

Case study

Merched y Wawr

Tegwen Morris, National Director of women's cultural organisation Merched y Wawr, shares how the charity helped their older members to connect with others during the pandemic, and how they are continuing to do so.



Merched y Wawr is a community organisation for Welsh-speaking women that promotes women's issues along with culture, education and the arts for women across Wales. All their activities are conducted in Welsh, with National Director Tegwen Morris describing Merched y Wawr as:

“

A chance for women to get together to do cultural events, informative events and to socialise.

”

After the outbreak of COVID-19, the charity began exploring how they could use digital technology to connect with their members from a distance. However, they found that many of their older members felt they were being left behind after many services moved online.

Tegwen says:

“

As a charity we work with people. We work towards ensuring they get a Welsh medium, and if possible, resolution to their needs. This now obviously includes digital.

”

Merched y Wawr decided to make digital inclusion central to the charity's practices and help their older members to connect with others during the pandemic. However, digital exclusion amongst their older members was something the organisation was already aware of prior to COVID-19.



Tegwen explains:

“

Lots of our members are elderly and we felt that they were being discriminated against, to some extent, by what was happening pre-COVID-19... People were feeling more and more disillusioned by the fact that they couldn't use technology.

”

Using courses training sessions run by Digital Communities Wales, Merched y Wawr began by training their staff across the country on how technology can be used for keeping in touch, digital storytelling and podcasting. Through these courses, they studied ways they could help their members stay safe by looking out for scams and sharing tips on staying secure when using the internet. From the training they received, staff began holding one-to-one sessions with members, helping them to get to grips with platforms like Zoom. Tegwen discussed how important their online events have been for bringing people together, such as for their St Dwynwen's Day celebration.

She says:

“

They could feel that they were part of that evening, and they felt included.

I would say that about 30% of our members don't use technology. Even getting one or two members to the one-to-one sessions we've been doing across Wales, and just spending an hour giving them the confidence to come on Zoom, that one-to-one connection is so important.

”

To improve people's digital skills, Merched y Wawr believes in communicating with patience and openness. Tegwen also emphasises the value of accommodating non-digital means of getting people involved, such as supporting people to dial into Zoom events from their landlines, or visit a friend who uses Zoom. This allows people to explore and see what technology can offer without the pressure.

Tegwen reminds us that:

“

It may sound very strange to people who use technology, but even sending an email can be daunting.

”

She continues:



The lack of confidence people have, the worry that they'll do something wrong, that they'll disrupt something is overwhelming at times. It really can disable people from taking part or from joining an event.

Many people for the first time turned to technology, even using their phone at home to join Zoom, which again proved to them that technology didn't mean you had to have a computer, or Wi-Fi, an iPad or a modern phone. So, it is achievable but in very, very small steps.



In a particularly touching example, Tegwen shares their experience of helping a frustrated member to use technology while isolating due to COVID-19. She was unable to communicate with her deaf grandson from a distance, but the team's dedication and patience helped her learn to use Zoom and connect with her family once again.

Tegwen shared:



It took my member of staff an hour and a half to get this lady on Zoom, but she has transformed the way she thinks of technology. She spoke of how important Zoom has been for her and her grandchild to keep in touch.



Merched y Wawr has also recently begun developing a podcast from their training by DCW. For both this project and all digital inclusion practices, Tegwen highlights the importance of making technology easy to understand - like comparing the podcasts to a radio programme. The podcast and online events have invited a more diverse and connected member audience to engage with the charity.

As Tegwen explains:



We've got a completely new client group, or followers, through our podcast. We've had Welsh learners who like to listen to the language in the different dialects of Wales. That was something where we've taken all of the different counties along with us, so in turn, the thirteen regions have had a chance to record the podcasts and to be part of the process. We do a lot with Welsh learners, but we've actually had people from Patagonia, from America, from all parts of the world joining in these events and that, to me, has been lovely.



To assist them in promoting digital inclusion even further, Tegwen and her team plan to introduce a loaning scheme of data-enabled tablets provided by DCW, to help those who cannot access technology.

Tegwen says:



There is poverty, especially in rural Wales, where some people still cannot use technology because there isn't provision in their areas. Lots of things need to radically change for everybody to feel they can afford to use technology.



Through their digital inclusion projects and working towards their digital transformation plan, Merched y Wawr are pleased to have fostered a supportive and connected community of members, both online and offline, and helped to nurture the confidence of their friends to use digital services.

Tegwen says:



It's about using what you learn to take people on the journey with you.



Three top tips from Merched y Wawr

1. Examine your online presence and plan feasible expansions
2. Include everybody in your project, even the most disconnected
3. Break down complicated concepts using simple language and demonstration



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



 digitalcommunities.gov.wales

 0300 111 5050

 @DC_Wales