



Wessex
Health
Partners

Impact Report 2025-26

wessexhealthpartners.org.uk

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1. Foreword

Across our region, partners have worked together with purpose to accelerate research, innovation and improvements in care. As the region's Academic Health Science Partnership, collectively we have continued to provide strategic leadership and coordination to help turn ideas into impact - strengthening connections, aligning priorities and ensuring our work reflects the needs of our population.

A major focus has been the development and delivery of our **driver activities** - targeted programmes designed to strengthen regional research and innovation infrastructure, connect collaborators, support academic themes aligned to population need, and enable innovation to move faster from discovery to deployment.

Together, we've created more opportunities for interdisciplinary research, expanded testbeds and helped accelerate the adoption of new models of care across Wessex.

Alongside this, we have worked to **raise the national visibility of the Wessex region**, showcasing our strengths, partnerships and potential. By amplifying our collective achievements and presenting a coherent regional offer, we are positioning Wessex as a **destination cluster for life sciences** - a place where innovators want to work, invest and collaborate.

Our collective efforts contribute directly to national ambitions: building an NHS fit for the future, driving economic growth, shifting from sickness to prevention, moving care closer to home and embracing digital transformation.

We are proud of what has been achieved and grateful to our partners for their commitment and leadership. Together, we are ensuring Wessex grows even stronger as a region where research and innovation flourish, delivering meaningful and lasting improvements to health and care.



Professor William Rosenberg
Chair,
Wessex Health Partners



Christine McGrath
Managing Director,
Wessex Health Partners



2. Our Board

Our Board champions a strong culture of collaboration and partnership working, acting as custodians of our values and modelling the behaviours that enable collective leadership.

It brings together expertise and experience from across the health and care, research, and innovation landscape to guide the development and delivery of our strategy.

Through this shared stewardship, Board members ensure that our work is shaped by diverse perspectives, grounded in our purpose, and delivered in a way that reflects our commitment to working together for regional impact.



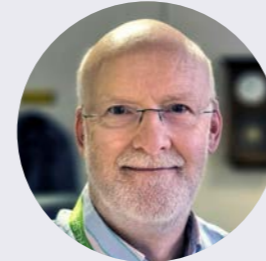
Dr Lara Alloway
Chief Medical Officer,
NHS Hampshire & Isle of
Wight Integrated Care
Board



Nicola Bent
Chief Executive Officer,
Health Innovation Wessex



**Professor Anoop
Chauhan**
Executive Chief
Research Officer,
Portsmouth Hospitals
University NHS Trust



**Professor Alastair
Hutchison**
Research Director,
Dorset County Hospital
NHS Foundation Trust



Dr Mark Kelsey
Chief Medical Officer -
Physical Health,
Hampshire and Isle of
Wight Healthcare NHS
Foundation Trust



Dr Lucy Knight
Chief Medical Officer,
Dorset HealthCare
University NHS
Foundation Trust



Dr Bernie Marden
Chief Medical Officer,
NHS Dorset Integrated
Care Board



Professor Diana Eccles
Dean of Medicine,
University of
Southampton



Paul Grundy
Chief Medical Officer,
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Southampton NHS
Foundation Trust



Professor Lesley Haig
Vice-Chancellor,
Health Sciences
University



Dr Carly Stewart
Pro-Vice-Chancellor &
Dean, Faculty of Health,
Environment & Medical
Sciences,
Bournemouth University



**Professor Richard
Thelwell**
Executive Dean, Faculty
of Science and Health,
University of Portsmouth



Dr Peter Wilson
Chief Medical Officer,
University Hospitals
Dorset NHS Foundation
Trust



Dr Ruth Williamson
Chief Medical Officer,
Hampshire Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Wessex has a thriving life sciences research and innovation ecosystem, built on long-standing relationships and deep expertise across our NHS, universities and industry. Recognising that by combining our excellence, we can accelerate change, our members founded Wessex Health Partners.

Wessex Health Partners brings together NHS organisations, universities and Health Innovation Wessex, supported by a core team, to provide strategic leadership, regional coordination and national visibility.

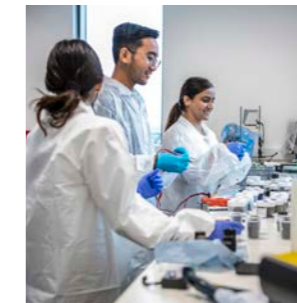


**Combined excellence
accelerated impact**

3. Wessex Life Sciences: A region of strength and opportunity

Wessex is home to a vibrant and growing life sciences cluster. We boast world class capabilities in precision medicine, diagnostics, medtech, digital health, artificial intelligence and clinical trials.

Our region hosts 300+ life science businesses, employing 24,400 people. Feeding into these is a strong talent pipeline of 6,300 life science students across six universities: Portsmouth, Southampton, Bournemouth, Health Sciences University, Southampton Solent and Winchester. Academic strengths are matched by four major university hospitals providing research leadership and extensive trials capability.



Major research assets give our region its distinctive character. These include the **European Xenopus Resource Centre, National Biofilms Innovation Centre, National Oceanography Centre, Future Photonics Hub, National Centre for Computer Animation and UK Health Security Agency.** Together, these organisations anchor specialist expertise and help attract global investment.



300+
life science businesses

employing
24,400
people

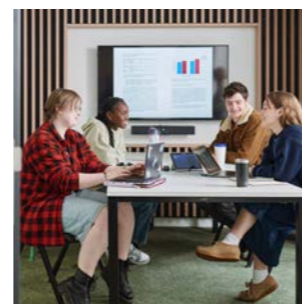
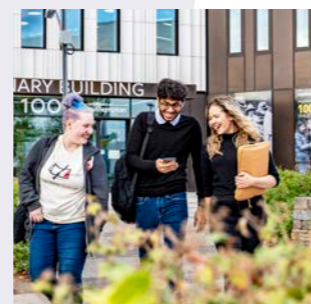
6,300
life science students

across
6
universities

The **National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)** continues to invest in our region with major infrastructure and programme grants. Alongside these, the **Wessex Secure Data Environment**, part of the national Health Data Research Service (HDRS), is enabling access to secure health data for research at scale. This is complemented by **Health Innovation Wessex**, **SETsquared Partnership**, **The Catalyst Programme**, and **Southampton Science Park**, all supporting innovators from concept through to company formation and growth.

We are poised for further expansion, with emerging innovation spaces in Hampshire and Dorset. These developments align with Local Growth Plans and will strengthen Wessex's position as a **destination cluster** for innovation, investment and talent.

Together, these assets form a powerful regional offer.



4. 2025-26 at a glance

Working in partnership, Wessex Health Partners...

Strengthened regional research and innovation infrastructure, expanding the work of:

- NIHR Wessex Experimental Medicine Network (19 small grants, 20 portfolio projects)
- Wessex Secure Data Environment (25+ research projects, home to PRANA)
- NIHR Commercial Research Delivery Centre Wessex (strong first year, four commercial studies delivered)
- NIHR Applied Research Collaboration Wessex (£16.3m funding secured)

Expanded collaborative research and innovation programmes, projects and networks:

- Delivered **£254k** through the Small Grants Scheme, contributing to **78** projects and **£2.3m** follow on funding

- Advanced four Academic Themes, supporting major bids including a **£2.8m** genomics submission and NIHR Research for Patient Benefit (RfPB) Programme bid
- Supported **78** collaborative funding applications, resulting in **£59.3m** awarded across 2023/24 and 2025-26
- Launched five regional research and innovation networks
- Held our second **Big Conversation** convening more than **200** professionals and partners

Strengthened regional resources and enablers:

