

The Academy of Medical Sciences Cross-Sector Hub

In August 2024, the Academy of Medical Sciences announced the launch of a new networking hub in Northern Ireland, established as part of their Cross-Sector Programme in partnership with HIRANI, with the aim to foster health innovation and strengthen cross-disciplinary collaboration between academia, industry, the NHS, and policymakers.

We joined existing hubs in Scotland and Wales, participating in a one-year programme designed to bring together cross-sector expertise and to raise awareness of clinical research, development, and innovation, with a focus on regional strengths, health challenges, and emerging opportunities.

The Northern Ireland impact

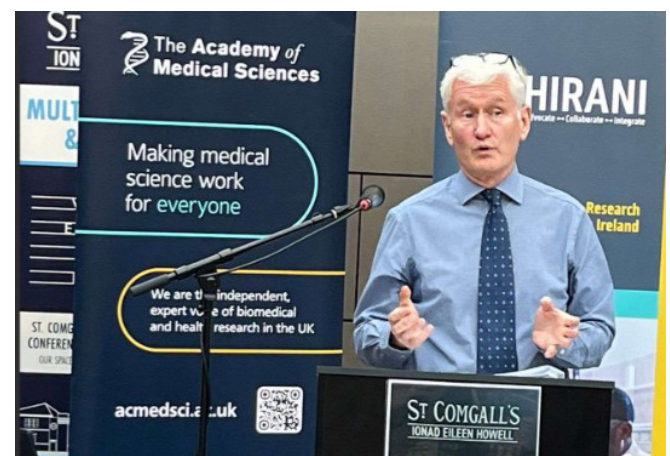
Now in year two of the programme in Northern Ireland, we have hosted four events with two more planned for later in 2026.

Speakers are recruited from across industry, academia, patient voices and the health sector and themes covered have included integrating data, healthcare system modelling using population data, person-centric data to enhance predictive capabilities and data-enabled clinical trials.

An in-depth look at our mental health event

In Northern Ireland, the mental health of the general population is a huge challenge with 1 in 5 adults and 1 in 8 children in Northern Ireland having a probable mental illness.

High proportions of mental illness in Northern Ireland are attributable to childhood adversities such as substance use, economic adversity, parental mental illness and the impact



of growing up during the sectarian conflict known as 'The Troubles'. In one study, McLafferty and colleagues posited that individuals who grew up during the worst years of the civil conflict in Northern Ireland experienced elevated levels of childhood adversities (McLafferty et al., 2018). This may impact their mental health throughout their lives, through their formative years and can be carried into adulthood.

Furthermore, mental illness costs the Northern Ireland economy £3.4 billion annually (O'Neill, McLafferty and Devine, 2022). With all these factors considered, it is evident that intervention is needed to improve the state of mental health in Northern Ireland. Experts in the area emphasise the need for early intervention such as school programmes to raise awareness of mental health, increased physical activity and parenting programmes (McDaid and Park, 2022).

In Northern Ireland, steps have been taken to raise awareness of mental health and to address the needs of the population.

In May 2020, the Department of Health launched a Mental Health Action Plan, followed by a comprehensive Mental Health Strategy in June 2021 which focused on areas such as prevention, early intervention, and care for those experiencing poor mental health.

The appointment of Professor Siobhan O'Neill as Northern Ireland's Mental Health Champion in 2021 brought renewed focus. Serving as a prominent advocate, this role champions evidence-based services and interventions. Despite these positive steps, obstacles to progress remain, for example, only 16% of the almost £77 million in funding which was supposed to be invested in mental health services across Northern Ireland has been allocated (Sheils, 2025).

The 'Communities, Technologies and Mental Health' event aimed to highlight the progress being made in mental health care in Northern Ireland, whilst also addressing where improvements are still needed and future actions to improve mental health care in the region.

With this aim in mind, HIRANI assembled a range of speakers and panellists from across the mental health sector in Northern Ireland, including health, policy, charities, communities and the patient perspective.

Our goal was to give an insight into mental health in Northern Ireland that encapsulated the many perspectives that both experience and treat mental health. We adopted a multi-disciplinary approach, also involving speakers who worked outside the mental health sector but had other expertise, such as VR technology, that were already or could become involved in the creation of mental health interventions.

We wanted to facilitate conversations across and outside of the sector to allow for connections to be made that could potentially improve the state of mental health in Northern Ireland.

Speakers were recruited from across industry, academia, the health sector, communities and charities, with representatives from Action Mental Health, Aware NI, MindWise, CAUSE, Ulster University, Queen's University Belfast and Digital Health and Care Northern Ireland among others.

As has been a key link throughout all the Northern Ireland cross-sector events, with the help of the Academy of Medical Sciences we involved the expertise of a patient speaker who gave her experience on living with an eating disorder and how this had impacted her mental health, her treatment and recommendations for involving the patient perspective in mental health research.

