

White paper

Digital Social Work

Pandemic experience survey findings

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The views and opinions expressed in this report are solely the author's and derived from the interview process described herein. Best endeavours have been made to keep the information current and accurate while recognising that the 'business' of social care and its related IT aspects is subject to continuous change.

If there are any anomalies, details, or differences of opinion that the reader would like to draw attention to, do please get in touch directly.

The author would welcome contributions from interested parties on the major issues that they face in managing social care IT in the current and post-Covid pandemic period, and in particular, how those experiences could influence the future shape of systems and technology solutions for social care.

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Introduction & Background

For this research project, to evaluate service priorities and how to achieve them through better utilisation of systems and technology, a standardised questionnaire was developed and responses to that, form the basis of this briefing note. The responses to the composite questionnaire for IT suppliers, IT managers and Service Managers are shown overleaf, either in bullet form or narrative, whichever was more relevant.

The interviews were undertaken by telephone, under 'Chatham House' rules and covered a wide range of senior managers, both in the service, LA IT services and major IT suppliers themselves; independent consultants specialising in health and social care IT also took part.

When gathering background material for this report, it became obvious that there didn't seem to be much in the way of recent or meaningful independently published material available on connecting social care services systems, technology opportunities, the capability of their IT suppliers, and IT industry innovations more generally.

Discussions do take place, workshops happen, and industry white papers do get published, but this activity is typically localised, with outcomes from initiatives sometimes being difficult to track down and research which tends to be 'single-issue' based.

More significantly, from the interviews it became obvious that there appears to be no real mechanisms to follow through ideas and opportunities around service and systems innovation that would bring benefits to the wider social care community, even though there are investment programmes that do fund pilot projects in a number of areas, many involving multiple organisations.

It was also identified that there appeared to be no specific 'knowledge-hub' for social care that systematically tries to 'join the dots' between service delivery improvements and technology capability in this 'digital age.' That's not to say that service innovation and technology support for this doesn't happen, as there are many examples where it does, but capitalising on these and associated systematic exploitation across the wider services nationally, is more difficult to achieve.

The service is not unaware of this, as a consistent message about the need for, and value of, a localised Information Strategy for social care was one of the key messages from the interview process that took place as part of the information gathering for this report, especially if they are to take advantage of the great volumes of data collected.

But the interview process was not just about IT strategy, another strong message was about encouraging essential critical thinking to identify service needs from IT, and embedded this in departmental strategic planning to get consistent value from investments.

Q1. What are the top social care service priorities 2020-2021?

Responses

- A re-alignment towards more early intervention, preventative, and community-based resources. For ASC, this to support more health service integration.
- Increased use of direct payments and 'personalisation' more generally.
- Learning from Covid experiences, e.g. what to keep, build on, or let go - redesigning services and business processes to support service delivery across organisational boundaries.
- More 'customer friendly' self-service portals and easier ways for them to carry out on-line assessments.
- Improving service package reviews particularly across agencies to monitor outcomes more effectively, and in more collaborative ways.
- More assistive technologies.
- Improved brokerage facilities.
- Evaluating process automation to increase efficiencies and improve decision making.
- Better information management facilities, including identification of risk, also better information results in better decisions, producing better outcomes.
- Embedding/alignment of new ways of working and accelerating business transformation generally for social work and interagency working.
- Enhanced financial management facilities to monitor working across the 'whole system of care' in ASC generally, and Care Homes particularly.
- Greater integration of Education and Children's services teams for efficiency and improving risk management.
- More intense levels of individual support to clients and increased supported living services.
- Reviewing workplace strategies to support more flexible working.
- Finding smart ways to 'reset' the service whilst at the same time trying to catch up with the backlogs, particularly in CSC where 'black-holes' have opened up due to lockdown.

Q2. Do you think that IT is seen as a strategic asset and an opportunity for service innovation and business change?

Responses

There was a clear recognition that individually and collectively, senior managers in the service and local IT managers need to get more engaged in identifying opportunities across the whole range of service operations for 'digital-age' improvements. Not just in improving service management and client outcomes, but also in projecting what the 'future-shape' of social care services could be in terms of citizen-based public services in the 'information-age' we find ourselves in.

Many senior managers are already seeing this as a priority and have projects and initiatives underway, but interviewees also acknowledge that more needs to be done, albeit given other current pressures and priorities take precedent.