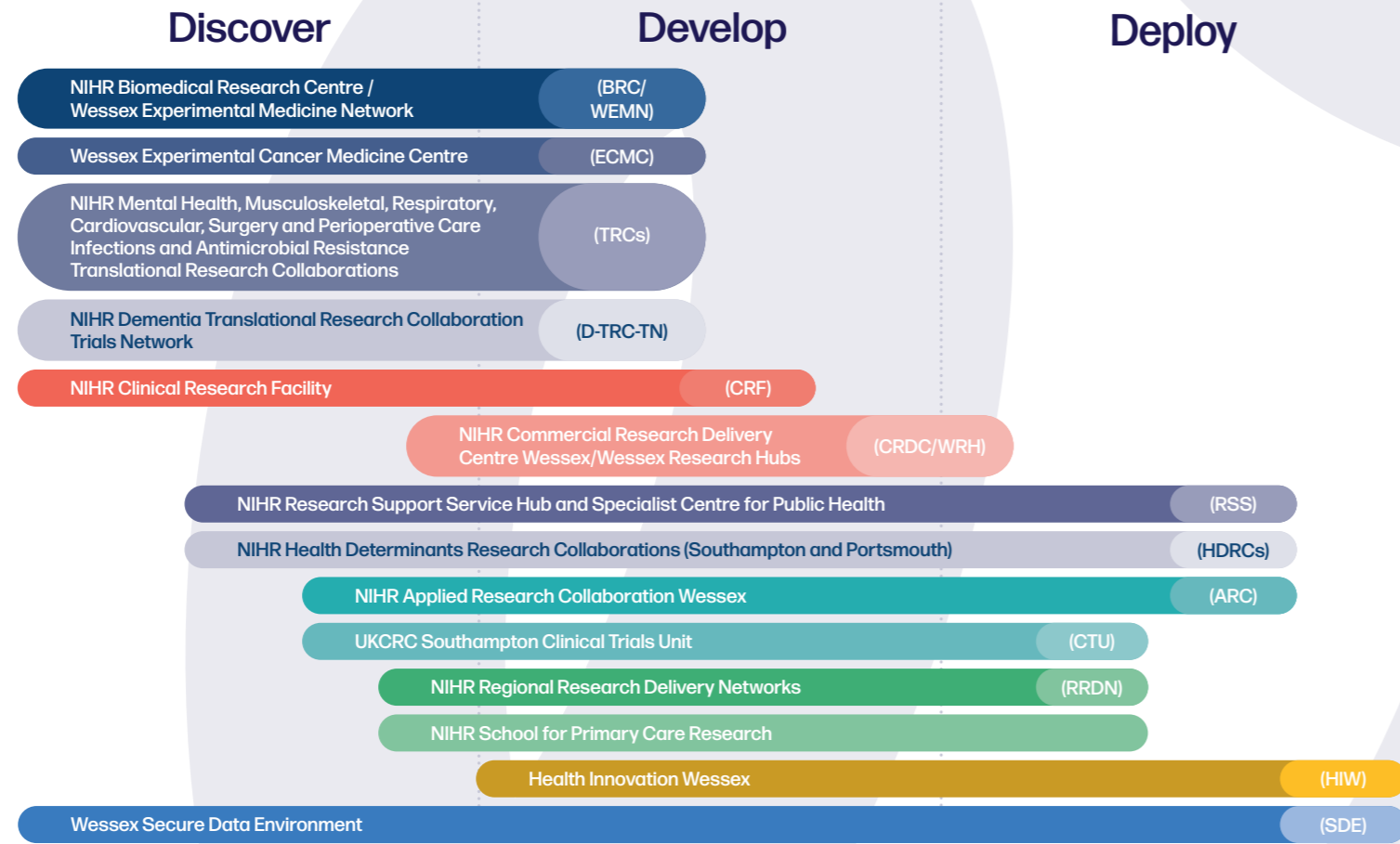
- Launched the **Wessex Data Directory**, improving access to regional data assets
- Created the first **People and Communities Directory**, consolidating Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE) support

Deepened engagement with local authorities and industry, strengthening regional Life Sciences in Hampshire and Dorset, including participation in the Hampshire Super Cluster Forum and Talbot Quarter Innovation Cluster Group.



5. Regional Research and Innovation infrastructure

Supported by
NIHR | National Institute for Health and Care Research



Together, our NIHR and other R&I regional infrastructure connect discovery, development and deployment, widening participation, attracting national investment and ensuring that research and innovation deliver meaningful benefit for the Wessex population and wider society.

In 2025-26 Wessex Health Partners prioritised four programmes for regional development.

- NIHR Wessex Experimental Medicine Network (NIHR WEMN)
- Wessex Secure Data Environment (SDE)
- NIHR Commercial Research Delivery Centre (CRDC) Wessex
- NIHR Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) Wessex



Widening experimental medicine to all



NIHR Wessex Experimental Medicine Network (NIHR WEMN) aims to expand the world-class work of the NIHR Southampton Biomedical Research Centre (BRC) across Hampshire, Dorset, South Wiltshire and the Isle of Wight, expanding access to experimental medicine for researchers and patients alike.

This work is closely aligned to the health and care needs of local people with a view to transforming services and treatments at ground level.

Over the past year, NIHR WEMN has supported the development of experimental medicine skills and careers through online seminars, networking events, workshops, conferences, and funding to support education, training and development of research staff.

In addition, the joint Small Grants Scheme helps kickstart new collaborative projects.

See more on page 26.



Ruth Challis
Regional Partnerships Manager,
NIHR Southampton Biomedical Research
Centre and Project Manager of NIHR WEMN

“The integrated partnership working in our Wessex region has enabled us to open up new opportunities for researchers and patients to get involved in experimental medicine. By blurring the boundaries between teams, departments and organisations, we’re creating a more connected research community. Our region is rich with exciting potential to improve patient care, and working together is accelerating the growth of research capacity and capability across the region. Together, we’re making a real difference.”



Diana Baralle
NIHR Research Professor and co-director designate,
NIHR Southampton Biomedical Research Centre

“I see enormous value in building a truly connected network that enables expertise, infrastructure and opportunities to flow across the whole patch, rather than being concentrated in a single location. By working collaboratively with our regional partners, we can bring expertise together and accelerate the translation of discoveries into improvements in care. For researchers and academics, this connectivity creates exciting opportunities to develop new collaborations, access broader patient populations and clinical environments, and co-create research that is both scientifically excellent and directly relevant to the needs of the NHS and our communities.”



Age Chapman
Professor of Computer Science, Head of the Digital Health and Biomedical Engineering group,
University of Southampton, and Operational Theme Lead for NIHR Southampton Biomedical Research Centre Data Health and Society Theme

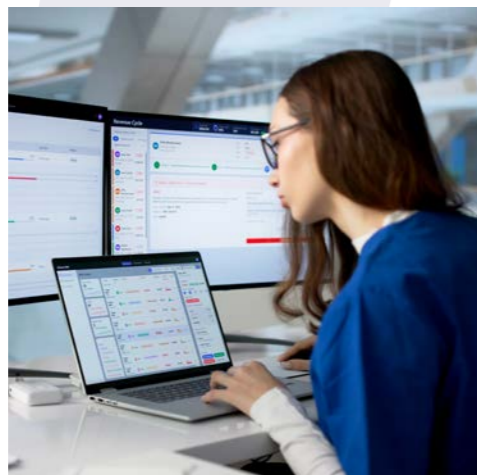
“An AI tool built to improve patient care may perform brilliantly in one region yet falter in another, because populations differ not only in demographics but in how they engage with the technology. By working across regions, we expose these differences, unlocking richer creativity, broader data, and more meaningful human insight. In doing so, we move beyond siloed solutions to create systems with greater reach, fairness, and real-world impact.”

Unlocking the region's patient data safely



The Wessex Secure Data Environment (SDE) provides researchers with secure access to patient data to accelerate discoveries, support life-saving treatments and medicines, and deliver real benefit for patients, communities, and the NHS. There are currently 20 live studies with more than 60 researchers, and 115 further studies in the pipeline.

The Wessex SDE, owned and managed by the NHS, is supporting a wide range of research, including improving our understanding of pneumonia in intensive care units, developing a tool to predict patients' discharge needs earlier, connecting dementia data across the multiple SDEs, and linking the patient journey from pre-hospital care through the full care pathway.



Mark Heffernan
Managing Director (Programme and Operations),
Wessex Secure Data Environment

“The vision for the Wessex SDE has always been about more than just storing data securely; it’s about unlocking the potential of data to transform patient care. What we are seeing now, with 20 live studies and more than 100 in the pipeline, is that vision becoming a reality. By giving researchers safe, structured access to NHS data, we are driving discoveries that would simply not have been possible before.”

Every study must demonstrate how it will deliver patient benefit and is evaluated by an independent Data Access Committee, including members of the public. By linking data beyond individual NHS Trusts, researchers can start to look at the impact of decision making at each stage of the patient journey and support partners to develop their own research agenda.

This year, the team worked with Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, to expand their research collaborations with academic and industry partners. The Wessex SDE provided an on-site analyst to help map and prepare the data and provide data governance support, helping the Trust’s Business Intelligence team gain a clearer understanding of where data is held across hospital systems and how it can be structured for research and service improvement.

Working collaboratively, the team is currently preparing several datasets for research, including critical care datasets supporting research into respiratory infections and ICU outcomes, cancer datasets, including prostate cancer data, and neuroendocrine datasets linked to national specialist research networks.



Natasha Chigbo
Associate Director of Research and Development,
Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

“Our data is valuable, but it is not usable if it remains unstructured across multiple systems. The Wessex SDE is helping us prepare and structure that data so it can be analysed safely for research, while we retain control over how it is used. That opens up opportunities for collaboration that simply weren’t possible before.”

Expanding access to cutting-edge commercial clinical trials

NIHR | Commercial Research Delivery Centre

As the newest NIHR-funded infrastructure in the region, the Commercial Research Delivery Centre (CRDC) Wessex has made significant steps in enhancing the speed and efficiency of commercial clinical research delivery across four linked centres. Two additional sites are in set up with new partners, expanding access further, and this truly regional partnership has extended to include the research team at SCAS (South Central Ambulance Service).

The CRDC successfully delivered a second round of Moderna's 301 Trial, researching the effectiveness of a norovirus vaccine. Known as the winter vomiting bug, norovirus is hugely disruptive and costly, closing hospital wards, schools and care homes. In total 185 participants were recruited, exceeding the recruitment target. There is currently no licensed vaccine for norovirus, and effective protection has the potential to benefit not just individuals, especially the elderly, but the healthcare system as a whole.



