Can online innovations enhance social care?

Exploring the challenges of using digital technology to develop new models of support for older people
The ageing population brings with it a rise in the concentration of assets that older people bring to a community: wisdom, experience, perspective and a wide range of skill sets and capacities. At Nominet Trust we are looking to understand where digital technology can best amplify these capabilities to strengthen communities and to enable meaningful participation in them by older people. Equally though, the ageing population brings a requirement to rethink our approach to social care as more of us require care; support in caring or become active as carers. This paper explores this theme highlighting a number of exciting new approaches to care, as well as some of the challenges we need to address if we’re to ensure our approach to social care is fit for purpose. As always, I’d be delighted to hear your response to this paper and to work with you to address the recommendations and challenges it sets out.

Dan Sutch
Head of Development Research
Nominet Trust – January 2013
Can online innovations enhance social care?

About the author

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Shirley supports organisations in optimising their digital presence by exploring, developing and evaluating their communication strategies. She is the author of 'The Future for Personalisation? service users, carers and digital engagement' (Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services) and the 'Click Guide to Digital Technology in Care'.

Shirley co-presents and produces the Disruptive Social Care podcast a weekly audio discussion programme promoting innovation in the care sector.

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Can online innovations enhance social care?

**Using the digital revolution to drive social change**

There is no doubt that the digital revolution has transformed our daily lives. The emergence and general acceptance of online and digital technologies in our workplaces and homes is a development that has brought positive benefits to millions of people – all in the space of just a few years. Isn’t it time to look at how that progress can be channelled into improving quality of life too?

Access to the internet and digital technology innovations are fundamentally changing the way people connect, and how they engage with and access information and support. So why has the care sector yet to take advantage of the power and potential of digital technology and social networks to develop new models of support for older people?

Surely these tools could be used to enhance social care right across Digital Britain. After all, in tough economic conditions, digital technologies offer a cost-effective way to reach out and support people in more imaginative and radical ways.

**The value of digital technology in a care context**

The pace of demographic change (with people living longer) and major budgetary constraints creates an ideal environment for considering and implementing new approaches to care and support for older people.

The effective use of digital technologies – based around the internet, computers, mobile phones, social networks, telecare and telehealth – will be critical in enabling people to live more independent and fulfilling lives, irrespective of their health and care needs. This will be especially true when there is an increasing demand for care services: the number of people aged over 80 is predicted to double by 2020, the number of adults with learning disabilities is forecast to rise by a third by 2030, and the number of family carers is expected to grow by 50% to nine million in the next 25 years.

At some point in our lives, we are all likely to have some degree of care need. Given the aforementioned statistics, it is highly probable that we will have carer commitments too. Whichever perspective it is viewed from, there is plenty of value that digital technology can add to lives in a care context. Foremost of these is the ability to stay connected – with friends and family, and with issues in the wider world around us.

**Making lives a little easier and more enjoyable**

Social exclusion, loneliness, managing health and disabilities, and unemployment are big issues for society generally. The problems for older people can be exacerbated by ill health, significant life changes such as retirement and transitions – which may require moving to supported living – and the death of partners and close friends. Retaining a sense of worth and value, keeping connected to family and friends, and continuing to contribute to society are important considerations in addressing social inclusion.
Can online innovations enhance social care?

Digital technology can help to enable older people to continue working, engage with family and friends, and contribute to their communities through volunteering time, resources and support for others. It isn’t an instant fix for issues around social exclusion or loneliness. But it can make lives a little easier and more enjoyable.

The true value of digital technology really lies in solving a problem, or otherwise helping to improve the quality of our lives. One of the simplest needs among older people, for example, is the ability to stay in touch with family and friends. In this instance, digital technology opens up options and enables that valuable contact to be much more immediate. Introducing people to the concept of emails, picture sharing, social networking, and online video calls, such as Skype can realise many benefits. This is especially important when families are widely dispersed and require a simple and easy way of keeping in touch and staying connected – whether they are living at home, in residential care, are in hospital or in different parts of the world.

