New Ways to Support Older People: The Role of Technology in Adult Social Care

- Transcript for the Institute for Gerontology Annual Lecture, Kings College London
- Michelle Dyson, Director General for Adult Social Care. Department of Health and Social Care

Good afternoon, and thank you all for being here today.

It's a privilege to speak with you at a time of real transformation in adult social care.

I want to begin by briefly setting out what adult social care is, because unlike the NHS, it's not something everyone has direct experience of. Too often, adult social care is seen as just care homes for older people. But it's so much broader than that.

Adult social care supports people of all ages, including working-age adults with learning disabilities. In fact, local authorities spend more on working-age adults than on older people. It also includes support for unpaid carers, often family members, who provide vital support to loved ones. There are almost 5 million unpaid carers in the UK.

Adult social care is like the NHS in having a very large workforce – with 1.7m people currently work in ASC. That is larger than the NHS, construction, transport, or food and drink industries.

But it's unlike the NHS in that it is generally not free at the point of use. It is heavily means-tested - something that can come as a shock to those who need it at a time of crisis. In that way, it is more like a benefit than a public service.

It also is not a national service like the NHS. It is run by local authorities who commission from around 18,000 mostly private/voluntary sector providers.

That is what adult social care is. But today, I want to talk about what adult social care can be - what it looks like when it's done well.

When we get adult social care right, the benefits ripple far beyond the individual. When individuals receive the right care and support, they can lead a life with greater choice, control and independence. In this way, adult social care not only supports those who draw on care, but also strengthens families and communities.

In the rest of my remarks today, I want to explore four key areas:

First, I want to explain why new methods are necessary. The challenges facing adult social care, such as rising demand and increasing costs, mean that doing nothing is

not an option. But we must also be aware that expectations are changing, too. Older people are increasingly more comfortable using technology – and this is an opportunity we should all grasp.

Second, I want to highlight that there has already been a transformation in how we are supporting people in the face of these challenges and opportunities. A 'quiet revolution' in digital transformation is already reshaping care, supported by the government, and I want to showcase some of the many examples of this.

Third, I would like to build on this great progress and discuss an ambitious agenda for the future. I want to discuss the technological advances happening now, and how that could take us in the future to a fully digitised adult social care sector that harnesses technology and data to deliver personalised, preventative, and proactive care and support.

And finally, I want to touch on the role we all must play. Because to truly unlock the potential of technology in adult social care, we need every part of the system – central government, local authorities, providers, innovators, academics and researchers and communities – pulling in the same direction.

Why we need new ways to support older people

As we look to the future of adult social care, one thing is clear: maintaining the status quo is not an option.

The challenges facing the sector are significant and growing. Rising demand, increasing costs, and a workforce under immense pressure have created a system that is stretched to its limits.

And these pressures are only set to intensify as our population ages: In England, the number of people aged 50 and over is projected to increase by nearly 20% over the next two decades.

Meanwhile, thanks to improvements in medicine and infant mortality, there are more people living with a learning disability, and these individuals have a unique set of needs once they reach old age.

Whilst we should celebrate the population living longer, this does have wide-ranging implications for adult social care, as the number of people drawing on care and support is expected to double.

At the same time, many people already rely on unpaid carers. These are family members and friends who provide vital support, often at great personal cost. As demand grows, so too will the pressure on these informal support networks.

However, it's not just about demographics and demand. Expectations are changing too.

CARE

Today's older people are increasingly comfortable using technology in their daily lives. I would hazard a guess that there are "older people" in this audience who were invited to this lecture by email and happily used Google Maps to find this location. Some of you probably use digital tools I'm not familiar with to conduct complex analyses as part of your research!

Whether it's online banking, shopping, or managing appointments, digital tools are becoming second nature. As other sectors embrace technology, people rightly expect the same from their public services. We're already seeing this shift in healthcare. For example, even two years ago pensioners were the most active users of the NHS App, showing that older adults are not only willing but eager to engage with digital health tools. Adult social care must keep up.

This goes beyond people drawing on digital services – we can also use technology and data to empower people to take their wellbeing into their own hands. For example, it's becoming increasingly normal for people to use apps on their phones or wearables like smart watches to track and manage their health and wellbeing.

