Durham University
Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing

Inspiring the extraordinary

Wolfson Report 2025/2026







Contents

Message from the Executive DIrector 3

Meet the Co-Directors 5

Our Administration Team 7

Our Fellowship and Early Career Researchers 8

Examples of Wolfson Research Institute Research 9

- World Health Organisation (WHO Europe): Complexity, Health Work force Resilience and Systems Thinking 9
- UK-Japan Collaboration on Extreme Heat, Health, and Visual Complexity through RENKEI 10
- Nelson Mandela University: Place, Environmental Justice, Public Health and Just Transitions 11
- NHS Workforce Research Investigating the Interplay between Workforce Reforms, Diversity, and Health & Wellbeing 12
- Using Generative Artificial Intelligence to Understand Regional Polycrisis Experiences. 13
- Inequalities in Resilience - Hidden Precarities and Policymaking in a Time of Polycrisis 13
- County Durham REACH (Research and Engagement Across Communities for Health 14
- Connecting Healthcare and Communities: From Evidence to Implementation 17
- Integrating Physical Activity into Healthcare Systems: From Clinics to Communities 18
- From Communities to Clinics: Strengthening Community-Based Pathways to Care 19
- FARMAR: Artificial Intelligence, Robotics and Resilient Agriculture 20
- NEWBEE: Pollinators, Sustainable Agriculture and Intelligent Monitoring 21
- Using Implementation and sustainability science to understand how health promotion interventions ‘play out’ in the real world. 23
- Using creative and participatory methods that emphasise children’s agency to reveal new insights on the lived experience of children living in poverty 24
- Research Recognised in New WHO Childhood Obesity Guidelines 25
- Dementia in the outdoors: Exploring mechanisms of engagement 25
- Harnessing knowledge of lifespan biological, health, environmental and psychosocial mechanisms of cognitive frailty for integrated interventions (CFIN) 26
- Northern Health Futures Hub (NorthFutures) 26