It is genuinely difficult to create the 'head-room' and associated budgets to take advantage of what might be on offer, both within the council and from the industry generally, especially in 'mirroring' consumer access to information services in the commercial and retail sectors.

Interestingly, the IT industry, including the suppliers in the sector, have mixed views on the extent that LA's and Social Care generally see IT as a strategic asset. Pre-Covid there seemed to be some ambivalence by LA's towards managing it as such, but since the epidemic created the working from home necessity, more thought seems to have been given to their existing IT capability and they are more optimistic about the critical nature of case management for operational service continuity, especially across organisational boundaries.

Ideally, suppliers would like LA's to develop Return on Investments models [RoI] as part of the commitment to strategic planning for IT, rather than just relying on the ad-hoc business cases based on systems replacements.

IT managers and suppliers both agreed that with a business-led 'information strategy' defining how taking advantage of systems and technology could be achieved would also identify how to get value from the large amounts of data they regularly collect, and this would be a significant opportunity to improve organisational performance at many levels.

Service managers found the idea of setting the pace of service change via technology-led innovation was something that would be attractive, and should be seriously considered; but the timing for this was not right now.

Q3. If investing in IT is seen as a strategic asset, what's your local experience?

Responses

- There has been a shift in attitude in this Covid-19 environment towards recognising systems and technology as moving away from being more than just 'enabling', towards an asset that can accelerate or even initiate rapid business change.
- The demand for an accelerated roll-out and adoption rate of MS Teams was achieved with hardly any significant 'resistance to change'.
- An acknowledgement that good IT infrastructure investment is essential and critical if operational service improvements are to be achieved quickly.
- Business transformation projects have become an increased priority, with an emphasis upon the need for a high IT content and context – 'digital first', especially related to clients/public engagement.
- The shareability of data, both within the council, and across organisational boundaries was easier to achieve under the Covid circumstances than ever imagined prior to this, and perhaps indicates that information governance practices were sometimes more of a barrier than they should have been.
- Business intelligence and predictive analytic tools have become really valuable technologies, rather than the latest 'toys in the shop' and have demonstrated really quickly, the value of skilled analysts coupled to service knowledge.
- The need to utilise the extensive personal technology skills that individuals have in the service even more post-Covid, to help drive change towards a more digitally-led service overall.
- Systems integration and data-sharing wasn't difficult to achieve and needs to become much more of the normal ways of working within the LA and with partner agencies.
- An increased recognition of the difficulty that suppliers must have in meeting the demands for systems solutions that can cope with the contrast between reflective, relationship based practice, and good back-office record keeping, particularly where different professional groups are involved.

Q4. What are seen as the top three - five IT priorities 2020-2021?

Responses

- Learning lessons from Covid experiences to re-launch the LA digital programme and link this to wider business transformation, e.g. re-imagining local government services.
- Delivering new styles of systems integration, e.g. with care service providers.
- Harmonisation of data and implementing more 'business intelligence' and data analytics services and enhanced reporting facilities.
- Using IT to support or enable more service collaboration with partner organisations.
- Publishing information strategies, linked to business plans/objectives so that technology can be exploited in a consistent, business-led approach, with executive sponsorship.
- For ASC, increased visibility of client's financial transactions across the LA and NHS service delivery spectrum.
- Channel shift – towards self-service portals, a more modern digital front-door to cope with a higher level of citizen engagement, but 'joined-up' internally within the LA.
- A shift away from LA-centric digitisation and records management, towards 'customer perspective' digital records, especially providing a digital end-to-end service within the LA to its community.
- Implementing platform based, supplier agnostic systems which are cloud-based and technology investments being more service led, including exploring the potential of Software as a Service products.
- Working more in partnership with IT suppliers.
- Implementing a continuous improvement programme for existing systems users, including extending the Covid experiences on e-learning.
- Exploring ideas around more collaborative working and data-sharing with coterminous LA's and pooling of scarce resources.
- Developing 'lightweight' systems solutions, ideally in-house, particularly for web-apps
- Managing the backlog in assessment and paused care delivery.
- Developing partner programmes for future proofing investments, particularly in advanced technologies like Artificial Intelligence and Assistive Technologies and supporting services like Public Health.

