



Wessex
Health
Partners

Delivering for Our Communities:

The Strategic Case for Health and Care Research and Innovation in Rural and Coastal Wessex

Aligning with the NHS Long Term Plan and the UK
Modern Industrial Strategy

January 2026

Executive Summary

Rural and coastal communities across Wessex including Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Dorset, Portsmouth and Southampton, face persistent health inequalities which are obscured by regional averages. These populations experience reduced access to care, higher disease burden, and poorer outcomes across physical and mental health domains.

This aligns with national findings from the Chief Medical Officer's 2025 report *Health trends and variation in England 2025*¹, which highlights that people in the most deprived areas live significantly shorter lives and spend more years in poor health. Drawing on Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JNSA) intelligence and advanced data platforms such as Dorset Intelligence and Insight Service (DiIS)², the Hampshire and the Isle of Wight (HIOW) Population Health System³, and the Southampton Data Observatory⁴, there is a compelling case for targeted research and innovation investment. It identifies scalable opportunities to improve outcomes, reduce system pressure, and deliver nationally relevant insights.

This strategic case is explicitly aligned with the NHS Long Term Plan (10-year plan)⁵, supporting national priorities for prevention, integrated community-based care, workforce sustainability, digital-first innovation, expanded mental health provision and climate-health resilience. At the same time, it advances the UK Modern Industrial Strategy⁶, contributing to the Pillars of Ideas (health innovation and translational research), People (workforce skills and productivity), Infrastructure (digital platforms and clean growth) and Place (regional testbeds for innovation).

By positioning Wessex as a living laboratory for health and care transformation, our proposal demonstrates how investment can simultaneously reduce inequalities, strengthen the NHS, and drive industrial competitiveness in the UK's life sciences sector.

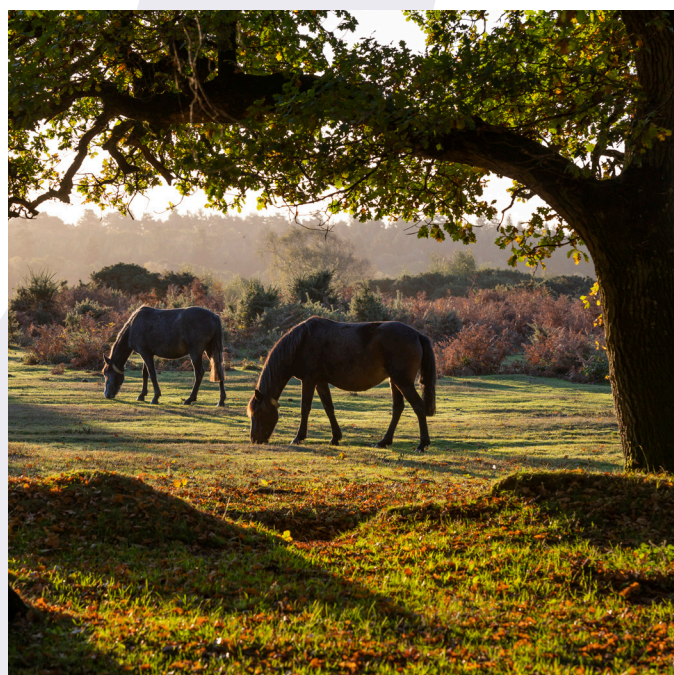


Case for Funding and Investment

Unmet Needs and Systemic Gaps

Access inequities

- Hampshire JSNA reports transport and service access barriers in districts like Test Valley and New Forest⁷
- Isle of Wight JSNA highlights geographical isolation and limited service capacity, contributing to delayed care⁸
- Dorset JSNA and DiiS data show digital exclusion and poor broadband access in rural areas, limiting uptake of virtual care models²
- Southampton JSNA reports unmet pharmaceutical care needs in their Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment (PNA), pockets of geographical isolation and neighbourhoods where limited English proficiency is often a barrier to accessing Primary Care⁴.



Ageing and multimorbidity

- The Isle of Wight has one of the oldest populations in England with high rates of frailty, dementia and long-term conditions⁸
- Dorset's coastal towns, including Weymouth and Portland, show elevated levels of social isolation and age-related health decline⁹
- Hampshire JSNA identifies population ageing and youth outmigration in rural districts, impacting informal care networks⁷
- Portsmouth JSNA notes that coastal communities include a disproportionately high burden of ill health, particularly heart disease, diabetes, cancer, COPD and mental health. Life expectancy, healthy life expectancy and disability-free life expectancy are all lower in the city's coastal areas for males and females¹⁰.
- More than half of Southampton residents aged 60 to 64 have at least one long term condition. On average, Southampton residents in the most deprived quintile spend 24% of their (significantly shorter) lives in ill health. Projected growth in older age groups and associated pressures from an ageing population are also reported, despite the city having a relatively young population structure⁴
- National data confirms that rural and coastal areas have higher proportions of older adults and elevated old-age dependency ratios, projected to rise sharply by 2043¹.

