



Health Innovation
North East and North Cumbria

Digital Pioneers Impact Report 2023/2024



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Foreword



Dave Belshaw, Digital Transformation Director, HINENC

Since the onset of the pandemic, digital health within the NHS has advanced at an unprecedented scale and speed, leading to a rise in online appointments and consultations, empowering patients to manage their own health using digital tools.

Digital technology is transforming patient care, but it is crucial to address these changes while maintaining adequate training and support for our primary care workforce, including general practice, pharmacy, optometry, and dentistry.

The North East and North Cumbria Digital Pioneers programme, launched in April 2022, with an aim to educate the workforce and drive digital health innovations in primary care. It has been a successful second year of activity, offering NHS primary care staff in our region opportunities to learn, share, and inspire the adoption of digital technologies. Through this, Digital Champions are playing a key role in enhancing patient care.

Our team has continued to work closely with partners, investing considerable effort in building relationships to better understand the needs of local primary care services and how we can add value in a complex and demanding NHS environment. As we enter the third year, awareness of the programme and its impact has grown.

I am incredibly proud of what we achieved in 2023-24. Over the past two years, our Digital Champions education programme has successfully trained more than 127 champions, and we've engaged over 500 individuals through events and masterclasses, driven by the needs and requests from primary care.

As we move into a third year, we will continue to develop the programme. However, due to funding challenges, the programme of activity will be revised.

There have been many highlights this year. In June 2023, we embarked on the launch of a pilot project with five practices to explore and accelerate the use of remote monitoring technology in primary care and develop use cases for the pathways that provide the biggest impact on both patients and the system.

The potential benefits of a digital NHS for patients are huge but we also know that without adequate consideration, digital transformation can exacerbate existing health inequalities. One of our programme's key goals is to prevent the creation of further disparities, which is why we are collaborating with stakeholders across health and care to tackle this issue through our Digital Inclusion Forum. We are also embedding digital inclusion into each of our programmes of work. Thank you to everyone and every organisation that has supported and embraced the programme. Our mission is to assist the primary care workforce both now and in the future by embedding innovation and developing a digitally skilled workforce to reduce NHS costs, alleviate clinical pressures, support new primary care initiatives (e.g. Primary Care Access Recovery Plan) and enhance patient care.

I hope you find our impact report informative. It provides more details on the achievements mentioned above and explores how we can continue to support the primary care workforce in delivering improved care for everyone.

Best regards,

Dave

Background to Digital Pioneers

The North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care System (NENC ICS) is recognised as a regional leader in integrating digital technology into primary care.

Significant time and money have been invested in these advancements, which is promising for primary care, particularly general practice. However, the region has not made substantial investments in developing the workforce's skills, knowledge, and tools

needed to enhance digital literacy.

Additionally, there is still work to be done in exploring the role of innovation in primary care, finding creative solutions to support the health of our population while ensuring safety.

The programme serves a vast geographical area and a population of over 3 million citizens.

The programme supports a vast geographical area and population of over 3 million citizens.

About us...

North East and North Cumbria ICS is the biggest in the country

We serve Circa
3.2m
citizens



We have
64 PCNs and
over
350
practices



We are one of the biggest employers in the region



Digital Services in Primary Care

Over the past few years, and throughout the pandemic, the North East and North Cumbria has seen exponential growth in the number of digital technologies introduced across primary care. Historically, the majority of this was funded through Estates and Technology Transfer Fund (ETTF) in addition to additional funding during the pandemic and funding to support Digital First Primary Care.