Mindings enables people to share captioned pictures, text messages, calendar reminders and social media content, with a digital screen that receiver doesn’t even need to touch. It has been described as ‘Facebook for the technology-shy’. The ‘GotIt!’ feature enables the sender to be told when content is viewed, letting them know the receiver is alive, well and interacting with the world - telecare, with social relationships at its heart. A positive clinical trial was undertaken at a London hospital, and with the service now live, users are already reporting that it is improving wellbeing and independent living.

www.mindings.com

AN ABILITY TO EXPLORE NEW THINGS AND CONNECT IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Digital technology cannot, of course, replace human contact, kindness, empathy and understanding. But it does allow people to connect in different ways, quickly and easily.

A major concern about the widespread adoption of technology is fear that it makes everyone, particularly older people, more isolated because they will have less face-to-face contact. It should be noted though that digital technology and social networks provide some of the most powerful tools available today for building a sense of belonging, support and sharing among groups of people who share similar interests and concerns.

Older people, their families and carers need to have the value of digital technology demonstrated to them in concrete terms; they need to see benefits that have direct relevance to improving the quality of their lives.
Can online innovations enhance social care?

There is understandably also wariness of the unknown among new technology users. But we are all capable of learning new things – given a little time, patience and motivation. Older people, their families and carers need to have the value of digital technology demonstrated to them in concrete terms; they need to see benefits that have direct relevance to improving the quality of their lives. Digital champions, who are able to work with and support older people to access new technology, have an important role to play in this regard. And once those initial steps have been taken, advisors who are confident about using technology are vital to help older people navigate the complicated care and support systems they find themselves within.

Information and advice service Independent Age is developing a scheme called Learn to Help, which will provide older people with one-to-one support in learning about technology while also enabling older people to provide peer support and networking.

Read the report Older people, technology and community: the potential of technology to help older people renew or develop social contacts and to actively engage in their communities (2012) www.independentage.org/publications/research-reports

The MiCommunity project piloted in London used intergenerational volunteering to build a stronger sense of community and connectedness between young volunteers and older people, bridging differences in age, ethnicity and culture and challenging negative stereotypes. The evaluation reported that the project has the potential to create significant and lasting change in communities through improving community cohesion, reducing social isolation in older people and improving their ability to remain independent for longer, improving younger people’s employment prospects and reducing poverty in both generations. http://ageuk.org.uk/london/our-services/micomunity-project

INHERENT DIFFICULTIES IN DEFINING THE DEMOGRAPHICS

One of the key challenges in exploring the potential of using digital technology to develop new models of support for older people is that these individuals’ needs and experiences are so wide-ranging.

Older people are not a homogenous group and are as varied as individuals in any other sector of the population. Using the term ‘older people’ does, therefore, present a challenge because there is no widely accepted definition of when a person fits into this category. Age UK, for example, provides services for people over 50; some state benefits become available at age 60; and the increase in the retirement age suggests that some people will be working until their late 60s.
Can online innovations enhance social care?


“There is a great difference between a 65-year-old who is still in work and actively engaged in learning about technological developments and a person over 80 who has never used a computer in their life and may regard themselves as too old to start now.”

More than nine million people in England and Wales are now aged over 65 – a figure that will increase by more than two million in the next few years as the post-war ‘baby boomer’ generation retires. This is a significant number of people, which includes older people in good health and poor health; those who are physically or socially isolated as well as those living with or supported by families; those who are digitally connected and those who are digitally excluded.

“Older people are individuals with life experience and aspirations, who do not want to be defined by their illness, condition or needs. Yet all too often, society considers them in this way.

Politicians and the media must take responsibility for demonising older people with constant references to the ‘ageing population’ being a problem, rather than a valuable resource within the community. Emotive terms such as ‘bedblockers’ and ‘a demographic timebomb’ reinforce the stereotype of older people as being a burden, consuming expensive resources, rather than as an asset to society. Encouraging the public to look beyond these negative stereotypes and take a more balanced view is essential.

Adopting a different perspective is key for service providers too. The difficulty with many traditional care-based models of support is that they assume that older people will be passive recipients of care, rather than exploring how services can help people maintain their independence, resilience, capacity and confidence.

Technology provides many different ways of connecting people and resources. This should enable the design and delivery of appropriate care services that help to celebrate and value the life experience and wisdom offered by the older people they are supporting.
It should not be forgotten that many older people are still actively contributing to the economy, paying taxes and employing people for their support needs. In the period January-March 2012, there were 0.9 million people aged over 65 in employment. With the extension of the pension age, more older people will be working longer and we need to consider how we can help older people to develop the new skills required in today’s knowledge economy.