Dr Patrick Moore
Poole-based GP and Wessex CRDC Director

"Many participants in our trials are motivated by a strong desire to give back to the NHS and contribute to groundbreaking medical advancements that could improve the health and care of others in the future. As we continue to expand our sites, even more individuals will have the opportunity to take part in vital research, driving meaningful improvements both regionally and beyond."

The CRDC is also playing a key role in delivering Moderna's Odyssey 301 Trial, investigating an avian (bird) flu vaccine. The international study aims to assess the vaccine's safety and its ability to generate a strong immune response against circulating and emerging H5N1 strains.

Although bird flu does not yet spread easily between humans, researchers stress the virus is evolving and human-to-human transmission must be treated as a real possibility. With 116 confirmed human cases globally since 2024, the trial forms part of a national proactive pandemic preparedness strategy drawing on COVID-19 learnings.

One of the first people to receive the vaccine was Clare Howard, from Hampshire. She was enrolled in under half the government's 150-day target, demonstrating the speed and effectiveness of the CRDCs.



Clare Howard
Trial participant

"I am well aware of avian flu because we have chickens at home, and there are a lot of outbreaks in poultry all around the country. When I heard about this trial and how easy it was to take part, I thought I would like to be involved. You really feel like you are doing something not just for the UK, but globally too."

Other trials delivered in this period include Boehringer Ingelheim's Easi-Protkt cardiac study. This study is open to adults with type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and cardiovascular disease.

The purpose is to find out if a medicine called vicadrostad, when taken with empagliflozin, helps reduce cardiovascular risk in people with these conditions.



Dr Elizabeth Jones
GP and Principal Investigator of the cardiac trial in Bournemouth and Weymouth

"We know that in this area we have a particularly high number of patients with cardiovascular disease. This cardiac trial is all about trying to offer better protection to patients who have multiple conditions and may be at cardiovascular risk. It's a great example of how the CRDC is delivering cutting-edge treatments to local people."

5. Regional Research and Innovation infrastructure

The new Southampton Research Hub opened in Shirley, another of our community-based centres, making it easier for people to take part in cutting-edge commercial clinical research close to home. The facility was opened by the local MP Satvir Kaur in an event attended by public representatives, research colleagues and commercial partners.



Deborah Knight
Local participant

“I was thrilled to take part in this special ceremony. I’ve previously taken part in a study which was investigating a new flu vaccine, and I am keen to take part again. We need all sorts of people, from all sorts of backgrounds, to put themselves forwards for clinical trials. This is the only way we can improve healthcare for everyone, helping save and improve lives.”



The Adam Practice in Poole, Dorset, was named as one of the 14 new Primary Care-CRDCs and will work collaboratively with CRDC Wessex.

5. Regional Research and Innovation infrastructure

Bournemouth University

Health and care excellence through collaboration and innovation

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

University of Southampton

Health Innovation Wessex



NIHR Applied Research Collaboration Wessex to continue to 2031

NIHR | Applied Research Collaboration

In a major achievement, the new NIHR Applied Health and Care Research Collaboration (ARC) Wessex secured £16.3m of NIHR funding, enabling teams across the region to deliver valuable applied research across the south of England for the next five years.

Applied health and care research targets the immediate issues facing the healthcare, public health and social care systems.

The new NIHR ARC funded infrastructure (2026-2031) follows and builds on two previous funded schemes, and through this new funding, the NIHR ARC Wessex has been designed as a **neighbourhood-based, equity-led** system transformation model for applied health and care research, working with universities, the NHS, councils, voluntary and community organisations, and most importantly the **public and patients** in Wessex.

The new NIHR ARC will focus on **five flagship programmes** alongside its research themes (Healthy Communities and Prevention, Living Well with Long-term Conditions, Mental Health, Integrated Health and Social Care, Data and Technology) targeting some of the biggest health and care challenges facing the UK. These include **obesity, dementia, multiple long-term conditions, addiction and everyday data.**

Themes and flagships are underpinned by the **Collaboration Hub** that brings expertise to strengthen alignment across research portfolio, enhance the scale, reach and impact of activities and actively nurture and sustain high-quality collaboration, enabling teams to work together more effectively and maximise the impact of their applied health and social care research work.



The new NIHR ARC is designed to strengthen system readiness alongside research delivery from the outset through:

- Co-production with people and research inclusion with communities and services
- Research capacity development embedded within the system, not just academia
- Early integration of knowledge mobilisation and implementation planning
- Partnerships with health and care systems, local government, voluntary and community organisations, and industry from project inception

This evolution towards building system readiness in parallel with research is a defining feature of the new ARC Wessex.



Professor Cathy Bowen
Director of NIHR Arc Wessex

“The Wessex Health Partners core team played a central role in our co-produced consultation with partners and collaborators. Their involvement was instrumental in helping us understand the needs of our regional health and care systems, enabling us to shape the new ARC in direct response to that collective insight.”



Professor Michael Boniface
Deputy Director of NIHR Arc Wessex

“William and Christine, with colleagues across Wessex Health Partners, provided valuable strategic insight and support in helping us shape our vision for NIHR ARC Wessex.”

6. Sharing resources across the region

As our regional research and innovation ecosystem grows, it is important to help colleagues across Wessex access the same high quality information, connections and support, regardless of where they work.

New online resources make it easier for researchers, innovators and partners to navigate the region's assets, find the right expertise, and build stronger collaborations from the outset.



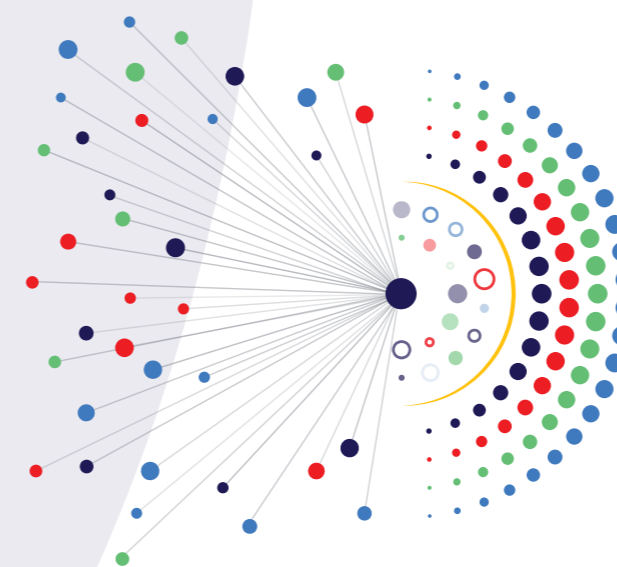
Wessex Data Directory

The Wessex Data Directory brings resources together in one accessible place, making it easier to find the relevant data, understand its purpose, and draw on high quality population health insights to strengthen research, innovation and care across the region.



Mike Grocott
Professor of Anaesthesia & Critical Care,
University of Southampton

“The Wessex Data Directory is a major step forward in making our region's data assets visible, accessible and usable. By bringing these resources together in one place, we're enabling researchers, clinicians and innovators to quickly understand what data exists, how to access it, and how it can drive better insights for population health. This is about removing barriers, accelerating discovery and ensuring that the full strength of Wessex's data ecosystem is working for our communities.”



People and Communities Directory

The People and Communities Directory helps researchers find the right advice, support and community connections to strengthen their studies, and identifies which communities each service works with, enabling earlier and more effective partnership building.

Drawing on collaboration with NIHR infrastructure, partner organisations, local authorities and voluntary, community and VCSE organisations, we have developed a comprehensive list of specialist involvement and engagement services across the region.

Our health and care researchers are now better supported to understand, design and deliver high-quality involvement and engagement with people and communities.



Dr Chris Stock
Head of Southampton Centre for Research Engagement and Impact (SCREI)

“The People and Communities Directory strengthens research across Wessex by making research organisations and research -active voluntary, community and social enterprises more visible and accessible. This supports earlier, more meaningful public involvement and enables researchers to build relationships with communities that reflect the populations we serve. At a system level, this helps ensure research is better aligned to real needs, delivers greater impact, and supports more inclusive and trusted research practice.”



7. Wessex Small Grants Scheme

The Small Grants Scheme (SGS) acts as a catalyst for early stage research and innovation, providing seed funding to help shape new collaborative ideas and partnerships. This way we can help researchers to connect, test concepts and build towards winning much larger, external funding.

At the heart of the scheme is genuine partnership. All our partners have both led and collaborated on projects, demonstrating a strong, region wide commitment to working together and engaging meaningfully with wider stakeholders.

The SGS is intentionally responsive, enabling researchers to pursue ideas shaped by the communities they work with. Nevertheless, clear themes have begun to emerge. These show how research, through meaningful engagement with people and communities, is naturally aligning with wider regional and national strategic priorities.