A number of those technologies include:

- Online consultations
- Video consultations
- Electronic patient records
- Health apps
- Advanced telephony
- Mjog and Iplato bi-directional messaging
- AccuRx
- NHS App
- Check in screens
- Web cam monitors
- Surgery pods
- Integrated devices

In response to the challenges, in 2022 the AHSN NENC launched the Digital Pioneers programme in partnership and on behalf of the system (see Appendix 7). The aim of the programme is to facilitate collaboration, exchange ideas and support the scale and spread of digital health innovations within primary care, to improve the quality of care to patients and support the workforce to deliver better healthcare for all. By providing opportunities for digital innovation and using digital technologies where appropriate, the Digital Pioneers programme aims to:

- Provide better access to digital care and services in primary care
- Empower people to be partners in their own health and care
- Improve patient satisfaction
- Reduce inequalities that exist within our population.

In addition to patient benefit, the workforce has had access to training for most of the digital products introduced. This has taken different forms including face to face, eLearning, videos and webex sessions. The programme identified a gap in investment in the wider skills needed for the workforce in order to create a culture of education and learning for all staff to feel empowered by digital technology. This led to the design of a Digital Champions education programme for primary care staff who want to inspire others to embrace digital technology.



The Landscape

In 2019, Eric Topol published a report which outlined recommendations to prepare the healthcare workforce to deliver the digital future (Appendix 1). Topol, a cardiologist and leading commentator on health care and technology, was commissioned to lead an independent review to advise on how technologies are likely to change the role and function of clinical staff and the lifelong learning of current and future NHS staff. The report explores the impact that advances in digital health care technologies, genomics

and artificial intelligence will have on the workforce.

The report offers a number of recommendations, including the early implementation of education to support the workforce to ensure that we gain the benefits that digital healthcare technologies offer.

“Successful implementation will require investment in people as well as technology. The panel recommended that NHS organisations should invest in their workforce to develop specialist digital skills.”

The top technologies are identified as:

- Telemedicine – video links to professionals
- Smartphone apps – self-care and remote monitoring
- Sensors and wearables for diagnostics and remote monitoring – smart watches, patches, vital signs, diabetes
- The Genome - DNA
- Speech recognition and natural language processing (NLP) – smart speakers e.g. Amazon Echo
- Virtual and augmented reality – VR
- Artificial intelligence and machine learning

Technology and digital developments were also highlighted in the Health Education publication, facing the facts, shaping the future (Appendix 2)



Programme aims

The programme set out with four key primary aims to:

- Improve primary care processes
- Improve staff and patient experience,
- Improve staff retention rates and
- Improve care.



Digital Champions

Over the past five years, the four pillars of primary care have encountered increasing demands, driven by both a heavier workload and the growing complexity and intensity of patient needs. The future of primary care relies significantly on the effective adoption of digital tools and technology, with success depending on having the right people and processes in place to maximise these benefits. This is where the role of the successful Digital Champion Programme which launched in April 2022 becomes crucial.

Digital Champions play a key role in helping people to get online, improving organisational processes, and developing their own skills. The programme, commissioned by NHS England and delivered by HI NENC and Redmoor Health, invites staff working or volunteering in general practice, dentistry, optometry, or pharmacy in the North East and North Cumbria to become a Digital Champion.

The role was established to enhance the focus on digital products with the aim to:

- Improve patient access.
- Manage the rising demand for primary care services.
- Offer visibility and support to colleagues, helping them confidently navigate the digital landscape.
- Promote digital technologies among primary care professionals.
- Share best practices.
- Provide peer-to-peer support for colleagues through a digital champion network across the region.

Some of the successes and outcomes from the programme over the last two years are listed to the right.

The table below shows the total number of Digital Champions trained since April 2022. (The primary reasons for dropout are staff being unable to commit time to the role or leaving general practice).

	Year 1 22/23	Year 2 23/24	Total
Total number trained	79	48	127
Total number dropped out	9	7	16

Alongside the training of Digital Champions, a series of masterclasses on various topics have been conducted. The table below outlines the topics covered and the number of attendees since 2022.