**RE-DESIGNING SOCIAL CARE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

We need a dramatic re-think in the way that care and support is organised for older people in the UK. This should focus on keeping people healthy and independent for as long as possible, and preventing crises before they occur.

Unfortunately, ‘care’ is a rather generic term, which covers a multitude of support services. Traditional care services provide help for people who need assistance after an illness, a spell in hospital or an unexpected event, such as an accident or fall. But the wide-ranging life experiences and needs of today’s older people mean that providing this reactive support is no longer enough – we need to be proactive too.

Older people want to have choices and control about how and where to live, and access to a much wider range of care and support services. So social care now needs to encompass all of the services that contribute to an individual feeling safe, secure and supported in their local community. Collaboration and partnerships are essential to achieving this and should include: social care; health; housing; education; services for children, young people and families; employment; transport; police; leisure and community activities.

**CARE SERVICES COMPLICATED BY COMPLEX FUNDING ISSUES**

Understanding how social care is currently provided, however, is complex. This is because, unlike the NHS, it is not free at the point of need and there are complicated funding streams.

For most people receiving care, the difference is subjective. But the reality is that preventative services are not well funded at a time when we need to invest in services that support independence and resilience. While there are significant gains to be had from helping older people to stay out of hospital and be supported in the community, the funding streams do not reflect this.

Local authorities are having to reduce the funding they provide for prevention, housing related support or voluntary sector services in order to sustain the funding for statutory responsibilities. This limits both choice and control for older people in deciding which services will best meet their needs. It is not clear that the limited funding that is currently available is being focused in the right places.

**DEVELOPING SUPPORT SERVICES TO MEET SHARED NEEDS**

The future development of support services for older people will depend on our capacity to innovate and adapt to the
Can online innovations enhance social care?

Rapid changes in the needs, wellbeing and longevity of this population group.

Social media has made an impact on the way many of us communicate, collaborate and share knowledge and information – whether that is with friends and family, colleagues or complete strangers. Online engagement is a powerful way to draw connections between people that may have never met, but who share many of the same life experiences and interests.

Feeling connected and having supportive social relationships has a strong link to health and longevity. Isolation, loneliness, physical and mental health challenges are important social challenges facing society as a whole. And for older people in particular, isolation is a major factor impacting on their wellbeing and life expectancy.

Isolation and loneliness are not necessarily the effect of the ageing process, but life events associated with older age – such as retirement, declining health and bereavement – do put people at greater risk. Fear of being alone is a major source of anxiety as people age. Some older people go for days without seeing another person; many die alone. It has been reported that 16% of older people in deprived inner city areas suffer severe loneliness.

So the question is: how can we develop support services to meet and satisfy these shared needs? And following on from that: can digital technology be used to deliver those services in an engaging and effective way?

Understanding the importance of social innovation

Social innovation is an important driver in creating and developing new ideas – whether for products, services or models – that meet previously neglected social needs and/or create new social relationships or forms of collaboration. Understanding this will be an essential element of successful service delivery throughout the care sector.

In the course of its work, Nominet Trust focuses on four key elements of innovation: “the application of new ideas, generated at the intersection of insight and invention that leads to social or economic value.”

The application of new ideas is of particular interest in this instance because social innovation using digital technology is not yet embedded into considerations about new models of care and support. Instead, and as a result, there is a real disconnect between how services are being developed by innovators and their adoption by commissioners, frontline practitioners and potential customers.
Can online innovations enhance social care?

But digital technology can be – and is being – used to bring people and communities closer together, and to connect family, friends and neighbours providing formal and informal care for an individual. Social networks can be widened and enhanced by web-based tools and technology, and the growth of online personal support networks strengthens the informal networks that already exist within communities.

The key to more joined-up and successful service provision and use is the ability to design and deliver appropriate support around the individual needs of the person requiring the care. Digital technology can help achieve this, but it also requires the involvement of the people who are ‘on the ground’ and facing that challenge every day.

The Scottish Government, through the Christie Commission, recognise this particular challenge within Scotland:

“Unless Scotland embraces a radical, new, collaborative culture throughout our public services, both budgets and provision will buckle under the strain. Scotland’s public services need to be designed with the person receiving them at the centre. The approach must be bottom-up, identifying what individuals and communities actually need and, from there, working out the services that will best fit those needs. Top-down delivery of uniform, one-size-fits-all services is not efficient, effective – or sustainable. And that means getting individuals and communities involved in the design of those services.”