27
projects funded
in round 3 (£254k)

Including
£50k
from NIHR WEMN

78
projects funded
across rounds 1-3

£2.3m
follow on funding secured



Katherine Baker
Strategic Research Lead,
Hampshire & Isle of Wight Integrated
Care Board

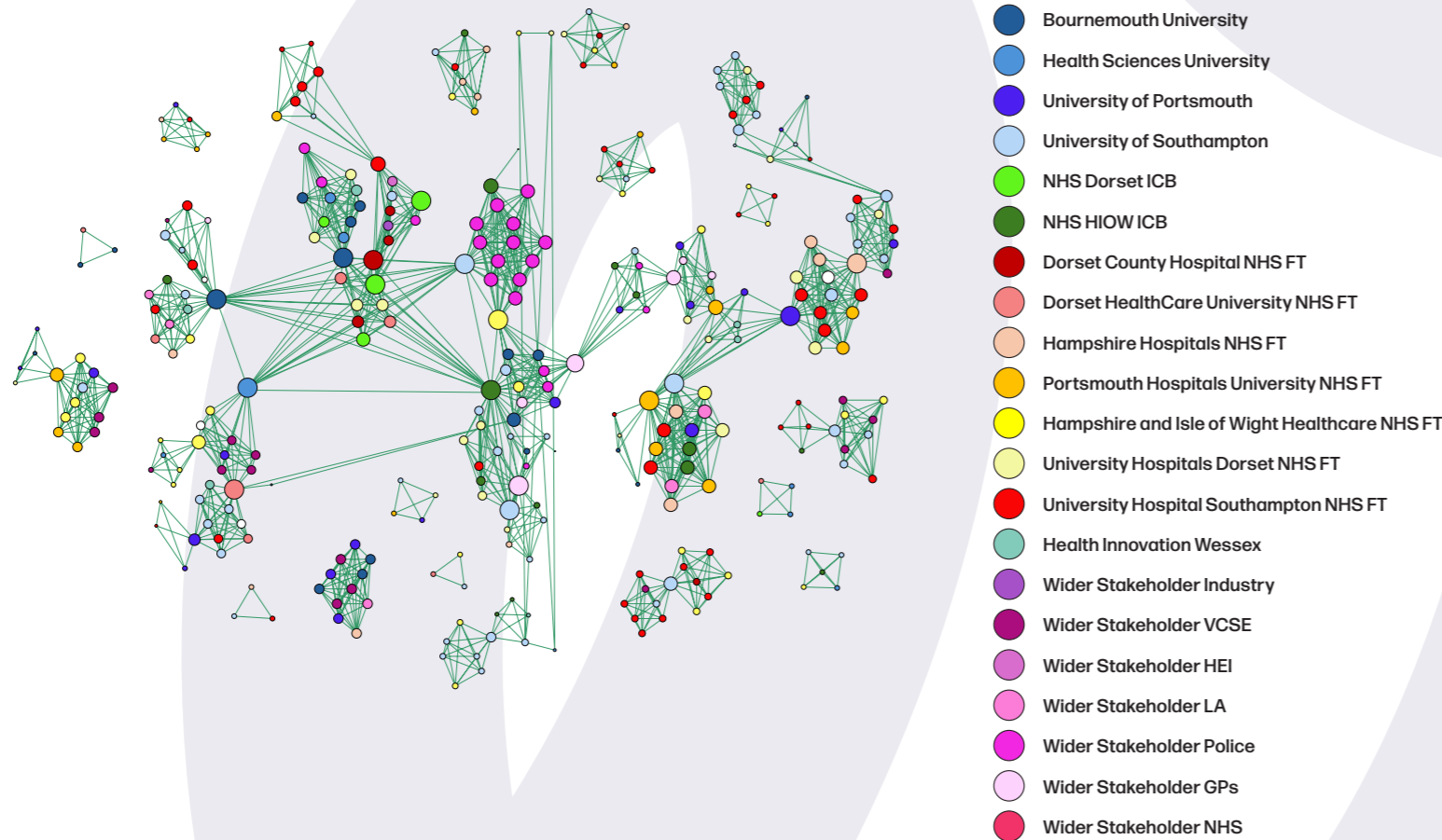
“The SGS has opened up new conversations about how colleagues within our Integrated Care Board (ICB) can begin their own research, support emerging ideas from community researchers, and help develop a community of practice and training across both Wessex ICBs. Backing from Wessex Health Partners has strengthened this momentum, driving an increase in applications connected to the ICB, from three successful bids in 2023 to ten in 2026, demonstrating a clear and growing culture of research engagement across the system.”

Network diagrams track the effectiveness of the Small Grants Scheme

To make collaboration more visible and measurable, the Wessex Health Partners core team tracks SGS collaborations in a visual way.

In this diagram, each dot (or 'neuron') represents an individual researcher, while the lines between them show collaborative projects developed through Wessex Health Partners or NIHR WEMN support.

Larger dots indicate researchers who are most connected across organisations, highlighting key convenors and connectors within the regional system. When viewed year-on-year, these visuals clearly show how connections expand and deepen over time.



Mel Hughes
Professor of Social Work,
Bournemouth University

“The small grants scheme continues to provide an entry point for many researchers at Bournemouth University connecting with the wider Wessex community. Whether submitting or not, whether successful or not, the scheme has facilitated fruitful conversations and connections which have continued to grow.”



Omer Elma
Lecturer in Physiotherapy,
Bournemouth University

“As an early career researcher new to the UK, this funding was transformative. It helped me build my research foundation, test ideas, and establish a professional network across Wessex.”



Sam Chamberlain
Professor of Psychiatry,
University of Southampton

“Wessex Health Partners fills a critical gap, providing the resources needed to build research infrastructure and generate the momentum required for major future funding.”



Chloe Casey
Lecturer in Nutrition and Behaviour,
Bournemouth University

“The Wessex Health Partners team didn't just fund my project - they championed it. Their support opened doors I could never have reached alone, including national media platforms.”

Case study: Dancing into better health in Dorset



Dr Neil Langridge
Director of the Institute of Musculoskeletal Health and Innovation, Health Sciences University

With low back pain costing the UK an estimated £2.1-£2.8bn every year and affecting up to one in three older adults, new evidence shows that dance-based community programmes offer a scalable, cost-effective option that supports wellbeing and independence while reducing pressure on NHS services.

The Health Sciences University-led project in partnership with Pavilion Dance South West took a fresh approach: instead of giving patients clinical exercises to undertake at home or in a gym, participants joined gentle, group-based, music-led sessions. The classes used visualisation, creative direction and a welcoming group environment to encourage safe, enjoyable movement.

Dr Neil Langridge, Director of the Institute of Musculoskeletal Health and Innovation at Health Sciences University, explains: "Our findings show it's not about eliminating pain, it's about helping people move more freely, build confidence, and overcome fear. By taking the programme out of clinical settings and into a social, creative space, participants feel more relaxed and more willing to try new movements."

People with chronic low back pain often feel tight and 'locked up,' which makes them avoid moving. This avoidance reinforces pain and stiffness. Breaking this cycle by helping people move with confidence is key. The funding from Wessex Health Partners gave us a springboard to explore this new model of practice."

Following the research, Pavilion Dance launched pay-what-you-can community classes so more residents can benefit. The project team is exploring pathways for social prescribing and wider regional rollout.

The project was featured by BBC South on television, radio and online.



Case study: The science behind the cold water high



Researchers at the University of Portsmouth and Bournemouth University are working together to examine how cold water immersion affects brain activity.



Dr Heather Massey
Associate Professor in Extreme Environments and Physiology, University of Portsmouth

Dr Heather Massey, Associate Professor in Extreme Environments and Physiology, at the University of Portsmouth, explains: "This is the first study to investigate changes in brain activity before, during and after head-out immersion in cold water. We want to understand how cold water immersion might help people living with depression. Lots of people tell us they experience a high going into cold water, they feel more relaxed, like they've had a reset, and a sense of calm once they've come out. We want to understand what's causing that and how it might be happening in the brain."

"We're the first team to look at why cold water may be having an impact on brain activity. We're using EEG, a more mobile form of analysis, which means we can actually record what happens during immersion itself, not just before and after. We're testing whether the popular theory of using cold water to support mental health has any bearing on brain activity, and whether it genuinely improves mood."



Dr Ala Yankouskaya
Lecturer of Psychology, Bournemouth University

"The next stage is to look at people living with symptoms of depression and anxiety, and see whether they respond differently to people without symptoms. None of this would be possible without collaboration. When you bring together people with different skill sets, you can advance knowledge so much more rapidly."

Case study: Standardising imaging



Sofia Michopoulou
Head of Nuclear Medicine
Physics at University
Hospital Southampton
NHS Foundation Trust

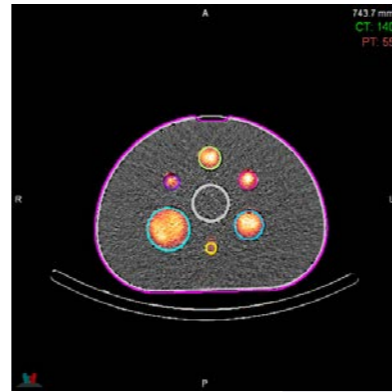
Our partners are standardising imaging to improve diagnostic quality and patient experience. This project is an excellent example of new collaborations which are deploying innovation into practice.