Mental health pressures

- The JSNAs and HIOW intelligence point to elevated suicide rates, depression and substance misuse in coastal and rural communities^{3,7,8,10}
- Southampton Observatory data reveals high mental health need in deprived coastal wards such as Bargate⁴.

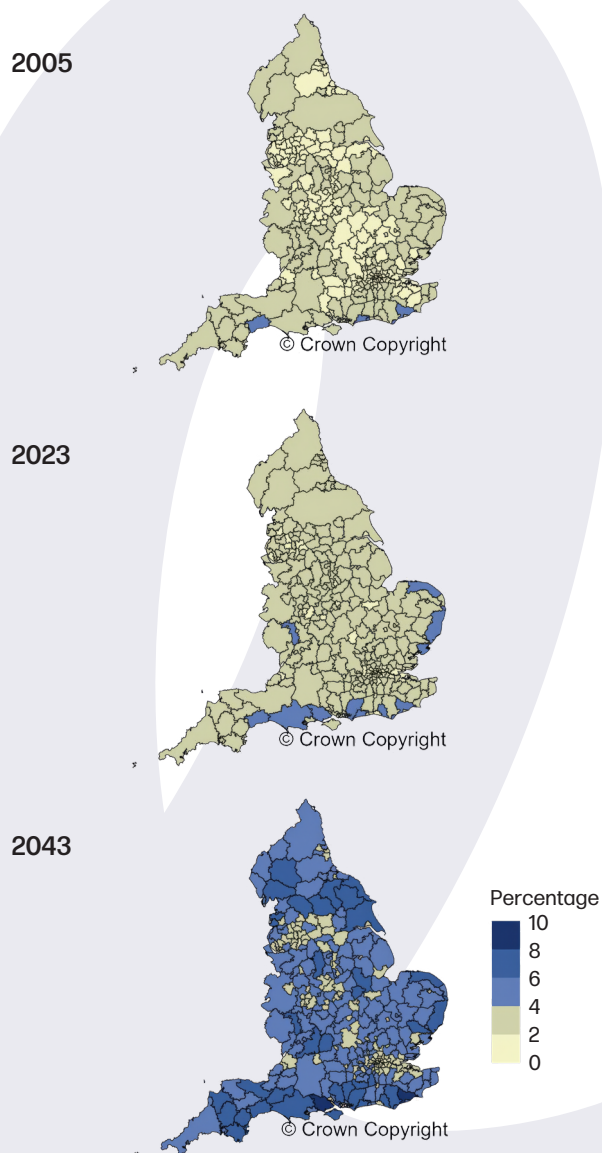
Preventable illness and inequalities

- Dorset JSNA and Diis identify above-average rates of cardiovascular disease and respiratory illness in coastal areas^{2,9}
- Hampshire JSNA flags disparities in diabetes prevalence and cancer outcomes between urban and rural districts⁷
- Isle of Wight reports elevated rates of preventable hospital admissions and late-stage cancer diagnoses⁸
- Southampton data shows male life expectancy in deprived coastal wards is up to 7 years lower than in affluent inland areas⁹
- Portsmouth JSNA highlights that coastal cities like Portsmouth experience greater exposure to risks and poorer health outcomes on a range of measures including key wider determinants of health such as educational attainment¹⁰.

These patterns mirror national trends, where life expectancy and healthy life expectancy are consistently lower in more deprived areas, with the gap widening over time¹.

Most areas are ageing, but by 2043 the largest proportions of the population aged 85 and over will remain predominantly in rural and coastal areas.

Figure 1.18 Population ageing by geography



Percentage of the population aged over 85 years in 2005 (top), 2023 (middle) and projected in 2043 (bottom).

Source: [Health trends and variation in England, 2025](#) (page 23)

Research and Innovation Opportunities

The following are examples of research and innovation opportunities that demonstrate how rural and coastal Wessex can act as a testbed for nationally relevant solutions.

Integrated Models of Care

- Pilot mobile health units and digitally enabled outreach in underserved rural and coastal areas
- Evaluate community-led service design approaches to improve trust, uptake, and outcomes

Workforce Sustainability

- Test incentive frameworks for rural and coastal placements, including housing support and remote supervision
- Explore new roles and skill mixes to support multi-disciplinary care in low-density settings