Of course, not all older people have the awareness, skills or infrastructure to use the internet and technologies – the government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan will be so important here. But as generations age, the people who make up our older generation will increasingly think of digital as the default.

And then there's the workforce. Recruitment and retention remain major challenges, with high turnover rates and growing demand for skilled staff. We need to make care roles more rewarding, more sustainable, and more focused on what matters most - human connection and high-quality support.

It's important to also recognise that the impact of supporting older people extends far beyond an individual's experience of adult social care.

When we invest in care technologies and data capabilities that help people stay well, we also reduce pressure on the wider health and care system.

For example, tech- and data-enabled proactive care can help prevent common but serious issues like falls and urinary tract infections. These are not only distressing for individuals but also major drivers of hospital admissions.

By preventing avoidable health conditions, we can also help reduce waiting times for GP appointments, A&E visits, and elective procedures—freeing up capacity across the NHS.

So in short I would suggest that there really is a burning platform to find new ways to support older people.

The quiet revolution already underway

CARE

Digital transformation is no longer just an ambition - it's becoming a reality that is reshaping how care and support is delivered. There's been a quiet revolution - the adult social care sector has led the way, and the Department has built on this momentum and is encouraging further progress.

I have seen this revolution first-hand. A few years ago, I visited a care home where staff were keeping meticulous handwritten records—pages and pages of notes, carefully filed in binders. It was a testament to their dedication, but not the most efficient way to support care delivery.

The pandemic brought this into sharp focus. Without digital infrastructure, it was harder to understand what was happening on the ground—and harder still for the department to respond.

At the outset of COVID, there was a lack of data for decision-making or oversight, which limited DHSC's ability to support the sector. One of the actions we took in response was creating a single, centralised 'Capacity Tracker' among care providers. This enabled key actors across the system to share daily critical information about care home vacancies, workforce status, and other relevant data, providing valuable insights to support providers in dealing with the crisis.

Fast forward to a recent visit, and the difference is striking. Staff are using tablets to access care plans, update records, and monitor wellbeing in real time. Technology isn't just present - it's enabling better, more personalised care and support. And it's freeing up staff to do what they do best: care.

The advances in data, digitisation and technology in adult social care during this extremely tough and challenging period is amazing.

Just three years ago, the majority of care providers were still using paper records. The proportion of care providers using digital social care records had only been increasing by around 3% each year.

That's despite the fact that using digital records has huge benefits for care providers and the people they support. They free up valuable staff time – saving at least 20 minutes per care worker per shift.

They enable more person-centred care, by making it easier for staff to quickly understand a person's care preferences and needs. They support safer care as well, because digital records are less likely to contain errors or be lost, and because they make it much easier for staff to spot issues and review care plans, so they're reviewed more frequently.

Many digital social care record solutions also allow families to see updates about their loved one's care in real-time, providing them with much-valued reassurance, especially for those who live far away or cannot visit frequently.

After years of slow progress, over the last three years the rate of adoption jumped up to roughly 10% of care providers switching to digital records each year. Now, over

three quarters of registered providers are using them, covering over 85% of people who draw on adult social care.

So, what changed? The government-funded Digitising Social Care programme took four key steps to drive up digital record adoption.

Government set standards for digital social care records and created a list of solutions that had been assured against those standards. This helped providers to confidently choose solutions that were fit for purpose and future proofed.

More standards were added over time, and suppliers had to meet these within the required timeframe to stay on the list. This kept the digital social care record market vibrant and competitive.

We then match-funded care providers' implementation costs, so that the up-front costs weren't a barrier, but care providers had enough skin in the game to ensure they were making sustainable purchasing decisions. Providers could only access this funding for solutions on the assured supplier list. This ensured that providers chose solutions which met important cyber security and data standards, laying the foundations for a secure system of interoperable digital records.

We also produced guidance and funded implementation support staff based in integrated care systems, to help providers choose solutions that made sense for them and to guide them in how best to implement digital records.

And finally, we developed tools to support care providers in developing their staff's digital confidence and capability.

As I have highlighted, care providers really ran with this. Let me show you how care staff in Somerset have been finding using digital social care records:

[DSCR video (2 mins)]

I'm so proud that the proportion of care providers with digital records has nearly doubled since the end of 2021. It's also really exciting to see that there are now 19 solutions on the assured suppliers list.

