UK Policy on New Technology to Support the Independent Living of Older People

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A. Sixsmith, UK Policy on New Technology to Support the Independent Living of Older People. Gerontechnology 2002; 2(1):206-210 The role of new technology to support frail and disabled older people living at home is likely to grow significantly in coming years. However, government policy is an important factor in stimulating or constraining the use of new technology in the health and social care sectors. This is a particularly important factor in the United Kingdom (UK), where the majority of services for older people are either funded or directly provided by public sector agencies. This paper provides an overview of some of the key policies in the UK in respect to health and social care services and to the technology and telecommunications sectors and assesses the likely implications for the deployment of new technology to support older people.

Key words: older people, new technology, ICT, assistive technologies, policy

Recently, there has been increasing recognition about the potential of new technologies to improve health and social care services and enhance the independence and quality of life of older people[1-5]. However, policy is an important factor in stimulating or constraining the use of new technology in the health and social care sectors. This is a particularly important factor in the UK, where the majority of services for older people are either funded or directly provided by public sector agencies. This paper summarises some of the key policies in the UK in respect to health and social care services and to the technology and telecommunications sectors and assesses the likely implications for the deployment of new technology to support older people.

NEW TECHNOLOGY, OLDER PEOPLE, POLICIES

The potential of new technology to support older people has emerged as a policy issue for several reasons[6]. Increasing numbers of older people have forced health and social services to look at more cost-effective approaches to care and support. Most older people want to stay in their own homes and demand improved services and enhanced levels of safety and security. Manufacturers and service providers have become more aware of the market potential for meeting the demand from older people and their carers for new products and related services. The provision of care for older people presents a complex picture, with responsibilities divided between the National Health Service (NHS), who is responsible for health care, and local authorities, who are responsible for social care. Care provision is further complicated by the range of private organizations involved in the provision of services at the local level. The potential of information technology (IT) to help integrate these agencies has become increasingly recognized.

"BETTER GOVERNMENT"

This government initiative *(www.bettergovernmentforolderpeople.gov.uk/)* recognizes

that older people in the UK have received poor standards of services and aims to address these problems through more integrated services, better information, better access to services and more open and transparent decision-making. The initiative has involved setting up pilot projects covering issues such as extending independence through 'preventative' services and promoting a positive image of older people. The importance of information and its effective distribution are recognized throughout the programme, with pilots on: Information technology training for older people; using IT for learning; using IT for consultation with older people; networking and data handling; various service uses of IT; intergenerational activity with young people and older people.

LONG TERM CARE

The Royal Commission for Long Term Care was set up in 1997 to examine options for a sustainable system of funding long-term care for older people in the United Kingdom. The Royal Commission's report [2] emphasized the role of new technology: 'One of the ways in which life could improve for older people is the harnessing of new technology in new, imaginative and profitable ways. Such use of technology will enable older people to be cared for more easily so that they feel secure in their communities without the need for other, more expensive interventions…'. Mention is made to specific technologies, such as environmental control devices and activity monitoring, and the need to stimulate markets to make these readily accessible. The Royal Commission's Report has been very influential in the framing of care policy and practice. The Commission also published specially commissioned research reports, which included models for incorporating assistive technologies within the care available to elders [7].

THE UK FORESIGHT INITIATIVE

The Foresight programme brings together representatives from business, government and the academic and scientific sectors to identify and respond to emerging trends within markets and technologies. The Foresight Ageing Population Panel[8] points to the development and use of new technology as an important factor in meeting the growing demand for support services amongst the older population. A number of key issues need to be addressed over coming years, such as: lack of awareness about how population ageing will affect markets and activities; need to widest possible access to the UK's emerging Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure; need for inclusive design of products and services; outdated and dispiriting stereotypes about older people; technology should be simple to use and reliable and invisible in terms of operation and cost. Suggested solutions from Foresight include: Internet and interactive TV for education and dissemination; technology transfer and e-accessibility need to be high on agenda of policy-makers and regulators; education and training should foster awareness of the needs of older people. A call for targeted research and development has contributed towards the setting up of the EQUAL programme by the Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (www.equal.ac.uk).