Digital Inclusion and Remote Monitoring

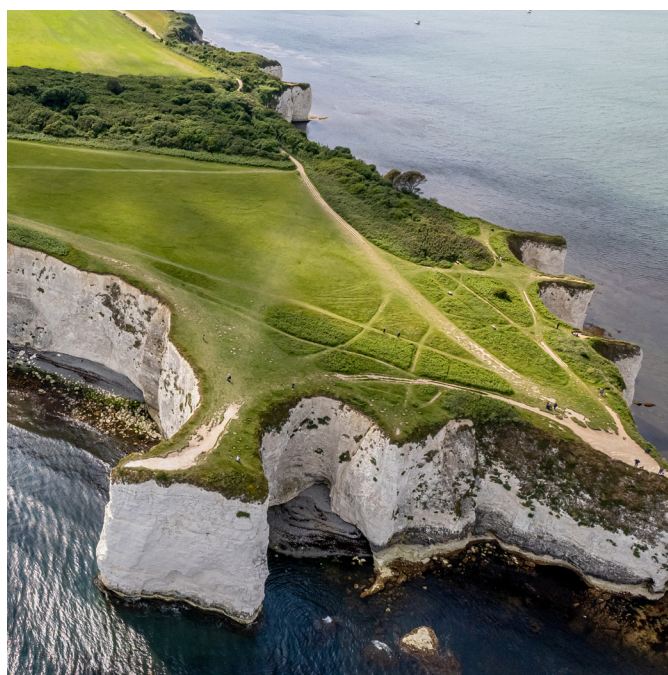
- Co-develop digital literacy interventions and evaluate their impact on engagement and outcomes
- Trial remote monitoring for chronic conditions in digitally excluded populations using low-tech solutions

Mental Health Innovation

- Design and test community-based mental health interventions tailored to seasonal and economic stressors
- Evaluate stigma-reduction strategies and peer-led support models in small communities

Climate and Health Resilience

- Investigate the health impacts of coastal erosion, flooding, and housing vulnerability
- Develop adaptive public health strategies for climate-sensitive communities



Strategic Alignment

These research and innovation opportunities align with national priorities and frameworks, ensuring that investment in rural and coastal Wessex delivers both health system transformation and wider economic growth.

- **National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR):** The focus on place-based research and underserved populations directly supports the NIHR's commitment to tackling inequalities and generating evidence that can be scaled nationally
- **Levelling Up Agenda:** By targeting coastal deprivation and rural health inequalities, the proposals contribute to the government's Levelling Up mission to reduce geographical disparities in health, education and opportunity.
- **Integrated Care System (ICS) Transformation Goals:** The emphasis on integrated, data-driven care models reflects ICS priorities for prevention, proactive population health management and system sustainability
- **UKRI and Innovate UK Frameworks:** The research and innovation opportunities outlined here align with UKRI and Innovate UK's focus on health innovation, resilience, and translational research that strengthens the UK's global competitiveness
- **Chief Medical Officer's 2025 Report:** This narrative responds directly to the call for evidence-based interventions to address geographic and socioeconomic health disparities, ensuring that rural and coastal populations are not left behind
- **NHS Long Term Plan (10-year plan):** The proposals reinforce the Plan's priorities for:
 - Prevention and early intervention through community-based models of care
 - Workforce sustainability by testing new roles, incentives, and skill mixes in underserved areas
 - Digital-first service delivery via remote monitoring, digital literacy, and inclusive technology adoption
 - Expanded mental health provision through tailored community interventions and stigma-reduction strategies
 - Sustainability and resilience by embedding climate-health research into system planning
- **UK Modern Industrial Strategy:** The narrative advances the Strategy's four pillars:
 - **Ideas:** Driving innovation in health technologies and service models
 - **People:** Developing workforce skills and new care roles to boost productivity
 - **Infrastructure:** Leveraging digital platforms and connectivity to enable inclusive care
 - **Place:** Positioning Wessex as a regional testbed for health innovation, contributing to clean growth and industrial competitiveness

Together, these alignments demonstrate that investment in Wessex health and care research will not only address local inequalities but also deliver nationally relevant insights, supporting both NHS transformation and the UK's industrial strategy for growth and resilience.

Conclusion

Wessex offers a unique testbed for health and care research that bridges geography with innovation. By investing in rural and coastal populations, funders can catalyse scalable solutions with national relevance, advancing equity, sustainability and system transformation. This proposal invites collaboration across Integrated Care Systems, academic institutions, industry partners and community stakeholders to co-create impactful, evidence-based change.

Data Sources and references

1. [Health trends and variation in England 2025: a Chief Medical Officer report](#)
2. [Dorset Intelligence and Insight Service \(DiiS\)](#)
3. [Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICB – Population Health Management](#)
4. [Southampton Data Observatory](#)
5. [Fit for the Future: 10 Year Health Plan for England](#)
6. [The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy 2025](#)
7. [Hampshire County Council JSNA](#)
8. [Isle of Wight Council JSNA](#)
9. [Dorset Council JSNA](#)
10. [Portsmouth City Council JSNA](#)



Contact us

If you are interested in connecting and collaborating with us, or have an idea you are keen to discuss, we'd like to hear from you.

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