

Digital innovation in social care and social work



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Introduction

In this free course, *Digital innovation in social care and social work*, you will learn about how digital technology has made a difference, both to social care sector and people living in their own communities.

There are many ways in which technology can measure and inform about health and illness, and this course will offer a broader view of how digitalisation can improve the care offered by social services. You will also learn about how incorporating technology in the home and in community settings has a range of benefits to people's wellbeing and ability to maintain independence in their community setting.

New models of care are driven by the need to create cost-effective and sustainable health and social care services, and in this course you will see some examples of how technology can help create a new model of care (essentially, new ways of doing things in health and social care). However, you will also have to keep in mind some of the challenges, risks and drawbacks of more technology-dependent services in social care.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [K102 Introducing health and social care](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- identify the ways in which digital technologies are used in social care services
- evaluate the impact of digital technologies in the home and community on peoples' wellbeing
- evaluate how digital technologies in social care can impact on the cost and sustainability of service provision.

1 Digital technology and social care

Going beyond healthcare, there are many different ways in which digital technology has the power to transform both social care and care in the home environment. Across the UK, there is an increasing focus to keep people in their own homes and able to live independently for as long as possible, which corresponds to growing concerns regarding treating and keeping people (particularly older people) in hospitals when they don't need to be there. In fact, being in a hospital when someone is very old or has signs of frailty can present a risk to their health, so we have a duty to think about the most safe and appropriate places to care for people.

Home care (domiciliary care) can be provided by social care services in a person's home environment. It may include assistance with washing and dressing oneself as well as preparing meals. For example, people with disabilities or people who are recovering from hospital treatment or dealing with illness may require assistance with some of these tasks. Predictions about the future of home care needs show that we can expect major increases in the number of people who need social care services for home care (Wittenberg and Hu, 2015) and that there has been an interest in the way that technology can help cater for the growing needs and future demands for social care and caring in the home environment (Bennett *et al.*, 2018). However, home care has a role in supporting people to regain physical, emotional and social skills and so we might wonder how technology can support people in this – this is an important question to keep asking ourselves as we increasingly adopt technology in the home care environment.



In the following activity, you will read a news article on how technology can change and improve social care.

Activity 1 Weighing up the news

The news article, '[Can technology fix the social care crisis?](#)', reports on why technology is being introduced to transform social care. Read the article and make

notes in the text box below about the key pros and cons of transforming social care with technology.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Here are some pros and cons you may have considered, along with a summary of what you have learned by doing this activity.

Pros

- Technology in social care may save money and the social care sector is under financial strain.
- The NHS Digital programme has money attached to it and so presents an opportunity to use some of these resources for the social care sector.
- Technology may make communication between individuals more streamlined.
- There may be improved record keeping or record management.
- Technology may allow individuals to receive home-based care.

Cons

- The article suggests that the care sector is behind the times when it comes to incorporating technology so far.

As you can see from the notes you made for your pros and cons list, the article suggests that there are a lot of benefits to incorporating technology in social care but is very scant on the challenges and risks of doing so. This article presents a somewhat simplistic and biased view of technology enhanced care and shows that by looking at the key messages described in the news, we can gain a better understanding of how in-depth and balanced the news article is. It is important to note that even though this article is presented as news, the writers may be supportive of a particular view and may be pushing an agenda in their article. You may have been surprised by how these developments are being presented as an opportunity for money-making and business as this might conflict with our traditional notions of the importance of quality and personal care that is offered for free at the point of use. This is an interesting tension in incorporating technology and digital services in health and social care. Hopefully, this activity will encourage you to see how you can identify bias and think critically when reading the news.

There are many opportunities that come with incorporating technology with care, but you may be able to think of problems as well. With that in mind, it is important to be able to weigh up the benefits and risks to ensure that any decisions regarding the use of technology in care do not go on to discriminate or present poor or inequitable care for people based on their access to and understanding of technology.