Sofia Michopoulou, Head of Nuclear Medicine Physics at University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust, explains: **“Patients across our region travel to different hospitals for scans to help diagnose illness and disease. But because hospitals use different scanners and imaging parameters, the images they produce can look different, and those differences can affect diagnosis. To address this, we worked to calibrate our equipment so that image quality and quantification (the precise measurement of detail within a scan) are consistent across all hospitals in the region.”**

To support this, the SGS funded a NEMA phantom: a standardised test object that allows us to harmonise scanner performance across multiple sites. This has enabled collaboration between two partners - University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust (UHS) and University Hospitals Dorset NHS Foundation Trust (UHD). The project, undertaken by Dr Kat Dixon and Ercan Turan from UHD, and Dr Amit Nautiyal and Dr Sofia Michopoulou from UHS, is expanding patient access to quantitative imaging services across Wessex.

“One practical benefit is reducing the burden on patients. Typically, patients would travel further for specialist services such as quantitative scans, whilst now the same level of quantitative accuracy can be provided in local services, reducing inequalities in access. By standardising imaging across sites, we can reduce unnecessary travel, cut costs, and ease pressure on departments.”

“What makes this work different is how the collaboration itself has evolved. The funding and collaboration has allowed us to move beyond the usual model of sharing what we’ve each already done. Instead, we are designing solutions together from the ground up, solving problems for our region, not just for ourselves.”



Case study: Fighting antimicrobial resistance



Esme Brinsden
University of
Southampton

Esme Brinsden, from the University of Southampton, is collaborating with researchers across Wessex to track bacterial strains.

She explains: **“Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is one of the biggest health threats facing our society today. It could cause up to 10 million deaths a year if left unchecked.”**

“We’ve collected clinical isolates from hospitals in Southampton and Dorset and conducted diagnostic analysis using multiple techniques, including Raman spectroscopy, MALDI and sequencing, to comprehensively characterise antibiotic-resistant strains. By analysing samples from several hospitals and primary care settings, we’re aiming to track AMR right across Wessex.”

“Through the small grant scheme, supported by NIHR WEMN, we’re bringing together a team to collect more samples and build a much deeper understanding of antibiotic-resistant bacteria in our region. What’s really important to recognise is that bacterial strains vary significantly by geography not just internationally or nationally, but locally too. Having a diverse collection and repository of strains gives us a far clearer picture of which strains are actually responsible for infection across a wider area, and that’s crucial if we’re going to respond to this threat effectively.”



Case study: INFORmED about nutrition



Obesity, malnutrition, food poverty and insecurity impact people's health and wellbeing and represent a significant burden on NHS services. Childhood obesity rates in Southampton and Portsmouth exceed the national average. In Dorset, 32% of children in Year 6 are overweight or living with obesity.

To respond to this challenge and address gaps in nutritional science and clinical practice, the Wessex Nutrition Research Network and INFORmED project are connecting clinicians, academics, patients and communities, developing research-ready dietitians and registered nutritionists and increasing the region's ability to develop more competitive funding applications.

A central focus will be to develop interdisciplinary research capacity led by professions currently under-represented in academic research.



Dr Caroline Anderson
Lead Paediatric Renal Clinical Academic Dietitian,
University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust

"Dietitians and registered nutritionists are vital to the health and wellbeing of patients in any clinical or care setting in our region. But there is an evidence gap in the nutritional science and clinical practice which needs addressing. The INFORmED project aims to build new connections and partnerships to tackle key nutrition challenges and develop interdisciplinary research capacity."



Co-lead Dr Sarah McHillier
Registered Nutritionist and Senior Lecturer in Nutrition,
Bournemouth University

"We need to grow the workforce of research-ready dietitians and registered nutritionists to address the pressing nutritional priorities within the UK. The Wessex Nutrition Research Network will support the development of research careers for dietitians and registered nutritionists. The potential impact is significant - we aim to transform practice, influence policy and address pressing health priorities in Wessex and the wider UK including obesity, malnutrition and young people's health."

8. Academic Themes

Our academic themes convene expertise from across the region to tackle challenges no single organisation could address alone. Each theme focuses on issues that matter most to people in Wessex, the priorities identified by our health and care systems, and global challenges where our partners hold world-leading strengths.

Services Health: The health and wellbeing of serving and veteran services personnel

Health Inequalities and Multimorbidity: The harms associated with the intersection between alcohol, obesity and deprivation

Genomics: The use of genomic medicine to limit the harms arising from polypharmacy in the elderly (taking too many medications)

Air Quality: Investigating the impact of poor air quality on health and wellbeing

Wessex Health Partners core team has worked with the themes to develop the following funding applications:

- **Genomics:** PRIMO - Pharmacogenomics Research for Individualised Medicine in Older people' submitted proposal to NIHR Programme Grants for Applied Research (PGfAR)
- **Air Quality:** CLEAR AIR - Co-designed evidence-based Living and Environmental Advice for Respiratory Health: Development of a clinical consultation tool' received NIHR WEMN SGS funding (£9,757)
- **Health Inequalities and Multimorbidity:** CLIFF-EDGE Wessex stakeholder network' received SGS funding (£4,935) which led to the submission of a further grant application to NIHR Research for Patient Benefit (RfPB)
- **Services Health:** A project group stemming from this theme received successful NIHR WEMN networking funding (£750) to host a sandpit networking event



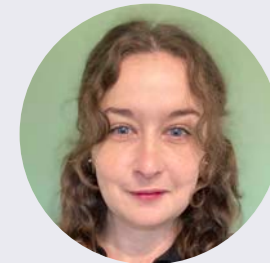
Meet our new Academic Directors

Four new Academic Directors will lead our regional approach to the development and delivery of research, innovation and training which meets local population health needs and benefits wider society, with global impact.



Mel Hughes
Professor of Social Work,
Bournemouth University

“There is so much potential for collaboration across Wessex to advance health and social care research. This role is already providing an opportunity to involve more BU research colleagues and our wider community networks in larger research collaborations and to amplify our work across the region. I am looking forward to exploring how we can further develop and support themes and networks through this work.”



Dr Michelle Holmes
Senior Lecturer in Workforce Development,
Health Sciences University.

“This is a brilliant opportunity to strengthen the collaboration across our region, aligning activities to tackle the challenges of Wessex, supporting both the health and social care workforce and outcomes for patients and communities.”



Dr Tim Exell
Associate Professor of Biomechanics
and Rehabilitation Science,
University of Portsmouth

“By leveraging the research excellence across the partnership, I am confident our collective efforts will significantly improve health and wellbeing outcomes locally and beyond. The foundation laid by Wessex Health Partners’ early work is exceptional, and our recent successes clearly demonstrate the partnership’s significant potential for future growth and investment in regional health and social care.”



Saul Faust
Professor of Paediatric Immunology and
Infectious Diseases,
University of Southampton

“I look forward to linking Southampton-based academics with other researchers across the region to drive new collaborations. Linking expertise in this way is key to being able to compete successfully for funding to accelerate improvements in health and care. Not only will this help address the region’s most pressing health needs, but also speed up change nationally and internationally.”



Academic Themes Case Study: Working with veterans



Ashleigh Boreham
Deputy Director Partnerships, Research and Innovation, NHS Dorset Integrated Care Board

The south west has the highest concentration of veterans of any region in England - 5.6% of the population are veterans, around 265,000 people.

Dementia is particularly prevalent in this population, with veterans experiencing symptoms younger than other demographic populations – and we need to understand why. As Ashleigh Boreham explains: **“Dementia, especially in ex-service personnel, is an underfunded and underrepresented research area. It needs more attention if we are to support our veterans and their families. And that’s what Wessex Health Partners is all about: bringing people together and reconnecting, so more people can become involved in conversations and projects that address the serious health issues that affect our region.”**

Emerging partnerships and ongoing conversations are identifying where Wessex Health Partners can support research in this area. One such new partnership is with Dr Michele Board at Bournemouth University.

Michele leads the Supporting Evidence-based Research for Veterans Experiencing Dementia (SERVED) project, which aims to identify the health priorities of veterans with dementia and give veterans a voice in shaping the future of the care and support available to them.

The project has held creative workshops and surveyed veterans to understand their experiences, with results expected later this year. The focus for veterans needs to be on brain health since 45% of a dementia diagnosis is potentially modifiable. Future work will include piloting brain health sessions with veterans across the country.



Dr Michele Board
Associate Professor in Nursing Older People, Bournemouth University

As Dr Michele Board explains: **“Dementia among veterans is becoming a significant issue, and yet they are less likely to report symptoms and avoid obtaining an assessment if they are worried about their memory. Our work aims to raise awareness of dementia with veterans and their families and find out more about why this group of people have symptoms earlier. Working with partners across our region is the only way to drive this work forward at pace and improve the lives of our Armed Forces community.”**

Other projects under this theme include investigating gambling activities and gambling-related harms among current and former military personnel and gaining insights into the experiences of non-UK spouses of service personnel facing domestic violence, identifying their support needs, and addressing barriers to assistance.

