TSA special case study

Creating the conditions for technology enabled care to flourish Sunderland CCG

Overview

Everything from e-consultations to video GP appointments will soon become the norm in Sunderland thanks to a joint vision for digital transformation between health, social care and other agencies. It's enabling TEC to become embedded.

Read Sunderland CCG's "local digital roadmap" and you'd be forgiven for thinking it sounds more like a wish list than something that's going to happen anytime soon.

It talks of a future where everyone can access GP services via multiple channels, have the option of video consultations with clinicians and access to "a range of self-care and remote monitoring solutions as standard".

It's true that there are obstacles to overcome before all of this becomes the norm. But Sunderland's digital revolution is well and truly underway.

The city is currently piloting a programme that by 2020 will see every GP practice become fully digital. E-Consult will mean all patients have access to a wide range of services such as video consultations and mobile clinicians and indeed many already do.

For example, it provides patients with a portal to answer a series of questions about their condition. This is then fed through to a GP who can either deal with it online or call them in for an appointment.

It's also home to Recovery at Home, an urgent care team that delivers short-term, often intensive, home-based care to support Sunderland's vulnerable if they become ill or injured and utilises the latest advancements in telecare.

And within Sunderland's acute services, new apps and other devices are being developed to support patients with everything from diabetes to severe headaches.

Foundations for success

In 2015 the city was awarded vanguard status, an NHS programme to develop new models of care.

The added resources and focus it's brought have been key to the city's success by enabling it "to explore and do different things", says Paul Gibson, the Head of Informatics at the CCG.

Sunderland is one of 14 vanguards tasked by NHS England with breaking down the barriers between different areas of the healthcare system – whether it's primary, community, mental health, social care or acute services.

It's all about "redesigning care around the health of the population" in order to achieve greater integration.

Recovery is part of All Together Better, the partnership of health and social care professionals and other support services that is driving the vanguard agenda in Sunderland.

"It's been an interesting journey and at the start of the vanguard it was clear that data sharing would be the key to embedding digital ways of working," Paul explains. "GPs were very protective around information and who they would share it with. We needed to demonstrate they could share the data in a controlled and secure manner."

Finding the champions

Rachael Forbister, TECS Programme Manager at the CCG, says it's been a case of winning over hearts and minds.

"People tend do what they have always done and sometimes don't understand where the digital aspect can help. A lot of the things we have done started with small pilots in order to bring the best innovations on and prove their value."

A governance group made up of clinicians, GPs, practice managers, social care staff and others has facilitated discussions about the sharing of data and the practicalities involved. This has encouraged early adopters and given momentum to the city's digital transformation.

Paul adds: "It's gone from people being protective to them seeing the benefits and now asking 'why can't we share with this group…?'.

"Mindsets are changing. Some GPs are starting to become champions for it – for example, using online consultations and video consultations. It makes our job easier and there's more awareness around information sharing and the potential that digital brings."

Among those champions is Dr Raj Bethapudi, a local GP who is also the CCG's chief clinical information officer.

He's excited about the potential digital practices offer in improving the responsiveness of patient services.

"Imagine someone suffering with anxiety and panic attacks who prefers to consult from home or a lady wanting advice on a change in pill and struggling to take time off work, e-consultations or video consultations can be very handy and time-saving for patients and GPs," he explains.

"If somebody has already presented all the relevant information on E-consult prior to seeing them, the face to face consultation, if needed, could run for a potentially shorter length of time as much of the patient's history has been gathered already."

Sunderland CCG is aiming to 'normalise digital working' by ensuring it's an integral part of health professionals' training.

It is currently working with the University of Sunderland on its doctorate programme to develop a digital module and is also in discussions with other training bodies.

Dr Raj Bethapudi, who trains new GPs, includes a presentation on technology for GP registrars.

'It's very much hit and miss at the moment and depends on how tech-savvy your trainer is,' he says. 'We need to embed this in everyone's training so that it becomes the norm.'

About TSA

TSA is the industry body for technology enabled care (TEC) services, representing organisations including telecare and telehealth service providers and suppliers, commissioners, digital health businesses, housing associations, emergency services, academics, charities and government bodies.

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