

Introducing Northern Ireland's New Neighbourhood Model for Health and Wellbeing - a blog by Prof Cathy Harrison

On 31 March 2026, the Health Minister announced the publication of a policy framework outlining the Vision for Neighbourhood Health and Wellbeing, marking the beginning of a major shift in how care will be delivered across Northern Ireland. The new Neighbourhood Model aims to help make it easier for people to get the care they need closer to home. It marks the start of an important change in how health and social care will be developed and delivered across Northern Ireland with a focus on prevention, early support and keeping people well in their own communities.

Northern Ireland's health and social care system is under real pressure, and many people are waiting longer than they should for the care they need. Staff across the system work incredibly hard, but the challenges we face show that we need to do things differently. The new Neighbourhood Model for Health and Wellbeing is designed to help us make that shift, towards earlier support, more care in communities, and services that feel more joined-up for the people who use them.

Why is change needed.

People are experiencing delays in accessing GP, community and hospital services, and many older people say they are struggling to get the support they need. Much of our system is still centred around hospital-based care, even though many issues could be managed earlier and closer to home. By focusing more on prevention, early intervention and community-based care, we can help people stay well, reduce avoidable hospital use and support smoother, safer journeys through the system.

Why a neighbourhood approach?

Neighbourhood-based working brings the right people and services together, GPs, community pharmacists, nurses, AHPs, social workers, mental health teams, VCSE organisations, councils and others, to support local communities in a more joined-up way. Many great examples already exist across Northern Ireland, from community-based clinics and Hospital at Home to strong voluntary-sector partnerships. The Neighbourhood Model will aim to build on this experience so we can make these benefits available to more people.

What people told us.

Hundreds of people contributed to shaping this model through stakeholder engagement and contributions to a Call for Evidence. They told us that relationships matter; that community organisations must be equal partners; that services work best when designed with the people who use them; and that information needs to be shared more effectively so care feels connected rather than fragmented.

The vision.

Neighbourhoods where people can live healthier, more independent lives, supported by teams who know their communities, work together day-to-day and focus on helping people earlier, closer to home.

The four pillars of the model.

- 1) Integrated Neighbourhood Teams (INTs): New local teams that bring together primary care, social care, community services, VCSE organisations, councils and people with lived experience. They will focus first on improving access, supporting older people and offering more anticipatory care in the community, reducing avoidable hospital attendance.
- 2) More Care Closer to Home: Over time, more outpatient care, diagnostics, reviews and planned care will be delivered in community settings rather than hospitals. This will help people get the right care sooner and where it suits them best.
- 3) Innovation and Better Use of Information: Local teams will be supported by improved data, digital tools and innovation partnerships so they can plan better, share insights and test what works.
- 4) Stronger Community Connections: The model puts relationships at its centre, working alongside communities, involving people in decisions, strengthening social prescribing and connecting health and wellbeing to wider support like housing, transport and community activities.

Starting with older people.

Older people often have greatest need of health and social care services and face the greatest barriers to access, so early implementation will focus on improving day-to-day access, avoiding unnecessary hospital stays, supporting safer discharge and helping people stay well at home.

Funding the change.

To make this shift sustainable, the model uses a mix of funding approaches. Dedicated support for Integrated Neighbourhood Teams, gradually shifting more resource from hospitals into community-based services, invest-to-save opportunities and partnerships with charitable, research and innovation organisations. This approach means change can begin now and build over time.

In summary, the Neighbourhood Model of Health and Wellbeing is about bringing care closer to where people live, supporting earlier help, strengthening prevention and making services feel more connected. By working together across all sectors, we can build a more responsive, community-focused system for everyone in Northern Ireland.

More information about the NI Neighbourhood Model for Health and Wellbeing, including links to the policy framework and call for evidence reports, frequently asked questions and a newsletter that you sign up to receive updates are available at <https://consultations2.nidirect.gov.uk/doh-1/neighbourhood-model-mailing-list/>.

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