2 Digital and technology strategies in the UK

All the UK nations – Northern Ireland, Wales, England and Scotland – have put in place their own strategies and priorities for involving technology in their health and social care. This is because each UK nation has the opportunity to govern its own health and social care sector, which means that there will be different focuses and different approaches to how technology becomes part of care. For example, Northern Ireland and Scotland have had a more established relationship between ‘health’ and ‘social’ care (an integrated approach) and so they can make decisions that affect health and social care altogether. England and Wales have traditionally had more separation between ‘healthcare’ and ‘social care’ and both governments are prioritising the need to create ‘joined up’ integrated care.

All three devolved governments in the UK (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) have been able to set their own strategy for how they will include technology in care, which will be explored now.

In the 2018 report,

[*Scotland's Digital Health and Care Strategy: enabling, connecting and empowering*](#)

(Scottish Government, 2018), the focus of digital innovation is often linked to empowering people to self-manage and live more independently. The report also describes the need for designing digital services using co-design methods with service users. This means that changes need to be made in collaboration with the people who are the recipients of services so the changes are made with the person at the centre of care. The report also describes how digital technology should be used as a way to ensure that social care systems are linked with health care systems appropriately to make sure that health and social care in Scotland is fit for the future.

In Northern Ireland, the [eHealth and Social Care strategy](#) (Health and Social Care Board, 2016) identified their priorities for how digital technology would benefit their care sector. Among these were the ability for the wide range of community and independent health and social care providers (including nursing homes) all being able to securely and consistently access the relevant service user data to ensure good care. There is also an intention to put individuals' historical records in digital format so that care professionals can have detailed past history across all of the health and social care sector in Northern Ireland. The eHealth strategy also explains that technology will be able to help provide information which can be analysed to improve productivity and avoid waste of resources and effort.



These two examples show how each government can direct its focus on how it wants to use technology to change social care and how each nation can adopt a suitable approach for their particular population and their needs. These are both examples of digital strategies from the nations' departments of health and social care about how they want technology to improve things. But how digital technology will actually go on to change and transform social care is unpredictable and we all may have our expectations about what will happen and what may or may not work in practice.

Activity 2 What strategy means to you

Thinking about these different strategies that are relevant to where you live, have you noticed any changes in your health and social care (whether you have been a patient, carer/family member, or a professional)? Do you think technology and digital changes like instant sharing of data and information has made care easier or made things more confusing and complicated? Comment on any differences you think you have noticed in relation to digital health and social care changes in the box below.

Provide your answer...

3 Smart tech and home care



Two key ways in which technology and digital advances are changing social care is through assistive technology and monitoring in homes. Assistive technology refers to products and tools that help people conduct tasks at home in order to remain independent or continue living in their own home. Over recent decades, we have seen how assistive technology has increased individual independence, e.g. using a wheelchair or having a lift installed in the home. However, digital advances and the internet now allow for smart assistive technology. For example, a smart (electronic) pill box can offer reminders when it's time to take medication, but also can track the medication and offer warnings to family or relatives if a dose is missed. A smart pill box can alert a user if they are leaving the house without taking their medication with them or if they are taking a double dose that day by mistake. This smart assistive technology can, therefore, enhance the safety of someone living at home independently as well as informing the care services or relatives about the user.



This example of a smart pill box has a monitoring function as well as assisting the user in doing their daily tasks (remembering and taking the correct amount of medication). Monitoring is also a key way that assistive technology can help with monitoring an individual while they are living at home. By connecting this technology to the internet, we now have 'smart' devices that enable individuals living at home to be monitored, both by care professionals and by relatives who are based elsewhere, e.g. a smart floor pressure mat to identify if someone has had a fall, or a bed pressure mat to determine if someone has been in the same position for long periods of time and may be at risk. [Belong Village](#), a housing scheme in Cheshire designed to support people with dementia, uses smart bed pressure systems to help identify if an individual has been out of their bed for a long time (which might indicate that they have had a fall) (belong.org.uk, 2019). Other types of sensors that can be used to monitor people at risk include ones that can be worn, such as wrist sensors designed to monitor for acute events such as seizures in people with epilepsy. Therefore, smart monitoring tools increase the length of time an individual can remain independent and/or live at home, while also keeping safe from a social care or family member's perspective.

In the next section, you will look at an example from Wales about how technology is transforming social care.

