

Digital Design Project

The Co-design and Development of a Digital Self-Management Tool in Partnership with Young People with Additional Support Needs

Summary

This project was developed when a previous digital wellbeing tool for children and young people, the Interactive My World Triangle (developed by Highland Children's Forum in 2008) would no longer operate with modern browsers. There was recognition that young people were now the experts in their use of digital platforms and that involving them in the design of any digital approaches to supporting wellbeing would be necessary.

Over three phases of participation, 39 young people with challenges in their lives described both their current use of digital media and what they thought might be helpful to their wellbeing. They then explored potential platforms and described what would be useful in taking this project forward.

Young people identified the need for safe and moderated online platforms where they could meet others who had similar challenges and interests as them to build peer support. Discord Community is a moderated digital community that could meet these needs. It has been explored with the young people who have indicated that with some further development, this platform could provide that peer support space.

Online mentorship was an idea that appealed to young people, but only if they could have a choice in who that mentor was. Mentor profiles have been developed so that young people can choose which mentor they want to contact them. They can choose a different mentor if that connection does not suit.

At times of crisis or challenge, young people wanted a safe space to speak to a trusted adult. Meeting a mentor in Virtual Reality was explored by the young people and they found that the space was not just safe but also equalising so that difficult conversations might be made easier there.

Young people want to be able to share their own stories, develop their own profiles and record their achievements on the Discord Community. This will empower them to have agency in their life and contribute their voice to personal plans.

These solutions will now be piloted with volunteer participants so that they can be further developed to serve a wider range of young people in the future.

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Introduction

This project is a partnership project between, Highland Children and Young People's Forum (HCYPF), Day1 Mentoring and UHI Digital Health funded by Alliance Scotland's Self-Management fund.

The project sought to co-develop with young people with additional support needs, or those who were experiencing long term challenges in their lives, working through the "LEAP"* three phases of participation:

1. **Learning:** what digital platforms young people already used; how they used them and how they might use digital platforms to improve wellbeing and deal with the challenges they faced.
2. **Evaluate:** offering young people examples of digital platforms developed in response to the learning phase of participation and seeking their evaluation to continue digital developments.
3. **Planning:** bring the developing platforms to young people and seek their ideas about how to take the development to the next stage of iteration.

At every stage, this project has been responsive to the input from young people. The project was delayed due to the Covid 19 pandemic but completed the final participation event on 29th October 2021.

*<https://www.scdc.org.uk/what/leap>



Learning Participation Phase

Young Participants

Number: 20

Age range 11-18

Need range:

care experienced, long-term health condition, physical disability, autistic spectrum, young carers, mental health issues



Young people, who had provided informed consent, met in groups either in school or at an accessible local venue. The final group met online during the first Covid lockdown.

What young people said would help:

Safe Space: a virtual space that was personal, a place for timeout; somewhere secure and private. The space might be helpful in school or at home.

Peer Support: Different levels of online peer support were described. Sometimes it was about connecting to other young people with similar experiences and from that shared understanding, supporting one another.

Online Mentorship: online mentors available but with young person being able to choose their mentor so it could be someone interested in the same things.

Creativity: Young people wanted to tell their stories, celebrate their creativity, and share their success with their peers and mentors.

Have a say in personal plans: part of the reason for the project was to ensure that young people had a say in a Child's Plan or other individual service plans. Young people need ownership of how their voice is represented in those plans.

What was developed from the learning:

Virtual Reality in Big Screen via Oculus Headsets: for a safe space to speak to a mentor or other adult for individual service plans

Discord Community: to enable peer support, online mentorship, and creative ways of developing personal stories/achievements

Mentor Matcher App: a selection of mentor profiles for young people to choose from.

Evaluation Participation Phase

Young Participants

Number: 19

Age range 13-18

Need range:

care experienced, learning disability, long-term health condition, autistic spectrum, young carers, mental health issues



The evaluation phase of the project, originally envisioned as being mostly in person, was adapted to be conducted digitally due to Covid 19 restrictions.

The 19 participants were split into smaller groups and attended scheduled digital sessions over a period of around 6 weeks.

