Using New Technology to enhance the lives of Older People in Newcastle

An ActiveAge Discussion Paper

This paper has been drafted following a series of ‘focus group’ discussions initiated by ActiveAge, a consortium of commercial and public partners that have come together to explore the potential uses of digital technology to help older people maintain their independence through social networking and other opportunities that the technology may offer. The paper seeks to present some of the areas in which digital technology might bring benefits for Older People in Newcastle from the perspective of the Council Adult Services Department. It also seeks to provide a strategic framework within which such developments can be rolled out across the city.

Current & Potential Products

It is possible to identify five categories of ‘product’ that could make a significant contribution to maintaining the independence of older people, some of which are already available within the City. These are:

TeleCare: Newcastle Council, the PCT and Your Homes Newcastle are rolling out TeleCare equipment to homes across the city, and a joint TeleCare strategy was launched earlier this year. However, there is a long way to go before the equipment is universally available to older people and the City may not be benefiting as much as it might from the most recent technological developments.

TeleHealth: The picture with regard to TeleHealth and TeleMedicine in Newcastle is less clear, although there is undoubtedly an overlap with TeleCare provision. There is significant scope for innovation in this field, including the use of various self-help facilities e.g. games to retard memory loss.

Information: Age Concern hosts the ‘Information Now’ website which is well used and well regarded, but there is undoubtedly more that could be done to enhance this service and to make it even more user friendly. There is a particular interest in developing an information service for people in crisis and/or with complex needs.

Social Networking: This is already well developed on the internet, but much more needs to be done to open up these opportunities to older people, thereby reducing social isolation and enhancing citizenship.
‘Shop for Support’: As people begin to receive Personal Budgets to design and purchase their own support packages, they will want access to a simple means of finding out about the support services that are available in the City.

There are a number of initiatives elsewhere in the country to develop an on-line way of doing this. We need to look at what has already been developed, but also consider whether there is a case for developing our own approach, perhaps as an enhancement to the Information Now website. It would also be immensely helpful to build into this the means whereby people can not only purchase from within the existing market, but can shape the market of the future.

**Access issues**

Although a growing number of people over 65 are making use of new technology, there is still considerable reticence on the part of many. In order to make the medium more accessible to those people, and to older people of the future, the following three areas probably need to be addressed:

**Points of Entry:** Access to the internet could be provided in three ways – in the person’s home, in community facilities (e.g. Libraries, GP practices, Day Centres etc), or via mobile equipment used by professionals.

There is probably a case for piloting some work around each of these. It would be useful to explore whether there a way of providing funding to increase the number of older people who have computers in their own home, perhaps as part of a care package and/or linked to training (see below). There is also a strong case for piloting access with support in some community facilities (the Council’s Libraries service would probably be keen to be part of this), and the use of mobile technology by professionals?

**IT Support:** Many people need training to use new technology (not just how to use it, but also what to use it for and how to get the best out of it). People would probably also benefit from some sort of ongoing support, so that they don’t give up when something goes wrong or they can’t work out how to do something.

There is a case for targeting such services at key groups of older people, but thought also needs to be given to planning for the future – what can be done to encourage the next generation of older people to become familiar and comfortable with new technology?

**Software:** What can be done to make formats/software more older-person-friendly?
Developing a Strategic Approach

There are a number of existing strategies within the City which have some relevance to the use of digital technology by Older People. Key among these are the following:

‘Everyone’s Tomorrow’: The strategy for older people and an ageing population in Newcastle upon Tyne. This strategy was developed under the auspices of the Newcastle Strategic Partnership. It is overseen by a partnership board with substantial representation from older people.

TeleCare Strategy: A joint venture between Newcastle Adult Services & Your homes Newcastle (the city ALMO), launched earlier this year following a successful pilot stage.

Digital Connectivity Strategy: This is currently being prepared by the Council to address digital exclusion in the City.

From the focus groups has emerged a sense that there are some good initiatives going on in the city, but that these are not ‘joined-up’.

However, over and above this concern, there is recognition that the potential benefits to Older People from using digital technology contrast markedly with the current accessibility of that technology, and that there is a need to develop a formal strategic approach to the issue. Everyone’s Tomorrow is due for review later this year, and it has been proposed that we should introduce a new strategic objective into the strategy as follows:

“To address the digital exclusion of Older People and to maximise the use of digital technology to promote independence, particularly among those Older People with long term conditions”

In order to achieve this it has also been proposed that the strategy might initially focus on the following key aims:

- Establish an Older People’s digital inclusion strategic task group
- Develop a programme to introduce Older People to digital technology and to familiarise them to its potential uses/benefits
- Develop some core digital tools that can be made accessible to Older People across the city
- Agree and develop a small number of priority projects e.g. social networking
- Provide strategic leadership for the accelerated roll-out of TeleCare and TeleHealth equipment
- Test out different models for access (e.g. home, mobile working, community locations) on a neighbourhood basis across the city
Next Steps

There are a number of focus group discussions still to take place, following which the core partners within Active Age will develop proposals for one or more ‘priority projects’ These proposals will then be presented to a stakeholder workshop for validation and shaping

There is a forthcoming review of Everyone’s Tomorrow. Representatives from the Council will work with the Quality of Life Partnership to include the proposals outlined above within the strategy

Colin Williams
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