activity, and user-friendly guides to navigate online applications for Blue Badge renewals.

A project called **Smart Phone Smart Friends** has worked with older people from the Chinese community around the use of phone apps after finding two thirds of older Chinese immigrants had no skills or experience with social apps (Skype, WhatsApp, Facetime etc.) and so were excluded from connecting with family and friends in an easy, cost-effective way.

Peer coaches and student volunteers delivered training through introductory workshops and taster sessions. Content was modified on a Test & Learn basis, using focus groups to reflect and contribute to training delivery improvements. The project has been successful in attracting male participants, a harder-to-reach group. Participants

have used the skills and knowledge developed to form their own online and offline support groups. A key learning point has been the need for different journeys for different people, based on their differing levels of digital skills and wellbeing.

The **Good Things Foundation**, a national social and digital inclusion charity based in Sheffield, carried out research into the use of digital in older people to find out why some older people use the internet regularly and some not at all. The Foundation found that good provision is informal, friendly, and focuses helping older people to do something online which is of clear personal value to them. Open-ended provision is key, along with creating a social community around the learning. Funding needs to reflect the complexities of bringing a person from total non-use to confident independent use in a person-centred way. Bad provision can be worse than doing nothing because it puts people off.

It's important to recognise that some older people are offline through informed choice, often using proxies – children, grandchildren – and reaping the social benefits of this. Equally, it's important to recognise that people's circumstances can suddenly change (bereavement, retirement, worsening health), and digital technology can play a role from optional extra to vital lifeline.

Digital inclusion support needs to be embedded into wider support services such as befriending services in care homes, the kinds of activities that are being funded through the Ageing Better programme. This is about catching people in transitional circumstances whose lives are becoming more difficult and who could benefit greatly from the internet but are not going to present themselves for standalone digital skills training. Research is ongoing in this area.

Equally, it's important to recognise what to measure. Digital is a means to an end, so you need to find out do people have other means to achieve these ends? It's important to consider the value of outcomes – people's ability to achieve what they

need in their life rather than digital being forced onto people for its own sake.

Consideration needs to be given to guides, instruction manuals or digital media (YouTube etc.) for the older person audience to ensure they're presented in user-friendly ways. But the regular updates, time and expense to create printed materials make it unviable to continually reproduce materials for this user-group. The self-supported learning community model can play a key role here, but these do need a lot of coordination and long-term external support if they're to be successful. The Good Things Foundation is exploring using older people in the co-design of YouTube guides.

The Healthwatch team are working with local hospitals helping older people access their own medical records and be more easily directed to the appropriate services. In a similar vein, the **Good Things Foundation** is three years' into a *Widening Digital Participation* project for NHS Digital, which is embedding healthcare skills into digital inclusion, teaching people how to access NHS website, find health information, manage health, and find personal records. The next stage of this project is to embed digital into healthcare – looking at the role of GPs in talking to patients about digital technology.

In terms of where emerging technology may be useful for older people, virtual reality could play a role in reducing isolation and loneliness where people are unable to physically leave their homes.

Specialist tech and devices bring enormous potential for people with life-limiting conditions. But they need to be accessible which means cocreation, user testing – principles brought into the third sector from the private sector, and specifically from software design, need to be disseminated. You need to make sure you're designing *with* and not designing *for*. For people who are uncertain about technology, it doesn't matter how good it is or what the benefit is, they need a living person to get them used to it, to understand it and understand the benefit.