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Digital prescribing for falls prevention in reablement

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

Ipsos MORI, Institute of Public Care and Skills for Care



Ipsos MORI



Digital prescribing for falls prevention in reablement

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

The Adult Social Care team at Newcastle City Council suspected that falls were a common problem among the people supported by their reablement service. In order to understand the extent of the problem, the Council and a local consultancy and digital transformation partner carried out a research project to explore the causes of falls, and possible solutions. The information gained from this research led to the project discussed in this case study – a trial of voice assistant and smart lighting technology to help reduce falls.

It was difficult to obtain codifiable data about falls from existing systems as there was no agreed place to record it. The majority of those using this service are older people, and the level of support required varied across the cohort – including people who could stand up and walk without assistance, people who used mobility aids, and people with dementia.

The team's preliminary study of those using the reablement service took place over a period of four months. They found that falls were even more prevalent than they had thought – around 40% of reablement service users had had a fall either before or during their reablement process. The consultancy partner reviewed this data and identified three main factors contributing to falls in those using the reablement service:

1. Hypertension (dizziness) – usually as a result of people not eating or drinking enough, or not taking their prescribed medication as scheduled;
2. Low light or unsafe home environment – people moving around the house during the night and becoming confused or disoriented;
3. Overestimation of physical capabilities, or not understanding physical limitations around strength and balance – for example, people reaching too far to switch on a lamp; or standing too quickly.

The Reablement Service team saw an opportunity to use digital technology to protect people with care and support needs from the fall hazards identified by the research.

The project

The Reablement Service team was already working to improve factors around safe home environments, for example, removing tripping hazards such as floor rugs and cables. This project aimed build on the existing work in order to:

- improve independent living for people with care and support needs
- reduce the prevalence of falls during at-home reablement
- improve and standardise methods of recording information about falls, to ensure all organisations involved in a person's care are able to access correct and up-to-date records

- better understand how different care and support needs can be addressed remotely, using technology in the home.

The Council's Digital Transformation Board advocates a challenge-based approach to using digital technology (identifying issues and then looking for technology to solve problems, rather than identifying technology, and working to understand how it could be helpful). The team referred to the standards set out in the Government Digital Service Design Manual¹; engaged with a local healthy living organisation; and conducted a technology scan to understand the options available such as smart plugs, motion sensors, and GPS trackers.

“It costs the service an awful lot of money to have [care workers] sleeping overnight. Newcastle City Council trialled introducing motion sensors, so then they get alerts and that can reduce the amount of staff on-call overnight. That was really successful.”

Innovation consultant

As a result of this discovery phase the team agreed on a set of options they wanted to trial, including:

- **Voice-activated assistants/smart speakers** to help with audio reminders of food and drink schedules; managing other smart devices installed in their home; helping people with care and support needs to access entertainment; and connecting people with care and support needs to family and unpaid carers, to provide them with reassurance.
- **Smart lighting** that switched on using motion sensors or a remote switch. These are more accessible for people with dexterity issues. The smart lighting can also be used to help manage sleep schedules, via lighting routines connected to sunrise and sunset times.

Implementation

The team chose to pursue consumer technology after creating and reviewing a service design map that studied capabilities and competencies within the reablement service. It was identified that consumer technology was more accessible for purchase, meaning that the reablement service could recommend products for people with care and support needs to buy and install themselves.

“It's less about dispensing technology, and more about giving advice and supporting [people with care and support needs] in their use of it.”

Council team member

Due to their previous experience of installing Wi-Fi in sites without an existing internet connection, an existing supplier of network connections to the local authority was invited to be involved with the project. Word of mouth and utilising existing relationships were key to the project and its success.

Outcome and impact

The project has helped people with care and support needs and their unpaid carers to improve their skills in using technology such as tablets. Participants who initially felt nervous and inexperienced now confidently use technology daily, with data on this being collected as part of an ongoing evaluation of the project by Newcastle City Council. Similarly, frontline staff have benefited from skills development, and a new understanding of how digital technology can benefit people with care and support needs. This is reflected in findings from user experience surveys being conducted by the Council on an ongoing basis, to ensure that learnings are captured and disseminated among the team.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/service-manual>

Throughout this project, the team has built positive relationships with key external organisations that feed into its goals of service improvement. They found that ‘Show and Tell’ meetings, where they shared best practice, their progress and challenges with the wider stakeholder group, were very helpful for improving understanding of how digital technology can support service improvement. Sessions were advertised through the team’s networks, inviting a range of stakeholders.

“There's been a little bit of luck, but then a lot of it's been relationships that the people involved have had, just thinking, 'It would be really good if you came along, had a conversation.', and thankfully there are lots of those conversations that have developed.”

Council team member

Lessons learned

Some technology takes time to set up and adjust before it can be used successfully; the team cited an example where they installed motion sensing lights, when it took several hours to adjust the sensitivity to an appropriate level. Ensuring sufficient time and resources are allocated for installations and adjustments is important for this reason. Communications around use of technology are also key – for example, explanations and reminders to external staff not to switch off automated lights.

It was also important to correctly identify people who could benefit from the technology, by understanding their specific needs, abilities, and access to devices (e.g. a mobile phone) to use the technology. It was recognised these specific solutions would not be suitable for all the people the Adult Social Care team worked with. Staff had to ensure that the people using the service had the physical and cognitive abilities to download and use an app on their mobile phone. People using the service also need to be able to understand, remember, and use passwords.

People with care and support needs will also need information and reassurance about privacy around data sharing, and the security of digital technology with microphone and camera features. As such, it will be important for project teams to factor in support around privacy and data-sharing, when planning a project of this nature.

To find out more about this project, please contact sarah.drummond@newcastle.gov.uk, Team Leader Reablement Service at Newcastle City Council

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