Masterclass	Date Held	Attended
Year 1: 2022/23		
MS Teams and Office 365	05/10/2022	7
Quality Improvement	20/10/2022	6
Social Media and Patient Comms	09/11/2022	28
Accurx Masterclass Year 2: 2023/24	16/02/2023	74
Year 2: 2023/24		
Social Media Part 1	28/06/2023	37
Understanding Capacity and Access	11/07/2023	99
Social Media Part 1 Repeat	19/07/2023	28
General Practice Referral to Community Pharmacy	27/09/2023	20
Social Media Part 2	10/10/2023	39
NHS App	19/10/2023	25
GPAD	14/11/2023	26
Social Media Part 3	17/01/2024	29
Reasonable Adjustments	15/02/2024	15
RPA Masterclass	14/03/2024	32

Additionally, Working Groups have been formed, driven by Digital Champions' interest in specific focus areas, as outlined below.

Working group
Accurx
Smart messaging
Website
NHS App

As the programme entered its second year, several Digital Champion videos were launched. See Digital Champion video stories [here](#).

Below you can see some interesting quotes from Digital Champions about the course as well as the impact on the new ways of working.

"The dynamic and presentation of the course was very good easy going and there was always help"

"The sessions were appropriate length and nicely spread out. Whatsapp group for each cohort also very good for information"

"It was good to know that there was someone to go to from the team if I was unsure about something, or needed help/pointer in the right direction. The masterclass covered a lot of different topics which were useful, and I could focus on what I needed to do"

"Patients access and displaying information on envisage screen to highlight different places and services available, cutting down call wait times"

"Patients using the NHS App has cut down call waiting times and also the number of calls coming into the practice"

In March 2024, a Digital Primary Care Education and Celebration Event was held, bringing together over 50 attendees, including Digital Champions, to celebrate the achievements to date and explore future opportunities. As part of the day's programme, Redmoor Health led a well-received 'Meet the Digital Champions' session, highlighting the successes of the programme in Year 2.



Primary Care Innovation

HI NENC has designed and developed an innovation pathway that has gained wider adoption within the Health Innovation Network, a national network comprising 15 Health Innovations. Historically, this pathway was primarily utilised in secondary care settings, the pathway has now been integrated into primary care through the efforts of the dedicated Innovation Programme Manager (Primary Care). (Appendix 3). The primary goal was to foster an innovation-focused culture across the primary care NHS sector, this is now expanding to cover social care.

The Primary Care Innovation Programme Manager continues to support innovators throughout the entire innovation pathway. Currently, several new early-stage innovation projects are in progress. Additionally, the Programme Manager has assisted 5 innovators in preparing applications for funding calls. If successful, this type of funding will support further development of their minimum viable products (MVPs). Notably, the digital screens in community pharmacy project has reached the later stages of the innovation process, serving as a strong example of how HI NENC's multidisciplinary teams collaborate to support NHS innovators. [Hear about this project in detail in this video.](#)

In March 2024, the Primary Care Innovation Programme Manager and the Digital Transformation Director represented HI NENC at the 'Digital Rewired' event, delivering a presentation on "Driving a Culture

of Digital Innovation." This presentation highlighted the evolution of innovation within the NENC primary care system over the past year. By showcasing the region's pioneering efforts in integrating digital solutions into primary care, it brought national recognition to the North East and North Cumbria (NENC) as a leader in healthcare innovation. The event provided an ideal platform to demonstrate how collaboration between HI NENC's multidisciplinary teams and healthcare innovators had driven impactful changes, promoting the region's reputation for advancing patient care through technology. This not only underscored the region's capacity for innovation but also strengthened its position as a model for digital transformation in primary care.

HI NENC has successfully filled two new Innovation Manager roles, which will play a pivotal part in expanding our primary, secondary and social care innovation offerings. These roles will aim to actively foster collaboration and maximise shared expertise across disciplines. By offering dedicated support to NHS innovators, the Innovation Managers are helping to accelerate the development and implementation of cutting-edge solutions in healthcare, ensuring that the North East and North Cumbria region remains at the forefront of innovation. This, in turn, benefits NHS innovators by providing them with expert guidance and resources, enabling faster progress from concept to real-world impact.

