

Technology is failing to meet the needs of older people with hearing and sight problems, report finds

March 10 2016, by Hannah Postles

Assistive technology developers and service providers need to do more to meet the diverse needs of the rising number of older people with both hearing and sight problems, according to a new report launched at the University of Sheffield today (10 March 2016).

The study - *Keeping in Touch with Technology?* - was commissioned in 2014 by Sense, the national charity for 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 and seven in ten of those are aged 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.

To find out more about their experiences, researchers made repeat visits over several months to 38 older people using telecare or other technology to help with their hearing and vision.

They found:

- 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 lives

- However, [service providers](#), assistive technology suppliers and product developers need to do more to meet the diverse needs of the rising number of older people with both hearing and sight problems
- Some people in the study had negative attitudes towards technology, but these were not the main thing stopping them from effectively using 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 sight and hearing problems.

Professor Sue Yeandle, Professor of Sociology and Director of the Centre for International Research on Care, Labour and Equalities (CIRCLE) at the University of Sheffield, led the study with the Universities of Leeds and Oxford.

The report will be launched during an event attended by former Home Secretary the Rt Hon Lord Blunkett.

Professor Yeandle said: "Huge strides have been made in technologies which can help people with sight, hearing and other difficulties communicate with others and live well and independently. But too few of the growing number who could benefit get this equipment – and many of them lack items designed with their needs and lifestyles in mind, or don't get the follow-up support needed to use them.

"We are working with Sense to ensure our findings are communicated to everyone involved in developing, supplying and planning support using technology. Our conference today will focus on exploring practical ways of giving older people with dual sensory impairment a stronger voice, and ensuring their needs and aspirations are met."

In the study, most of the people with DSI used equipment to summon help or alert them to something – like a pendant alarm or flashing beacons linked to a smoke alarm. About a third had technology to help them hear, aside from hearing aids, and two thirds had devices to help them see. Some also had specialist ICT or telecommunications equipment, and away from home accessible GPS devices helped some to travel and access activities.

People with sight and [hearing problems](#) are entitled to a specialist assessment, but some participants reported difficulty in obtaining one and others said their focus was almost exclusively on risk and safety rather than what was important to them. Most telecare and 'alerting technology' had been supplied by local authorities. A few people had been referred by the NHS to social services and some had been supplied with [hearing](#) aids, magnifiers and talking blood glucose monitors through the NHS. Charitable organisations had also provided some participants with equipment, support and advice relating to technology and most were happy with this service.

However, some people were sceptical or concerned about using telecare or assistive technology, either because of past, negative experiences with equipment or a fear it might mark them out as vulnerable. Some felt they were too old to learn, while others were enthusiastic and said [technology](#) helped them manage everyday chores, journeys and routines.

The study found alerting technologies, like pendant alarms, improved people's relationships by reducing concern about risk, particularly if their family or friends were concerned about their safety.

However, participants noted some barriers to using [assistive technology](#), including:

- Not knowing what is available or where to get it from

- The cost and choice, with many feeling confused or worried about different prices and the many products available for private purchase
- A limited choice of products being available from their local authority
- The available equipment failing to fit their needs and feeling they were forced to 'compromise'
- Lacking the necessary guidance on using [equipment](#) when it was first supplied, if any difficulties arose, or when their circumstances changed.

Provided by University of Sheffield

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