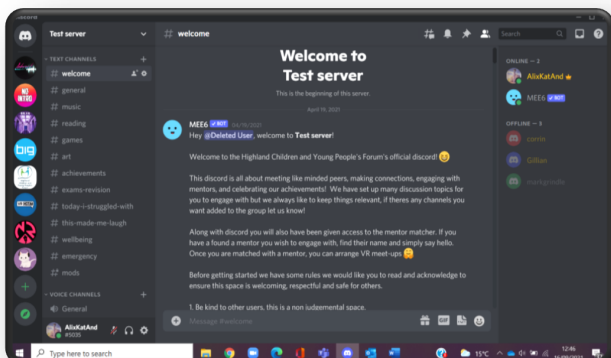
These sessions included:

Discord and Mentor Matcher Demonstration

The participants attended a meeting in Zoom and then Discord to be updated on the project, be provided with demonstrations of the platforms, and discuss the developments.

In Discord we asked the participants for their thoughts and ideas for making it a well-functioning digital space for peer-to-peer support and meeting mentors.

Key points from the participants' feedback in these sessions included:



- It is good to have choice.
- Discord is a safe platform and feels secure.
- Peer to peer support is important
- It would be good to connect with young people from other areas and schools.

The participants then had the next session they were scheduled for outlined to them, which was meeting members of the development team in virtual reality (VR) to explore the virtual environments and discuss with them- what they thought of those environments and the potential of meeting mentors there.

Virtual Reality Demonstration

Participants each had Oculus Quest 2 headsets sent to their homes to enable them to meet an HCYPF worker and another member of the development team in virtual reality. They were provided with detailed instructions and additional safety briefings on how to get set up and ongoing support by phone if any issues arose.



In groups of 2 or 3, the participants met members of the team initially in Zoom to be provided with a briefing of events for the evening and a room code to access a private room in the app BigScreen.

This app was chosen because of the function of being able to set up private rooms which are invite only.

It is a series of digital screening rooms set in different environments for example- an apartment with a balcony, a fireside, woodland, Mars, or variously themed cinema rooms.

Each virtual reality session began with settling the participants into the controls and speaking. This was done by encouraging them to throw tomatoes at each other and move around the room to avoid them whilst discussing what the participants had done that day.



The participants also had the opportunity to customise their avatars and were then encouraged to move around and interact with the environments and use the drawing tools that were available.

As participants explored, they discussed with team members what they thought of the environments and what they thought of meeting a mentor or another trusted adult in VR.

Conversations were recorded and transcription notes taken from these recordings afterwards. At the end of the session, workers and

participants returned to Zoom to have a brief discussion to allow participants to share any additional thoughts.

Key points and themes from the participants' feedback in these sessions included:

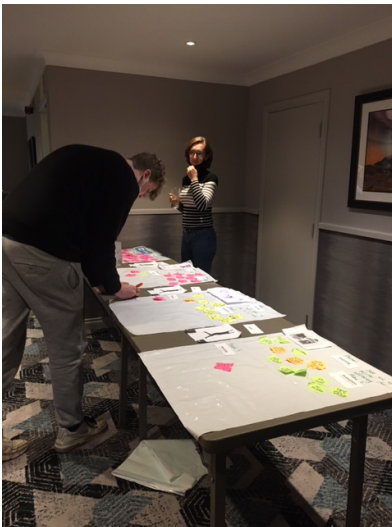
- The digital environments are fun and friendly.
- Participants described feelings of escapism.
- It potentially feels easier to talk to an adult as an avatar than in real life or via video conferencing.
- The environments felt safe and a good place to talk. Participants discussed feeling protected.
- Environments could perhaps be too playful or engaging depending upon what is needed from meeting with a trusted adult.
- It was observable that the participants were more relaxed and having more fun in VR compared to Zoom.
- It can potentially feel less awkward than a real-life meeting.
- Freedom i.e. freedom to move around, to interact with environment and to leave or take a break without awkwardness or uncertainty.
- It is convenient and accessible from home.
- Feeling free from worrying about personal appearance.
- Some concerns about the reliability of the technology. Apps being glitchy and accessibility of the technology. Some people may need additional support to get set up and become familiar with using both the hardware and software.
- It's an engaging experience.



