

Putting the rural citizen first: Developing inclusive and accessible health services in a rural area

Tim Smith, Business Manager, Powys Living Well Service

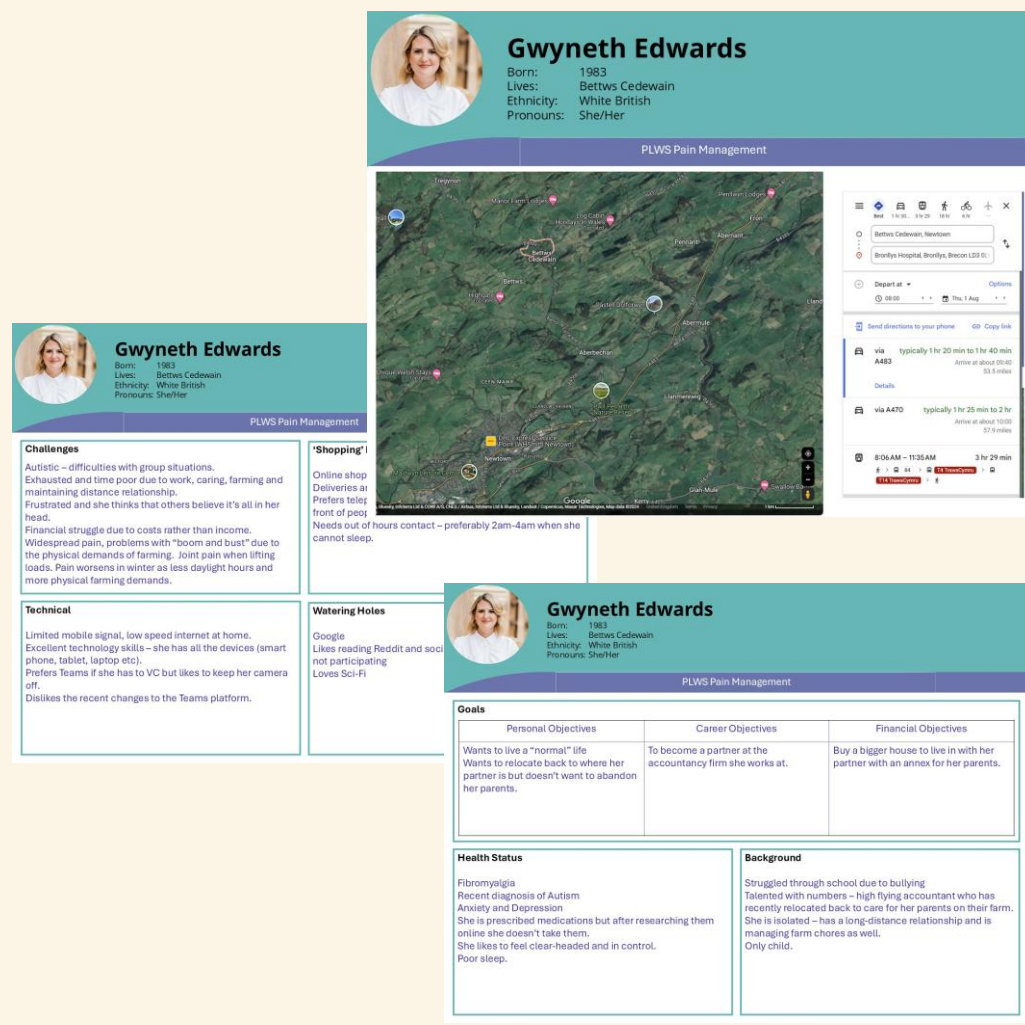
Contact: timothy.smith2@wales.nhs.uk

What?
Building a library of User Personas

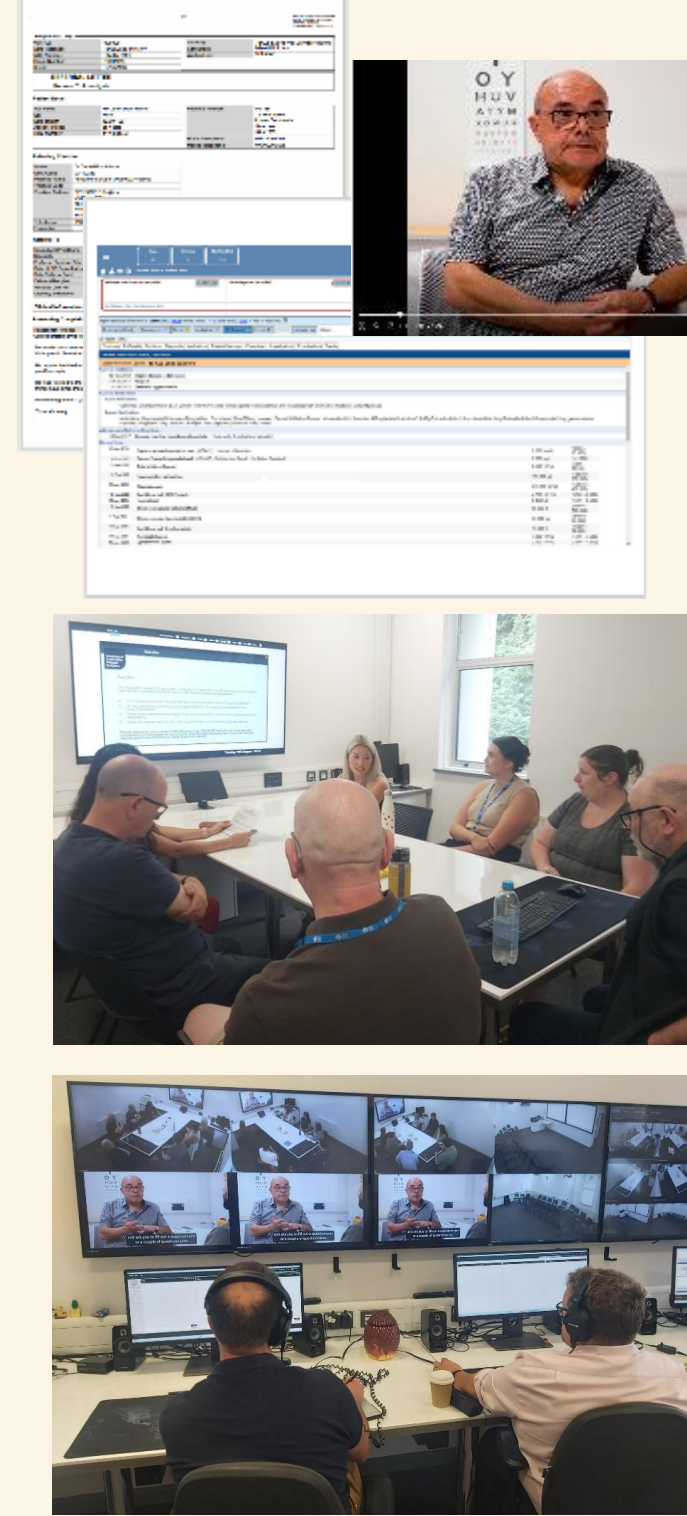
Why?
Personas were developed to help staff understand the real lives and barriers faced by rural service users. They expose inequalities such as transport challenges, digital exclusion, and social isolation, and show how planned services can differ from lived experience.

How?

- Structured template captures key demographic, clinical and contextual details.
- Composite personas based on multiple real experiences.
- 80/20 rule to include typical users and those facing greatest inequality.
- Hero's Journey model used to map emotional and practical journeys.
- Co-produced by multidisciplinary team to challenge bias and assumptions.



What changed?
Staff better **understand rural realities** and **recognise gaps and barriers** in existing pathways. Personas remind us of the needs of seldom-heard groups. They provide everyday reference points to test ideas and maintain user-centred thinking whilst supporting more **inclusive** and **resilient** rural service redesign.



What?
Immersive Simulation to understand the user experience of being referred to the service.

Why?
To uncover barriers that routine data cannot show. Simulation exposes hidden inequalities, confusing communication, digital friction, and assumptions that shape real user experience, especially in complex services provided in rural settings.

How?
A full-journey simulation recreated a user's path from referral through to MDT preparation using authentic letters, digital interactions, and real decision points. Staff from clinical, administrative and digital groups alongside guests from partner organisations participated in a psychologically safe, neutral environment enabling open reflection. The process made communication patterns, assumptions, and workflow problems visible.

What changed?
Clearer, simpler information for service users, earlier digital and non-digital support, and better alignment across roles. Colleagues reported more empathy, confidence, and psychological safety, leading to tangible service improvements.



