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Digital Communities Wales
Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being

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Case study

Pembrokeshire Digital Connections

Gwyneth Jones from the Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services explains how going digital can help older and vulnerable people to live their life to the fullest.

Pembrokeshire Digital Connections is a joint project between the Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services (PAVS), Hywel Dda Health Board, Pembrokeshire County Council, Digital Communities Wales and the West Wales Care Partnership. After recognising the pandemic was causing older and vulnerable people to become isolated, they linked people to digital activities and services that would normally be delivered face-to-face, as well as supported a range of health and wellbeing initiatives.

Gwyneth Jones, Connected Communities Project Manager at PAVS, said:

> Our third sector partners had to start delivering their services virtually. They worked very quickly to get these activities online but soon discovered that many vulnerable couldn't join them.
>
> This was due to a number of reasons - they perhaps didn't have the equipment, or broadband, or the skills to access online platforms such as Zoom. We knew we had to do something to support these individuals.

With their partners, community organisations and a range of third sector organisations, PAVS set up a network to support providers in reaching digitally-excluded people. Called Pembrokeshire Digital Connections, the project not only offers providers advice and support, but also discusses issues, barriers and the positive results of getting more people online. The group gather audience stories to track the work's impact on the lives of vulnerable people.

Gwyneth explained:

> We use a story-gathering process called 'Most Significant Change'. Here, we've been collecting stories from individuals who found that having access to digital made a 'most significant change' to their life.

The Connect IT project, which has proven to be a cornerstone of Pembrokeshire Digital Connections, helps to upskill digitally-excluded people through 'how-to' guides, telephone advice, Zoom and WhatsApp tutorials and more. They also offer a loan service, so people can 'try before they buy', and during lockdown offered 'front door to front gate' advice style when they couldn't visit people in their homes.

The loan scheme was funded by local GP clusters, with a key goal of Connect IT being to support digitally-excluded people to access GP surgeries online. This can include everything from registering and booking appointments virtually to using the e-consult service, all of which have helped to ease pressure on GP services during the pandemic. The project also helps people to follow the NHS's 'Five Steps to Wellbeing', by supporting their social connection, skill building, physical activity, mindfulness and altruism.

Gwyneth said:

> Our Connect IT project has helped people to make new friends online or to stay in touch with their families. It's also helped people to keep learning by linking them to organisations who have been offering online activities during COVID-19. Digital Communities Wales also has a huge suite of virtual activities available for people to take part in, as well as giving people the chance to mentor others.
> For 'pay attention to the present moment', we encouraged people to take their digital devices out and about with them and take photographs, using daily themes for inspiration. And for 'give to others', we encouraged people to volunteer online or share their time.

Gwyneth feels the project's two biggest achievements so far have been identifying what is important to people and showing them how digital can be used to pursue their interests, as well as how using games can improve people's digital skills.

She explained:

> If you can find what interests people and show them how technology relates to that, going digital becomes more appealing to them.

> We also found that using games can help people to practise their digital skills. For example, we downloaded a jigsaw game, where participants had to swipe to put the pieces onto the board. This improved their ability to swipe, which some older people struggled with initially due to age-related conditions.

Although the project has had great results, it hasn't always been smooth-sailing. Supporting those with sensory issues - such as a hearing impairment - remotely can be difficult, and the organisation had to find new ways to support those separated by their family due to COVID-19. Supporting those less knowledgeable with digital technology has also proven to be a learning curve for PAVS.

Gwyneth said:

> Pre-COVID-19, many people would have family who'd visit and help them with technology, but the pandemic changed that – it could be very isolating for them. It was also important to remember that older generations have not grown up with technology and may need more basic training. So, we created visual guides to help those who needed to build their knowledge

For Gwyneth, her favourite part of the project has been the joy it's brought to people's lives.

She said:

> Seeing people getting on with digital and hearing the stories and feedback from participants has been incredible. The joy it's given people has been really pleasing, especially if that person was lonely or isolated. Something small can make such a difference.

Three top tips from Pembrokeshire Digital Connections

1. Don't assume someone's level of knowledge
2. Celebrate the successes
3. Small things can make a big difference

Help your community learn life-changing digital skills with our free training. Get involved here:

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