To give just one example of the important standards these solutions meet, the GP Connect standard meant that these solutions provide care provider staff with appropriate and secure access to core information held in an individual's medical information, supporting the quality and safety of care.

This thriving market and rapid rate of adoption illustrate the adaptability of suppliers and care providers in embracing the potential of digital transformation.

The adult social care sector had a surprising advantage here. Since the sector was still largely paper based just a few years ago, government was effectively working with a "greenfield" site. We didn't have to work around widespread, outdated systems – the sector could build up sensibly from the start, having learnt many lessons from the challenges of digitisation in health.

We often hear about how countries like Kenya have leapfrogged traditional banking infrastructure, with much of their population adopting mobile-based financial services like M-Pesa without having had a traditional bank account first. In the same way, many care providers have jumped straight to modern, cloud-based, mobile-friendly digital records.

You can see what a difference this is making to individuals. But it's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the benefits of this digital transformation.

Digital social care records contain a huge amount of information about a person's care, including their care needs, what's important to them and all the care they've received. A care home resident might have over 50 care interactions recorded daily. Just imagine how useful this information could be if the right people could access it at the right time.

So, we're now building on the successful roll-out of digital social care records by investing in national data infrastructure for care. This is laying the foundations for health and care professionals to have real-time visibility of information about people's health and care, in a consistent way across the country.

There's lots of work to do here, but it would make a huge difference. If staff had seamless access to health and care data, then multidisciplinary neighbourhood teams could provide more joined-up care; and hospital staff could provide safer care to people who also draw on adult social care, equipped with information such as when someone last took their medications. It would also mean people and families no longer have to repeat their stories to every new professional they meet.

During a recent visit to Liverpool, we saw how data was used to enable faster provision of reablement or rehabilitation services, reduce waiting times and offer an overall faster journey for people to get home. This meant services like their specialised reablement centre have access to real time intelligence to help provide the most joined-up support possible.

In the last 12 months alone, the time taken for a person to go home from one of the reablement centres has reduced by just under a week, meaning they have more capacity to offer this service to more people. That is the transformative potential of digital and data.

To build towards this future, the government has set an ambition for all care providers to be fully digitised and for staff to have access to essential medical information by the end of this Parliament.

And it isn't just care providers who are digitising. Local authorities are embracing the shift too, with several modernising their adult social care 'front door' – the first crucial point of contact for local residents – by improving websites and integrating digital tools.

Councils like Dorset, Lambeth, Redbridge, Bristol and Kent are leading the way – enhancing accessibility, integrating with health services and empowering residents to manage their own care online. It means people can find the right support earlier, make more informed choices and ultimately experience better outcomes.

We're also seeing fantastic efforts to streamline back-office processes. Take Wigan council, for instance. Their adult social care team is working to automate care needs assessments and roll out AI chatbots that offer instant support to people seeking information about adult social care.

Similarly, several local authorities are trialling the use of AI-powered technology to transcribe and summarise care assessments in real time. It's helping to free up social worker's time, so they can focus on being present during care conversations, with Swindon council citing a 60% reduction in time spent on administrative tasks. It's smart and efficient – and is making a real difference.

Opportunities for supporting older people in new ways

So, we've seen how adaptable and innovative the adult social care sector can be when it comes to embracing digital solutions. But that's just the start, and we want to help take it even further.

Looking ahead, our ambition is clear: a fully digitised adult social care sector that harnesses technology and data to deliver personalised, preventative, and proactive care and support. A system where data flows seamlessly to support decision-making, identify risks early, and ensure that every person receives the right care at the right time and in the right place.

The government has set up an independent commission led by Baroness Louise Casey into adult social care. But no matter what that recommends, it's clear that we'll need the right digital foundations in place.

By harnessing the potential of digital innovation, we can ensure:

- Older people can live more independently, supported by technology that helps them stay safe, connected, and in control.

- Family members and friends can stay informed, manage care more easily, and collaborate with professionals to support their loved ones.

- Care workers and social workers can spend less time on admin and more time on face-to-face care and support, using data to target their time where its most needed.

