lasa *Connecting Care*

Technology advice for social care providers

Connecting Care Project
2013–2016

Executive Summary of the Evaluation Report

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Acknowledgements

Executive summary

1   Background

The Connecting Care project, delivered by technology charity Lasa with funds from the Department of Health, ran for three years between 2013 and 2016. Its aim was to improve the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in voluntary and community sector (VCS) social care organisations. The project was delivered by a small team of expert ICT advisors at Lasa, who visited VCS social care organisations across England to assist in strategic ICT planning and to improve ICT knowledge and skills amongst staff, volunteers, service users and carers.

The project was evaluated throughout its duration by an independent evaluator using a shared learning approach. Learning from the previous year informed the design and delivery of the project as it progressed. The findings from the overall evaluation – based on interview and survey data from more than half the participants – are summarised here.

2   Project overview

Forty (40) small social care organisations (i.e. with fewer than fifty staff) from across England participated in the project. They included residential, homecare and community services providing support to adult clients including older people, people with disabilities, people with long-term conditions and carers.

The project team had identified three principal challenges they were seeking to address:

- a lack of organisational capability to make best use of ICTs in VCS social care organisations
- low levels of ICT confidence and skills amongst staff, and
- low levels of ICT access and support for people using services.

The team sought to address these challenges by delivering strategic ICT support – in the form of site visits to deliver tailored ICT self-assessment, action planning and development – and ICT skills support – principally through face-to-face 'Show and Tell' sessions demonstrating the potential for mobile devices in care settings.

3   Evaluation findings

Successes

Respondents to the evaluation reported consistently positive experiences of the project. Those who engaged with the strategic planning activities cited resultant benefits including:

- having a better understanding of current ICT status and future priorities
- being better able to align ICTs with organisational objectives
- being more confident and informed purchasers of ICT products and services.

The organisations particularly valued the way the Lasa team combined technical ICT expertise with an understanding of the values, priorities and constraints of voluntary sector social care provision. It mattered to participants that Lasa 'got' voluntary sector social care, and as a result could help the organisation to utilise ICTs in the service of their fundamental objective of

providing care and support. A jargon-free, practical approach was of the essence. Evaluation respondents told us that they felt more confident and capable of managing strategic ICT challenges as a result of Connecting Care's support.

Some social care organisations did not have the capacity, or feel the need, to engage with ICTs at a strategic level. These organisations – often micro-organisations operating with mostly volunteer staff – reported significant benefits from the project's 'Show and Tell' workshops. The Lasa team added these to the project offer from year two onwards, partly in response to participant feedback, and partly to reflect the increasing ubiquity of tablet devices. The Lasa team's practical and supportive demonstrations of how tablet devices can be used to enhance everyday activities in care settings were well received by staff, volunteers, people using services and carers. Participants told us of previously sceptical – or unconfident – staff becoming engaged with ICTs for the first time. They also identified lasting benefits in terms of improved knowledge and skills, and demonstrable improvements to the direct support of service users.

Participants we spoke to were dismayed that the project was ending. They anticipated an ongoing need for both strategic ICT support and ICT skills support, and were unaware of any other sources that could deliver the effective help Lasa had provided.

Challenges

The Lasa team faced a number of challenges during the three years of the project. The first challenge was recruiting organisations. One expected source of recruits was not as fruitful as anticipated, and at the start of the project Lasa had a relative lack of pre-existing network links with VCS social care. Recruitment messaging is also difficult for these kinds of project-based, time-limited interventions. The offer needs to come to an organisation's attention at the very moment they are aware of a problem *and* have the capacity to address it. As a result, the team had to spend more of their time on marketing and recruitment than they had planned.

The other principal challenge concerned the use of expert ICT volunteers. The original project plan incorporated the use of specialist volunteers to deliver discrete development tasks identified during strategic planning. As it turned out, there was insufficient volunteer expertise to support the Lasa team. The team addressed this challenge partly by stepping up the level of developmental support they offered themselves, partly by helping organisations source commercial products and services cost effectively, and partly by broadening their activities to focus on mainstream ICT skills support as described above.

Learning points

- Care sector VCS organisations continue to struggle with ICT capability at both a strategic and operational levels. The result is an inability to take advantage of the benefits ICTs can bring to organisational efficiency, service quality, and service user experience.

