

Smart Homes and Independent Living Call for Evidence

The Disabilities Trust

Who are we?

We are a charity that works alongside people with an acquired brain injury, autism, and/or learning or physical disabilities to help them live as independently as possible. Our high-quality services across the UK support people to move forward with their lives. These include: brain injury assessment and rehabilitation centres, hospitals, care homes, supported living accommodation, care in people's homes and a school.

We also campaign, conduct research and pilot new ideas to amplify the voices of people who can't access our core services.

Our dedicated teams of specialists provide the individual support people need to live as full a life as possible. They work closely with those we support, their families and friends, funding authorities, housing associations and others.

Find out more at www.thedtgroup.org

1. Commissioning: How can local adult social care commissioners be supported to plan for and deliver better independent living technology provision?

The Disabilities Trust aspires to offer cutting edge technology, which has the power to transform the services we offer, including helping those we support to maintain greater levels of independence and improved outcomes. We want to be offering and adapting our technology at a driven pace, meeting the diverse needs of those we support and to play an active role in technology enablement so that organisations across the sector can equally see the benefits for the people they are providing a service for.

However, in our experience this endeavour could be supported by a more collaborative approach to innovation. Currently organisations and charities tend to develop strategies and their technological capability in isolation. Across the social care sector, organisations work in silos, spending large amounts of time and resources bidding for grants, which ultimately may be unsuccessful. Alongside having to research what other organisations are doing, this preoccupation on securing funding may make it increasingly difficult for organisations to quickly adapt to advances in technology and secure funding to ensure these benefits can be efficiently and effectively felt by those we support.

For instance, The Disabilities Trust were excited to get through the first round of the rigorous Ministry of Justice's Prison Leavers Innovation Challenge, with a bid to develop an app in collaboration with Orbital Global. The app will utilise our existing tools and information to support prison leavers with a brain injury to build a positive, non-criminal identity, which is crucial to prevent reoffending. Whilst we are not technology developers, we welcomed the opportunity to work collaborative with Orbital Global to share what we know having developed and piloted our service in over ten prisons in England and Wales. Having secured funding through phase one for us and our partner to build this prototype app, we will then share this at a closed pitch day to secure up to £350k funding to develop the prototype into the complete app and run a pilot to evaluate across a number of prisons.

Within a sector which faces historical challenges, exacerbated by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic such as financial constraints, rising demand from both working-aged adults and the elderly and a complex structure, a landscape wherein collaboration is nurtured and encouraged would better enable technology to be tried, tested and developed in a more robust and dynamic way. A collaborative working style, incorporating Local Authorities, commissioning groups, charities and social care providers could also enable the development and adoption of new innovations better suited to meet the diverse needs of those supported by The Disabilities Trust with physical disabilities, brain injury, autism and learning difficulties but also the wider sector.

Important for a collaborative working style and delivering cutting-edge developments for those we support is good communication. The Disabilities Trust is therefore keen to see a space wherein organisations can more readily evaluate what is available to them and what others are doing, subsequently enabling innovations and technologies to be more easily identified and adopted.

2. The Disabled Facilities Grant: How could the Disabled Facilities Grant be reformed to make it easier to use provide independent living technologies and/or tech related home adjustments (wiring etc.)?

The Disabilities Trust recognises independent living technologies offer the opportunity to increase the independence and wellbeing of those currently in need of care. As such, we are currently undertaking a pilot project to evaluate the impact of Smart Assistants (in this case Alexas) on the wellbeing of those we support. Whilst still in its initial stages, the project aims to provide a number of our services covering acute brain injury, severe brain injury, chronic brain injury, autism and physical disabilities with mainstream devices to evaluate its impact on day-to-day living.

Having installed 24 devices in our service supporting those with physical disabilities in East Sussex and Northumberland, 75% reported that they felt very happy to have an Alexa and 88% said they used their devices daily. Those we support reported staff could spend “less time on small, irritating tasks that [they] could not do [themselves] before” and that they could “do stuff without [their] hands much more easily, for example reading books”. Those we support also reported their Alexa’s offered more choice, control and independence and enabled them to be less reliant on staff. The latter of which could free-up staff capacity and ease the pressures of the workforce shortage currently faced by the sector.

Although still in its early stages, the above demonstrates the contribution to independence that can be felt from the inclusion of technology, including mainstream devices which need not be specialist or expensive. Whilst The Disabilities Trust would gladly see the introduction of additional independent living technologies, this ambition can be hampered by funding streams which are not always timely nor readily accessible.

The Disabilities Trust would also advice the consideration of how the successful adoption of new devices can be shared across the sector, to ensure such information is readily available to those seeking to try something similar or looking for inspiration. During the scoping phase of the above project it was, at times, difficult to research similar schemes

which had utilised smart home devices, including the potential challenges we may face, the likely outcomes. Consideration of how these examples can be best shared and communicating new technologies could further enable the identification and adoption of new innovations and collaborative opportunities to benefit both our colleagues and those we support.

3. Service Delivery and Workforce Development: What can government do to improve the adoption of technology among care providers and workers to support independent living?

Our reliance on technology within the social care sector is increasing, providing security, convenience and the opportunity to innovate and as such, our colleagues learning to use new technologies and increase their digital literacy require space, time and training.

The social care sector, however, is currently at a crisis point and as a leading provider of care for people with disabilities we see every day that additional funding is much needed across the health and care system to address the needs of people living with complex conditions and address systemic workforce shortages.

Without additional funding and a commitment from Government to address workforce shortages across the sector, it will remain difficult for staff to find the space and time they need to adapt their working style to incorporate new technology and innovations, potentially leading to devices being abandoned.

We know from many of our dedicated staff, pay is not the main reason why people choose to work in the health and social care sectors; however, it does have an impact on attracting and retaining skills and talent. The Disabilities Trust feels the adoption of technology among care providers ultimately needs to be begin with a commitment from Government to address some of the challenges faced by the social care sector through funding and clear strategy.

4. How and why does the independent living technology market fail to sufficiently meet the needs of disabled and older consumers? How can local authorities and central government increase access and choice for a) service providers and/or b) private self-purchasers of technology?

Whilst The Disabilities Trust does not regularly use the independent living technology market, we feel there is a role for local authorities to work with charities and organisations within the social care sector to support research and develop funding opportunities for new products and service models, alongside considering the ethical frameworks which will support these new technologies.

5. Coproducing projects and services with disabled or older people:
 - a) How can we ensure disabled and older people are active partners in their own care and support? What challenges do organisations face in engaging in coproduction?

Coproduction is a great way of ensuring new technologies and innovations are designed, developed and tested to best meet the needs of those they are designed to support. The impact evaluations from those we have supported are therefore already helping us

generate and identify new innovative ways in which these devices can be used and generating new hypotheses for further research, challenging our thinking to secure more tangible outcomes.

As previously mentioned in our answers, additional focus on collaboration would further allow working-aged adults with disabilities and the elderly to be involved in the development and testing of new technologies and innovations.

- b) What challenges do technology developers face in involving disabled and older people in product development? How can these challenges be overcome?

The Disabilities Trust is not a technology developer.