



Dear Participant,

Thank you so much for your valued participation in the Circles of Support project. This was, as you know, part of a wider research project, called STRETCH, (Socio Technical Resilience for Enhancing Targeted Community Healthcare) which was funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.

Our original aims were to develop healthcare technologies that put older people at the heart of the process and to enrol a community of family and friends into health and social care plans. The project including the research and service components was originally for 3 years then received a 3 month extension. This project ended at the end of June 2020.

Without your hugely valuable input, as well as that from your family and friends, we would not have been able to carry out the project and learnt so much about how technology and people combine together to support us in our social and medical networks.

In this letter/email to you, our intention is to provide an overview of what we have achieved through the Circles of Support ( CoS) service and research.

During the project we have had many conversations, and completed several drawings of and about your networks. We have, together, explored how people communicate with each other and who does what in your support network. We have considered how robust and resilient these networks are, looking at what resilience means for you and your CoS. We spoke about how to better plan for the future and looked at how people and ways of communication might adapt as things change as we age. We didn’t however, consider how a worldwide pandemic might impact on your CoS. Perhaps we should have.

Those of you who were also part of the research branch of the project kindly agreed to having room sensors in your home which recorded light, humidity and movement. This information was used to see if the devices worked, what it was like having them around and how the information could be shared on an App (SPA STRETCH participants’ App).

Later on in the research some of you also agreed to trial two novel mood recording devices/tangibles. The team found this part of the project particularly exciting as it was something new and has led to many interesting discussions as well as research papers being published.

Learnings that the research team noted in particular:

* How happy most of you were to share your personal stories and discuss your current situation
* The researchers were really pleased to see how willing you all were to help out, answer questions and that you all got something out of being consulted and involved in these topics.
* It is difficult mapping the information about peoples’ Circles of Support in a way that can be used by technology. The challenge is to ensure that technology incorporates social support.
* The importance of considering physical and mental health on an equal basis
* Tangible/Mood recording devices can be engaging and interesting and gather accurate assessment of mood. They were a conversation piece yet primarily helped participants feel empowered to change their mood.
* We were pleasantly surprised at how accommodating you were letting us install technology in your homes. Those who were concerned about overheating had them removed once this was requested.
* There was a lot to learn from you- particularly noting that there is a gap between what the technology does and what people actually need
* Always important to remember that those who design technology need to remember that people are at the heart of it all.
* We noted how protective you all were about those in your network and that you didn’t want to overburden anyone. **Researchers learnt how independent older people are and how they want to hold onto this for as long as possible.**
* Technology needs to consider participants’ wider social support network
* The importance of including your ideas, views and opinions. Your input from the workshop was invaluable and the research team felt, in retrospect, that they should have run at least one earlier.
* How important the everyday is – the hello to the person in the local shop and how crucial hairdressers, cleaners and gardeners are in spite of social support not being their main purpose!
* How hard it was for many, but by no means all, to think about difficult aspects of ones future.

**Age UK Exeter learning**:

* At the 18 month point in the project, with the help of my then manager, Lisa Shrimpton, I created a user manual so that others could have similar conversations about how to draw a Circle of support and have following on conversations. This is available for any of you should you want one. I would like to have this document freely available to help older people who might be interested.
* I had planned to give talks about the project and our learnings – I would still like to do this if possible in the future.
* Age UK Exeter is very interested in aiding older people and their friends and relatives, to make plans for the future so that one can feel as secure as possible as one ages. This work continues in the background as COVID 19 and the changes and adaptations we have had to make have taken precedence. Working more on this is an aim at some point in the future, to continue linking in with our in-house Information and Advice service who already offer a lasting Power of Attorney service.

**The future**:

One of my main learnings from being involved with research is that some questions get answered but most breed new questions!

Some of the research team have gone on to a related project called SERVICE, which recently won funding to develop an App based on our STRETCH work.

<https://serviceproject.org.uk/>

The STRETCH team have published papers from this project on a number of topics including tests of the technology, and psychology papers on how groups and families can support health.

If you would like to be kept informed of how CoS and STRETCH informs future products and research then please email Avelie Stuart on [a.stuart@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:a.stuart@exeter.ac.uk) or contact Blaine Price (Open University) on 01908 653 701, or [b.a.price@open.ac.uk](mailto:b.a.price@open.ac.uk)

So thanks very much again- we couldn’t have done anything without your patience, input and good humour!

With very best wishes from the whole team of STRETCH .

Jessica Cohen

Age UK Exeter

01392 202092

[j.cohen@ageukexeter.org.uk](mailto:j.cohen@ageukexeter.org.uk)