Christie Commission report (Scottish Government 2011)

The **Tyze Personal Network** allows connected individuals to share and communicate using messages, events, tasks, stories and photos. It is a secure, online personal network that bridges informal and formal systems of care.

www.tyze.com

**Grouple** is a secure, private online social network that helps people to share the responsibilities of caring for someone with dementia.

www.grouple.cc

**HELPING TO ALLEVIATE ISSUES AROUND ISOLATION**

The lessons identified in the Serious Case Review of the abuse of people with learning difficulties at the Winterbourne View residential care home near Bristol are a stark reminder of what can happen when people are isolated and ‘out of sight, out of mind’.

However, it is also important to remember that older people live in a variety of environments, which could include their own
Can online innovations enhance social care?

The sense of isolation can affect anyone, anywhere. Research by the Campaign to End Loneliness www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk/information-on-loneliness/loneliness-research/ highlights the problems of isolation and loneliness for older people and the implications for society. There is widespread agreement among experts that loneliness is a serious health issue, because it makes it more likely that older people will develop illnesses that reach crisis level and require hospital care.

In the UK today, over half of all people aged 75 and over live alone. And although living alone doesn’t equate to loneliness, half of all older people (about five million) say the television is their main company. This is a particular issue for men aged over 75 who live alone. WRVS research www.wrvs.org.uk/news-and-events/news/loneliness-rife-among-older-men identified that 36% of older men typically spend more than 12 hours of the day on their own.

Digital technology can help people to feel less disconnected. Recent studies have shown that older people who regularly use the internet are less likely to suffer from depression.

The research, conducted at the University of Alabama http://psychcentral.com/news/2012/07/16/internet-surfers-over-50-less-depressed/41713.html in the United States, found that regular internet usage among retired Americans aged 50 and older reduced depression by 20-28% and also helped promote wellbeing among this group.

There are also a number of pioneering local and UK-wide projects that use digital technology to bring people together – online and in person too – to help ease the sense of isolation felt by many later in life.

**The After Work Club** is a social network for men who don’t want to be ‘retired’. It aims to inspire, connect and empower them to do something amazing with this time in their lives. http://theafterworkclub.co.uk

**DropBy** is an interactive website targeted at the over-60s and their families. It is designed to help keep older people ‘in touch’ by providing a secure place for people aged over 60 to meet, both online and in real life. Members of DropBy include people living alone and in residential care. www.dropby.co.uk

**Casserole Club**, currently being piloted in Surrey, provides a way for local communities to tackle social isolation through a food-sharing initiative. It connects people, who are prepared to cook an extra meal, with neighbours who would appreciate a home-cooked meal. www.casseroleclub.com
Can online innovations enhance social care?

Supporting those who support others

Digital technology can be used in similar ways to bring clear benefits to family and friends too – because it’s not just those who need care who sometimes feel isolated.

Carers face many challenges in their daily lives and the need to stay close to the person being cared for can lead to increased isolation. As a result, use of the internet is an integral part of the lives of many carers around the UK.

More than 70% of carers who have online access use the internet to search for information related to caring. Most are looking for particulars relating to a specific interest, disability or condition, with a search engine often their first port of call.

A very significant 42% of carers say that access to the internet helps to reduce their feelings of isolation. The 2012 report *How can the web support carers?*, published by the Carers Trust, states that around 6% of internet-using carers are making care arrangements online, and 4% have used a website to book a caring break.

In response to the need for support for those who support others, voluntarily or otherwise, an increasing number of online social networks have been developed specifically for carers.

**Chill4usCarers** actively uses social media to raise awareness and support for carers. The Carer Forum provides information, news and views, and the online chat room is open 24 hours a day. The site also organises Computers4carers, which provides free computers for carers. [http://chill4us.com](http://chill4us.com)

**Breakaway for Carers** is being piloted by Hertfordshire Council and Hounslow Council. The service recruits volunteer sitters to offer companionship to an older or disabled person. The web-based platform provides an infrastructure that enables local authorities and the voluntary sector to increase the number of active volunteers. [www.hertsdirect.org/services/advben/carersupport/supportadcarers/carerbreaks/breakaway](http://www.hertsdirect.org/services/advben/carersupport/supportadcarers/carerbreaks/breakaway)

**Digital engagement to drive enhanced social care**

Access to the internet and the use of other digital technology has a clear role to play in reducing feelings of isolation and providing valuable support to both people requiring care and their carers. However, more needs to be done to ensure greater all-round availability of this level of interaction, and further study is required into how digital engagement can drive enhanced social care across the UK.