INFORMATION FOR HEALTH

Recent policy for the National Health Service (NHS) has emphasized the theme of 'modernization'. Central to this is the effective use of information systems to facilitate and support the services provided to NHS patients. The NHS information strategy (www.nhsia.nhs.uk) has the following goals: lifelong electronic health records for every person in the country; round-the-clock on-line access to patient records and information about best clinical practice; genuinely seamless care for patients through general practitioners (GPs), hospitals, and community services sharing information across the NHS information highway; fast and convenient public access to information and care through

on-line information services and telemedicine; the effective use of NHS resources by providing health planners and managers with the information they need. While the emphasis is very much on information provision and sharing, there are also significant references to telemedicine and telecare interventions, for example: '…telecare technology will be used to provide reliable but unobtrusive supervision of vulnerable people who want to sustain an independent life in their own home. Video links with electronic monitoring will allow community health and social care workers to "visit" patients at home more easily ' (section 1.29).

DEPARTMENT OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY

The Department of Trade and Industry[9] has examined the needs of older and disabled people from the perspective of new technology equipment and services providers. Key weaknesses exist within the current market that constrain the use of new technology to support older people, for example: lack of awareness of the potential benefits; poor performance in designing suitable products. Inadequate access to products and services; inadequate distribution channels; lack of awareness of Disability Discrimination Act; lack of standards to ensure that benefits of new technologies are passed on to older people. Several recommendations have been made to address these issues, such as improving awareness and information channels; increase adoption of Design-for-all principles within industry; encourage and improve technology transfer; improved training for product designers; elderly people should be championed on standards committees.

STRATEGY FOR CARERS

The Department of Health[10] published its 'National Strategy for Carers', aiming to support carers through better information, support and care services. New technology was seen as a way of providing information more accessible to users, e.g. through help lines and access to counseling services. Technology can also help in the task of caring, e.g. monitoring systems and community alarms. Public access to information will require information points in GP surgeries, libraries, etc. A range of concrete actions have been implemented including: new UK charter on long term care: NHS Direct helpline for carers; government information on the Internet through UK Government online.

A NATIONAL SERVICE FRAMEWORK

The National Service Framework for Older People (NSF)[11] is the current government's strategy to improve health and social care services. The NSF outlines a programme of reform based on a number of themes, such as person-centred care and helping older people to stay healthy and live independently. While direct reference to technology is limited, considerable emphasis is placed on the role of equipment services in general in helping older people to remain independent and to '…improve the safety of the older person at home'. Specific mention is made of new technology and passive monitoring systems. The NSF outlines a timetable for specific actions in relation to finance; workforce; research and development; clinical and practice decision support services; information strategy for older people. For example specific requirements for the joint planning, delivery, and funding of equipment services are outlined.

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

In the UK, there are a number of non-governmental organizations concerned with issues relating to older people and the use of technology. These organizations are actively involved in the formulation of policy and play a major role in shaping public opinion, governmental policy, and the development of regulations, legislation and product/design guidelines. Some or these, such as Age Concern England, have a general concern over elderly issues.

Organizations such as the Anchor Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation are major funders of research and have been involved in technology-based projects. A number of organizations have a specific interest in disseminating, promoting, and facilitating the use of technologies by disabled and older people. For example, the Advisory Committee on Telecommunications for Disabled and Older People (DIEL) was set up by Act of Parliament to advise the telecommunications industry regulator OFTEL, on the specific requirements elderly or disabled people, with the aim to promote better access to telecommunications by this group.

CONCLUSION

This brief report has summarized some of the key UK policies relating to older people and the use of new technology to support independent living and improve health and welfare services. The role of new technology has been recognized and articulated within a range of policy statements. The debate involves a range of perspectives and initiatives in both the public and private sectors, including the non-governmental sector, long-term care, telecommunications industry and technology/commercial foresight. However, these show considerable amount of convergence in terms of issues and problems being addressed and agreement regarding potential solutions. The policy debate is also being translated into practical measures. For example, the NSF specifies a number of key targets for equipment services.

However, current policy is rather limited in some respects. While the NSF will be a major force in shaping services for older people, it lacks a clear vision of how new technology should be developed and implemented in the coming years. Although the potential of new technology is recognised, no clear development strategy or targets have been mapped out. It is also important to raise two further issues.

Firstly, if the development of new technology is to be user-led, rather than technology-driven, then it is important that mechanisms for articulating the views of older people and their carers are set up, not only in terms of usability studies, but also at the strategic level in terms of socially shaping new technology development and implementation[12]. Secondly, there is very little concrete evidence about the cost-effectiveness of technological interventions[13]. Without clear evidence of potential cost savings/implications and the development of new business models for health and social care services, the adoption of new technologies will remain limited. The issues raised in this paper indicate that the realization of the potential of new technology for the benefit of older people requires a strong champion. As the major funder of health and social care in the UK, the state has a crucial role to play in driving the use of new technologies within health and social care.

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