Q5. Recent BASW AND SCIE research identified that front-line social workers spend too much time in front of computers to the detriment of face-to-face time with clients – what is your view and local experience?

Responses

Pre-Covid, this may have been probably, generally, correct and perhaps in CSC this attitude had become more prevalent, justifiable or not, in the view of interviewees. But there would have been multiple reasons for this, some of them positive, others less so.

However, part of the pandemic response has meant that there has been extensive use of MS Teams as a primary communication tool within the service, and across organisational boundaries, and to a certain extent, with clients themselves, thus making computers “indispensable”.

More extensive case-management information sharing has also taken place in these pan-organisational settings, and with flexible working and remote access becoming the norm, rather than staff being office-based, mobile technologies are also utilised more, and more often, adding to the “indispensable” nature of digital working.

Many of the interviewees thought it would be more interesting to revisit the original research behind this work and comparative research on better ways of recording of information more imaginatively to optimise data capture and enable more innovative case management content. This would make it more attractive to use ‘computers’ in the broadest sense and increase efficiency substantially.

One of the common themes emerging though was the difference in attitude and culture of the newer qualified practitioners, who believed that using ‘computers’ was the working normality, “so what was the problem”? But some also thought that they were being de-skilled when comparing their personal digital experiences with work-based offerings.

However, many also thought that the design of some CSC systems weren’t intuitive enough and didn’t reflect operational practice flexibly enough and was more of an organisational imposition at times.

There was a recognition that if more effort had been put into implementing more substantial ‘client-held’ records by the service, computers would have helped more in terms of genuine digital case management engagement when clients were socially isolating. Interestingly, case management suppliers have had the capability to deliver this functionality for some time now, but it hasn’t been deemed essential by customers.

The general view was that overall, social workers would not be that concerned with further digitisation and use of computers if they could easily and quickly recognise a direct benefit, to efficiency and improving client outcomes.

Q6. The same research had also identified that there is a greater need for education and training to create a more ‘digital-ready’ workforce – what is your view and local experience?

Responses

Without a doubt the Covid-19 pandemic and the public service response to it by social care generally has accelerated the ‘digital-readiness’ of its workforce, albeit, for many, with the minimal of training on the likes of MS Teams.

Many interviewees thought this was a significant positive force for change and has implications for learning styles, workforce development and previous ideas around the need for an ‘evolutionary’ approach to introducing systems-led business change.

For a small number of councils, their replacement of much older case management systems has encouraged a greater acceptance of digital systems solutions, and these were delivered primarily remotely, in terms of user acceptance testing, staff training, systems configuration and data migration.

This has been a remarkable implementation experience for suppliers and LA’s alike, which has many implications for future deployment of new or upgraded systems solutions. For example, the need for having ‘back-office’ systems support based locally, particularly if resources locally are in short supply, either through costs or skills availability.

Case management systems suppliers have all experienced substantial gains in digital readiness in the service where they have delivered new Covid-style systems improvements, but would acknowledge that in their experience, digital readiness was not universally embedded in the service pre-Covid.

But they are encouraged by recent responses, although they genuinely believed that developing a more digital-ready workforce was inhibited by the lack of local IT training and business analysis skills and capacity, which in essence was partially about more effective and consistent funding, especially if a continuous improvement programme was to be implemented.

LA’s readily accept that there is not enough funding to put in place additional resources so that they can take their systems utilisation to a higher level, and they would have plenty of good ideas as to how to do this, as and when the opportunity arose.

There were some interesting comments about what might happen if the service was much more digital savvy in terms of having greater knowledge about the opportunities possible from advanced technologies, and thus increasing their ability to apply pressure on system suppliers to deliver better solutions.

Q7. What might bring the highest value from IT investment, and how might this be achieved?

