

North East and North Cumbria innovation project

NHS 10-year plan shift: analogue to digital

Problem

It can be difficult to foster innovation when local authorities are balancing capacity and resourcing constraints, with funding easily swallowed up by 'business as usual' activities. This is particularly hard to manage when working across areas with a large Integrated Care System (ICS) footprint, like North East and North Cumbria, where there are widely varying priorities and demands.

Innovation

The North East and North Cumbria therefore decided to develop a regional innovation fund pathway for adult social care to accelerate development, evaluation and commercialisation of innovative ideas, which they felt would lead to successful adoption and spread of the best projects across the ICS.

Project overview

The North East ICS is the largest in the country, covering 13 local authority areas. North East Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (NE ADASS) have a well-established and trusted working relationship with each of the authorities, coordinating regular partnership meetings and working to add value across the ICS footprint. Because of this existing relationship and scale of the work, local authorities opted for NE ADASS to lead on the Accelerating Reform Fund (ARF).

Due to the varying nature of proposals for ARF spending across the region, NE ADASS established an Innovation Fund for localised projects to enhance the overall quality of adult social care. Strict funding criteria were drawn up, with projects having to demonstrate how they would benefit unpaid carers, people with lived experience and families, ensure transformation and have the potential for scalability. An Expert Reference Panel (ERP) has been established to consider bids, provide guidance and feedback on digital innovation ideas, advise on the feasibility of implementation and provide recommendations for improvement. The panel includes people with lived experience, commissioners and heads of service.

"There is a good balance on the ERP which means that the bids are considered through a number of lenses. As the ERP has matured, there have been some changes agreed, for example presentations to accompany the bids and clearer guidance for applications, which has been beneficial all round."

Natalie Shaw, ERP Panel Member, Assurance and Co Production Manager, Stockton on Tees Borough Council

Grants are available for a maximum of £50,000 per local authority, however local authorities can partner with each other to increase funding bids. It is also a requirement for projects to conduct robust evaluation to demonstrate impact, as per the original ARF criteria. To ensure this is delivered, funding is allocated 50% up front and 50% at the end, with the second payment dependent on submission of the evaluation report.

"We want to look at individual projects and create a repository of resources, solutions and learning for the region, so that if local authorities have issues, they can check the repository and see if there's any relevant solutions they can apply."

Kerry Topping, Policy and Projects Manager, North East Association of Directors of Adult Social Services

Key project activity

- Showcasing event to introduce local authorities to providers
- ERP established and robust criteria outlined
- Presentations delivered to local authorities to introduce fund and application process
- Quarterly meetings between ERP to discuss applications
- Four rounds of applications, supporting eight projects with a value of £515,000
- Plans for 'hackathons' and design sessions with local areas and providers to spark innovative thinking and encourage applications
- Further three rounds of application reviews planned for upcoming year
- Budget assigned for external evaluation of fund

"The culture of local authorities is different... Regional teams can avoid repetition across local areas, doing things once rather than 13 times... that requires us to be innovative, and question, and agitate, and the ARF has absolutely been a big catalyst for that."

Kerry Topping, Policy and Projects Manager, North East Association of Directors of Adult Social Services

Emerging learnings and insights

- Regional teams add value by keeping innovation at the forefront and reducing repetition.
- Non-ringfenced funding makes room for innovation and scalability.
- Procurement should allow for intelligent and meaningful engagement with providers, so local authorities aren't limited when commissioning.
- Cross-collaboration and knowledge sharing across ICS areas is beneficial.

"The impact that [the ARF] is having, it really has given us a boost, in terms of being able to explore scalable solutions and think about things differently. It would be brilliant if it was a regular grant."

Kerry Topping, Policy and Projects Manager, North East Association of Directors of Adult Social Services

Emerging impact

The eight projects that have been funded so far include:

- Gateshead – in partnership with WordNerds, using AI and Large Language Models to advance analysis of text rich data leading to improved service delivery and outcomes
- Stockton – developing an app to provide an easy and efficient route for social care and health professionals, and informal carers, to gather feedback from people drawing on services in real time, and analysing this to inform service development
- Hartlepool – using an Artificial Intelligence (AI) 'Chatbot' to improve adult social care information, advice and guidance, including accessibility, on Hartlepool Now
- Durham – developing a solution with Health Call that will allow providers to record restraint and restrictive practices to provide data to health and social care professionals in a quick, safe and secure manner, using an app or a web portal
- South Tyneside – encouraging young people in schools and colleges to pursue a career pathway in social care, including development of a new website with resources and guidance
- Redcar and Cleveland - using machine-learning and data mining to explore what they can learn from the data they already hold to influence service improvement and outcomes
- Cumberland and Sunderland - working together to develop an AI driven case management tool 'Measuring the Unmeasurable' which considers factors such as complexity, emotional impact and existing relationships when allocating cases to practitioners
- a small amount of funding given to each of the 13 Local Authorities to support the pilot and implementation of 'Magic Notes', on the condition that they contribute to regional impact evaluation work

"It was really good to see experts by experience on the panel and actively engaging in asking questions during the panel process. We are still in the early stages of our project but the funding has helped us to progress and we are confident the final product will have a positive impact on care delivery in County Durham. This is a new tool and we are delighted to be leading the way with it."

Diane Moore, Project Co-Ordinator, Supporting the Provider Market (STPM), Adult & Health Services, Durham County Council

"There is a real benefit in working collaboratively to test and learn. Innovation is crucial to our development as a sector; by 'testing small, but sharing at scale', we can ensure we get the best return on investment."

Steph Downey, Strategic Director, Integrated Adults and Social Care Services (DASS), Gateshead Council

Next steps

NE ADASS are beginning to consider ways to make this funding pot sustainable.

One idea is to educate local authorities on the value of their contribution to providers. If LAs work with providers on a 'stumbling block' or pilot, this benefits both parties, and there is a case for return on investment. This return would go directly back into the funding pot, encouraging a continuous loop of innovation across the region and attracting providers.

Another suggestion includes exploring the commercialisation of projects via intellectual property, educating local areas on what this means and how they apply for it.

"A collaborative approach with the private sector is needed. Particularly around AI, digital, and data. The work that local authorities give to providers is really valuable, and there is no return being seen for local authorities on that at the moment."

Kerry Topping, Policy and Projects Manager, North East Association of Directors of Adult Social Services