Themes covered on the day included mental health provision in Northern Ireland, the patient and charity perspective on mental health, community, care and change and how digital interventions could improve mental health treatment.

Key takeaways:

The need to strengthen Northern Ireland's Mental Health Strategy and existing interventions.



Professor Siobhan O'Neill outlined the 10-year Mental Health Strategy for Northern Ireland, highlighting her role in shaping policy informed by lived experience. One in five people in Northern Ireland meet the criteria for poor mental health, underscoring the scale of the challenge. The strategy focuses on early intervention, recognising that funding alone is not enough and that resources must be effectively targeted. Professor O'Neill emphasised the economic cost of poor mental health and the need for investment that reflects the complex, interlinked drivers of distress, including poverty, childhood adversity, chronic stress, and trauma. Workplace wellbeing was identified as a major issue, with burnout, stress, and lack of neurodiversity awareness (e.g., ADHD, autism, dyslexia) contributing to poor mental health outcomes.

Collaboration and Innovation Across Sectors

David Babington (CEO, Action Mental Health) discussed ongoing work to overcome barriers to collaboration, particularly around joint funding bids and partnerships with universities such as Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University. The event reinforced the need for cross-sector collaboration to translate research and innovation into practical mental health solutions.

The Power of Lived Experience

This was highlighted by the patient speaker Mary Bower who emphasised the importance of empathy and understanding in mental health recovery, advocating for a "recovery takes a village" approach. She discussed the helpfulness of digital tools as interventions, particularly those that combine clinical knowledge with lived experience to create more compassionate and effective support. Mary also called for fair recognition and remuneration for individuals sharing lived experiences, emphasising that their insights have professional and financial value. Importantly, learning materials and research should integrate the voices of those with lived experience, helping identify what truly helps or harms.

Digital and Community-Based Support

Nigel Fyffe presented I Am Aware, an interactive e-learning platform developed with Queen's University Belfast (QUB) to support workplaces and organisations. The tool's flexibility allows it to be tailored to specific organisational needs, with ongoing potential for further development. Cherry Cantrell shared the success of online peer support groups (Aware and QUB, since 2015), valued for their accessibility, low cost, and ability to provide consistent weekly support without the need

to travel. Mickie Mairs reinforced the importance of peer networks, describing them as a vital "safety net" for ongoing mental health support.

Diverse Perspectives from across the sector

Morgan Largey (CAUSE) highlighted the carer's perspective, noting the importance of building confidence to engage with digital tools. David Babington raised questions about data use and transparency, emphasising trust and accountability in digital mental health. Kirsten Kearney (MindWise) spoke about empathy mapping and user needs, stressing the importance of respecting and amplifying people's voices in the design process. Mary reiterated that sharing lived experience is valuable labour, not a free resource. The panel collectively agreed that authentic collaboration involving the combination of expertise, empathy, and support is essential to creating meaningful and sustainable mental health solutions.

Catalyst for Collaboration

The event provided the space for a new collaborative project aimed at improving mental health in Northern Ireland to form and have consequently formed a funding bid. Participants highlighted the need for more events like this to create similar opportunities for connection and innovation.

Cross-Sector Innovation in Digital Mental Health

Strong support was expressed for innovators in the digital mental health space. The inclusion of contributors from outside the traditional mental health field such as Dr Dominic Holmes from eXRT, Daithi Conlon and Chris Thomas from Propeer, who brought valuable digital expertise demonstrated the benefits of cross-sector collaboration and the potential for new ideas to emerge through diverse participation.

Launch of the Mental Health Collective

The event provided a platform for the Mental Health Collective to establish itself publicly and introduce its mission to a wider audience.

From Discussion to Action

A recurring theme was the importance of translating strategies into tangible outcomes. Both the Mental Health Collective and the Digital Mental Health Strategy were cited as examples of how to take meaningful action using existing resources.

Engagement with the Department of Health

Productive engagement with the Department of Health was an important step toward aligning innovation with policy and implementation.

Community-Based Venue

Hosting the event in a community space rather than a university setting was well-received. The location reinforced accessibility and inclusivity, helping to bridge the gap between academia and the wider community.

Value of the Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) Perspective

Mary Bower's talk highlighted the power of lived experience. Including a patient perspective humanised the issues discussed and resonated strongly with attendees, turning abstract data into real, relatable experiences.

Need for Action on Existing Funding

While mental health funding is available in Northern Ireland, 80% of the strategy has been shelved. This underscores the need for decisive action to make use of existing resources.

Progress on the Digital Mental Health Strategy

Following the event, the Digital Mental Health Strategy was recognised as a positive example of concrete progress in the sector, illustrating how discussion at the event is already leading to practical outcomes.