Planning Participation Phase

All participants were invited to a final in-person meeting. Due to Covid concerns and other issues, only three young people were able to attend to explore the trial of a new method of choosing mentors in Discord; four profiles of volunteer mentors were available and young people could choose who to meet in the virtual reality space during the session.

The project was summarised under the LEAP headings and young people were asked to provide feedback about how they would like the project to develop moving forward.



The LEAP framework was used for young people to add comments on the use of Discord, Mentor Matcher options, use of Virtual reality and the overall use of digital platforms to promote wellbeing for young people

Quotes from Participants

I enjoyed the project and am happy to help out. I think some of these things can really help others.

It would be good for others to speak to young people like them who have similar interests.

I enjoyed taking part in this project, I think it could really help young people in the future.

You are in a personal space and can look how you like and can play around to start and have some fun.

Digital Design Project
- What comes next?
Final evaluation
feedback

Discord is a lot easier for people to access then meeting up real life. Not Good - Internet can be annoying or technical difficulties.

This would help some people because they may find it easier to talk over one of these platforms than face to face with someone in the same room as them.

Well some people prefer to talk in person and others prefer not to do that so having the choice will be good. Also having some time to muck around and have fun can also help.

Key messages:

What was good about Discord peer community space:

- easy to access
- good for meeting people
- young people could be themselves and talk openly
- good variety of channels
- safe and easy to use
- easy to link with mentor
- takes away barriers

How Discord should develop:

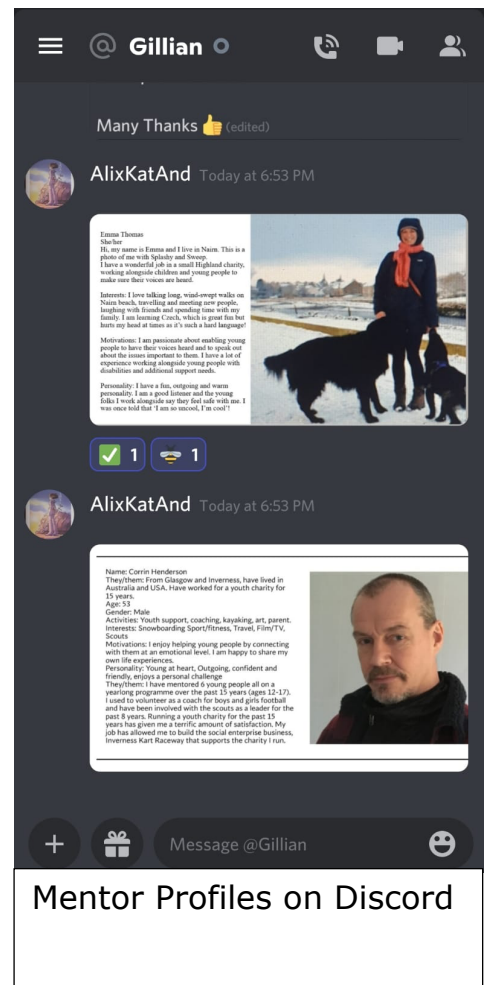
- more channels of interest to young people
- evolve over time by asking young people for their ideas
- use young people's interests to create groups
- "bots" could offer other options such as music
- more emojis to be used
- could be much bigger
- mentor interactions would need to be private

What was good about the Mentor Matcher Profiles:

- good way to get to know about the mentor.
- shows what you need to know about mentors
- simpler than talking to people

How it should develop:

- need an administrator or moderator for safety
- use young people profiles too
- mentors should make first contact
- profiles could have more information
- App good as works on phone or laptop
- easier to have the profiles on Discord



Young people getting their safety information for the Go Karting



Participant using Oculus Headset

What was good about Oculus Headsets:

- good space to escape to
- being able to see and talk to mentor as an Avatar was really helpful
- good environment that allows you to muck about; felt comfortable and fun
- relaxed environment allows personal approach to discussion; better than a call or meeting with nothing to do
- feels safe.