Responses

- A greater level of data harmonisation so that it can be used more effectively.
- Investing in data quality improvements so getting real value from the use of Predictive Analytics and Artificial Intelligence tools becomes more realistic
- Investing more in 'personalisation'.
- Investing more in strategic commissioning of IT investment and supplier market management.
- Making best use of what you already have.
- Having a more digitally mature organisation.
- Finding ways to save time = saving money.
- Properly thought through benefit realisation programmes.
- More collaboration between LA's, as not all councils are equal in terms of availability of skills and resources, e.g. couldn't cheaper and probably more available LA IT support staff in Northumberland support social workers in Surrey if they had the same system [these LA's were used just as an illustration, not an ambition!].
- Employ data scientists as well as boosting Business Information Team resources and profiles so that the ability to create multiple views from expanded data sets [including from elsewhere] is easier to achieve.
- Recognising the lessons from the Covid-19 experiences, e.g. the office of the future is not an office!
- Identifying new value chains for IT to influence, and making sure that these can be used to re-shape the service, and services.
- Take more control over your current IT investments, including its future utilisation.
- Invest in the infrastructure first, then the business applications, then training.
- Invest in the workforce to make them more aware of the transformational nature of systems and technology.

Q8. What would be the most important change IT suppliers and LA's would like to see?

Responses

- Both wanted to see more strategic relationships being developed, locally, or perhaps with a regional emphasis, but with more 'original thinking' taking place wherever it happened.
- Both recognised that exciting ideas and concepts are discussed in terms of service innovation and technology options, but a consistent lack of funding and traditional commercial interests usually get in the way of making progress.
- LA's would like IT suppliers to stop 'monetising' everything they seem to do, which inhibits developing closer working relationships.
- LA's would like IT suppliers to be more open and transparent about their business, particularly their limitations around road-maps and options for future development.
- LA's would like to see more competition and choice, but don't really know how to help achieve this, due to their acknowledged lack of commercial 'nous'.
- LA's would like to see more collaborative working initiatives between suppliers, but recognise that they are competitors in a challenging business environment.
- LA's would like IT suppliers to commit to more pilot work or proof of concept development under a shared risk/reward basis.
- IT suppliers would like LA's to spend more time trying to understand the commercial nature of a software company, for example, applying strategic commissioning attitudes.
- IT suppliers would like some acknowledgement that LA's, by being traditionally risk-averse, limits innovation, but also suggest LA collaboration may help manage this.
- IT suppliers would like to see more strategic information systems planning undertaken to help set the framework for their technology solutions, including jointly owned benefits realisation strategies.
- IT suppliers wanted LA's to be more committed to understanding the difference between price, cost and value and recognising that going for a lowest cost model eventually inhibits competition, i.e. "a race to the bottom".
- IT suppliers would like LA's to acknowledge that their lack of skilled resources is one of the main limitations to getting better value from what already exists.

Q9. What would social care and case management suppliers like to see as the outcome from this research project?

Responses

Both liked the idea around promoting and developing a more collegiate way of working, but sometimes for different reasons, e.g. the benchmarking of IT efficiency and effectiveness could create ‘leverage’ with IT suppliers for LA’s, which IT suppliers may not welcome too much, if it seemed to affect their short-term commercial interests.

But an expansion of the spread of knowledge and innovation could be worth the price of this, if it increases the development of new ideas and clearer definition of key business requirements more generally that both could benefit from.

IT suppliers cautiously welcomed the idea around more strategic ‘competitive collaboration’ to support technology innovation¹ or meet legislative requirements², which to a certain extent already happens operationally where there are different suppliers for each service group in a single council, or multiple suppliers involved in the same local Integrated Digital Care Records projects across a region.

Both LA’s and IT suppliers for broadly the same reasons, would like the profile of social care IT to be much higher within the overall council investment and strategic IT planning process, and would like this to be broadcast more widely and acknowledged more openly.

They also collectively agreed that the major limitation in LA’s getting more value in almost all circumstances was about not having enough skilled and experienced staff to take advantage of digital innovation or existing systems and technology, and would like this to be broadcast more widely and acknowledged more openly.

Q10. Would you be interested in taking part in future research/ shaping of social care IT

There was universal acceptance of the need for more work in this area, and all interviewees would be more than willing to take part in developing new ideas and ways of improving on what already exists.

1. Senior practitioner’s who took part in the Partners in Practice programme mentioned that they would have preferred to have had IT supplier input into the projects to support service innovation at the outset, but this opportunity for shared development and corresponding value was not recognised until much later, and thus not capitalised on.

2. The Care Act identifies that for prisoners, portable case management records should exist; there are around 58 prisons spread across 150 LA’s and little progress on shareable care records has really happened although discussion on this between the two major suppliers is now underway.

About this white paper

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