

In the second part of our Volunteer Network Events, we invited volunteers to split into groups to share challenges they've faced keeping services and activities going during the pandemic, and also what has worked well.

Some consistent themes emerged from the discussions, including:

Successes:

- There are multiple examples of groups moving fitness classes (yoga, Pilates, tai chi, dance, seated exercise, etc) online very successfully.
- Social events (including karaoke, quizzes, bingo, coffee mornings, pub nights and crafting) have also transferred well. With the festive period approaching, there are lots of plans for Zoom parties – involving Christmas jumpers, silly hats, mince pies, and the odd cheeky drop of sherry.
- Some more unusual activities have also been on offer:
 - **Hull, Beverley & Holderness** have been working on a ten-week creative project via Zoom, led by the Hull Truck Theatre Company.
 - **Dundee** have joined with the Tayside Health Care Trust to offer creative writing and photography classes.
- Volunteers and members have embraced unfamiliar technology and now feel confident to use it. Many have shared their knowledge to help others get online.
- Online events have attracted new joiners (including the newly diagnosed) who wouldn't previously have attended in person, and allowed groups to experiment with timings, without being tied to a venue.
- Collaboration has increased, with groups sharing resources, opening up their online services to their neighbours' members, or welcoming those from a whole region or nation.
 - **Aberdeen** have shared their newsletter with the members of another group unable to produce one.
 - **York & District** have collaborated with **Leeds & District** and **Harrogate & District** to share the costs and logistics of delivering regular exercise and social activities online.
 - **Caerphilly & District** have been holding a quiz attended by people from across Wales.
- Social media has also played an important role, with lots of activity and connection on Facebook and WhatsApp.

- Groups have continued to connect with their members and service users (especially those without online access) through regular phone calls and with newsletters (both posted and hand delivered).
- A number of groups have successfully applied for grant funding (either locally or through the National Lottery), which has been used to fund online activities and, in some cases, to provide tablets or smartphones for members to get online.
[NOTE: If your group would like to apply for the National Lottery Community Fund (Awards for All), our eLearning module here explains what you need to do - <https://volunteers.mssociety.org.uk/awards-for-all.>]
- Despite the restrictions, some great fundraising has still gone on:
 - **Halifax & Calder Valley** raised £3,200 during July, with members choosing their own sponsored challenges (knitting, swimming, circuits up and down stairs, etc).
 - **Surrey's Big Golf Day**, which usually raises £15K, was cancelled, but the organisers raffled prizes online and still raised £5K.

Challenges:

- Volunteers remain concerned about the isolation of members and service users without online access, especially in rural areas with a more elderly demographic.
[NOTE: Don't forget that the audio of a Zoom meeting can be joined by phone.]
- Some coordinating teams have found it hard to motivate their volunteers to keep things going.
- Some groups have tried very hard, and yet failed, to persuade their members and service users to engage online. They have put on online events, but these have been poorly attended.
- Fundraising has been particularly difficult, and groups are concerned about the future of street collections if fewer people carry cash in future.
[NOTE: We'll be investigating the options for providing our groups with card readers.]

Moving into 2021:

What seems clear is that this year has changed the way we'll work in the future. Online video platforms have been wonderful tools for staying connected over the past months, but 'Zoom fatigue' is understandably setting in.

Everyone's looking forward to resuming face-to-face contact as soon as it feels safe to do so.

[NOTE: For those groups that wish to, we currently hope to allow certain face-to-face activities to resume in mid-January, depending on the restrictions.]

However, where moving activities online has been a success and increased numbers, some groups have already decided to keep a mixture of online and face-to-face options, to suit a wider variety of people and manage costs.

Thank you!

Above are just a few examples to give a flavour of what was discussed, and demonstrate the amount and variety of support on offer from our groups across the UK.

[NOTE: We're aware that, due to health and personal circumstances, some volunteers have been unable to continue during the pandemic, and some groups have become dormant. We completely understand this, and look forward to welcoming them back when the time is right.]

Many thanks to everyone who came to the events and shared what their groups have been up to.