- ICT expertise alone is insufficient to effectively support the VCS social care sector; attitudes and approach are equally valued, the most important of these being knowledge of beneficiary needs and an understanding of the constraints and challenges faced by SMEs working in social care.

- The scale and complexity of the ICT strategic support needs in the VCS sector cannot be adequately addressed with volunteer resource. Strategic ICT skills are as essential to the needs of the voluntary sector as competent financial management; they are not an optional add-on which can be left to the unpredictability of volunteer support.

- Dedicated, face-to-face ICT support is highly valued in this sector, where in-house capacity and capability is often minimal and sometimes non-existent.

- Digital skills support activities aimed at frontline staff, volunteers and service users are seen as highly valuable by VCS care organisations. Such activities are 'quick wins', and enable the engagement of participants who might otherwise feel ICTs are not relevant for them or their role.

- Frontline digital skills support activities are an effective way to leverage pre-existing volunteer resource, as volunteers do not need to have specialist ICT skills, merely an interest in using mainstream technologies to support people using services.

4 Recommendations

- Consider the business case for an ongoing social care ICT support service – designed to expand and contract with demand – on which VCS organisations can draw once they have recognised their own needs and are ready to address them.

- Consider a range of business models – for example a low-cost, partially subsidised service, where organisations pay for some elements of the service.

- Consider partnering with trade bodies or other organisations with extensive and sustained network connections to relevant recruits. This would also provide the opportunity for the kinds of cross-marketing and network effects needed in order to recruit at scale.

- Consider partnering with existing care sector volunteer schemes to train volunteers to use digital technologies with the people they support. This is a potentially productive and manageable focus for volunteer effort, whereas strategic ICT development requires more structured, formal and sustainable support.

- Accompany face-to-face ICT strategic support with an online ICT support platform, which would offer a structured and engaging set of assessment and planning resources for users, as well as encourage them to develop their own knowledge and skills.

The full Connecting Care evaluation report can be downloaded from our website: **www.connectingcare.org.uk**

In their own words

Below is a selection of feedback comments by Connecting Care project participants [verbatim text]:

On strategic planning

"I was like a woman floating in the ocean looking for a plank to grab hold of! Our IT was a hideous mess and while I am not an IT geek I do know enough to realise that it was badly holding the organisation back, and we needed to do something about it. But I did not know where to start. The CC offer came across my desk at just the time I needed it." (Year 3 participant)

"We liked the non-techy approach, the avoidance of jargon, the focus on how technology can be used for practical everyday things by people who are not IT savvy. This really struck a chord." (Year 2 participant)

On strategic development work

"The main task I got to grips with during the project was our IT support. We basically had none; we were relying on husbands, brothers you know people coming in and trying to help but sometimes not really helping at all. So what I got from the Connecting Care project was a clear direction on what IT support we needed and where to look for it. I could show the trustees this and they felt confident in signing off on it." (Year 3 participant)

"We did the Tech Check [before the first Lasa visit], which prompted us to have really good internal discussions across the whole organisation about where we currently are with our ICT. The [Connecting Care] strategic planning process, the diagnosis first then the prioritising - this crystallised the most important priority for us, and that was so useful." (Year 3 participant)

"I knew I needed to talk to someone impartial who understands the sector and knows IT....I knew if I sat down and talked to our existing suppliers they would give us advice that involved using their products and services. The impartiality Lasa offered was really important." (Year 3 participant)

On ICT skills development

"It improved my knowledge and skills and that of our volunteers. We all found out about ways to use ICTs with older people which we did not know before. This in turn meant we could improve the range and variety of the activities we offered residents." (Year 3 participant)

"The [Show and Tell] … has opened up our eyes. Just the other day I was working with an older resident of one of the care homes, and he was talking about how he read the Shropshire Star, the local newspaper. So we brought up the on-line version and he was amazed – he had not received the print version yet and there was all the latest news already on-line. With the same man, who is in his late 70s or early 80s and had never used a tablet, we used Google Earth to look at the street where he used to live. It was fascinating to watch as he realised the power of the digital device, what it could do that was of direct interest to him." (Year 2 participant)

Summing up their experience of the project

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"Connecting Care has given us a level of professionalism in our approach which we simply did not have before. In six months' time, thanks to Lasa, we will have proper IT support, and the right kind of software and services. And we will also be using ICTs with our service users in ways we would not otherwise have done." (Year 3 participant)