Remote Monitoring in General Practice

Remote monitoring has been part of the NHS for some time, but the COVID-19 pandemic greatly accelerated the use of digital technology in primary care. Despite the potential benefits, these technologies are not yet fully utilised.

To address challenges like workforce shortages, NENC ICB and HI NENC launched a remote monitoring pilot programme in 2023-24. This pilot programme involved five general practices in Gateshead and Newcastle, focusing on new pathways and processes to monitor everyday conditions and increasing capacity.

The pilot programme explored remote monitoring across various clinical pathways, including contraceptive pill checks, HRT reviews, hypertension, diabetes, and UTIs. Patients monitored their health at home, providing feedback to their GP, which streamlined the process and reduced the need for lengthy face-to-face appointments.

Although Phase 1 has concluded, practices continue to use and refine the pathways developed and due to the pilot programme's success, funding has been secured for Phase 2 (2024-25), which will expand the model to 20 practices.

More information and resources for adopting similar approaches can be found on [HI NENC's website](#). A [case study](#) has also been produced, providing an overview of the pilot programme and highlighting the benefits achieved in such a short period.

This programme has utilised [HI NENC's Innovation Design Service \(IDS\)](#) to facilitate and design bespoke sessions to practices involved in the project.

The Innovation Design Service supports clinical teams, businesses, innovators and operational teams to rapidly discover innovative solutions to complex issues for the benefit of patients, clinicians and the wider ecosystem.

IDS sessions have provided an opportunity for the practices engaging in the pilot to come together alongside the HI NENC team, NENC ICB and NECS to work together to understand more about how remote monitoring would work in their practice and which clinical pathways were best suited to take forward. More information can be found in our case study, [Identifying practice priorities for the Remote Monitoring pilot programme - Health Innovation NENC](#).

A snapshot of results

The programme has developed a catalogue of solutions. Below includes approximate number of appointments saved per month in just one practice:

- Contraception pill (using eConsult) – 50
- New patient registrations – 20
- UTI pathway (using Accurx) – 35
- Blood pressure at home at home pathway - practice exceeded monthly target by 100 patients.

*The results show appointments saved in one practice, if this was adopted across multiple practices, the project has the potential to save 1000s of appointments every month.



Our approach

- Design-based thinking and service redesign principles
- Co-produced with five practices
- Rapid approach over six months
- Mixed skills amongst project team including programme, project, change, evaluation and commissioning
- Hands on approach
- PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) cycle
- Materials created, such as standard operating procedures



Why this approach?

- Free up clinicians in primary care from administrative processes
- Improve patient experience
- Improve efficiency
- Improve patient safety
- Decrease costs
- Accelerate innovation



What did our practices think?

"For just the UTI pathway, by implementing these new changes we have saved approximately 29 15-minute appointments a month. If this is multiplied throughout the year, we could be freeing up 12 full days of vital GP appointments for just one practice."

"More nurse appointments are now available to manage patient with long term conditions."

"Convenience for those patients who work 9-5."

"Saves face-to-face appointments for patients that may need them."

What did our patients think?

"The process is a lot better...much better than having to wait around all day for a GP to ring."

"Years of experience with UTIs, the new process is streamlined and efficient."

"Helps you monitor your blood pressure properly."



Key takeaways

- Remote monitoring is safe to use and clinically tested
- Approach creates capacity in general practice, helping alleviate some of the pressures
- Provides a new a more efficient way for many patients to manage their health
- The time dedicated to redesigning the pathways is well invested to create long term savings.

Communications Plan

The success of the programme has been supported by a strong communications strategy which has helped to position and promote the programme.

In the second year of the programme, marketing and communications were focussed on celebrating achievements of our region's workforce and highlighting good news stories with an aim to raise the profile of digital innovation in primary care and inspire more people to innovate.

