

# RAISING THE STANDARD

the final report of a feasibility study for a scheme to rate, approve or accredit Assistive Technology

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Spring / Summer 2011



**Institute for  
Ageing and  
Health**

 **Newcastle  
University**  
**Business School**

  
**years ahead**  
partnership  
ageing redefined

Demographic changes and pressure on public finances are leading to radical changes in statutory provision of simple Assistive Technology<sup>1</sup> (AT)<sup>2</sup>. Simple aids for daily living (SADLs) are increasingly appearing in a variety of existing and new channels. Initiatives such as the Department of Health's recent Transforming Community Equipment Services project have further advanced the 'mainstreaming' of such AT items<sup>3</sup>. However, there are challenges for this emerging market. There is evidence that the public's awareness of the existence and benefits of AT is low; that take-up is limited by stigma and negative associations of old age and disability and that healthcare professionals are nervous about such developments<sup>4</sup>.

This joint study, by The Institute for Ageing and Health, Newcastle University and Years Ahead Partnership, looked into the feasibility of a consumer-led product rating, accreditation or approval scheme which would raise awareness, improve consumer confidence, help to de-stigmatise the use of products and offer reassurance to professionals working in the field. This initiative is funded by Years Ahead's not-for-profit Better Living Trust, and as such any scheme that is developed will not be a commercial venture for either Years Ahead or Newcastle University.

A range of methods were used for data collection for the feasibility investigation phase, including focus groups, semi-structured interviews and a survey. This paper reports the key findings from the feasibility study and recommendations for the development of a scheme.

### What We Found

- 1 Consultation on possible scheme models showed that the majority of participants felt that an online rating model was their favoured approach. There were also suggestions that a panel or accreditation process alongside the online review facility would provide further rigour to the scheme.
- 2 It was felt that the scheme models that looked at approving or rating retailers and suppliers would provide less value to both consumers and industry.
- 3 Themes that emerged from the stakeholder consultations included:
  - the importance of having users involved with the scheme to provide feedback to industry and also develop a community which can help others find out more about AT;
  - a scheme has the potential to significantly increase consumer awareness of AT;
  - potential links with mainstream media outlets have been explored and, as ageing is high on the social agenda, it is felt that there will be room for exposure;
  - the internet is an important medium for consumers to undertake research, engage with others and to make purchases.

<sup>1</sup>This study uses the following definition of Assistive Technology: AT is any product or service designed to enable independence for disabled and older people. (User group consultation at the King's Fund, 2001.)

<sup>2</sup> Putting people first: a shared vision and commitment to the transformation of adult social care 2007, DH.

<sup>3</sup> <http://dhcarenetworks.org.uk/csed/TransformingCommunityEquipmentService/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.yearsahead.co.uk/news>

### The Proposed Scheme

- 1 There was widespread support from consumers for a scheme.
- 2 Indications from the stakeholder consultation process were that there is potentially good industry level support for the development of a scheme. In order to quantify this support the study partners are keen to receive responses to this report.
- 3 A proposed scheme model has been put forward which combines a panel of expert and consumer evaluators alongside an online facility which would allow users to upload reviews of AT products.

#### This model would benefit consumers by:

- allowing them to access peer reviews of AT;
- developing a strong consumer focused information brand which is easily recognisable;
- providing clear signposting for any additional information they might need;
- providing a means to give feedback to manufacturers and suppliers and thereby the potential to influence product design;
- establishing a community around AT.

#### This model would benefit suppliers and manufacturers by:

- providing a means of engagement with consumers;
- receiving first-hand feedback from consumers and experts on new and existing products;
- the display of product listings and ratings on a high quality website;
- hard copy reviews can also be administered by the scheme body;
- allowing testing for new product concepts.

#### This model would benefit retailers by:

- enabling them to use the review information to inform their procurement decisions;
- providing reassurance for consumers with products that have been independently reviewed;
- linking online product listings directly to the scheme's website.

### Moving Forward

- 1 The project partners expect to engage with a number of organisations to move this scheme forward. Envisaged support is requested in the following areas:
  - the development of panel testing criteria;
  - facilitation of panel meetings;
  - IT and website support;
  - website content;
  - governance;
  - seed funding.
- 2 The project partners would be pleased to hear about offers of support.
- 3 Phase two of the project will look to design the rating scheme and will include further engagement with stakeholders.

## ENDORSEMENTS

The following organisations have endorsed this study and offered support:  
(in alphabetical order)

Alliance Boots

Bath Institute of Medical Engineering (BIME)

College of Occupational Therapists

Gordon Ellis

Health Design and Technology Institute (HDTI), Coventry University

Lloyds Pharmacy

Mangar International

Patterson Medical

Ricability

Stannah



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