4 Technology-enhanced care in Wales

The Welsh Government outlined an intention to use technology to enhance care in Wales in 2015 in its report, 'Informed Health and Care: A digital health and social care strategy for Wales'. Figure 1 shows the ways in which digital technology is expected to transform care.

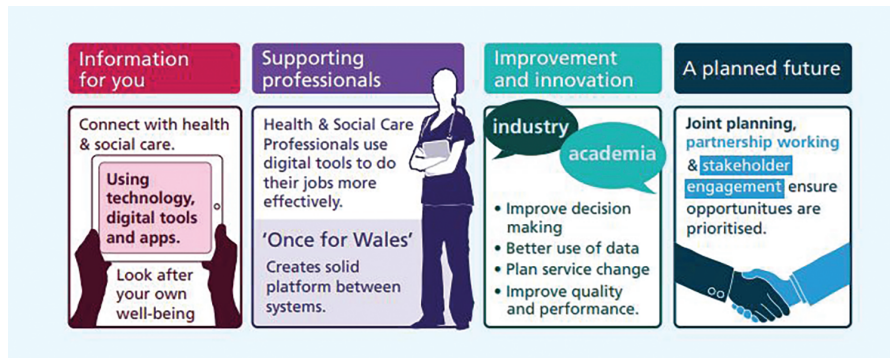


Figure 1 Infographic

Some of the unique challenges for Wales include incorporating the use of the Welsh language in any IT or digital technologies and ensuring the languages are treated with equal parity. This means that if a particular service or app was to be offered to service users, there would have to be some consideration that some Welsh people can only or would prefer to receive this in Welsh (Welsh Government, 2015). Overall, in Wales there is the expectation that technology will enhance care by allowing service users to:

- see their own data and information to make better decisions about their care
- add information to their data and records (such as linking to their apps and wearable devices)
- access and use digital apps and wearable devices
- use the internet to connect to social care services and communicate with professionals via video conferencing, email and text
- use digitally-enabled services to support them to be able to live independently as long as possible.

For example, Powys, a region in Wales which is one of six locations in Europe that is taking part in a project on technology-enhanced care for older people who have chronic conditions. One hundred people in Powys are included in the project, CareWell. As part of the project, participants' electronic data and records will be shared between community workers equipped with mobile devices and there will also be a shared record between GPs and hospital doctors. This project is about supporting the service user to remain safely and independently in their own home through all the health and social care professionals who are supporting the service user to all work from and input into the same electronic 'patient record' so that care is joined up. As part of the project, the community worker will also be able to communicate using the mobile device with the service user's informal caregiver using text and picture messaging (Welsh Government, 2015; CareWell, n.d.). The CareWell project is a way to determine how and whether technology-enhanced care actually does work in practice and how it works.

In the next activity, you will learn about some of the practical issues around incorporating technology into care in Wales.

Activity 3 Changing practice through technology in Wales

Watch the following video, concentrating particularly on the section from 2 minutes 39 seconds onwards, about incorporating technology into social care. The speakers include a social care professional from Wales, England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. They are all discussing both the opportunities and the challenges that this strategy will present for social care in incorporating assistive technologies in relation to their social care workforce in their own national setting. As you watch the video, make a list of all the advantages/opportunities that the speakers mention in the video in the left-hand column below, and all the disadvantages/challenges that are mentioned in the right-hand column below.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 1](#)



Technology to Care

Advantages and opportunities for technology-enhanced care

Provide your answer...

Provide your answer...

Provide your answer...

Provide your answer...

Disadvantages and challenges for technology-enhanced care

Provide your answer...

Provide your answer...

Provide your answer...

Provide your answer...

Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...

