



NorthHFutures Hub

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NorthHFutures: New Digital Health Hub across the North East and North Cumbria

Northumbria University, Newcastle, is part of a groundbreaking £4.17m Digital Health Hub for the North East and North Cumbria (NENC), in collaboration with five regional universities, and seven NHS Trusts within the Integrated Care System (ICS) for NENC.

The EPSRC-funded Northern Health Futures (NorthHFutures) hub aims to create a world-leading healthcare technology (health-tech) research and innovation ecosystem that addresses health and social inequalities in NENC

by supporting: inclusive digital skills training and sharing, responsible health-tech design and development, networking and entrepreneurship.

This three-year project aims to address unmet health needs in the NENC region, including: health and nutrition for children and young people; mental health and wellbeing; monitoring of people before, during and following treatment beyond the hospital; wider application of virtual and augmented reality in training and delivery of clinical care; and ageing well with long-term conditions.

The Hub combines the complementary strengths and resources of over 50 partners: six universities – Northumbria, Newcastle, Cumbria, Durham, Sunderland, and Teesside; seven NHS Trusts; regional, national and global industry partners; health and care providers; local authorities; innovation accelerators; plus voluntary, community, and social enterprise sector organisations. Through an integrated, regional approach uniting this consortium for the first time, the aspiration is for NorthHFutures to establish global leadership in Digital Health.

The NorthHFutures hub partners aims to create a supportive community infrastructure, drawing upon world-leading expertise and research excellence in Data Science and Data Analytics, Biomedical Sciences, Nursing and Allied Health, Medical Device Engineering and Diagnostics, Digital Business, and Human-centred Design that involves end users of the innovations.

The team will commission research studies and pioneer networking platforms, services and entrepreneurial environments to engage diverse stakeholders in digital skills training and responsible health-tech projects, stimulating social, economic and cultural growth for all.

NorthHFutures is one of five Digital Health Hubs funded across the UK as part of an £16.5 m EPSRC pilot scheme.

Dr Kedar Pandya, Executive Director of Cross-Council Programmes of EPSRC, said: “The projects and hubs announced today will deliver a variety of innovative approaches to improve healthcare outcomes for patients. This investment will support scientists and engineers who are transforming the way we treat and diagnose diseases by using the latest developments in robotics, computer modelling and imaging.”

Transforming health and care delivery

The leads for the Digital Health Hub at Newcastle University are Prof. Abigail Durrant, Co-Director of Open Lab and EPSRC Centre for Digital Citizens, and Prof. Naeem Soomro, Consultant Urological Surgeon, and Co-Director in Robotic & Digital Surgery at The Royal College of Surgeons of England. They said: “We are delighted to be leading one of five EPSRC Digital Health Hubs in the country.

The NENC region already has a great track record of collaboration on health-tech projects, and for research and innovation centred on understanding and evidencing people’s unmet needs.

We have been fortunate to partner with the Newcastle Health Innovation Partners (NHIP), Academic Health Sciences Network (AHSN) and Integrated Care Board (ICB) for NENC, plus other great connectors in this space like Innovation SuperNetwork, to build on established networks and knowledge bases.

Core partners include HDR UK who are leading in Health Data Science, and by collaborating with VCSE, community representatives, and entrepreneurs alongside global tech giants and government agencies, we interconnect truly diverse stakeholders in Digital Health.

NorthFutures humanises health-tech; equity, participation, and investment in people are core to our vision, for transforming health and care delivery across the region whilst also creating opportunities for: raising digital literacy, career development, knowledge exchange, and the creative realisation and translation of tech innovations for commercial success.

Through this joined-up endeavour, we aim to better understand how to address health inequalities, and to promote proactive health monitoring, patient-involved care, and positive ageing through responsible design.

We aim to better connect rural and urban populations through pioneering applications of data science – in health and care delivery, in best professional practice, in analytics and strategic planning – grounded in research evidence.

Our aspiration is that the Hub will deliver a supportive and diverse

community infrastructure that will stimulate social, economic and cultural growth, and will promote wellbeing for all.”

Aejaz Zahid, Executive Director of Innovation, NENC ICB said: “We hope to realise the potential of data-rich health-tech innovations by integrating health and care services, empowering patients, and promoting self-management of health and wellbeing.

“The NENC ICB is committed to developing a culture of innovation and transformation across the different sectors which impact on the health and wellbeing of the diverse communities our health and care partnerships serve.

Professor Graham Evans, Executive Chief Digital and Information Officer/SIRO, at NHS NENC ICB said: “We are looking forward to working closely with the Digital Health Hub and accessing its extensive expertise to co-design solutions which would directly address many of the challenges we identify across our health and care system, while supporting research and the development of innovative new products and services which could help stimulate further economic development in our region.

Our region has a strong history and legacy of innovation, transformation and collaboration. Many of our future aims and aspirations will be enabled with digital data and technology, allowing our region not just to do the same things better, but to do better things.”

Bringing academia and healthcare providers together

Professor Rob Wilson, from Northumbria University’s Newcastle Business School, said: “ In a challenging health and social care landscape the ESRC funded hub offers a fantastic opportunity to innovate the relationships between business, academia and service delivery for the benefits of staff, carers and patients.”

Mark Walsh, Portfolio Manager, Academic Health Science Network for the North East and North Cumbria “The AHSN-NENC is delighted to continue our partnership in the development of the NorthFutures Digital Health Hub. NorthFutures brings together world-class expertise across the North East and North Cumbria Life-Sciences sector in a unique collaboration including healthcare, academia and industry which will ultimately lead to health and

care advancements that will benefit our local population.”

Professor David Burn, Director of NHIP, said: “We have a proud tradition of excellence in research and innovation in our area and the new Digital Health Hub gives us the opportunity to build upon this further. By bringing together the expertise of all of these partners, we will have impacts for patients and citizens that will be far beyond what may have been achieved in silos.”

Dr. Amanda Taylor-Beswick, Director Centre for Digital Transformation, University of Cumbria, said: “We are delighted to form part of this vastly expert research group and are very much looking forward to progressing the work of NorthHFutures and making it a huge success. Everything about this project aligns with the University of Cumbria’s mission of transforming lives and livelihoods through learning, applied research and practice.”

Professor John Murray, Academic Dean in the University of Sunderland’s Faculty of Technology, says: “This is an excellent opportunity to showcase the skills and strengths of the University in areas such as health and wellbeing, artificial intelligence and virtual reality. We will be playing a key part in this project with input from our Faculty of Technology, Faculty of Health Sciences and Wellbeing, and the Helen McArdle Nursing and Care Research Institute.”

Professor Vikki Rand, Director of the National Horizons Centre (NHC), Teesside University’s national centre of excellence for bioscience and healthcare, said: “Creating partnerships and leading on research and training for the biosciences and healthcare sector is at the heart of what we do at the NHC and this project will allow us to play a vital role in sharing expertise and innovation to help transform digital healthcare provision.”

Professor Brian Castellani, Director of the Durham Research Methods Centre and Co-Director of the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing, says: “Developing a people-centered, co-designed health-tech ecosystem through the NorthHFutures hub allows us to help improve health and wellbeing in the North East, particularly for underserved communities and those struggling with health inequalities.”

Alisdair Cameron, ReCoCo Co-Director, says: “Improving people’s human connectedness is at the heart of what we do at ReCoCo. NorthHFutures will clearly provide substantial opportunities for digital skills, training and knowledge transfer and exchange between academia, health and social care

partners and industry, but every bit as important, if not more so, is including lived experience, the service user voice from the outset, and we are pleased to be an integral partner for the NorthHFutures Digital Health Hub".

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