



sense
for deafblind people

Summary for Participants

Keeping in Touch with Technology?

*Using telecare and assistive
technology to support older people
with dual sensory impairment*

Kate Hamblin, Emma-Reetta Koivunen & Sue Yeandle

Keeping in Touch with Technology?

Summary of the study's main findings

Our study was commissioned in 2014 by **Sense**, the national charity for dual sensory impaired (DSI) and deafblind people, to explore the experiences of older people using telecare and assistive technology.

Growing numbers of people with sight and hearing problems are living in the community; 7 in 10 of them are over 70. **By 2030, the UK is likely to have 570,000 people with hearing and sight problems**, including 418,000 people over 70 and 245,000 people with severe impairments. There have been rapid developments in telecare and other forms of technology designed for older people living independently. **Our study aimed to find out how well this worked for those with DSI.**

In 2014-15, researchers from the Universities of Leeds and Oxford and from Sense made repeat visits over several months to 38 older people using telecare or other technology to help with difficulties with their hearing and vision.

We discussed their experiences of using telecare and other technologies with a communication function (such as a pendant alarm, computer screen magnifier, liquid level indicator, pen reader or flashing beacon) and other aspects of their lives, as well as their thoughts and feelings. **This leaflet outlines some of the things they found.**

What everyday activities do hearing and sight problems make more difficult?

Not everyone we spoke to was finding everyday activities difficult, but many said things like travel, cooking, cleaning and communicating with others were affected by their hearing and visual impairments. Some had adjusted to a single sensory impairment earlier in their lives and were dealing with deterioration of the other sense on which they had been relying. Others also had other health conditions or disabilities which affected their mobility, strength, dexterity, balance, energy or mood.

What types of technology were people with sight and hearing problems using?

People had varied technology, from simple devices to complex, specialist equipment.

- 29 people had **technology they could use to summon help** (e.g. a pendant alarm) or which alerted them to something (e.g. flashing beacons linked to a smoke alarm).
- About **a third had technology to help them hear** (aside from hearing aids) and around **two-thirds had devices to help them see**.
- Some, but less than half, had **specialist ICT or telecommunication equipment**.
- Away from home, **accessible GPS devices** helped some to travel and access activities.

Mrs Bennetton, 60

Sadly, I no longer feel safe unless I have another person with me. I never thought I would feel vulnerable. Going out alone with my guide dog has become a challenge for me psychologically.

Where did people get their technology equipment?

Most telecare and 'alerting technology' had been supplied by local authorities (and a few items by local fire services). **People with sight and hearing problems are entitled to a specialist assessment** but some participants reported difficulty in obtaining one. Some felt their assessment had not adequately explored what was important to them, as it had focused almost exclusively on risk and safety.

A few people had been referred by the NHS to social services; some had been supplied with hearing aids, magnifiers and talking blood glucose monitors through the NHS.

Charitable organisations had provided some participants with equipment, support and advice relating to technology; most were happy with this service.

A few people had equipment on loan. **Some organisations offered a wide range of equipment, supported by training courses, home visits or bespoke assistance.**

Many people had purchased some equipment privately; a few did so after reviewing equipment at a Sight Village exhibition. **Many felt anxious about purchasing expensive items and would have liked independent advice** which had not been available.

How did people feel about using technology?

- **Some people were sceptical or concerned about using telecare or assistive technology**, either because of past, negative experiences with equipment or machinery or because they felt it might mark them out as 'different' or 'vulnerable'.

Mrs Bradshaw, 86

I have a deep mistrust of technical items (especially electrical) as they 'go wrong' quite quickly after purchase. My husband who could 'do everything' kept all items repaired, fixed and usable. I miss him so much.

- **Others felt they were 'too old' to learn**, and a few expressed a preference for human rather than technological assistance.

Mr Terry, 92

I could not keep up. I find technology is moving too fast – the latest phone or Ipad is superseded next week.

- By contrast, **some participants were 'enthusiasts'** who said they had always been interested in, or always liked technology.
- **Technology helped some people manage everyday chores, journeys and routines**, but others said it changed the nature of activities like shopping and socialising, which became a different experience when done online.

