Tech to Connect

Tackling isolation through innovation

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Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport

The Tech to Connect Challenge ran from April 2019 to March 2020 and aimed to help civil society develop their early stage ideas for tech to enable more or better interactions between people. Technology can be alienating or divisive for those that are isolated, but it doesn't need to be that way. Tech to Connect was all about supporting civil society to translate their knowledge into good ideas for new ways to connect people.

The challenge prize helped ten finalists develop their ideas into working prototypes and plan for their implementation. The £1 million prize was split into £500,000 of business support with the other £500,000 being awarded as financial support – £25,000 grants for each finalist, plus a winning prize of £100,000 and two runner-up prizes of £75,000.

Finalist of the Tech To Connect Challenge

What's It Like? by People with Alternative Learning Styles (PALS)

FINALIST

Location

Hampshire

Our idea

An app that uses immersive technology (360 video, augmented and virtual reality) to help people who live with anxiety view places and activities in advance of attending. The aim is to reduce their feelings of anxiety and increase their confidence in attending, which in turn reduces their potential social isolation.

Who do we want to reach?

Our primary audience is autistic people for whom raised anxiety levels are the norm and are accompanied by sensory difficulties that compound the anxiety. We have also broadened

this to include people who suffer from severe and chronic anxiety, often brought on by trauma or early life experiences and people who suffer episodes of anxiety or who have a tendency to procrastinate and hence avoid places and activities that will improve their social outcomes.

The story so far

Initially PALS teamed up with JP Morgan and Autism Hampshire to run a 'Code 4 Good' hackathon for 15 young autistic people. Their challenge was to create a design for our website and to consider lived experience in the design and operations. The project has developed a long way through the course of the Tech to Connect challenge, understanding that anxiety-based isolation is a much wider phenomenon than the autistic community originally envisaged as the primary target group.

Rather than use a traditional development team, PALS contracted Future Coders CIC to develop the web app that would provide access to the immersive material for users and for admin functions. For this, they recruited five

young people who live with anxiety (including three on the autism spectrum) to carry out the coding and to incorporate their lived experience into the design. Two autistic film specialists were contracted to produce all the immersive materials based on users' needs and their lived-in knowledge. In addition, an independent impact review was commissioned to assess the impact of social inclusion for the development team. One thing we learned is the need to tailor experiences both to meet the needs of venues and also for the beneficiaries who will use the service. Based on the support received through the Tech to Connect Challenge, we have worked with Portsmouth Football Club and Enable Ability (a charity that offers work experience for disabled people), and we have also partnered with Autism Hampshire to set up a clinical advisory team to oversee the support function for beneficiaries using the service.

What's next?

We plan to scale and deliver this service across England as well as across our group of beneficiaries, which means designing different approaches depending on the degree of support that each person needs. Our aim is for the service to become mainstream in a whole range of public service organisations: education, the justice system, health and social care, transport, rural affairs, and Job Centres. One of our key ambitions is that each of these organisations' websites includes a link to our What's It Like? webpage and we will begin to deliver for community-based organisations outside the public sector, including sports and leisure groups.

"What's It Like? service is a repurposing of existing technology and builds on the fragmented approach that currently exists. The graded approach, taking people step-by-step towards inclusion and the use of beneficiaries to design, build and implement the service has received incredible levels of interest from beneficiaries, users and clinicians alike."

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58 Victoria Embankment, London EC4Y 0DS

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