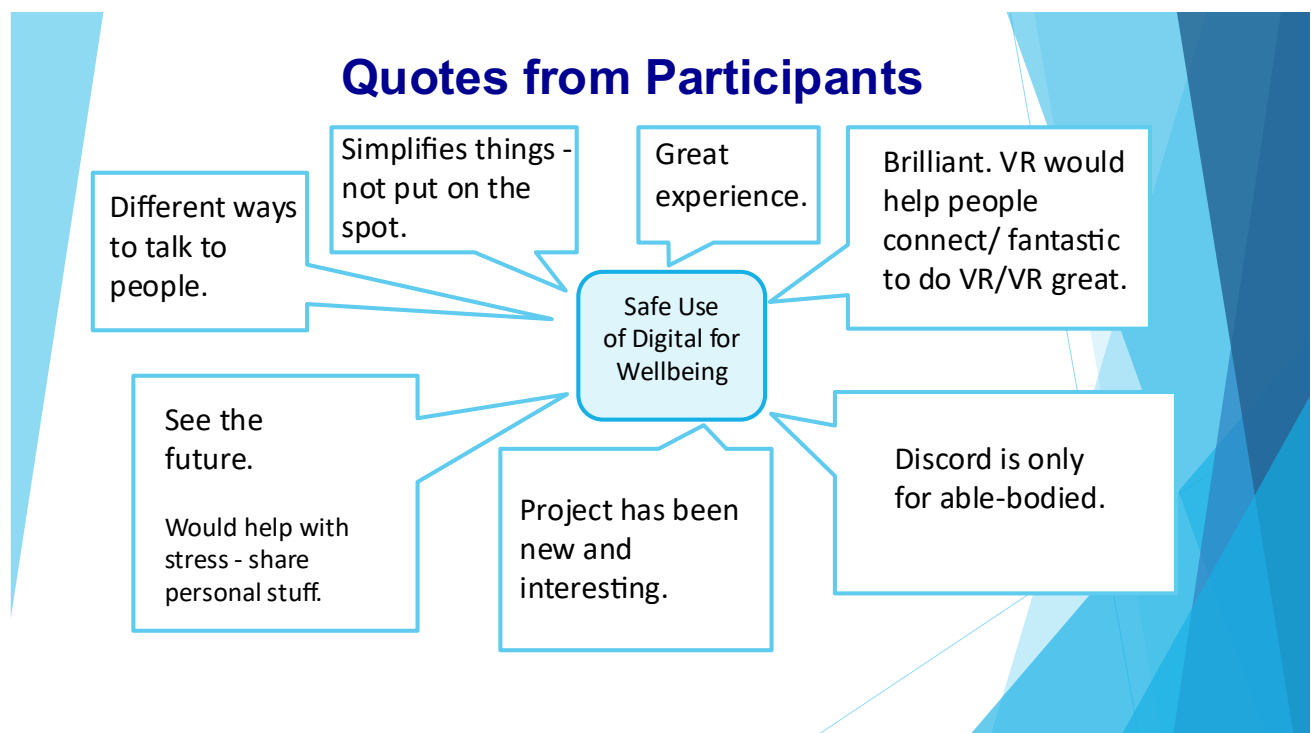
How it should develop:

- get more fun things on it
- story should be encouraged to help towards their goals
- funding would be difficult so access to headsets might be difficult.

This event was followed up with an evaluation form asking the wider group of participants to consider what could be next for the project and offer their ideas if they wished to.

Planning for Continued Development of Safe Use of Digital Media for Wellbeing:

Quotes from young people.



Methodology

The original plan for participation had been that all three stages of involvement with young people would be in person. The participation plan was submitted to and approved by the North of Scotland Research Ethics Committee and informed consent gained from all young people. When meeting in person, young people were offered a meal. Risk assessments were carried out for each meeting, both face to face and digitally. All efforts were made to ensure each meeting was fully accessible to participants.

Young people were identified through HCYPF and Day1's contacts with schools and organisations working with young people facing long-term challenges in their lives.

In the first phase, young people were seen in small groups (three to six) in their school or in a venue chosen for accessibility. One group met online during the first lockdown of Spring 2020. Young people were asked about their current use of social media and digital platforms and if they knew about augmented or virtual reality. They were introduced to the idea of an online mentor and about sharing stories and achievements in the digital space. Young people could talk freely about their interests and thoughts about how digital media was or could be helpful. Their input was analysed by the UHI researcher.