Engaging our veterans in research

A team of researchers at the University of Southampton, led by Professor Sam Chamberlain, has undertaken public engagement activities with Armed Forces communities to understand the barriers to health research participation in this group.

Working through the Wessex Health Partners interdisciplinary sandpit sessions, the team identified challenges in engaging the Armed Forces community in health research, with response rates among ex-service personnel ranging from 40 to 60% and as low as 10 to 20% among serving personnel.

Reflections from qualitative evidence further highlighted reduced engagement and pockets of under-represented groups whose health needs may be currently overlooked.

Working in partnership with local stakeholders and third sector organisations and groups, the team has delivered in-person and remote PPIE activities with serving and ex-service personnel that show promising insights and add a practical lens for developing meaningful, inclusive research with the Armed Forces community.

This work was funded by NIHR ARC Wessex and supported by Wessex Health Partners.

9. A driver for regional investment: Supporting collaborative funding success

Wessex Health Partners core team supports regional partners to develop high quality inter and intra disciplinary collaborative funding applications. This includes brokering new connections, facilitating partnerships, gathering intelligence, shaping and refining applications, preparing letters of support, and offering interview preparation.

In 2025-26:

- 78 external funding applications were supported by the Wessex Health Partners core team
- All Wessex Health Partner organisations collaborated on at least one supported application
- £59.3m in total funding was awarded from applications supported from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2026

This work helps grow the scale, quality and ambition of collaborative research and innovation, bringing significant external investment into the region and strengthening our collective ability to deliver impact for our communities.



Collaborative bid case study: NIHR Maternity Disparities Consortium: Addressing inequality in maternal health

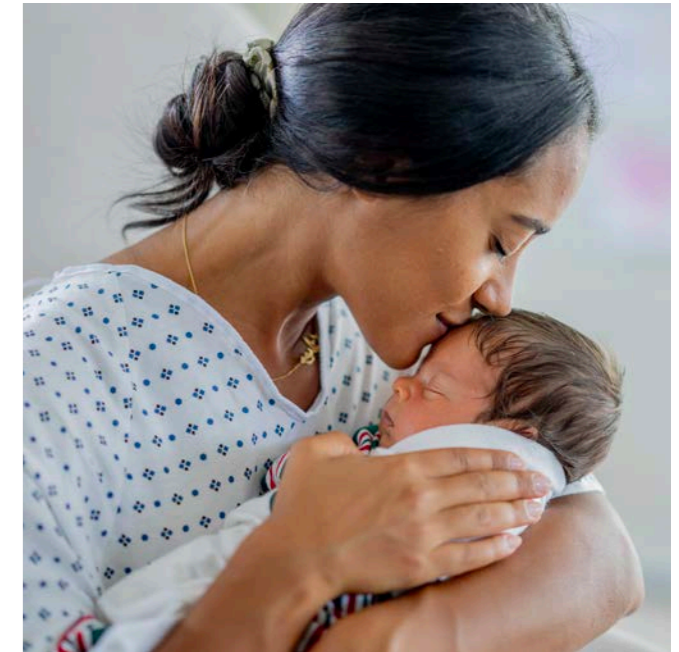
Maternal mortality rates in the UK have risen since 2000, compounded by the increasing physical and mental health challenges faced by women and their partners before and during pregnancy.

These issues disproportionately affect women from minority backgrounds and those living in disadvantaged areas, with evidence showing that maternal mortality for black women in the UK is almost three times higher than for white women. Significant disparities also exist for Asian women. Pre-existing health conditions, limited access to care, and wider social determinants of health all contribute to these inequalities.

The NIHR Maternity Disparities Consortium (MDC) has been established to develop, implement and evaluate practical interventions that reduce inequalities in maternal and infant health across the life course. Its work is organised around three themes: preconception and interpregnancy health; pregnancy, birth and early postnatal maternal health; and neonatal and longer-term child and family outcomes.

The consortium's goal is to build an equitable care system that meets the needs of all women and their partners, ensuring healthier outcomes for mothers, babies and families.

Over the past year, work has focused on programme management, guidance and practical assistance, all in preparation for the formal commencement of consortium activity.





Keith Godfrey
Professor of Epidemiology & Human Development,
University of Southampton,
Co-Chair,
UK Preconception Partnership

“Over several years, Wessex Health Partners has been instrumental in bringing together researchers, care providers and those with lived experiences across the region in the field of women’s health. This work has been fundamental in enabling our potentially transformative research to reduce maternity disparities through care and support before and between pregnancies, both within Wessex and across the UK.”



Vanora Hundley
Professor of Midwifery,
Bournemouth University

“Capacity development is essential if we are to address the disparities that exist in maternity care. Wessex Health Partners plays a vital role in strengthening networks across Wessex and bringing together researchers from underserved populations, disciplines, and communities to build the skills we need to address the challenge.”



Dr Lara Alloway
Chief Medical Officer,
NHS Hampshire & Isle of Wight Integrated
Care Board

“The focused support provided this year means our partners will begin united, prepared and ready to deliver measurable impact for the communities we serve.”

Collaborative bid case study: Supporting clinical academic careers



Dr Tim Exell
Associate Professor
of Biomechanics and
Rehabilitation Science,
University of Portsmouth

Research shows that 41% of postdoctoral researchers never make it into an academic career. For clinicians, an academic career can be even more challenging due to the need to balance the demands of patient care alongside research. It means many talented postdocs quietly step away from science, not through lack of ability, but through lack of support at a critical moment in their careers.

Colleagues in Wessex Health Partners, collaborating with the University of Oxford, want to change that.

The South-East Clinical Academic Partnership (SECAP), funded by the Medical Research Council’s new Regional Accounts for Clinical Researchers (RACR) programme, has been awarded £700k over the next two years with the award possibility increasing to £1.4m over four years. The partnership will support clinicians across the south east region to remain in research.

Led by the University of Oxford and bringing together the medical schools based at the universities of Southampton and Portsmouth, Brighton and Sussex Medical School, and Kent and Medway Medical School, SECAP aims to retain talent and accelerate research that benefits patients and communities.

Clinical academics funded through the proposed scheme will receive protected research time, alongside structured mentoring, skills development, grant-writing support, and opportunities for cross-institutional exchange.

As Dr Tim Exell explains: “Too many talented clinicians reach the end of their PhD and find there simply isn’t the infrastructure to help them take the next step. Through SECAP, we aim to combine our internationally established research environments in Oxford and Southampton with coastal and rural medical schools to widen access to biomedical discovery and give the next generation of clinical academics the platform they deserve to be successful in their research careers.”

Collaborative bid case study: Transforming clinical research facilities



Natasha Chigbo
Associate Director
of Research and
Development,
Hampshire Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (HHFT) is a research-active organisation with more than 3,300 trial participants each year across specialities including oncology, cardiology, gastroenterology and women’s health. Despite this research activity, the absence of dedicated spaces and essential infrastructure has traditionally constrained the Trust’s ability to keep pace with the expanding portfolio of trials.

Thanks to the collaborative support of Wessex Health Partners and the NIHR Commercial Research Delivery Centre (CRDC) Wessex, HHFT was able to apply for NIHR capital grant funding, securing a landmark £1.03m. This investment will dramatically increase the Trust’s capacity to deliver innovative clinical trials and bring state-of-the-art treatments closer to the community.

The grant will fund two transformative improvements: the construction of a new modular research facility at Basingstoke and North Hampshire Hospital, and the acquisition of modern equipment for the Trust’s pharmacy and pathology departments. These enhancements will finally provide HHFT’s research teams with a permanent, purpose-built home, replacing years of dependence on borrowed clinic rooms, and shared spaces.

As Natasha Chigbo explains: **“As part of the NIHR CRDC Wessex, our ambition is to play an influential role in attracting top-tier research to the region. However, our current facilities have limited what we’re able to accomplish. The addition of dedicated research spaces will be a game-changer, it will allow us to expand our capacity and participate in a broader spectrum of studies. Furthermore, it will strengthen our relationships with our stakeholders, notably our Patient Research Ambassadors. Ultimately, this investment will ensure that our teams, and the patients who generously contribute to research, will have access to the facilities they truly deserve.”**

Collaborative bid case study: Inspiring the next generation of researchers



Chantal Ostler
Associate Director
of Research and
Clinical Academic
Physiotherapist,
Hampshire and Isle of
Wight Healthcare NHS
Foundation Trust

Hampshire and Isle of Wight Healthcare (HIOWH) NHS Foundation Trust has been named as one of 12 regions to develop and deliver innovative research internship programmes to inspire health and social care professionals to build research careers.

In partnership with NHS Trusts across the South Central Region, HIOWH secured £900,000 from the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) to host and deliver a Health and Care Professional (HCP) Internship Programme.

The programme aims to empower and encourage professionals from across the healthcare sector in the South Central region to pursue research activities through flexible and tailored opportunities that increase research skills and leadership. Innovatively, the programme gives pre-application support and training to those wanting to learn about how research might fit into their roles, and ongoing mentoring through the internship. This includes those who weren’t successful with a full internship application.

