ARC East of England
Exploring the use of digital technology in older adults social care

This study is exploring digital technology use in social care and how this may support social wellbeing.

Digital technology is seen as vital to the sustainability of social care and to address service users needs with greater efficiency, speed, and relevance.

COVID-19 led to an accelerated adoption and innovation of digital technologies in social care, as well as people using their own devices to maintain contact with others. The study aimed to understand what works well, for whom, and how this supports social wellbeing. High levels of loneliness and social isolation amongst older adults and the impacts of this on individuals and health and social care services make this a timely research project.

What was the aim of the project?
This project aims to better understand if and how digital technology could support social wellbeing and identify implementation challenges to support future evaluations.

What did we do?

We have reviewed literature, scoped technologies aimed at supporting social wellbeing, and talked to people who use, design, and commission these technologies, e.g. older adults, local authorities, policy officers, technology developers, and others.

How did we involve people?

We visited places in Hertfordshire where older people live and socialise (sheltered housing, community centres, retirement complexes) and invited people to take part in focus groups and interviews to tell us if and how digital technology supports social wellbeing. Local organisations facilitated the recruitment of older adult public contributors with experience of social isolation / social care to a 'Research Advisory Group' supporting and guiding this research.

What is the impact so far?

Older adults are using technology to stay informed and connected but still value face-to-face contact. Social wellbeing may be a low cost, high-payback target for technology, but service providers and older adults can struggle to 'keep up' with the pace of digitalisation. Exclusion is attributed to a lack of resources, skills, or support, and the 'language of tech' is a barrier.

What next?

We are producing briefings of the findings and recommendations to support implementation and evaluation for older adults, stakeholders, and service providers. We will host events to gain feedback on our findings and address issues of digital technology exacerbating social inequalities. We have also identified a need for further research to focus on the perspectives of those who are choosing not to engage with technologies.

For more information about this project

Scan the QR code or contact the Principal investigator, Professor Kathryn Almack (k.almack@herts.ac.uk).

What is NIHR ARC East of England?

The National Institute for Health and Care Research Applied Research Collaboration East of England is one of the 15 NIHR ARCs. NIHR ARC East of England collaborates with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust, and the Universities of Cambridge, East Anglia, Hertfordshire and Essex along with other NHS Trusts, Local Authorities, Integrated Care Systems, patient-led organisations, charities, and industry partners.

Get in contact with NIHR ARC East of England

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