- And when people do need hospital care, digitisation can play a vital role in helping them return home safely and quickly. Seamless information sharing between hospitals and care providers will ensure that the right support is in

place from day one, reducing delays in discharge, preventing readmissions, and helping people regain their independence sooner.

One of the most exciting areas of progress is in supporting people to live independently at home. Across the country, we're seeing a range of technologies being adopted, some by individuals and families themselves, and others through formal care services.

In many cases, people are using everyday consumer technology to stay safe and well at home. Smart speakers and voice-activated assistants are helping disabled people control their lights, doors, and heating without needing to wait for a carer to help them. Smartphones can provide medication reminders or help people stay connected with loved ones.

We're also seeing more advanced technologies being used, such as AI-enabled and sensor-based systems that can detect changes in someone's daily routine. These tools can alert family members or care staff to potential issues early, helping to prevent crises before they happen.

A smart plug in a kettle could send a notification if someone who normally makes a cup of coffee at 7.30am hasn't yet used it and might be stuck on the floor after a fall. Similarly, data from a smart oven that is increasingly being left on for long periods of time could indicate increasing forgetfulness.

Door sensors can pick up increased nighttime activity which might mean someone has a UTI, or that someone is spending longer inside which might indicate loneliness and the onset of depression.

Falls detection and prevention is another area where technology is making a real difference. I'm sure many of us know someone who forgets to wear their pendant alarm, which they're meant to press if they fall and need help.

New sensor-based technologies can detect falls without the need for a wearable pendant, enabling a faster response. This also reduces the need for care home staff to check on people throughout the night, so people get a better night's sleep, which would further reduce their risk of falling.

Some of these technologies also detect when a person is doing something that often leads to a fall and intervenes to prevent it – for example automatically switching on the light as someone gets out of bed, or calling a carer to assist a person heading towards the bathroom.

Emerging evidence suggests this kind of technology can reduce falls in care homes by over a half. And the benefits don't stop there: these game-changing technologies can also help to determine whether a fall was serious enough to require an ambulance, reducing unnecessary emergency calls and easing the burden on urgent care services. That's a huge step forward.

This ITV news report really brings the technology to life:

CARE

about Nobi (5 mins)

Electronic medication administration records are also proving valuable. These tools reduce medication errors, meaning people are less likely to suffer complications and avoidable trips to their GP or the hospital. They also cut down on waste and improve staff efficiency. Given that older people are more likely to be on multiple medications, these systems are especially important for this group.

We're also seeing promising use of AI in care settings. One example is an AI-driven tool that uses a smart device camera to examine facial expressions and combines this with other indicators to calculate pain scores.

This helps improve the identification and management of pain, particularly for people who cannot reliably communicate, such as those living with dementia. This kind of innovation is helping staff deliver more compassionate and effective care.

Imagine being able to step in *before* a serious fall changes someone's life. That's exactly what is happening in Norfolk, where AI is being used to analyse case notes and identify those most at risk. These AI-powered data insights have enabled joint interventions with other public services, tailored to the individual.

And the opportunities for AI don't stop there. Researchers at London School of Economics have pioneered the first UK use of machine learning to spot signs of loneliness through care records, finding that 44% of people who draw on care are lonely or socially isolated at their initial assessment. And their follow up research has shown that loneliness is a strong predictor of someone moving into a care home.

That kind of insight could be a game-changer, meaning we're not just reacting – we're preventing. And that's the future of adult social care.

Everyone has a role to play

We all have a role to play.

Because as we continue to embrace the transformative potential of technology, we must work together to ensure that the future of adult social care is not only more efficient - but more human, more inclusive, and more empowering for everyone it touches.

As you've heard today, we're not starting from scratch. The collective effort of the sector is already driving a quiet revolution. From care homes to councils, from innovators to individuals, we're seeing real momentum. But we can go further, and we must.

To truly unlock the potential of technology in adult social care, we need every part of the system pulling in the same direction.

I want to see:

- Technology suppliers working hand-in-hand with older people, care providers, and local authorities to co-produce solutions that are not only innovative, but intuitive, inclusive, and grounded in real-world needs.

- Care providers embedding technology into their day-to-day practice, not as an add-on, but as a core part of how they deliver high-quality, joined-up care.

- Local authorities continuing to digitise their services and integrating technology into care packages, so that support is smarter, more responsive, and more personalised.