The aims were to:

- Showcase the unique offer to support digital health innovations in Primary Care through the HI NENC's innovation process ([the Innovation Pathway](#)).
- Highlight the role of the HI NENC in facilitating, driving and supporting health and care innovations across the digital transformation agenda.
- Publicise the real life, tangible benefits of the programme, highlighting improved patient care, staff experiences and driving better clinical outcomes, across the region and beyond.

In 2023-24, the outputs and achievements of the programme have been shared in various communications, including:

- [Film](#) and [podcast](#) to showcase innovative pilot to digitise public health messaging in community pharmacy. Funded and supported by the Digital Pioneers programme, community pharmacies in the region have taken part in a pilot to digitise public health messages. Rather than traditional leaflets and posters, 20 pharmacies in Durham have installed digital screens which promote healthier lifestyle campaigns.
- [Remote monitoring case study](#) – a case study introducing and demonstrating how the pilot project is increasing capacity in GP practices.
- [Evaluating an eko digital stethoscope case study](#) – in this case study, read about how HI NENC evaluated the Eko Core Digital Stethoscope to explore whether this technology could improve patient care in general practice.

Examples of resources developed as a direct result of, and shared to promote the programme, include:

[Remote monitoring resources webpage](#) - hosting tried and tested resources for the remote monitoring programme. this includes standard operating pathways, pathways and guidance videos so that resources can be spread and adopted.



Lessons learnt

Change isn't easy. It takes time to build up the stakeholder network and reach out to the people who would benefit from the programme. The first year has supported a fantastic communications strategy and delivered a number of presentations across the patch. The programme team have delivered showcase events, lunch and learns and masterclasses to top up primary care knowledge in this field.

The key lessons learnt were:

- Timings of sessions was a key learning factor
- Summer time had much lower numbers
- It took time to gather momentum
- Primary Care are still on the journey of understanding innovation and the implementation of digital technology
- Expert Reference Panel worked really well to review and advise on next steps for innovative ideas
- Capacity continues to be the biggest challenge and how we support primary care to invest time to gain in the long term.



Programme recognition

The programme has been recognised for its excellence in transforming digital health and care. In 2023, we were shortlisted for the HSJ Digital Awards in the Digital Literacy, Education and Upskilling category for our Digital Champions programme. As well as being recognised in awards, our aim is that the programme becomes embedded into primary care so that the workforce knows to speak to us about their innovative ideas, regardless of the stage of the development.

The Digital Champions education programme has generated a lot of interest, as reflected in the numbers of enrolments for the 2023-24 cohorts. This enthusiasm was also evident at the Digital Primary Care Education and Celebration Event held in March 2024, which brought together over 50 attendees to celebrate the achievements so far and explore future opportunities.

Next steps

The following activities have been recognised to take the programme forward in to year three:

- Designing and implementing the Year 3 Digital Champions programme, incorporating key learnings and establishing an updated programme of work for the future workforce.
- Continue to align to ICB priorities and the 2023 Primary Care Recovery Plan.
- Successful projects funded via the project calls are due to submit their final reports which will be shared later in the year.
- Scope activities for further project calls across all disciplines of primary care.
- Run a number of masterclasses linked to gaps in knowledge and skills.
- Further development of the accelerator programme focusing on remote monitoring in primary care.
- Continue building the stakeholder network.
- Increase activity amongst Pharmacy, Optometry and Dentistry.
- Develop defined process for innovation across the NHS.
- Building on the successes of sharing positive news stories by incorporating additional case studies, testimonials, and uplifting narratives.

Appendices

Appendix	Link
Appendix 1	Topol Review, Preparing the Health workforce to deliver the digital future, 2019
Appendix 2	Facing the Facts, Shaping the future, a draft health and care workforce strategy for England to 2027, 2017
Appendix 3	Promoting Innovation in healthcare - 2017
Appendix 4	Redmoor Health – Digital Champions Year 2 report 2023-24
Appendix 5	HI NENC Digital Pioneers web pages
Appendix 6	Digital Pioneers on a Page

