

Case study: seAp

Creating a 'virtual advocacy' app

How a small local charity used funding from TLEF – together with cereal boxes, cake and 'hundreds of sticky notes' – to create an award-winning app which is helping disability claimants across the country.

Around 720,000 people each year apply for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), and another 400,000 will apply for Personal Independence Payments (PIP).

Many of them will find it a daunting, overwhelming process, says Liz Fenton, strategic service development manager at Hastings-based advocacy charity seAp.

'People tell us they feel as if their whole lives depend on that interview. They can get into a terrible state worrying beforehand, because they have heard horror stories in the press about the assessors getting it wrong and people losing all their benefits.'

The work capability assessment which is at the heart of the ESA process has been widely criticised. Some 40 per cent of ESA decisions are appealed; a third of them, successfully. While PIP has not been subject to such intense criticism, research has raised concerns about some decision making.

Inaccurate assessments are a problem for everyone: they lead to high numbers of appeals, which put additional strain on the assessment system; but also, crucially, for claimants, whose health and well being may deteriorate unnecessarily, if they are wrongly denied support.

seAp is an advocacy charity, which supports vulnerable people across the south of England, to ensure that their voices are heard in health and welfare-related decisions that affect them. It receives specific funding to provide support to people going through the medical assessment for disability benefits. In its experience, ESA and PIP applicants often need a particularly high level of guidance to steer them through the process and ensure they secure their rights.

seAp's advocates receive training in welfare benefits and can spend time with PIP and ESA clients, explaining how the application process works. They work with applicants to identify how their daily lives are affected by their disability, and tease out details which, although often difficult and distressing to talk about, are vital if an accurate assessment is to be made.

Pete O'Mant is one such advocate, seeing around 120 clients a year, many of them ESA or PIP applicants. 'I can spend an hour or two chatting over medications, problems, limitations, conditions, where they live, all that kind of stuff. Then I write it up so they've got it on a piece of paper, and I can go to the assessment with that person. This could all take four hours, six hours.'

It is an invaluable service, but one that seAp can only provide to clients with the highest needs, such as communication or mental health difficulties. Yet it was clear to the charity that many more ESA and PIP applicants would benefit from extra support.

Pete says: 'People kept using the same words, "I'm terrified"; or "I didn't sleep last night worrying"; or "I've been sick all morning before my assessment appointment." We also noticed that people were forgetting to mention important things during their assessments. They were getting too wound up before the interview to make notes or write down questions they wanted to ask. We knew we had to do something.'

It was then seAp decided to try to find a way of using digital technology to help ESA and PIP applicants prepare for their assessments, wherever they live, and on a much greater scale. ▶

Objectives

1. Understanding and using law

2. Improving legal training and practice

3. Supporting next generation of lawyers

Funding tools

Overview

Research and learning

Law, policy and regulation

Communications

Information technology

Financial summary

People

Objectives

1. Understanding and using law

2. Improving legal training and practice

3. Supporting next generation of lawyers

Funding tools

Overview

Research and learning

Law, policy and regulation

Communications

Information technology

Financial summary

People

Objective 1 Understanding and using law

The result was c-App, a mobile enabled website providing 'virtual advocacy', which was launched in January 2016, after a year in development.

Liz explains how it works: 'The site starts out with basic questions, but then goes down several layers, so people can really understand what the assessor is looking for. When they say, "can you feed yourself?" People may say, "yes", but does that mean you can only eat takeaways? Does that mean you can only cook beans? Or, are you able to use a cooker or microwave? Are you able to walk across the kitchen holding a plate of food? It goes into a lot more detail, so that people can be really clear about the limitations on their lives.'

After completing the app process, users have the option to print out their assessment, which gives them a record of the key information. 'If there is a specific question they've answered which indicates that they are definitely entitled to the benefit, at the end, the app will flag that up, and say: "You must make sure the assessor knows x, y, and z." ▶

“

When we kept hearing people say they were 'terrified' about their benefits assessment, we realised we had to do something.

Funding for c-App

The award-winning c-App is an example of the way TLEF can work collaboratively, both with grantees and other funders, to provide flexible, responsive, practical and financial support at different stages, as a project evolves.

TLEF first met staff at seAp to discuss the initial idea for a 'virtual advocacy' app in early 2014.

TLEF went on to provide a grant of £61,000 in July 2014 for the development stage of the project.

It also helped seAp with the tender process, including introducing the charity to Neontribe, the web design company which ultimately won the bid after a competitive tendering process (in January 2015) and produced the app.

seAp then obtained a grant of £41,800 from Comic Relief which covered the cost of further development and refinement of the product.

c-App – which is technically a 'mobile responsive website' rather than an app – was launched to the public in February 2016.

TLEF made a further grant of £22,000 in 2017 to cover the cost of marketing and promoting c-App to other referral agencies and potential users, and for the project to be independently evaluated.

In October 2017, c-App won the Charity Times award for best use of technology.

Liz Fenton (left), who led the c-App project, shown here with seAp chief executive officer Marie Casey



Objectives

1. Understanding and using law

2. Improving legal training and practice

3. Supporting next generation of lawyers

Funding tools

Overview

Research and learning

Law, policy and regulation

Communications

Information technology

Financial summary

People

Liz adds that, provided questions are answered correctly, the app's assessment is guaranteed to be accurate. 'It will tell clients the result they should get. If they get a different result after the actual interview, it's a good indication they should go to appeal.'