The recent Government White Paper *Caring for our Future* [www.dh.gov.uk/health/2012/07/careandsupportwhitepaper](http://www.dh.gov.uk/health/2012/07/careandsupportwhitepaper) emphasises the need for greater national consistency in access to care services, a focus on wellbeing and independence where possible, better information for informed choice and service-user
Can online innovations enhance social care?

The White Paper recommends that councils build (or use existing) ‘skills, resources and networks’ in communities to support their care users, but also to enable them to contribute to their communities ‘where they can and wish to’. Local authorities ‘will be expected to take a leadership role’, which includes supporting the informal and community networks that help people to stay independent.

Informal and community assets have an important role to play in this regard, and require a strategic approach to connecting the services that ensure that older people are supported, valued and safe within their community.

Digital technology can support the development of asset-based approaches within communities by enabling people to give small amounts of time in their neighbourhood when they can, for example, rather than being required to commit to more formal volunteer programmes.

**Spots of Time** makes it easier for people to put their spare ‘spots of time’ to good use in their communities. They create fun, bite-size activities for people to do, and work with voluntary and community groups to support them to offer these activities.

[http://spotsoftime.org.uk](http://spotsoftime.org.uk)

**Haringey Neighbourhoods Connect** aims to improve the quality of life of older people and reduce the cost of care to public service organisations by supporting older people to live independently in their communities, with lowered reliance on public services. The project uses a blend of social media, online tools and real world interactions to stimulate informal support of older people through active neighbouring. The project is designed to encourage older people to contribute their skills and experience to their community as well as receiving support.

[www.haringey.gov.uk/nc](http://www.haringey.gov.uk/nc)

**NEED FOR BETTER EXPLANATION AND UNDERSTANDING**

As well as greater consistency in the delivery of essential support services that can be driven by digital technology, there is also a need for better explanation and understanding of what both technology enabled social care actually means in practice.

Access to good information and advice is imperative in supporting carers to get the best from their own lives and to assist them in getting the right help to maintain their caring role. The 1.3 million registered visits to the Carers Direct website in
Can online innovations enhance social care?

2011 confirm the important role of digital technology in addressing this need for information and advice.

Carers Direct provides an online information point for carers, as part of the NHS Choices initiative. The Department of Health’s 2012 Review of Carers Direct Information and Advice usefully summarises the key problems that need to be addressed with regard to social care.

In summary, it reports that people:

− do not know, or have a clear idea of, what social care is;
− do not know how or where to access the information that would help them plan and prepare at key points in their lives, or support them to make appropriate choices if they are in receipt of care or expect to need care in the near future;
− Need access to a comprehensive range of help in terms of navigating through the choice of services available and supporting them to get the right ‘personalised’ care.

In addressing these concerns, we need to challenge the assumption that older people will not be able to cope with digital technology and social networks. To some, the concepts will always be unfamiliar. But others will embrace the idea of exploring and acquiring new skills – given time, patience and an appropriate learning environment for their particular needs.

Learning for the Fourth Age (L4A) ran a project to introduce older people in Leicestershire to new technologies through one-to-one and group educational and learning sessions. As part of the project, older people were encouraged to discover and use a wide range of new technologies, including laptops, iPads, Wii games, mobile phones, digital cameras and video cameras. The project offered an invaluable opportunity for volunteers of all ages to share their skills, meet new people and develop a better understanding of old age. www.l4a.org.uk

The use of technology for enabling social contact and participation can be very successful, but many older people need a little help to start using digital technology – plus ongoing support if there are issues with vision or mobility.

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The use of technology for enabling social contact and participation can be very successful, but many older people need a little help to start using digital technology – plus ongoing support if there are issues with vision or mobility. While some older people have a good grasp of how to use computers already, many lack confidence in their ability to learn something new. Some have visual impairments that make reading small type difficult or limited manual dexterity due to arthritis or other conditions. Some may have cognitive impairment that makes it hard to remember complex commands. These issues are not irresolvable, but do highlight the importance of accessible and user-friendly technology.
Can online innovations enhance social care?