- Within the home, **technology helped some people with leisure**, including reading and cooking, but was rarely used for activities like cleaning or gardening.
- **Some people used technology to manage personal correspondence and finances**. Devices such as audible scanners, Braille note-takers and accessible software were expensive, however, and out of reach for some.
- For some, but not all, participants, **technology made a positive difference in their communication and relationships**. Some had technology which enabled them to use email and social media and were regularly in contact with 'email friends'.

Mr Hopkirk, 86

Getting my textphone was a real boon in terms of communication. It's essential for me.

- **Alerting technologies improved some people's relationships** by reducing concern about risk, particularly if families or friends were anxious about their safety.

Mrs Jackson, 72

I've got the security. I've got the independence. I've got a pull cord system in each room. So if I'm ill, I just pull the cord and there's somebody on the end of the line. That feeling of, when you live on your own, that feeling of having somebody at hand if you need them.

Barriers to using assistive technology

The people we spoke to told us about some of the issues they faced in accessing assistive technology. They included:

Information and advice:

- **Not knowing what is available, or where to get it from**, or feeling information might not be reliable or that they might purchase something not right for them.

Mr Gill, 74

It's hard to know what else I would like, technology-wise, without knowing what else is available.

- Although family members or care workers were often willing to help people find out about or use technology, many did not know how to do this.
- Some people had obtained good information and support from voluntary organisations and used specialist services for people with hearing and sight problems. Even for them, however, **'choosing the right option' was difficult and could be a source of anxiety.**
- Most people thought **an independent advice service, specifically for older people with hearing and sight problems, was needed.**

Cost and choice

- **Cost was a major barrier to access for most people. Many felt confused or worried by different prices and the many products available** for private purchase; some bought nothing, lacking confidence in the suitability or the value for money of items.
- A few people felt 'lucky' they could afford the things they needed. **Most had to think very carefully about expensive items** and needed to use the payments they receive to help them manage their disabilities to cover their cost.
- Some people said their local authority **offered a very limited range of products, or focused only on safety**, ignoring other equipment they might wish to have.

Fit for purpose?

- Many people said that **available equipment did not meet their needs** and that they felt forced to 'compromise'.
- As products for people with sensory impairments often rely on using another sense, **much equipment was unsuitable for people with a hearing and visual impairment.**
- At home, many people had **equipment they could not use, had put aside, or could not locate.**
- Many had **lacked necessary guidance on using equipment** when it was first supplied, if difficulties arose, or when their circumstances changed.

What were our conclusions and recommendations?

- When it suits the abilities of an older person with both sight and hearing difficulties, **technology can have many benefits** and help them in their everyday life.
- **Service providers, assistive technology suppliers and product developers need to do much more** to meet the diverse needs of rising numbers of older people with both sight and hearing problems.
- Some people in the study had **negative attitudes** towards technology, but these **were not the main impediment to effective use of technology**.
- **Limited knowledge and low awareness** of available equipment and technology, and a lack of information about how to obtain it, were common problems.
- **Few items of equipment seemed to have been designed for those with both hearing and sight problems.**

What did we do with our findings?

- We are working with Sense to ensure our findings are communicated to everyone involved in developing, supplying and planning support using technology.
- We have published a **full report** about the findings of the study. **If you would like a copy** of this, please contact Kate Hamblin or Sue Yeandle:

Dr Kate Hamblin

Oxford Institute of Population Ageing
66 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 6PR
Tel 01865 612816
kate.hamblin@ageing.ox.ac.uk

Professor Sue Yeandle

CIRCLE/Dept of Sociological Studies
University of Sheffield
Sheffield S10 2TU
Tel 0114 2226485
s.yeandle@sheffield.ac.uk

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For more information about Sense, the charity for deafblind children and adults, and how Sense helps older people with problems with both hearing and vision, contact: Email: info@sense.org.uk, Tel: **0300 330 9256** or **020 7520 0972**, Textphone: **0300 330 9256** or **020 7520 0972**, Fax: **0300 330 9251**

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