Discussion

Here is an example completed table:

Advantages and opportunities for technology-enhanced care	Disadvantages and challenges for technology-enhanced care
People want to see the strategy succeed	Trying to meet needs with less resources
Relying less on paper and paperwork	Some people don't have good access to technologies
Support staff can scaffold learning of service users to use internet and technology themselves (as they see it in action)	Need to build in digital skills or literacy into how social care employers recruit, induct and train
The staff themselves will learn and gain confidence using technology	Some managers/employers feel that they need more qualification or training in technologies themselves in order to manage their teams
People using the equipment gain digital confidence – staff and service users	There might not be many relevant training and qualifications to support technology in care in the early stages of adoption
Can reduce social isolation	
Relieves pressures on carers	
Reduces lack of access to technology	
Particularly useful for people who live in remote or rural areas	
Can be used to improve quality of life and independence for people, enabling them to stay at home for longer	
It's exciting and innovative to include technology	

5 Supporting young people

Young people are common users of apps and digital technologies for information and entertainment (Beckman, Bennett and Lockyer, 2014). Research indicates that young people value accessibility and immediacy of information as well as the options to have personalised information which may be provided in digital technologies and apps (Gardner and Davis, 2014).



There is a unique power and potential to how digital technology can influence or support young people assuming they have access to it and it is centred around their needs, which is summed up in this quote from a youth adviser working for RERights, a project championing young people's rights in the digital age:

Life is a blind lottery. You cannot choose the circumstances of your birth: your gender, your ethnicity, your parents' wealth, or your disability. Yet technology has the immense potential to even the playing field. Technology can transform the way children learn, connect and discover opportunities for their wellbeing and development. In a world of growing inequalities and uncertainties, technology can be a source of empowerment, enabling children to become the authors of their futures and to rise above the cycle of disadvantage.

(Third *et al.*, 2017, p. 3)

In the activity below, you will learn about Aye Mind, a project in Scotland designed to use the internet, social media and mobile technologies to support young peoples' mental health.

Activity 4 The minds of young people in Scotland

Part 1

For the first part of this activity, watch the video and read the information page about this intervention using the link below. Make some notes as you watch on the following:

- describing what this intervention is
- how it could change service users' experience of their social care.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 2](#)



Information page about intervention: [Mind Of My Own](#)

Provide your answer...

Part 2

Now watch this video of Callie, who is describing how she experienced care as a result of the intervention. As you watch, check back on your notes to see if they reflect any of the thoughts you had about how the intervention might change service users' experience of care, and also whether it raises any additional points for you to think about.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 3](#)



Provide your answer...

Discussion

Describing the intervention: This intervention is about getting young people with mental health support needs to be able to feel comfortable communicating with care professionals who are assisting them. It also allows young people to document and self-monitor or track their own thoughts and feelings. This intervention comes in the shape of a series of apps called Mind of My Own. One app can be used during one-to-one conversations between the professional and the young person which makes it easier to describe feelings such as through the use of emojis. The app then sends a PDF of what the young person said. A young person can also use the app to structure and understand their thoughts, and they can choose to send it to others if they wish.

Changing care experiences: The app might help young people feel more in control of what they say to social care professionals, as they can make notes and then choose (or not choose) to send this information to social workers. The young people might find it easier to describe their emotions using the emojis as this is a common thing that we often do in text messaging and social media and so this may be a more socially acceptable way to share their feelings.

Reflecting on the video of Callie: This may have been in keeping with some of the thoughts you'd already had, but it was clearer to see how the app can be used to determine or direct the care needed. For example, Callie used this method of communication to say that she was unhappy in a foster care placement and this resulted in her changing placements which she found helpful. You might not have considered how the app could take away the awkwardness of face-to-face encounters with social workers for young people, which Callie describes in her video. Interestingly, Callie thinks the app may not be for every young person, but that every young person should be told about it so they have the option, and it could save lives. Callie also mentioned how her information would come up as a message on the dashboard for her social worker, which might have made you wonder about the effect on the professional. For social workers, they may feel a sense of reduced burden knowing that their young service users have an easily accessible way to reach them. However,

they could also feel stressed and worried about being available to be contacted on the app all day, every day.

You may have made other notes and this app offers a lot of room for thought about how technology can be used to change social care experiences for young people.

You have learned about some of the powerful ways that technology can change or enhance social care in helpful ways. However, there are still a number of barriers to these changes and these may come from individuals not wanting to adopt technology or not having access to technology, along with their concerns about digital and technological interventions and tools.

In the next section, you will learn more about the barriers to some of these technological changes to social care.