There is also a basic problem with public understanding and perceptions of digital technology. The Department of Health, for example, believes that at least three million people with long-term conditions and/or social care needs could benefit from the use of telehealth and telecare services. However, research commissioned by the Telehealth Forum has found that the vast majority of people in the UK have never heard of ‘telehealth’ or ‘telecare’. Even more significantly, a full 93% of people aged 55 or over (those statistically more likely to be one of the 15 million people in the UK with a long-term condition) had never heard of telehealth or telecare.

Addressing the digital divide

In addition to better explanation and understanding of what both social care and digital technology actually mean at all levels of society, there is also an ongoing need for commitment from the Government to address the digital divide.

Digital exclusion can broadly be described as a lack of participation by some groups in services or activities that are provided online (Hacker and Mason) – whether through choice or lack of facilities. The issue of online access and internet use is especially important for older people, because more and more public services are moving online.

Over eight million adults in the UK have never used the internet and their needs must not be overlooked in this increasingly digital age. It is important that public service information is provided in a number of formats, both online and offline.

The research report Online Government services and the offline older generation (Fujitsu and Age UK, 2011) http://www.fujitsu.com/uk/research/online-government/ indicates that only 15% of older people have used a local council website to find information.

Over and above this obvious disconnect, the Government vision for digital inclusion and the concept of ‘digital by default’ presents a number of challenges for social care – most notably the disparity of access to digital technology among different groups of older people.

The 2009 Ofcom Media Literacy Audit reported that 40% of the UK population do not use online channels, including websites such as Directgov and NHS Choices. Infrastructure investment to ensure better internet connectivity is essential to support the development of and access to digital technology, especially in rural and isolated communities.

Adopting a connected approach in a complex market

The potential for using digital technology to develop new models of support for older people would also be enhanced by
Can online innovations enhance social care?

the creation and promotion of more productive partnerships right across the social care sector.

The social care market is complex, with numerous disparate providers – including the public sector, charities, social enterprises and the private sector. While the majority of social care is commissioned by local authorities, we need to remain aware of the fact that an increasing number of people are self-funding their care.

A major concern stemming from this development is how we can meet the information and support needs of older people who are not eligible for state funding of their care and therefore may not be known to the local authority. One option may be to consider the development of universal, rather than targeted, services that are aimed at all older people, including those with significant financial resources.

Although there are many excellent examples of social innovation in this area, they often seem to be isolated, very small-scale pilots or developed outside of mainstream social care practice.

Finding scalable and replicable models for providing services while also developing sustainable business models remains a challenge for funders. It is difficult to systematically identify the market gaps and the funding priorities that take account of the care sector’s diversity and fragmentation. There may also be a tension between developing a scalable business model and the need for local and personal solutions.

In addition, there does not seem to be a level of engagement or ‘buy in’ for supporting digital technology in the public sector, whose organisations are major commissioners of care and support services for older people. Market development is a relatively new area for the care sector and it is unclear whether commissioners truly understand the role of digital technology in developing appropriate provision to deliver more effective outcomes for older people.

“Commissioners should stop using services which are too large to provide individualised support; serve people too far from their homes; and do not provide people with a good quality of life in the home or as part of the community, in favour of developing more individualised, local solutions which provide a good quality of life.”
Can online innovations enhance social care?

**Professor Jim Mansell**, advising on service models in Valuing People report (Department of Health, 2001)

Promoting more productive partnerships

Transformational change in social care also requires the creation and promotion of more productive partnerships between the many different stakeholders within the sector. These include the digital technology industry, academics, care providers, people who use services and carers. This suggests the need for more opportunities to share best practice and information across the wider care sector about the benefits of digital technology and how online innovations can enhance social care.

There is no doubt that technology will have a significant role in supporting older people to live more independent and fulfilling lives. Digital technology enables older people to renew and develop social contacts, reduce isolation and engage more actively in their communities.

The concept of partnership comes into play here too. Using digital technology to develop new, sustainable models of support requires older people to be more involved at every stage of the design process to help address issues of accessibility and complexity in the product and service design. Possibly, we have to focus less on the technology and more on understanding the needs of different groups of people in the care marketplace.

