

A health technology milestone amid a global pandemic: reflections on the first year of the HealthTec Cluster

“When the HealthTec Cluster launched a year ago, nobody could have predicted that it would reach its first milestone in the midst of a health crisis,” commented Phil Carvil (HealthTec Cluster Development Manager, Science and Technology Facilities Council) on the week that marked the first ‘anniversary’ of the HealthTec Cluster, hosted at Sci-Tech Daresbury.



A space physiologist by background (as well as a trained Barista!), Phil has led the development of the HealthTec Cluster since its inception. Driven by his strong belief in collaboration and, of course coffee, the cluster has the vision of supporting cutting-edge R&D, commercialisation and the growth of solutions that can empower citizen health and wellbeing.

“Throughout the last year businesses involved with the cluster have achieved incredible things in an effort to address our health system challenges; from building our next generation of cancer therapy, to testing kits for COVID-19, they are delivering solutions that will drastically improve people’s lives,” remarked Phil.

Welcome to the coffee shop

Whilst hosted at Sci-Tech Daresbury, the HealthTec Cluster works to drive collaboration and connectivity across the North West and beyond. Over the last year the cluster has supported more than five trade missions to the North West, built a connected community through the bimonthly ‘HealthTec Huddle’ events, and worked to build cross-sector relationships both regionally and nationally. This influence is clear to see, with more than 40 health and life science organisations now based at Sci-Tech Daresbury, equating to a 15% growth in the sector on campus this year.

So what is the cluster? As a former Barista there’s clearly no better way to explain than through a coffee shop analogy, “The innovation landscape is so rich and diverse for me, it’s

like going to a coffee shop. When you walk in you have so many options on that board. You likely have an idea of what you are looking for, it could be access to finance, it might be understanding more about a technology or process, a critical friend to sound an idea off, or a route into an organisation. The cluster acts like that reliable shop with a board of different opportunities. Importantly, as what you’re looking for develops and changes over time, the cluster community allows you to connect, share and develop these insights. The ‘over time’ part is important because whilst you could try all those options in a single visit, you’d likely need a lie down after.”

These connections allow companies and organisations to operate more flexibly and productively; accessing new technology, information or skills, which would otherwise need to be developed independently.

Reacting to coronavirus

Government commitments of support for the development of health solutions continues to grow, and the wide ranging impact of the sector has been explicitly highlighted in the UK response to coronavirus. From the accelerated adoption of remote consultation through telemedicine, to developing novel testing techniques, the importance of health and life sciences innovation in addressing health challenges has been unequivocal during the pandemic.

“These past few months have been tough, for some it has meant a complete rethink of the business model and operation, for others a pivot on their research and innovation endeavours and for many all hands on deck. Throughout though it has been astounding to hear how the sector has been responding and there has been some incredible achievements,” Phil commented.

Looking ahead

This breadth of work throughout the community acts as an effective illustration of the strength and benefits of regional and national connectivity in enabling innovation and rapid response to health challenges. The next year will continue to see focus placed on maximising these connections, aiding recovery, sharing learning and boosting innovation.

To borrow a quote from Einstein “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them”. There is no doubt that this period will have altered our way of thinking, and the cluster is a great way to enable that conversation, of course, over a coffee,” Phil finished.

To find out more about the HealthTec Cluster visit:
www.stfc.ukri.org/innovation/healthtec-cluster