- Integrated Care Systems, which are local partnerships that bring health and care organisations together, designing pathways that make the most of digital tools and joined-up data, using insights to improve population health and deliver truly integrated care.

- Academics and researchers helping us identify the challenges that technology can solve, and rigorously evaluating what works, so that we can build an evidence base that drives smarter investment and better outcomes.

- Sector bodies and voluntary organisations playing a vital role in helping people understand what technology is available, how it can help, and how to use it confidently and safely.

- Older people themselves, with the right support, making the most of technology to stay independent, connected, and in control of their lives as they age.

- And friends and family members, using digital tools to stay informed, coordinate care, and support their loved ones in ways that are more manageable and meaningful.

This is not just a government mission. It's a shared mission. And when we each play our part, the result is a care system that is not only more sustainable—but more compassionate, more personalised, and more prepared for the future.

Role of central government

And as we look to the future of adult social care, particularly for our older population, it's clear that technology holds immense promise. But unlocking that promise doesn't happen by accident – it requires leadership, coordination, and strategic investment.

That's where central government, and specifically the Department of Health and Adult social care, plays a vital role.

DHSC holds powerful levers to accelerate the shift from analogue to digital in adult social care. We can fund, regulate, convene, guide, and even build the infrastructure that underpins innovation.

But we must also be honest: we don't have unlimited resources. So, we must focus our efforts where they matter most, and where government is uniquely positioned to make a difference.

Through **vision and guidance**, we can set a clear direction to help everyone in the system – local authorities, care providers, private tech developers – work together to prioritise the right innovations, and share what works.

And we can establish **standards and assurance**. In a crowded and fast-moving landscape, people need to know which technology they can trust. Government's role is to help people choose technologies that are safe, effective, and reliable.

That is why we're working to set new national standards for care technologies – and developing our approach in partnership with care providers, tech companies and people who draw on care and support. This will help to ensure:

- People and families can identify the right solutions for them.

- Care providers can make smart investment decisions.

- Tech companies can develop solutions that truly meet people's needs.

Regulation also plays a role, where it's necessary. Such as where technologies are essential to delivering safe, high-quality care, we can work with regulators like the CQC to ensure their use is not just encouraged, but expected.

We embed **learning and development**. Technology is only as effective as the people using it. That's why we will continue to invest in digital skills and training to help build the confidence and capability required to lead digital transformation across the sector.

And we build **central data infrastructure**. Rather than asking every local system to solve the same problems in different ways, we're creating national solutions that allow data to be recorded and joined up once, and used many times, to improve care, planning, and outcomes.

We've been seeing the benefits of better adult social care data through the Capacity Tracker for years now, as it is the primary source of adult social care data from registered care providers.

In Huddersfield, it has cut back on administration for discharge teams as they can search for suitable care homes for their patients within minutes. In Lancashire, it has made it easier for care services to support families with that all important choice, by putting care home information at their fingertips.

And we can go further than that, by developing new national social care data infrastructure to unlock the full potential of the rich data care staff are already recording in digital social care records as part of their direct care provision. Increasing health and care staff access to real-time information will help improve the safety and quality of care services.

And finally, we ensure that **funding flows** support the system to embrace these opportunities. Whether through pooled budgets that encourage the NHS and local authorities to collaboratively invest in improvements for the whole health and care system; innovation funds, or broader investment strategies to help leverage the private sector, we are aligning financial incentives with digital transformation.

In short, DHSC's role is not to do everything, but to do the things only government can do. By improving the structures we already have, and using our levers more effectively, we can help create an adult social care system that is not only more digital, but more resilient, more efficient, and above all, more person-centred.

During my speech, I spoke about a care home visit from five years ago, and a more recent one that showed just how far we've come. Lately, I've been asking myself: what will I see if I visit a care home five or ten years from now?

The honest answer is, I don't know. And that's what makes this so exciting.

The pace of innovation across adult social care, especially in technology, is extraordinary. Every week brings new ideas, new tools, and new ways of supporting people to live more independent, connected lives. I've been fortunate to witness but a fraction of that progress.

This constant evolution is what gives me hope. Because it means we're not locked into the status quo. We're building a system that's open to change, driven by creativity, and shaped by the people who use and deliver care.

Thank you.