

## Can technology help us to support the ageing population?

How we care for our older relatives and neighbours could be the greatest challenge facing society

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Over the coming decades, older people face a perfect storm. They will reach retirement age when people are living longer than ever, pensions are in crisis and national government and local authorities are facing unprecedented spending cuts. Serious medical conditions, and the socio-economic challenges resulting from ageing, are on the rise - with dementia causing particular distress to many older people and their families, and isolation proving a persistent curse.

This crisis will only deepen over time. Tax revenues continue to diminish and state-led solutions, which for the past 70 years have provided comfort, dignity and care for people in old age, are not going to provide

all the answers in future, no matter which political party is in power.

At a time when many older and middle-aged people should be looking ahead to the period of their greatest opportunity, they are in fact instead facing the era of gravest threat.

Thankfully, government departments, local authorities and charitable trusts are alert to these challenges, and making efforts to find solutions. From the Department of Health to charities and organisations like [Nesta](#), [UnLtd](#) and the [Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation](#) funders and researchers are embracing innovation and taking punts on ideas - seeking the concepts, technologies and partnerships that could be improved and rolled out more widely in the future, and at low cost.

Spurred by research indicating that people aged between 50 and 74 are more likely to volunteer, UnLtd has a programme to increase the number of social enterprises created by older people, for older people.

It is hoped that user-led entrepreneurialism will inspire dozens of hyper-local schemes, each responding to a particular need in specific communities. That must be a blueprint for the national government's approach, too - unleashing new projects, learning from the best, and applying the skills, expertise and human interaction that's so important for a healthy life.

In particular, entrepreneurs are harnessing the power of digital technology to bring people together to develop local solutions to global problems.

[Grannynet](#) is a website that supports a community of more than 3,000 grandmothers. It is a vibrant digital community that also provides access to offline courses for grandparents to get to grips with modern parenting methods. Its founder, Verity Gill, says the site is a place "to exchange the positive experiences of grandparenting and also a course of support through the bad bits".

[Cura](#), a new technology platform set up in Wiltshire, is a website that helps families and friends share in the delivery of care for their loved ones. Based on a simple, secure and sharable online calendar, Cura offers respite and provides peace of mind for some of the six million unpaid carers in the UK.

The social enterprise I founded, [North London Cares](#), uses social media

to recruit young professionals to help support elderly neighbours with low level but crucial tasks, such as getting the weekly shopping done, or making that all important GP appointment. Those small, personal interactions can have a really positive effect in people's lives, providing the connection, comfort, companionship and care many of our more isolated neighbours need.

In the private sector, too, new solutions - often built around new digital techniques - are beginning to appear. Some supermarkets are looking at how to use the web to better serve their older customers, including to reduce the cost of an average food basket. Banks are seeking similar ways to provide a more accessible service to their older customers - developing networks, consulting with customers and responding with improved systems.

In the networked age, that human capital and civic participation represent a potent force waiting to be harnessed for the improved care of our older friends and family. Government, and an enabling mentality across the broader social and private sectors, has a big role to play in unleashing that powerful resource.

Of course, no single group or idea will provide all the solutions. But, given the nature of the problem - and the power of modern technology to connect, enthuse and inspire - I'm confident that in the coming decade we will make strides in deploying technology and human capital to tackle perhaps the greatest challenge of our time: how we care for our older relatives and neighbours in a rapidly ageing society.

**Alex Smith is the founder of North London Cares**