Applied Research Collaboration North East and North Cumbria 27

Fuse: The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health 28

Our Events 29

Our Publications 33

Our Partners and Networks 36

Message from the Executive Director
Professor Charlotte Clarke

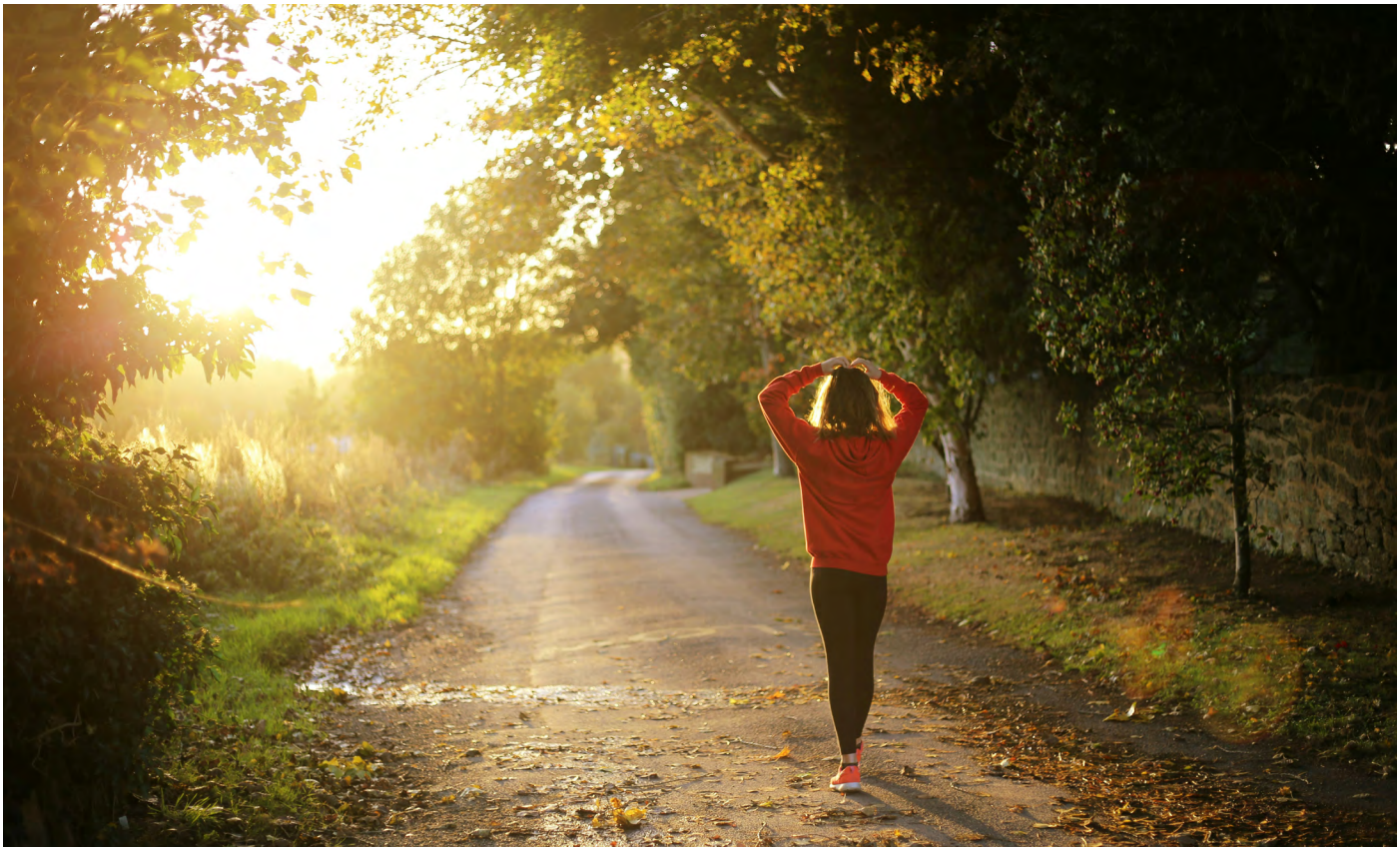


The Wolfson Research Institute for Health & Wellbeing at Durham University is celebrating 25 years of providing a distinctive institutional environment for research! Today, we combine internationally recognised strengths in social science, medical humanities, health data science, AI and systems modelling, together with leading work in organisational and workforce development.

Our vision is to foster a complexity-informed, place-sensitive paradigm for health inequalities research. This requires researchers who can work across disciplines, professions and sectors to understand how local systems function, evolve and can be steered towards equity. We integrate perspectives from health sociology and anthropology, business and management studies, complexity science, data science and AI with inclusive methodologies to inform ways of conceptualising health need as expressed by those with lived experience. As such, we research in the interplay of place, systems and lived experience, rather than at the margin of single diseases or services. Our research takes us into places such as prisons, local authorities, healthcare organisations, community and voluntary sector organisations, and towns and cities that experience deprivation and disadvantage in north-east England and across the world.

'Why treat people and send them back to the conditions that make them sick?'
Michael Marmot, 2015: 1

This question lies at the heart of the work of the Wolfson Institute for Health & Wellbeing. We explore and address through critical research, the complex systems that generate health inequalities. These inequalities are deeply rooted in the structures of economy, society, governance, and are place-based, shaping the conditions of daily life. We are working towards the development of system leaders, to interrogate upstream drivers of inequality and lead towards the translation of research into credible action. A leadership agenda that is provocative of these drivers as a system aligns with the realities that members of the public, patients and clinicians live and work in; it accelerates discovery and ultimately delivers fairer health outcomes.



Our work builds on the evidence base about the social determinants of health, highlighting how health outcomes are patterned by unequal distributions of income, education, housing, work, and environmental conditions. Despite decades of such evidence, inequalities in, for example, healthy life expectancy remain stubbornly persistent. As Wistow argues, this reflects a social contract that underpins our health systems – privileging treatment and individual behavioural change over prevention and collective and systemic accountability for inequitable health outcomes, and thereby overlooking the political, economic, and spatial determinants that make people ill in the first place. Understanding and reshaping the macro systems of illness treatment, housing, employment, economy, education and social welfare is essential for tackling root causes of health inequity. Therefore, addressing these determinants as an interacting system, rather than as isolated factors, is central to improving health, and requires researchers who are able to generate insights into how these systems function and change. Health inequalities are deeply rooted in the structures of economy, society, governance, and place that shape the conditions of daily life. The need to develop this shift in focus and approach is well recognised but delivering it is challenging given the development of the NHS as an illness service that prioritises treatment over overall population health. The social determinants of health are less at the forefront of funding and system priorities yet are critical to mitigating inequalities.