The first cohort of 23 professionals, which includes people working in hospices, the ambulance service, mental health services and community care settings, started their internships this year.

As Chantal Ostler explains: **“A big challenge for health and care professionals is that they might be interested in research, but their jobs are normally so full on that they can’t fit it in. The internships are designed to give protected time to explore research, regardless of geographical location or service. It also aims to engage and include professions that previously have not been so research active, for instance those working in hospices. Developing skills in research and innovation is really important for the future of our workforce. But we need more opportunities for health and care professionals in all areas to get involved. This internship programme does just that.”**

Our Dorset partners are benefitting from a similarly successful funding application for the south west central, collaborating with University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust.

Collaborative bid case study: Tackling gambling harms in Wessex



Dr Jeremy Solly
Clinical Research Fellow,
University of
Southampton

Academics, clinicians and policymakers across the region are coming together to deliver new research to tackle and prevent gambling harms.

The cost of gambling-related harms to the UK economy is estimated at around £1.4bn per year. These harms impact the healthcare and criminal justice systems as well as negatively affecting individuals and communities. A lack of high quality independent evidence on gambling-related harms is a major barrier to effective policy, prevention and treatment.

Through nearly £500,000 of funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), teams in Wessex will contribute to four rapid evidence reviews related to gambling harms, assessing issues such as measurement of gambling disorder, defining relapse, digital approaches to treatment, and neurodiversity in gambling disorder.

The region will also host two Gambling Harms Research and Innovation Partnerships (GHRIPs), collaborative projects aiming to build networks of stakeholders, including people with lived experience, to develop new research programmes around specific themes.

The University of Southampton will lead a partnership focusing on the structural drivers of gambling-related harms, while also collaborating with the University of Hertfordshire to study digital gambling ecosystems.

The successful UKRI bid was supported by the Southern Gambling Service’s Lived Experience Advisory Group, funded by Wessex Health Partners.

“Wessex Health Partners’ involvement in our work has been transformative. The support to establish the Lived Experience Advisory Group was essential for attracting UKRI funding. Despite gambling disorder being a significant concern, treatment provision and research infrastructure remain underdeveloped. The rapid evidence reviews will help identify the gaps in the evidence base and inform the work of the GHRIPs. By building a network of stakeholders who are committed to developing large-scale collaborative projects, we aim to design new prevention and treatment strategies, particularly for underserved communities who are at higher risk of gambling-related harms.”

10. Developing networks across Wessex

Wessex Health Partners research and innovation networks bring together professionals with similar interests and expertise from across the region with a collective aim to address the health needs of our local population and the healthcare system.

Five new networks are now working together to drive forward research and innovation.



Supporting women to live longer and lead healthier lives



The Wessex Women and Girls Research and Innovation Network is bringing researchers and academics from across the region to address inequalities in women’s health.

Formally launched this year, the network aims to spark collaboration and build momentum for change. A steering group has been established, bringing together 15 representatives from 12 partner organisations and two non partner organisations, and will provide strategic direction in shaping the network’s development.

More than 200 researchers, clinicians, healthcare providers and community voices are now connected to the network, demonstrating a clear commitment to prioritising women’s health research. Four webinars have taken place on key topics affecting women and girls, including Osteoporosis in Women, Violence Against Women and Girls, and Cervical Screening and Endometriosis. More than 150 attendees received CPD accreditation for their involvement.



Joanna Wakefield-Scurr
Professor of Biomechanics, University of Portsmouth and Co-Lead Wessex Women and Girls Research, Innovation Network

“It is a real honour to serve as a co-lead of the Wessex Women and Girls Network. This network has been instrumental in bringing people together and showcasing the incredible work being undertaken across Wessex to transform the health and wellbeing of women and girls in our region. I’ve been fortunate to attend several of the recent webinars and have felt truly inspired, and at times surprised, by the breadth and impact of the research and projects underway. What makes this network so valuable is the energy, insight, and commitment of those contributing to it.”



Dr Jemma Longley
Consultant Medical Oncologist (Gynaecological Cancers) and Honorary Senior Clinical Lecturer in Cancer Sciences, University of Southampton

“The Wessex Women and Girls Network is fundamental in pushing the health agenda of women and girls across the region in a time when there is increased spotlight on improving women’s health outcomes nationally. I look forward to driving these changes as chair along with my colleagues by addressing the research and funding gaps that have long existed in women’s health.”



Jess Correia
Safeguarding Midwife, University Hospitals Dorset and Postgraduate research student, Bournemouth University

“I’ve loved being a part of the Wessex Women and Girls Health Innovation and Research Steering Group. Having the opportunity to network with wider multi-disciplinary professionals all working towards the common shared goal of improving health outcomes for women and girls is incredibly motivating. It’s really insightful to hear about all the work being done across Wessex and share opportunities for additional learning.”



Farnaz Jokar
Senior Physiotherapist, Dorset County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

“As a pelvic health physiotherapist working at Dorset County Hospital, I have attended the webinars arranged by the Wessex Women and Girls Network, which covered a wide variety of topics imperative to women’s health. The webinars’ subjects were really useful, as they made me aware of different services in the Wessex region and also helped me find valuable professionals to network with for my future research.”

Building the evidence to prevent motorcycle collisions



Motorcyclists account for a small proportion of road traffic but a disproportionately high number of road deaths, serious injuries and major trauma. In 2024, 340 motorcyclists were killed on UK roads, representing around one-fifth of all road deaths.

Serious motorcycle injury carries major consequences for patients, families and carers, and a significant burden on the NHS. Yet there is currently a lack of evidence in this area, meaning prevention work is not having the impact it intends to.

The Motorbike Injury Prevention Network (MIPnet) brings together clinicians, researchers, road safety professionals and charity partners to connect the available data and apply a rigorous research ethos to prevention work, building an evidence base that can drive meaningful change. The network received Wessex Health Partners funding this year, and a steering group has been established to give structure to its activities.

The first priority will be to assess the epidemiology of motorcycle collisions and injuries - identifying who is injured, where, when and why collisions occur, and which populations, routes, events and mechanisms carry the greatest risk. This builds on previous work by network colleagues, which suggests that police-reported Department for Transport data may capture only around 40% of injured motorcyclists in Dorset.



Dr Ian Mew
Consultant in Anaesthetics & Critical Care, Dorset County Hospital and Dorset & Somerset Air Ambulance

“For the past 13 years, we’ve been working with charities and organisations to tackle motorcyclist collisions. Whilst that work has been extremely valuable, it has had little tangible impact. By working across a network and bringing together people with experience of running large programmes, we can build an evidence base that addresses the gaps, evaluates prioritised prevention approaches, and ensures our work helps and supports motorcyclists in our region before collisions happen.”

A new network for global health



**Wessex
Global
Health
Network**

This year, the Wessex Global Health Network became part of the wider Wessex Health Partners, to strengthen connections, align activity and ensure the network remains sustainable and impactful.

Global health is concerned with improving health and promoting equity for people worldwide through research, education and collaboration, addressing transnational health challenges and integrating population level prevention with individual clinical care.

Four themes have been established to align NHS organisations, universities, Health Innovation Wessex and wider partners, shaping a more coordinated approach to global health activity in Wessex:

- **Research** - to drive clinically informed global health research and innovation
- **Education** - to strengthen learning opportunities, courses, abroad placements and other pathways into global health
- **Health Partnerships** - to build on sustainable partnerships that enable shared learning
- **Experts in our midst** - recognising the global experience and expertise within the local workforce

Meetings and workshops have taken place to re-engage colleagues across the region and a core group of people has been identified to manage the network going forward. A formal launch event is planned later this year.



John Acres
Visiting Fellow in the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing's Centre for Global Health, University of Winchester, and co-ordinator for the Wessex Global Health Network

“Wessex Health Partners provides a natural home for the Wessex Global Health Network as our aspirations align so closely. We hope to support Wessex Health Partners, particularly in its vision to have a global impact. We have greatly appreciated Wessex Health Partners’ help and have been able to take important steps towards providing a structure that will support all those involved in work that benefits both partners in low and middle-income countries and staff in Wessex.”

Reshaping critical care

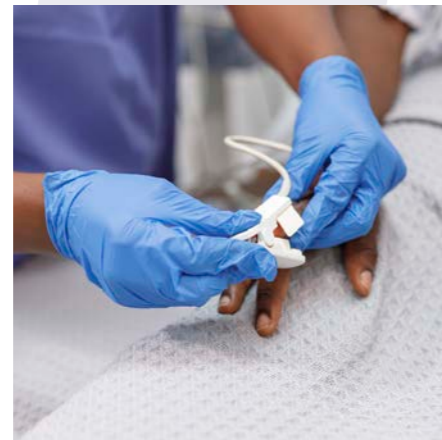


The Intensive Care Innovation and Research (WICIR) Network aims to improve care for critically ill patients through collaboration, research and innovation.