“*The role of technology in both improving care and containing costs, so far, has been mostly a case of great promise but poor delivery. Evidence from the New Dynamics of Ageing Programme emphasises the enormous potential but, also, the need to work closely with older users if this is to be realised.*”

**Professor Alan Walker**
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So can online innovations enhance social care?

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So can online innovations enhance social care?

The answer to the question ‘Is there a different way of providing services which will support older people to remain independent and supported in their communities?’ is a definite ‘Yes!’ – but we need to do more to build on our understanding of the challenges confronting older people in using digital technology.

Developing technological solutions that address the needs of older people requires an independent and longer-term way of linking research and analysis in this area. This demands intelligence about the impact of social innovation through using technology in the care sector. This is a potential role for an organisation such as the Oxford Internet Institute (OII), which...
Can online innovations enhance social care?

is well placed to provide an authoritative and independent source of information about older people’s use of, access to and attitudes about the internet and digital technology.

**BRIDGING INFORMATION GAPS AND LEARNING LESSONS**

In addition to more in-depth research, there remains a need for a comprehensive UK-wide directory of care services, which includes digital technology innovations and web-based projects. EducationEye offers an interesting example of collating search queries from the internet. The model of an internet and social network mapper – which collects and indexes content from hundreds of websites and blogs to deliver fast search results – could perhaps be further explored for the care sector.

But we also need to bridge information gaps. Research has found that the major reasons for people not using the internet are lack of knowledge and lack of access. The Demos report *Ageing Sociably* (2012) [http://demos.co.uk/projects/aging sociably](http://demos.co.uk/projects/aging sociably) suggests that businesses should be encouraged to support the development of local social hubs for older people. These hubs could potentially provide a focus for local digital technology innovations and deliver practical support to enable older people to discover, develop and sustain their technology skills – including access to social media surgeries.

Market development in social care is an area being explored by the Think Local Act Personal Partnership, [www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/Browse/commissioning/National_Market_Development_Forum/The_work_of_the_National_Market_Development_Forum/](http://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/Browse/commissioning/National_Market_Development_Forum/The_work_of_the_National_Market_Development_Forum/) a network of national care organisations promoting innovative approaches in social care. There is the potential for a useful collaboration with social innovation funding bodies to explore the issues, benefits and barriers to more widespread adoption of digital technology for social care. Sales of mobile devices (laptops, tablets, smart phones etc.) have been outstripping sales of traditional personal computers for some time. Any new service or product that is not designed and optimised for working on a mobile device will lose out in the market.

Learning from others and sharing best practice is essential. The value of giving time, skills and resources has been acknowledged through the Cabinet Office Innovation in Giving Fund [www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services_lab/giving](http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services_lab/giving) We need to make it a lot easier for commissioners, care practitioners and potential customers to access information about digital innovations and the cost of purchasing digital products and services.

The care market is fragmented and confusing. Developing an online marketing and communications toolkit, complete with progressive project examples and case studies, would enable developers and innovators to more easily understand and access this growing market. This could include the lessons learned from funded projects about establishing a sustainable, longer term business model.

**WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?**

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a 'burden' and promotes the benefits of technology to enable people to live more independent, safe and fulfilling lives. Digital innovations offer different ways of providing services which will support people to be more connected in their communities. Supporting technological solutions which address the needs of individuals requires an independent and longer term way of linking research and analysis in this area. We need to bridge the gap between thinkers and doers to move from discussion, ideas and pilots to mainstream adoption of digital technology.

The research base for understanding and supporting technology innovation is widely dissipated across many organisations. For example we have the work of the New Dynamics of Ageing Programme www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk/ a seven year multidisciplinary research initiative with the aim of improving the quality of life of older people co-ordinated by the University of Sheffield and the Dementia Services Development Centre http://dementia.stir.ac.uk/virtualhome at the University of Stirling which has created the 'virtual dementia-friendly care home'. There is certainly evidence about the benefits of technology innovation but this is not easily accessible to the public.

There is also an urgent need to explore ways of connecting public sector organisations (including social services, health, housing, education and learning, economic regeneration and employment), charities, social businesses, the private sector and the academic research community to provide coherent messages about how and why social innovation through digital technology is making an impact.

Care and support in a digital society needs to have a different focus which challenges the perceptions of older people as being a 'burden' and promotes the benefits of technology to enable people to live more independent, safe and fulfilling lives.