Situated in the heart of the post-industrial North-East, where the gradient of health inequality is among the steepest in the UK , the Wolfson Institute for Health & Wellbeing emphasises cross-sector collaborations that harness community insight for transformational research. By addressing the social, environmental and technological determinants of health through an equity lens, the North-East is a living laboratory for globally relevant health research and innovation. But we work across the world, aspiring to shape healthcare ecosystems to reduce unnecessary inequality. It is a privilege to work with all of our regional and global partners with whom we share a strategic focus on addressing inequalities and understand health as ‘unbound from clinic’ .

Charlotte

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Meet the Co-Directors



Professor Brian Castellani
Co- Director

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As Co-Director of the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing, my role is to advance our local and global impact in environmental health, mental health, healthcare workforce resilience, and the use of social complexity theory and methods. My aim is to position Wolfson as a leader in applying social complexity frameworks to improve health and care, while building partnerships that bridge policy, practice, and research.

At present, my work spans several major agendas. Locally, I collaborate with Durham Council, the County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust, and the NHS Strategy Unit, including projects with colleagues such as Jonathan Wistow on adolescent healthy eating and with Durham's Institute for Hazards, Risk and Resilience on NHS workforce resilience in the face of polycrisis. Globally, I am engaged through RENKEI and the British Council in developing environmental health collaborations with Kyushu University (with a focus on mentoring early career researchers) and I am also working with the Institute of Science Tokyo on the health impact of extreme heat. I am also a Visiting Professor at Nelson Mandela University, working on complexity and environmental health, and with colleagues across Europe, North America, and Scandinavia. I am also working with the United Nations on the value of complexity for addressing healthcare workforce issues around the world. I am also advancing a research agenda on mental health, working with Effie Law (Computer Sciences, Durham) on two major initiatives: a collaboration with Sony and colleagues in Japan on digital mental health interventions, and the Horizon Europe SERENY project on scalable youth mental health support.

Among my recent successes, I am proud of my contribution to the Royal College of Physicians report on air pollution and health, where I led on brain and mental health policy, and of my work with InSPIRE to shape the national and international research and policy agenda on air pollution, dementia, and mental health. These build on my wider efforts to bring complexity methods, such as COMPLEX-IT, into practical use with public sector partners.

Looking ahead, my goal is to consolidate Wolfson's role as a hub for interdisciplinary, complexity-driven approaches to health and wellbeing. This includes strengthening our contribution to the NIHR Mental Health Translational Research Collaboration, deepening our international partnerships, and advancing a just transition agenda in environmental health and sustainability.



Dr Jonathan Wistow
Co-Director

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I'm a Co-Director of the WRIHW and serve as the Strategic Research Lead for Wider Determinants of Health and Well-being on the County Durham REACH (Research and Engagement Across Communities for Health) partnership, which is a collaboration between Durham County Council, Durham Community Action, and Durham University. Through this role, I'm helping to drive our shared vision to: 'tackle the unfair and avoidable differences in health experienced by communities in our area, what we call the wider determinants of health.' This mission sits at the heart of my work within WRIHW.
Successes linked to this work include leading and contributing to evaluations of stop smoking services, exploring complexity in relation to healthy weight, and supporting strategic direction across the collaboration and its various steering and working groups. Through active involvement in these I am working with colleagues to ensure that we retain a strong focus on health inequalities and integrate co-production with policy, practice and community groups. These contributions are all part of our wider effort to tackle the root causes of health inequalities across County Durham.

My goals for the next year include: deepening community-engaged research through the REACH Community Involvement Steering Group; strengthening cross-sector collaboration between academia, public health and VCSE organisations; advancing a complexity-informed understanding of place-based health inequalities; and to apply for and secure funding to enhance capacity, research and innovation in the project.

Meet the Co-Directors (continued)



Professor Barbara Bechter
Co- Director

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As Co-director, I actively engages with the broader WRIHW community and provides strategic leadership in generating research income. Through research, I aim to contribute to Durham University's institutional priorities, including local engagement and impact, particularly through work on Polycrisis and Resilience, which focuses on the North East of England, as well as internationalisation, supported by comparative healthcare workforce research spanning the UK and beyond.