People

Experience

Support

Partnerships



The Citizen First Approach
For healthcare to be genuinely inclusive, people must not only be able to **access** services, but also be empowered to **navigate, understand, and utilize** those services effectively.

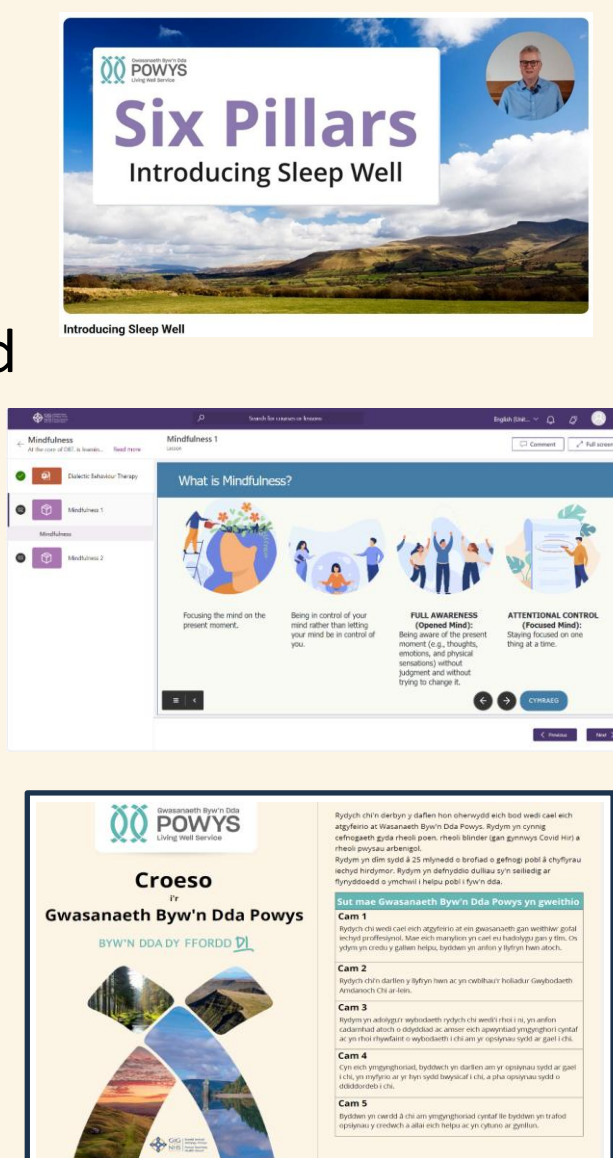
What?
Blended support for individuals experiencing long-term health conditions

Why?
People with long-term conditions need flexible, blended support because their symptoms affect them continuously and vary day-to-day. Relying solely on digital or in-person delivery doesn't meet their needs - especially in rural areas - so mixed approaches help them stay engaged and make ongoing progress.

How?
The Powys Living Well Service uses a blended model of support, combining digital tools (like virtual consultations and online learning), in-person sessions, and practical activity groups. This mix helps people build skills, apply strategies, and sustain improvements in managing their own long-term health conditions.

What Changed?

- Digital support material is bilingual (English and Welsh), allowing people to understand, describe and manage their health conditions in their preferred language.
- Reduced need to travel to appointments, making support more sustainable.
- Improved confidence, accessibility and equity through clearer information, earlier support and flexible options that match personal needs.



What?
Partnerships to provide support to access services

Why?
Many people in rural Powys face challenges when accessing health services - especially digital services - due to low income, mobility or sensory needs, poor connectivity, caring responsibilities, or low confidence.

How?
By developing strong partnerships, we have created flexible and personalised, in-home and community-based help, helping to prevent widening inequalities and digital exclusion.

- **Powys Living Well Service** provides 1-1 digital support sessions to boost confidence and provide experience of virtual consultations before clinical appointments via Digital Facilitators.
- **Powys Library Service** provides extended loans of devices, free data SIMs, in-person support, and safe spaces.
- **Accessibility Powys** – a third sector group - offers in-home digital support, accessibility advice, confidence-building, and bespoke solutions.



What Changed?

- Improved **access to digital health services** – the service now delivers over 90% of appointments digitally.
- Provided hundreds of **free device loans**, as well as **connectivity and training**, reducing digital exclusion.
- Reduced the number of missed appointments due to avoidable causes, such as transport challenges, cost and digital confidence.



Icons made by Freepik from www.flaticon.com