There are a number of partnerships and alliances exploring how to embed social innovation and develop community capital but it is unclear how they are collaborating to provide a UK overview. A social network analysis to identify current relationships would provide a useful starting point to determine the potential for future collaboration and partnerships.

There is a critical issue about the dissemination of information about the value of technology across a complex and disparate sector. On the one hand we have a sector which has difficulty embracing innovation and is managing change in a time of financial austerity and on the other hand innovators who do not understand the complexity and fragmentation of the sector. The challenge is how we connect all the different stakeholders.

We know the value of giving time, skills and resource at community level to reduce isolation and to make connections and we have the technology tools to enable this to happen. We now need to map and share the exciting, useful and relevant innovations and make these resources more accessible.
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How can we use technology to facilitate collaborative working? I believe that we need to develop a coherent and independent voice which will facilitate connections between the hundreds of potentially conflicting and competing stakeholders with an interest in this area.
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Recommendations

There is a need to explore the potential for developing a Community Wellbeing and Social Technology Innovation Hub which brings together all the organisations funding, researching and promoting digital technology innovations and pilots across the wider care sector. This could be an independent organisation or a new remit that falls to an existing one, however it could also be developed ‘from the ground up’ in a way that takes advantage of the very technology that it reports on. By supporting practitioners, researchers, funders and policy makers to share resources in ways that makes them highly discoverable, we could begin, now, to create this useful hub of knowledge. We could start simply by aggregating links using a shared twitter hashtag or social book-marking site (such as [www.diigo.com](http://www.diigo.com)); or we could look to bring together the available open source software (such as that which [www.educationeye.org.uk](http://www.educationeye.org.uk) is built upon) to bring together, catalogue and share this information as it is published. Either way (or indeed using a mixture of both), we need to create a better shared understanding of innovations in this sector.

Second, we need to develop a more co-ordinated and coherent approach which enables carers and care seekers to easily access online information and support. We know that information, advice and advocacy are essential in enabling people to make choices about their care and support needs. Care recipients, their families and carers need signposts to explore what technology products and services are available, both through statutory services or to purchase independently.

Third: there is a wealth of content and support available to help older people overcome the barriers to digital inclusion and access supported services. However, all of these resources are missing a focal point, resulting in a fragmented and confusing approach. To avoid expensive and unnecessary duplication of pilots we need to encourage more shared learning, collaboration and partnerships. We could start by mapping all of the existing ‘community hubs’, however they are defined, to ensure that people have easy access to local resources. This would also identify areas where there is no support currently available.

Finally, we need to create and promote events that showcase digital technology innovations in care which could be adopted by local authorities, the NHS and housing providers, as well as being purchased by people funding their own support needs.

"Technology is a vital part of human existence. They show us that the right tools, in the right hands, can help everyone, regardless of our frailties, to achieve our true potential and advance as a civilisation."

Professor Stephen Hawking accepting his ‘AbilityNet award for Excellence in Accessibility’ at the Technology4Good awards September 2012
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About the series

Nominet Trust provocation papers are undertaken by leading thinkers, writers and researchers to provide an alternative view on the existing challenges of digital technology. By reflecting on current research, policy and practice, the authors explore alternative approaches to a topic, in order to stimulate debate and to provide new perspectives on particular challenges.

By providing insight and new ideas, it is hoped these publications will add to the imaginative applications of the internet to drive social action.

As always, we value your comments and suggestions for how to act on the ideas presented within these publications, and how we can build the series so that it is more useful to us all as we work towards a safer, more accessible internet, used for social good.

We look forward to your comments and suggestions at: developmentresearch@nominettrust.org.uk
Digital technology offers a phenomenal opportunity to stimulate new forms of collaboration, to mobilise new communities of interest, and to unleash the imagination of millions of users in addressing specific local and global challenges.

At Nominet Trust we are committed to making these opportunities a reality – for as many people as possible.

Nominet Trust is a UK-based social investor that advocates the imaginative use of digital technology to improve lives and communities.

That’s why we bring together, invest in and support projects committed to using digital technology to make society better.

Through our on-going research programme we identify specific areas of need and channel funding towards initiatives designed to make a significant difference to people’s lives.

Since our inception in September 2008, Nominet Trust has invested in hundreds of projects, providing business support as well as financial investment, seeking to make a positive difference to the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable people.

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