In its first eight months, c-App had 80,000 users, which enabled seAp to extend its client reach by 1,000 times, and equates to 5 per cent of the total number of people registering for PIP and ESA during that period. Detailed data analysis by seAp shows that 38,000 of those users found the app's information sections useful; 34,000 found being able to practise questions useful.

In October 2017, c-App won the Charity Times award for best use of IT, fending off competition from far bigger charities, like Age UK and the National Trust. 'It was brilliant to see everyone's teamwork recognised,' says Liz, who attended the ceremony to collect the award.

c-App's development involved a core team of 17 individuals from 11 different organisations (including TLEF), plus, crucially, detailed roadtesting by numerous clients.

Kevin Haith is a seAp client with a background in IT, so brought his own expertise when he was asked to roadtest c-App. He says: 'It was actually very helpful. More helpful than I thought. Being a bit of a techie at heart, I am always, "Well, why did they do that?" But I was very happy with it.'

Liz describes the development process – which was quite a departure for seAp – as 'exhilarating'. Nick Hopkins, the independent welfare benefits consultant who was brought in as project manager, confirms it was 'genuinely enjoyable'.

After a tender, Neontribe, a Norwich-based software developer founded 10 years ago, was selected to develop the app.

Neontribe's Harry Harrold says the company has done various 'tech for good' projects previously, but possibly none where the intended users were so vulnerable, or the stakes for them so high. As a general rule, the more vulnerable the client group, the more vital it is to have their input – but also the more care that needs to be taken in achieving this. ▶

Employment and Support Allowance

ESA replaces Incapacity Benefit and provides financial support for people having difficulty finding work because of a long term illness or disability. Applicants go through a work capability assessment, which determines whether they are eligible, and what level of support they qualify for.

Personal Independence Payment

PIP replaces the Disability Living Allowance, and helps with some of the extra costs caused by long term illness or disability. Applicants have to be assessed by a 'health professional' who determines what level of support they are entitled to.

80,000

c-App users in first 8 months

Neontribe's solution was to develop a series of 'personas' and 'scenarios', which enabled clients to feed in their own experiences, without the process becoming too personal. Harry explains: 'When you are speaking to people who have a vulnerability, as a professional, what you don't want to do is intrude into their lives. By creating fictional characters, you can get them to talk about their lived experiences in a way that isn't intrusive or insensitive. So, we made up characters who would represent the people that we are trying to help, and we put those personas in situations – and ideas came out the other end.'

Liz says there was no shortage of client volunteers, which was not just down to the copious amounts of cake Neontribe brought with them. 'The clients enjoyed it. They wanted to be part of it and to help extend something to other people that they've benefited from.'

Another technique Neontribe deployed was a 'cereal box pitch'. For this one, Harry and his colleagues arrived with cardboard boxes, glue, and marker pens, and instructions to everyone to design packaging for the product. What would it say on the box? How would you describe what it does? What are its key features?

It was, says Liz, a highly effective way of getting the team to focus on the essentials. They determined that the app must have the following features: free to the user; for individuals to use on their own behalf, or with the support of an advocate; anonymous, with no data stored anywhere (in case it was being used on a public computer); accurate; easy to use; independent; able to be used on a phone.

Before any coding was done, the designers created a paper version of how the programme would work, which was also roadtested by a dozen seAp clients. Liz says: 'Neontribe had a big piece of paper that's supposed to look like a computer screen, with hundreds of sticky notes, which show where you go to if you press a particular button. It means you can see how it all works.'

Nick says the reason the project worked so well was because everyone respected each other's – and their own – expertise. On any issues to do with clients, everyone deferred to Pete, because of his advocacy experience (and, indeed, the app is intended to replicate his 'tone of voice').

Nick says: 'You must retain control of the content because you will understand the importance of something that the IT guys won't. They need to encode the logic you give them.' But, he adds, it's equally important not to be precious about things that aren't vital. 'Don't hold on to something that's not worth holding on to.' Harry agrees: 'You need to listen to what's being said by the service users and the testers.'

seAp's starting point was that c-App users would be those who couldn't access face-to-face support, and they were surprised to learn that some clients preferred it. 'People who have used it have said in some ways, it's better than face to face advocacy: they could do it in the middle of the night, if that's the only time they felt well enough. They could stop and start whenever they wanted. They didn't have to travel.'

One client with lupus said it made the process less distressing. 'She said she spent all her time trying not to think about her illness and how it impacts on her and her family, so to be forced to sit there and tell someone all the things you can't do is very upsetting. Being able to do it at home and at her own pace, was better for her.'

seAp

seAp – which stands for support, empower, advocate, promote – is an independent charity, based in Hastings, East Sussex, which advocates for vulnerable people to ensure they have a voice in decisions that affect them. Its services are free and confidential. seAp provides advocacy to clients across the south of England, although its face-to-face disability advocacy service is restricted to people living in the Hastings area (for reasons to do with the terms of its funding for this service). With the launch of c-App, however, disability benefit applicants nationwide can benefit from seAp's expertise and support.