The first lockdown occurred before the first round of participation was complete. Thanks to the generous extension of both time and funds offered by Alliance Scotland, the participation moved to online after changes had been agreed by ethics and new consents sought from young people.

In planning the next stage of participation, a new risk assessment was conducted for the digital approach and mitigations put in place for all risks identified. Careful planning of the logistics of ensuring each participant received an Oculus headset for the date of their participation was required. Each participant was offered two digital sessions, one to consider Discord and Mentor Matcher options and one to explore Virtual Reality through the Oculus Headsets.

The final participation event was planned to be in person as Covid regulations allowed. A meal and drinks were provided. Participants were also offered a chance to go karting at the next-door karting facility. As this event was in person, the risk assessment was expanded to ensure all measures were taken in accordance with Covid regulations and recommendations.

At each stage input from young people was examined, compared, contrasted and analysed to ensure the next stage of development was in response to their design suggestions.

Discussion

The original budget contained an allowance to buy in coding support to develop the ideas of the young people. Most requirements the young people sought were possible through the platform of Discord.

Two coders were contracted to develop a Mentor Matcher App to allow young people to view the profiles of trained and available online mentors so they could choose to meet a mentor of their choice online. The coders developed a prototype App, but the prototype did not meet the needs of the young people. Other solutions were found through the Discord platform to allow young people to view mentor profiles and indicate preferences.

Involving young people in the co-design of digital supports to wellbeing from the outset was crucial to the direction of this project. It was not clear where young people might lead that design and they have led us in a surprising and innovative direction.

Their desire for a safe and moderated online platform to meet other young people with similar challenges and interests to build peer support is admirable. Young people do not just want to manage their own challenges in life but to use their experience to help others. While traditionally mentors have operated as face to face supports to young people, the opportunity to have an online mentor was appealing to young people. Their desire to be able to choose their own mentor was a refreshing reminder that the success of a mentor relationship, so dependent on a good match, could be facilitated by letting the young people choose and try a mentor and be able to change their mind and choose someone else.

While the offer of virtual reality was initially sought by young people who did not always feel safe at home or at school, the evident comfort that young people expressed about meeting a mentor in that space led to young people indicating that other difficult or challenging discussions with adults would potentially be easier for young people in virtual reality.

In the virtual reality environment adults and young people are represented as avatars which can possibly have the effect of rebalancing the power dynamics between an adult and a young person with the avatar acting as an equalizer in terms of appearance, movement and space occupied. Furthermore, the virtual environment is a neutral territory that is fun, friendly and familiar to the young person, with potential to customize further to increase a sense of ownership over the space for the young person. The freedom of movement in the space and interactivity of the virtual environment was described by the young people as freeing and more engaging, seeming to promote a sense of agency and autonomy for them, for example being able to take a few moments out of the conversation at the push of a button if they needed it.

It is hoped that in feeling this increased sense of agency and engagement, the virtual environment as a meeting place would be particularly helpful for those children and young people who are looked after and may be experiencing social or communication challenges and this will be a focus for the project moving forward.

Conclusion

This project has been an exciting journey with the young people co-designing solutions to meet their needs. These solutions will first be piloted with consenting participants to enable continued development in accordance with young people's ideas. The project partnership team will then seek further funds to launch these platforms to a wider range of young people.

As this project continues to co-design with young people, we hope that the digital developments will enable a wider range of young people to better manage the challenges in their lives, build resilience as they support one another, develop positive and meaningful mentorship relationships online and have access to the safe and equalising space of virtual reality in times of great challenge or crisis.

Next Steps

1. Pilot the use of these wellbeing tools with young people.
2. Four experienced volunteer mentors will be upskilled to engage digitally.
3. Discord Community will be set up and offered to a group of young people with care experience.
4. Oculus headsets will be offered to young people in a residential home.
5. Young people can co-design the evolution of the Discord Community to build peer support, choose and access online mentors and develop their own profiles or stories.
6. Young people with Oculus Headsets can pilot meeting a mentor in this safe space, exploring the use of that space for times of challenge or crisis.