Cumbria Strategy for Digital Technologies in Health and Social Care

Rural communities like Cumbria face particular challenges when it comes to healthcare. Further distances to travel to hospitals or GPs, an older population, smaller/professionally isolated GP practices and poor quality broadband/mobile infrastructures are just some of the problems faced.

Digital technology such as video-links for remote consultations, health monitoring apps and digital sharing of patients’ records can help address rural challenges and significantly improve the patient experience.

In Autumn 2013, the Cumbria Rural Health Forum was formed by a group of interested people including the University of Cumbria, Cumbria Partnership Foundation NHS Trust, Cumbria Clinical Commissioning Group, Action for Communities in Cumbria and Cumbria County Council to consider the specific health and care delivery issues facing Cumbrian communities and how digital technology could help.

The Academic Health Science Network for the North East and North Cumbria (AHSN NENC) funded a two-year project to develop the Forum and enable it, through collaborative working, to create and implement a strategy for digital technologies in health and social care across Cumbria.

Outcomes

The impact of the Forum’s work has been far reaching. By bringing specialists together and facilitating an open environment for sharing, the project has inspired ideas and generated an energy to drive projects forward. It provides a platform where work can be integrated and resources shared to improve health outcomes and the overall patient experience.

A key outcome of phase one of the project has been the development of a full digital healthcare strategy for Cumbria entitled The Cumbria Strategy for Digital Technologies in Health and Social Care.

This strategy provides a roadmap for the introduction of digital health with three key themes:

- Develop targeted, integrated plans for specific groups of people with a particular condition
- Share information and best practice, influence change within Cumbria and elsewhere
- Develop a digital-health-ready workforce

It is helping the Cumbria Clinical Commissioning Group to develop the Local Digital Roadmap for Cumbria. The Forum has also influenced various provider strategies, including the mental health strategy and is working with the Success Regime in North Cumbria and Vanguard/Better Care Together in South Cumbria.

Project Impact

The Cumbria Rural Health Forum undertook a range of activity as part of the project:

- Formalised the Forum and established a network of more than 50 organisations from the public, private and voluntary/third sectors, representing more than 160 professionals from technology companies, academia, social enterprises, charities and all health providers in Cumbria.
- Developed communication tools to co-ordinate this network through social media, events and a

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- Mapped current projects and services in Cumbria or adjacent to Cumbria, using digital technologies in health and social care
- Reviewed best practice in using digital technologies in rural areas internationally
- Undertook primary research with GPs and patients with long-term conditions on their attitudes to using technology for healthcare
- Held three road-mapping workshops to share and discuss findings, develop key themes and priorities for Cumbria
- Held a ‘round table’ of senior managers from key organisations to review and endorse the plan
- Held a conference and exhibition at the Rheged centre near Penrith to showcase digital technology and discuss the particular challenges relating to digital health for Cumbria generating more than 50 delegates and 17 exhibitors.

Background summary

Digital technology is embedded in our everyday lives. From booking holidays to online banking and staying in touch with friends and family, the use of digital technology is now second nature. Numerous studies show it can also improve the delivery of health and social care services and there are many successful digital health schemes in place demonstrating this.

In rural communities digital technologies can be particularly beneficial. Cumbria’s population is dispersed and ageing. Travel distances to health and social care services can be a problem with travel time to reach key local services such as GPs and hospitals considerably longer than the national average. In addition, smaller GP practices and health and social care departments mean staff often feel professionally isolated with fewer opportunities for professional development.

The Cumbria Rural Health Forum was set up to bring together all of the relevant health and social care providers, academics, commissioning bodies, technology companies and voluntary organisations to share knowledge, expertise and best practice and identify the right approach to implementing digital health and social care across Cumbria.

With a focus on mature, commercially available digital products and services, the Cumbria Rural Health Forum sought to understand the specific benefits and barriers to adoption in Cumbria in order to develop a robust strategy and implementation framework for digital health and social care.

Andrew Sullivan, project lead at the Cumbria Rural Health Forum, said: “We wanted to create a robust plan for digital health across Cumbria to ensure technology was introduced where it could make a real difference - benefitting both the lives of patients and improving healthcare provision in the area. I believe the Forum has delivered this and key stakeholders now have a shared plan of action moving forward.”

Support provided by the AHSN

- The AHSN NENC funded a two-year project to develop the Forum and enable it to create and implement a strategy for digital technologies in health and social care across Cumbria.
- The project is being delivered in two phases and funding for phase two was also received from the North West Coast AHSN.

Next steps and plans for the future

The implementation phase of the project runs for nine months from July 2015 – March 2016 and involves the delivery of the roadmap themes identified in the strategy:

- Digital ‘think tanks’ are being rolled out with specific groups of professionals, looking at how digital technology can be implemented within particular areas. The results of these ‘think tanks’ will directly influence practice in:
  * End of Life Care
  * Carlisle WHO Healthy City and life-course health promotion
  * Assisted Living for Learning Disabilities
  * Reducing patient travel from Millom.
- Undertake consultations with continuing professional development networks to identify what skills need to be addressed to implement digital technologies.
- Continue and build on the networking, dissemination, advocacy and influencing activity already undertaken. Additional activity will include three Forum meetings, presentations at external conferences and events and providing evidence to organisational strategies - including the CCG Digital Roadmap for Cumbria.