How might a Digital Health Hub within The Gathering Place have helped people during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The internet provides a crucial way of accessing health and social care information and services, particularly in rural areas yet there are still many people unable to take advantage of current and emerging digital technologies which can help support our health, mental health and wellbeing. The people most likely to be facing barriers to using the internet are older, poorer and facing other forms of disadvantage. The coronavirus lockdown risks turning the problem of this digital exclusion into a catastrophe of lost social connection, education, and access to goods and services for the poorest and most vulnerable in our communities.

If a digital health hub within 'The Gathering Place' had been up and running for some time prior to the coronavirus lockdown how might it have helped people cope with restrictions?

It may seem like the whole world is online during the pandemic, but many are excluded because they lack the money, the skills or access to people who would help them. We would have been able to identify where that lack existed through community involvement and helped people through digital skills classes and access to Wi-Fi, computers, tablets, smartphones etc. Skills gained would have helped people to:

- Communicate – through video-conferencing platforms like Zoom or Skype for family/social contact
- Handle information and content – vital public health messages; applications for benefits/support
- Make transactions – online banking, shopping and paying bills
- Access educational platforms for themselves or to support other family members
- Problem solve – how to fix technical or other problems with online activities
- Be safe and legal online – data protection, privacy on social media and reporting concerns
- Have fun – through online games, music and video streaming channels and social media
- Mind their health and wellbeing – use of mindfulness apps and health monitoring wearables

If a digital health hub within 'The Gathering Place' had been operational and then designated an essential service during COVID-19 behavioural restrictions how might that have helped people who live in the area?

The Hub could have provided a safe and restorative environment for people to learn digital skills, keep in contact with family, communicate with health providers, complete online applications for housing or other social support as well as assistance with digital self-management health programmes. We could have organised time slots for children and young people who couldn't easily access their online classes from home. Similarly, we could have supported young people and adults to look for training and job opportunities as well as apply for financial help if they faced losing their income. We could also have offered restorative digital experiences using virtual reality to help combat the mental health impacts of lockdown.

It would be fair to suggest that The Gathering Place and all its component parts, including the Digital Health Hub will be needed more than ever, and should be seen as an essential service, because our rural communities undoubtedly face further social, health and economic hardship and upheaval in the coming months and years.