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Digital care advisor roles in a County Council

**Adult Social Care
Digital technology and skills review**

Ipsos MORI, Institute of Public Care and Skills for Care



Ipsos MORI



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This case study supports a review of technology and digital skills in adult social care, undertaken by Ipsos MORI, the Institute of Public Care (IPC) at Oxford Brookes University and Skills for Care on behalf of NHSX. Further information is available on the [study webpage](#).

Problem to be solved

As part of efforts to improve delivery of its social care services, Suffolk County Council identified several key priorities including a need to improve health outcomes of people with care and support needs, an ambition to promote independence, and a need to help the Council better manage demand for care services. The Council already had a long-term interest in the potential of digital technology for addressing these issues and their strategy development had focused on incorporating digital care technology in the commissioning of care services.

To successfully implement this strategy, the Council recognised that broader culture change and support was needed to encourage care practitioners to think differently about the care packages they designed.

The project

The challenge of making better use of digital technology in care services led senior leaders to create a new role within the Council - digital care advisors - with responsibility for supporting and encouraging care practitioners to explore what digital solutions are available and how technology could be used to solve issues and improve care. The role would also create space for further investigation about how technology could be used for delivering care outcomes in the future.

As the need for digital technology across care services was judged to be substantial, it was decided that a team of digital care advisors was needed. This would provide sufficient capacity to help frontline care practitioners adapt to new ways of working and meet the longer-term transformation goals of the County Council.

Implementation

The first step was to develop a business case for digital care advisors. This case focused on improving health and care outcomes for the local population, better management of demand for care services and identifying potential financial savings from the use of technology.

The next step was defining the remit of the role and involved senior leadership determining how they would measure success. A job specification was developed which included supporting the development of the digital care programme; supporting and managing digital care partnerships; encouraging the workforce to include digital technology in their assessments and support offer; championing digital care; and implementing new frameworks around care technology ethics, data and eligibility.

Senior leads felt it was important that digital care advisors had experience in a frontline adult social care role, such as a social worker or occupational therapist. Another key criteria was for digital care advisors to be interested in researching new technologies and how these could be used to improve care outcomes in the future.

Following approval of the business case, senior leaders established a team of five advisors covering the different localities across the county.

Outcome and impact

The new roles resulted in several outcomes and benefits.

- The ability to rapidly implement care technology during the COVID-19 pandemic was seen as a testament to the success of the digital care advisor role.

“When COVID-19 hit, we rolled out tablets and succeeded in that work and the outcomes from that. That benefited a lot of people and showed the value of our role.” Digital care advisor

- A digital care support service was established to give social workers and the people they support access to an end-to-end ‘one stop shop’ digital platform for selecting digital care technology for people with care needs, making the choice of technological solutions much clearer for care practitioners.
- The development of this service was also supported by training for care practitioners on how to use the platform and how the technology could be incorporated into their practice and the support packages offered. This was seen as contributing towards the overall development of digital skills in the care workforce.

“We have raised the profile of digital care, we’re providing an infrastructure, with enthusiasm, knowledge and building awareness. We have seen a big increase in referrals for digital care as it’s easy to access. A lot of people were [previously] put off by how complicated it was, going to different companies, things getting stuck in admin for a week or two.” Digital care advisor

- By helping practitioners consider technological options, the digital care advisor role has led to improved care outcomes for people with care needs, e.g. more people being able to stay in their home for longer in accordance with their wishes and maintaining independence, rather than moving to a formal care setting.
- Early indications suggest the use of digital technology has led to cost savings for Suffolk County Council, and the team are in the process of developing a formula for consistently measuring this.

Lessons learned

A key lesson from implementing the digital care advisor role was that embedding change takes time and there was a need to maintain interest in the new support service in order to bring staff along on the journey. Digital advisors needed space and time to test different products, and design systems of support and methods of engagement with care practitioners.

As the role was advisory in nature, it was important to define the remit clearly. This includes setting out how success is measured so that impact and performance can be assessed over time.

Establishing a team of digital care advisors and adopting new technology requires investment, both in terms of capital and staff time and it is important to identify how financial benefits and cost savings will be measured.

To find out more about this project, please contact Sam Bassett, Digital Care and Innovation Lead at Suffolk County Council: Sam.bassett@suffolk.gov.uk

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