The launch event was chaired by network leads Dr Ahilanandan Dushianthan from University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust and Dr Elizabeth Webb from Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. Rather than presenting a finished plan, the launch was designed as a starting point for future co-production; attendees were encouraged to help shape what a truly connected intensive care research network should look like in practice.

The breadth of work already happening across the region, covering nutritional recovery after critical illness, real-time biomarker monitoring, and psychological support for ICU survivors, was presented alongside updates on how the Wessex Secure Data Environment can help shape future work.

WICIR aims to support joint studies, shared data, education and cross-site learning, building research capacity while keeping patient outcomes at the centre. Regular in-person meetings are planned, with the next event expected later this year.



Dr Ahilanandan Dushianthan
Consultant in Intensive Care and Respiratory Medicine,
University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust

“We are bringing together multidisciplinary teams and ICU network leaders from across Wessex. There’s a real sense of shared purpose and momentum - we’re now in a strong position to turn ideas into collaborative, high-impact research and innovation that will make a difference for our patients.”



Dr Elizabeth Webb
Speciality Registrar in Intensive Care Medicine,
Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

“We already knew innovative work was happening across the Wessex Intensive Care community, but we didn’t know the details, nor how we can work together to bring greater results for patients. At our launch event, network members inspired us with their projects and collectively set clear ambitions for us. We look forward to using these to shape the next steps in WICIR’s journey!”



Giving hope to cancer patients across the region



The Wessex Cancer Research and Innovation Network connects clinicians, academics, charities and wider partners across the region to address longstanding variation in cancer care, research and innovation. The goal is to ensure all patients have equal access to quality care and equal opportunities to take part in research, no matter where they live.

The network is building a clearer regional picture of where access falls short and how participation can be widened. It is also tackling workforce capacity by bringing together clinical leaders, research nurses and delivery networks to identify gaps and strengthen links between discovery science, clinical priorities and external partners.

A key focus is to increase trial participation in rural areas, and leverage existing regional research infrastructure to enhance cancer research opportunities across Wessex.

Through close connection with Health Innovation Wessex and Wessex Cancer Alliance (WCA) within the steering group, the network is helping inform and shape the research element of the WCA strategy, and is helping align regional activity with the NHS Cancer Plan.



Sarah Doyle
Associate Director of Research & Development, Dorset County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and Chair of WCRIN

“It doesn’t matter where you live, Lyme Regis, Gosport, New Milton - all patients have the right to a high standard of cancer care and the choice to take part in research. For too long, many areas in our region have had significant inequality in access to cancer research opportunities, but now we can work together and learn from one another to ensure a more coordinated approach, giving hope to patients and their families.”

11. Our Big Conversation 2026

Partners from across the region came together to explore how research and innovation can play a stronger role in addressing health inequalities and improving access, outcomes and opportunities for people living and working in deprived rural and coastal areas.

Coastal and rural communities face significantly worse health outcomes than urban areas due to poor access to services, workforce shortages, and longstanding neglect in national health policy.

Nearly 200 people attended the event, making it the largest Big Conversation to date. The keynote address from Professor Sir Chris Whitty, Chief Medical Officer for England, highlighted how existing data fails to capture pockets of deprivation, and framed rural and coastal communities as testbeds for innovation, from community-based care and digital inclusion to workforce approaches and prevention-focused interventions.

There were passionate discussions and debates across plenary discussions, panels and parallel sessions, exploring how we can work collectively to move from insight to impact. Sessions focused on neighbourhood health, community led research, NIHR strategy, and the practical levers needed to translate evidence into adoption.

Exhibitor stands and networking sessions further showcased the breadth of research and innovation already underway across Wessex, helping to connect people, programmes and infrastructure.

The insights, connections and commitments generated reaffirmed the power of partnership and will now inform ongoing work across our networks and collaborations, to continue the shared ambition that health outcomes are determined by need, not geography.



11. Our Big Conversation 2026



Professor Sir Chris Whitty
Chief Medical Officer for England

“Meaningfully addressing the health challenges in rural and coastal areas will require close collaboration with partners across the health system. The Wessex Health Partnership is a great example of this approach, with local partnerships driving health improvements for Wessex communities.”



Anne Croudass
Lead Research Nurse, CRUK

“What a great day - so many Big Conversations. Looking forward to turning some of those conversations into action!”



Sarah Chessell
Head of Research and Innovation, NHS Dorset Integrated Care Board

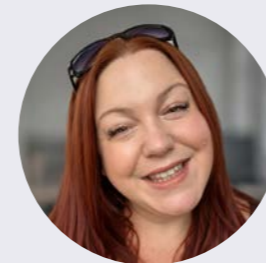
“Fantastic day - great presentations, networking and importantly conversations that can help improve lives in rural and coastal communities”



Dr Victoria Goss
Associate Professor of Early Diagnosis and Translational Research, Southampton Clinical Trials Unit

“A really important element of our early diagnosis studies is about improving the opportunities for people to take part in research and reducing health inequalities. The conversations on the day about research in rural and coastal communities are helping to sparking new ideas about how our studies can fit into that future direction and help to ensure no communities are left behind.”

11. Our Big Conversation 2026



Kate Henaghan-Sykes
Public Partnerships Manager, University of Southampton

“You can’t beat face to face connection. I left today feeling quite inspired with a flurry of new opportunities for collaboration and connection with colleagues and community groups from across the region.”



Afsoon Azadi
Research and Innovation Development Manager, University of Portsmouth

“Discussions highlighted the importance of place based approaches, community involvement from the outset, neighbourhood health models, and coordinated research and delivery across complex systems. From national research priorities to locally driven initiatives, the event emphasised collaboration, realism, and long term impact.”



Cheryl Davies
Senior Programme Manager, Innovation Adoption Health Innovation Wessex

“Facilitating a joint session with Professor Cathy Bowen was an opportunity to demonstrate the collective strength of research and innovation in this region, working together to accelerate adoption. Next steps? Making this happen!”



Julie Northam
Director of Research, Health Sciences University

“The event highlighted the scale and complexity of health inequalities in our coastal and rural communities, alongside the significant opportunity to address them through regional collaboration. Bringing together partners enables shared understanding and the co-creation of innovative, place-based solutions that deliver meaningful impact for our population.”

12. Life Sciences Cluster & Economic Growth

Alongside the NHS mission, delivering high quality health and care research is now recognised as a core driver of the Government's wider Growth Mission.

In 2025-26, Wessex Health Partners and Health Innovation Wessex senior leadership teams worked together to deepen relationships with local authorities, developers, and regional economic bodies, ensuring health and life sciences are embedded within Wessex's long term economic strategy. Achievements included:

- **Strengthening relationships with Local Authority Economic Growth teams** across Wessex, building shared understanding of the region's health innovation assets and opportunities
- **Establishing, with Health Innovation Wessex and Hampshire County Council, the regional Life Sciences Industry Cluster Working Group**, providing the first coordinated mechanism for shaping a regional cluster strategy

- **Joining the Talbot Quarter Principles/ Innovation Cluster Group**, contributing to the development of a major new innovation district in Dorset
- **Submitting evidence to the Hampshire Local Growth Plan**, ensuring the region's life sciences strengths, needs, and opportunities are reflected in future investment priorities
- **Joining, alongside Health Innovation Wessex, the Hampshire Super Cluster Forum**, reporting to the Hampshire Prosperity Board and enabling collaboration with other high growth clusters such as Space South Central and the South Central Regional Defence and Security Cluster
- **Continuing engagement with developers of the proposed Knowledge Campus (Science Park) in Winchester**, supporting early stage planning for a new anchor site within the Wessex research and innovation ecosystem
- **Wessex working together: Leveraging our leading life science sector to collaborate for impact**, hosted by Health Innovation Wessex, this region wide workshop brought partners together to harness Wessex's leading life sciences strengths and turn them into collective action.



Frank Ratcliff
Director of Industry and Innovation,
Health Innovation Wessex

"The momentum behind the Wessex life sciences cluster is real and accelerating. With Wessex Health Partners and alongside our local authority colleagues, we're creating the conditions for innovators, clinicians, and industry to collaborate at pace and scale. This is how regions build globally competitive strengths, and Wessex is now firmly on that path."

This foundation positions Wessex Health Partners, Health Innovation Wessex, and regional partners to progress the next phase of cluster development in 2025-26, ensuring that Wessex's health innovation strengths translate into economic growth, investment and improved outcomes for local communities.

13. Final thought

"This year's achievements show what is possible when a region chooses to work together. Across Wessex, partners have shown how collaboration is a powerful driver of progress – strengthening research infrastructure, accelerating innovation, and ensuring discoveries translate into real benefits for people and communities."

The momentum built in 2025-26 provides a strong foundation for the years ahead. With shared purpose, growing capability and an increasingly confident regional voice, Wessex is poised to play an even greater role in shaping the future of health and care. Our collective commitment remains clear: to turn potential into impact, and to ensure our region continues to deliver meaningful change for the populations we serve."

Christine McGrath
Managing Director,
Wessex Health Partners



Our partners



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Together, we are transforming health and care





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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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