

2020 Vision

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We have just begun a new decade, and it's one that promises great change for health, housing and social care and organisations like Tunstall that work with them. A major reason for this will be the way technology is used. The NHS Long Term Plan, published in 2019, underpins the importance of technology in the future NHS, and the creation of NHSX in the same year was intended to drive digital transformation. This coincides with the transition of the UK's communication network from analogue to digital, which is currently underway and set to be complete by 2025.

But what will digital technology give us?

The ability to deliver more person-centred care.

Telecare systems have always been flexible and able to adapt to people's distinct and changing needs. However, the latest generation of solutions are able to establish a baseline for an individual's activities and behaviours, providing valuable insight to help create the right care package for them. For example, if someone goes to bed and gets up at regular times, unobtrusive sensors can be put in place to raise an alert if this fails to happen, enabling their wellbeing to be checked. Behaviour can be monitored over time, and changes such as reduced movement around the home, or fewer visits to the kitchen or bathroom may indicate a reduction in the ability to self-care, and the requirement for increased support.

A move to more proactive and preventative models

Traditionally, telecare (and community or social alarms as they used to be known) has been used to react to emergencies such as falls or fires. Technology is advancing to become more predictive, using monitoring and technology to enable early intervention if it becomes apparent that someone's health is deteriorating.

Tunstall in Spain combines a telecare and response service with outbound calling for more than 165,000 people in Catalonia. Calls are made on a regular basis to check on service users' wellbeing, remind them about appointments or to take medication, and also to offer public health advice or in the event of a personal crisis such as a bereavement. A recent evaluation study found that the service had enabled admission into residential care to be delayed by 262 days (median) or 346 days (mean) per service user, and ambulance mobilisations per person, per annum, had fallen from 0.46 to 0.31.

Greater integration

Interoperability will play a greater part in the provision of services over the coming decade, both in terms of devices and data. The use of digital devices in the home is growing exponentially, and as the decade progresses, I predict we will see not only increased adoption of smart technologies, but also an increasing amount of these technologies will connect and work together. Consumer technology will be mixed and matched with standards-compliant telecare systems to create person-centred care. Family members will become increasingly tech aware, and will identify and even fund devices to support people they care for. From a software point of view, we may well see convergence, as stakeholders continue to move towards more integrated working practices and the digital transition accelerates.

The digital opportunity

In short, the next ten years could be pivotal in transforming the way we use technology as part of services, and my focus is on shaping Tunstall's strategy and resources to help our customers become agile enough to fully realise the digital opportunity.