6 Barriers to transforming care

Transforming social care services will be met with barriers. For example, there will be needs, preferences and concerns from the service user groups that need to be considered. There will also be challenges and concerns for the social care professional workforce in expecting or asking them to work in different ways due to the introduction of new technology. There may also be technological barriers in that the digital products or technology may not actually work as they are supposed to. Importantly, changing social care through technology will most likely raise ethical questions that we need to consider. Some of the barriers to service users adopting technology include not feeling competent or well-trained enough to get to grips with the technology, feeling that some types of technology undermine one's reliance on themselves or ability to cope, and some have had fears that technology and digital services will result in depersonalisation of the care (Sanders *et al.*, 2012). For some people, how easy, useful and effortful and anxiety-provoking it is to use the technology may be key barriers to adopting technology in their care (Cimperman *et al.*, 2013). More recently, research reports that fears about safety and security and having privacy concerns can be an important barrier to service users adopting technology in their care (Vassli and Farshchian, 2018). This raises some ethical issues about who has access to data from the care technology, and whether it is appropriate to, for example, monitor people all the time in their homes (Clark and McGee-Lennon, 2011).

Sometimes, the decision to use new technology may be a collaboration between the service user and their family or carers and so the perspectives of the carers are also important. Cook *et al.* (2018) studied family caregivers and their decision to use assistive telecare for older people (for example, smart assistive technologies that may be connected to health and social care services to update them on user information and vital signs, etc.). In their study, they found that the family carer often felt the responsibility to make the decision about the technology as the service user was not always aware or sometimes did not understand what the technology was and what it did. Usability and functionality of the technology was a key issue so if the technology was problematic, difficult, inconvenient or time-consuming to use, this might be a barrier and the technology might not be used. This study reinforces that it is not enough to simply offer technology to ensure better care, but the technology needs to improve services and/or outcomes.



Not all people have access to technology such as mobile devices and smartphones and computers. Some people cannot or have not ever used the internet and we may refer to those as 'digitally excluded'. In the activity below, you will have the opportunity to consider how being digitally excluded feels for carers in the UK.

Activity 5 Digitally excluded carers

Part 1

First, read pages 21–22, entitled 'Digital exclusion is a key issue amongst carers', in the Tinder Foundation's report,

[The Health and Wellbeing of Unpaid Carers: Where Can Digital Skills and Community Support Add Value?](#) The relevant section describes the issue of digital exclusion relating to carers.

Part 2

In this course you have learned about all the ways that digital technologies can transform social care services. This report highlights some of the barriers that exist in being able to reach some people as well as how it is important not to assume that everyone is as able and willing to use technology in their care.

As you read the findings on pages 21–22, make a list of all the barriers that the findings raise to including and involving digital carers. Write as many points as you can think of in the text boxes below.

No. Barriers:

1.

2. *Provide your answer...*

3. *Provide your answer...*

4. *Provide your answer...*

5. *Provide your answer...*

6. *Provide your answer...*

7. *Provide your answer...*

8. *Provide your answer...*

9. *Provide your answer...*

10. *Provide your answer...*

11. *Provide your answer...*

12. *Provide your answer...*

13. *Provide your answer...*

Discussion

No. Barriers:

1. Lacking basic digital skills
2. Never having been on the internet
3. Not having much access to the internet other than at home
4. Affordability concerns regarding the internet
5. Not having good internet connectivity
6. Being restricted to the home, for caring duties
7. Needing help learning to use technology or the internet
8. Lacking confidence in their own ability
9. Not knowing where to get help and support for increasing digital confidence
10. Worrying about internet safety and anonymity such as for dependents
11. Feeling that the internet is impersonal

12. Finding no benefits to being online
13. Social factors, such as being older, having disability and being in a lower socio-economic group contribute to increased digital exclusion

Conclusion

In this free course, *Digital innovation in social care and social work*, you have learned about how technology and digital tools, such as apps and smart assistive technology in the home, is changing social care. You have examined some of the promises and pitfalls of technology; for example, thinking through who is using the technology to transform their care experience and how and whether it works for them. There are lots of challenges of incorporating technology including the anxiety around using new products as well as the fact that many people are digitally excluded to the extent that millions of people have never been online. These are important lessons to bear in mind when designing a digital strategy for an entire nation.

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