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The NHS shift towards neighbourhood health will depend as much on digital infrastructure as new models of care. **Charlotte Lewis**, commercial health and health tech lawyer at Mills & Reeve, explores where the opportunities lie for technology suppliers – and why SMEs could be among the biggest beneficiaries



Why neighbourhood health could be a **defining opportunity** for tech suppliers to the NHS

The government's vision for neighbourhood health is that care is delivered digitally by default, at home where possible, in neighbourhood settings when needed and in hospital only when necessary. Achieving that vision depends on digital infrastructure that enables proactive, preventative care by connecting primary care, community services and social care into a single, coordinated team.

The 10-Year Health Plan for England sets out how the government intends to shift activity out of acute settings, strengthen prevention and improve population health. Behind those policy objectives sits a substantial redesign of the delivery model itself. For the health tech market, however, it signals something equally significant. It reflects a reconfiguration of where, how and by whom care is delivered and therefore a reshaping of demand for technology.

Much of the discussion so far has centred on neighbourhood health centres and new models of integrated care. But the real enabling factor is the tech. Delivering care across dispersed settings depends on a digital infrastructure capable of connecting providers, patients and data in real time. In this respect, neighbourhood health is not simply a service redesign but a large-scale digital transformation programme.

The practical requirements are substantial. Systems will need digital front doors such as the NHS App, tools to identify risk at a population level, remote monitoring technologies to support care at home and the development of a Single Patient Record that enables clinicians and care professionals to access consistent information

across organisational boundaries. Without these, the ambition to shift care into the community will remain constrained.

This is where recent capital planning becomes particularly relevant. While attention has focused on estate modernisation, investment is also being directed towards core digital infrastructure, including modern clinical systems, data architecture, interoperability and the replacement of ageing technology.

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These components form the foundation for a wider transition from hospital based to neighbourhood care, from analogue to digital and from treatment to prevention.

However, the 10-year Capital Plan for Health and Social Care exposes a longstanding tension in NHS technology investment. Much of the digital innovation needed to support neighbourhood care is delivered through recurring licence or subscription models,

which are funded as revenue expenditure rather than capital. Bridging that gap will be important if investment is to translate into widespread adoption.

For health technology suppliers, the opportunity extends far beyond digitising existing services. As care moves closer to home and becomes increasingly coordinated across organisations, demand is likely to grow for technologies that enable integration, support population health management and improve outcomes at scale.

Where is demand likely to grow?

The strongest opportunities are likely to emerge in technologies that support integration, prevention and care closer to home. Shared care records, virtual care platforms, remote monitoring, digital triage and advanced analytics will all be central to enabling earlier intervention and more coordinated care. Interoperability solutions are likely to become more valuable as systems attempt to bridge historically fragmented data and support joined-up decision making across neighbourhood teams. The ability to make real-time information available across multiple providers and care settings may become as important as the applications themselves.

For SMEs, this creates an opportunity

Smaller suppliers are often well-positioned in areas aligned to neighbourhood health. They offer flexible deployment, user-centred design and innovation in remote care and analytics. As care models become more lo-



calised and preventative, demand may increasingly favour modular, interoperable solutions rather than large-scale systems. This shift could open space for SMEs to enter or expand within the market.

At the same time, structural challenges remain. Procurement processes can be complex and resource-intensive, favouring incumbents. Differences in digital maturity across systems may slow the adoption of new technologies, as can poor interoperability across systems. Successfully capturing this opportunity will depend not only on technical capability but on navigating these organisational and commercial barriers.

The opportunity also extends beyond traditional NHS-facing technologies. If neighbourhood health is to support independence and reduce reliance on formal services, digital social care solutions will become increasingly important. Technologies that enable care in the home, improve coordination between health and care professionals and generate actionable insights from data may move from peripheral to central components of delivery.

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Underlying this is a broader shift in what constitutes infrastructure. Traditionally associated with physical assets, infrastructure in health and care is now as much about connectivity, data and digital capability. Neighbourhood health centres may provide a visible anchor, but their

effectiveness will depend on how well they integrate into a wider, digitally enabled ecosystem.

There is, however, a growing alignment between policy direction, capital investment and service design. For the first time in some years, there is clearer articulation of both the intended operating model and the enabling infrastructure required to support it. For the market, this provides greater visibility of future demand.

The more important question may not be how many neighbourhood health centres are built, but how the system around them evolves. Those providers and suppliers that are best able to operate across organisational boundaries, support prevention and enable care in the home are likely to be best positioned as the model of neighbourhood care develops.

For healthtech SMEs, neighbourhood health represents a strategic opportunity. Those that recognise it early and align their solutions to the realities of integrated, preventative care may be among the biggest beneficiaries of the NHS's shift to neighbourhood health.