

From our testbed partner:



Debra's Story

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Debra, 54 is a former midwife and keen sewer. She has five children, seven granddaughters and one grandson on the way and lives alone in a supported housing scheme in North London, managed by Haringey Council. Debra has lupus and rheumatoid arthritis and she uses a wheelchair due to spinal surgery.



How do you feel about technology?

My independence is everything to me. I raised five children on my own – I'm used to looking after myself. Aids and technology help me do that.

My flat was adapted last year. Doing things like turning a key in a lock had become very painful and difficult but now I have an adapted front door with a fob lock and my kitchen has rise and fall worktops and pull-down shelves. The way I suffer with my limbs and fingers means that using the phone is difficult, too. But someone loaned me an Amazon Echo during lockdown, and I was able to communicate with the grandkids, rather than having to use my phone. The grandkids taught me lot of things – like how the Echo can tell you jokes - although none of them are funny! That interaction really helped with the isolation I felt.

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There was another way that technology helped me cope during lockdown. I taught myself to sew by watching YouTube videos. It's now one of my greatest passions and I can sew almost anything. I particularly like making things out of African prints. I'm Caribbean and I think African prints are beautiful. The housing management team here has even given us a room to do sewing. Residents often come in and want to know how to sew but they also come to have a social chat.



What are the barriers?

The cost of technology can be a problem. People with a disability often want to use technology as an aid, rather than having the latest gadget and it becomes expensive – you need to buy more and more up to date devices.

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How can these barriers be overcome?

We need more education around how to use technology: evening classes or sessions in communal rooms, once a week, where someone comes and shows people different devices. Those of us who know how to use technology could be involved – helping each other. That would take the age restriction away from technology.

On New Year's Day I did a dinner with some of the residents, and I got in all my grandkids and children. It was fantastic – the youngest person there was two and the oldest was 93! The old and the young work so well together. I think there should be tech open days where local school children do day trips to residential homes and help residents to access the internet. It's an easy exercise and it wouldn't be patronising.

Not knowing how to use technology is a problem too. For example, the majority of GP appointments are made via the internet. A lot of older people are just about getting used to the phone so to put in the amount of information required to make an appointment online, they just can't do it and it puts them off accessing certain services. I often have to help older residents in my building to contact the management team – I send emails for them.



Why did you get involved in TAPPI?

I've been involved in co-production before, around mental health. They asked us to be experts by experience and we really changed and developed the mental health service. So, with TAPPI, when I heard about co-production, a light bulb went on. It's about really listening to residents.

I also want to find out about technology that can help with my own disabilities. There are things I do not take for granted – like opening the curtains and turning off lights. And I've learnt you can get Alexa to do those things for you. There are days I don't open my curtains because I dread having to stand. So getting gadgets to do that would really help.

I want TAPPI to improve access to technology. I get a lot of pleasure from seeing people accomplish things and by the time this project finishes there will be many more residents with different gadgets – and that tech will change their lives. I believe in empowering people to be independent because I know how it makes me feel.

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Acknowledgements

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Find out more about this project at:

www.housinglin.org.uk/TAPPI2



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