

Making life easier – Virtual Assistants, Smart Devices, and Applications (apps)

Over recent years, technology has evolved so that you can now control various aspects of your home environment from a single remote control, smartphone app or by using your voice to ask a virtual assistant to complete a command for you. Many of the voice-activated devices currently available, work using ‘artificial intelligence,’ which means that over time they become more useful as they ‘learn’ to recognise your voice and the best way to help you.

These innovations mean that tasks you may otherwise have found difficult or tricky to do, can now be completed with greater ease or efficiency. For example, you can use simple plug-in smart devices to create a full smart home that can help you complete tasks by automatically opening and closing curtains, turning lights on or off, or playing reminders to prompt you to take your medication or get your lunch. Some will also answer questions for you, such as what the weather forecast is for today, or how long you should boil an egg for, or can be used to play your favourite music or call a friend.

Smart devices and apps can be of great benefit to those who struggle with mobility, have physical or learning disabilities, or struggle with remembering to do everyday tasks. Apps can be used to help you regain control of your health and wellbeing and when used alongside simple smart devices in your home, they can help you feel more confident to keep living at home for longer.

Bristol City Council would not usually provide these devices but will be able to support you to identify appropriate items and how to use them.

Virtual assistants



Voice-activated (high tech) systems or virtual assistants (such as Amazon Alexa or Google Assistant) allow you to ask the device questions, such as if you want to know what the weather will be like today, and the device will provide an audible answer for you. Some can also play your favourite music for you when asked, telephone a friend or family member, or be used to remind you to take medication or attend appointments. When connected to other compatible smart devices, some virtual assistant systems can also be used to carry-out certain tasks for you, such as turning the lights on or off, opening and closing the curtains or adjusting the central heating. Voice-activated systems and virtual assistants can be of particular benefit to those with visual impairments, poor dexterity, or mobility, or those with physical or learning disabilities.

Smart devices

Smart devices are simple gadgets that allow you to control an appliance from a single remote control, smartphone app, or central smart home hub. Some can also be voice-activated or linked to a virtual assistant so that you can “ask” the device to do something using your voice, for example, “open curtains” or “turn bedside lamp on.” The devices all aim to make your life easier by helping to automate daily tasks that you might otherwise find tricky or time-consuming, or simply forget to do.



- **Smart Plugs** look like standard extension plugs but allow you to control devices in the home remotely either through a home automation smart hub or by using an app on your smartphone. The smart plug simply plugs into your wall socket and then you plug the device into the smart plug. For example, if you plug your lamp into a smart plug, you will be able to turn the light on or off from the comfort of your chair. You can even programme some smart plugs so that the appliance will turn on or off automatically depending on certain timers or events.



- **Smart thermostats** are a type of heating control which connect to the internet, allowing them to be accessed and adjusted remotely. You may have heard of brands such as Google Nest or Hive. They can give you much greater control over your heating from wherever you are, at any time of day, or if you give them permission, also means that your loved ones or a carer is able to help you control these remotely. There are a range of different smart heating controls currently on the market - each works slightly differently and has unique features.



- **Smart meters** help you keep track of the energy you use in your home and cut out the need for you to take regular gas and electricity meter readings. They are fitted by your energy company and come with an in-home display unit, that shows you how much energy you are using or have used, help you identify which appliances use most energy, and can remind you to turn off appliances or lights you are not using.



- **Robotic devices** such as automatic vacuum cleaners or lawn mowers are becoming more common place and can be useful if you are concerned about keeping your home and garden clean and tidy but do not have the mobility to do this as often as you would like. If you do not have anyone who can do this for you, then these you may like to consider one of these devices, although they can be expensive, and you need to ensure they are not a trip hazard!

Smartphone applications (apps)

Applications or apps are frequently used to help those sharing caring responsibilities, to coordinate care, and communicate better. They can be downloaded and used on smartphones or tablets and can help you to remember do things such as take your medication, reduce feelings of loneliness or isolation, or help find you if you have got lost or loved ones are concerned you are missing.

They can also be used to monitor a variety of issues including, but not limited to, daily activity, food intake, mood, advice on public health (for instance giving up smoking) as well as linking with health devices to monitor blood pressure and weight. Apps can also be used to access information, advice, and services offered by the local authority, NHS (National Health Service), and other providers.

Apps can help you remain in control of your health and wellbeing. They can be used to help you continue doing the things you enjoy and reduce feelings of anxiety, isolation, and loneliness and improve your confidence. Apps can help you listen to music, video call friends or family, or provide you with games and activities to help with memory loss and mental stimulation. They can also help you to set-up reminders or alerts or be used to stay connected with family and friends. Some common types of app are mentioned below:



- **Communication and social media apps** can help you to stay connected with family and friends or make it easier for you to attend 'virtual' appointments that would otherwise be difficult to attend in-person. For example, video-calling apps allow you to see the person you are speaking to on your smartphone screen or tablet device. You may already have experience of this as over the last few years, it has become more common for certain appointments (such as health appointments) to be carried-out via video-calls, rather than in-person. Social media apps can also be a wonderful way of staying connected, as you can see regular updates and photos of what your loved ones are up to or places they have visited. Some social media channels also allow you to message, or video call your loved ones.



- **Health, fitness, and wellbeing apps** are the most common type of app frequently used to monitor and track health, wellbeing, and fitness. You may already wear an activity tracker watch or similar device such as a Fitbit, or if not, you know someone that does. Many people use them to help manage their own activity levels, especially as they can be set-up to prompt you to be more active, for example, by tracking the number of steps you do or notifying you if you had a bad night's sleep.



- **Medication Reminder Apps** may be beneficial if you or your loved one tends to forget to take medication or gets confused by how much should be taken and when. If you have a smartphone or tablet device, you can download various reminder apps that are free to use and available for both Apple and Android devices. Most allow you to set personalised medication reminders, setting the appropriate frequency and time of day for each medication you take. You can also add notes to each reminder, to let you know which medication to take, and for example, if you need to take it with food. For more information on alternative medication aids, please refer to the section “Prompts, Reminders, and Medication Aids.”



- **GPS (Global Positioning System) Apps** can be useful if you or your loved ones are at risk of wandering or becoming lost or disorientated when active. There are various apps that you can download and use for free. If you have the person’s permission, then apps such as what3words, Find My Friends, and FollowMee, can all be used to help locate a loved one if you are worried that they are missing or have not arrived home as planned. Please see the [Being Safe While Active](#) for more information on GPS.



- **In Your Pocket**, by RealSAM is the Royal Nation Institute for Blind People’s (RNIB) accessible newsagent, library and information app that is delivered to your mobile phone. RealSAM Pocket is a fully voice controlled mobile phone designed specifically for ease of use by the Blind and Visually Impaired and can connect directly to Bluetooth enabled hearing aids. Please get in touch with our Sensory Impairment team or visit the RNIB’s In Your Pocket website for more information.