I am working on research with colleagues at the Business School focused on hospital workforce wellbeing, health, and safety. This study will examine the practical implementation and enforcement of relevant legislation, including the Health and Safety at Work Act, regulations addressing violence and harassment, and policies concerning psychosocial risks in the workplace. Additionally, I am establishing research collaborations with institutions such as the University of Leeds, the University of Sheffield, and the Royal College of Nursing. These partnerships aim to secure funding for a study investigating the impact of skill mix and NHS recruitment policies and practices on workforce productivity within the NHS.

In 2024/25, I led three research funding applications in collaboration with colleagues at Durham University Business School and beyond and contributed to an SRF application (later cancelled). I successfully secured Seedcorn Funding (£4,944.50) to support a project titled "Productivity Challenges in Healthcare: Investigating the Root Cause(s) of the Problem", which includes hiring a research assistant to conduct algorithmic text mining on NHS workforce plans and policies.

My primary objective is to secure research funding for the Resilience and Polycrisis project, with a focus on using generative artificial intelligence to collect and analyse large-scale data on regional polycrisis experiences in the North East of England. I am committed to delivering WRIHW-related activities, including health-focused workshops and seminars at the Business School, such as the upcoming session with Professor Robert Wood (Macquarie Business School), which aligns closely with the project's theoretical framework and could be extended to a wider audience. Further goals include contributing to NIHR network-building efforts with external partners, particularly those involved in Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE), to prepare for joint funding applications. I am also leveraging existing networks and actively pursuing collaboration opportunities with Tees NHS Trust hospitals to advance research on workforce health and wellbeing.



Dr Amir Atapour-Abarghouei
Co- Director

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I'm delighted to be starting as a Co-Director at the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing, and genuinely excited to get to know, and get behind, our ECR community. My focus is simple: help talented colleagues do their best work by connecting people across faculties, clearing small hurdles before they become big ones, and nurturing collaborations that speak directly to Wolfson's mission of enabling people to thrive in the places they live. I want the Institute, in general, and our Early Career space, in particular, to feel warm, practical and ambitious, with quick routes to partnerships and opportunities.

My research focuses on the fundamentals and applications of artificial intelligence, particularly where it meets healthcare, with a particular emphasis on diagnostic imaging and the fairness and trustworthiness of the tools we build. I am working with County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust to co-develop projects that start from real clinical questions and move carefully towards practice.

With wonderful collaborators and students, I've helped to deliver work that matters for health: studies on bias-free skin lesion analysis, imaging approaches to distinguish glaucoma and related eye conditions, early indicators of neurological disease visible in retinal scans and the use of AI to analyse CT scans of breast cancer patients to support more confident staging and care pathways. Some of this has grown into industry and NHS-facing activity, including a Knowledge Transfer Partnership focused on equitable dermatology AI, and a steady stream of talks and community events that build capacity and confidence.

In the year ahead, I want to grow a lively, visible ECR network with easy on-ramps to collaboration, mentoring and small-grant seed funding, while actively pursuing new external funding for interdisciplinary health projects with clear community impact. I want to deepen our NHS partnerships, beginning with CDDFT, so that the research we co-create answers priority questions and can be adopted where it will help patients and practitioners most. If you're an ECR with an idea, at any stage, I'd love to build it with you.

Meet the Co-Directors (continued)



Professor Mark Stoutenberg
Co- Director

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Mark is a Co-Director of the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing and a Professor in the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences. After initial training in exercise physiology, Mark has worked in the field of public health for the past 15 years. Within the discipline of public health, Mark's are of methodological expertise is implementation science, through which he strives to promote the adoption and integration of evidence-based practices, interventions and policies into health care and community settings. More specifically, he examines strategies to connect patients from clinical settings to supportive community resources (clinic-community linkages) for health and wellness. Mark strives to accomplish this work by forming partnerships with community health organisations leading to collaborative research projects involving healthcare systems, administrators, and providers aimed at improving the health of local residents. Mark has ongoing research projects across Europe, South Africa, and the United States. As an academic, Mark has successfully developed and launched post-graduated public health programmes in Chronic Disease Prevention and Control and Public Health Nutrition and currently leads a module at Durham University on knowledge translation.



Professor Carolyn Summerbell
Associate Director

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Professor Carolyn Summerbell joined Durham University in 2008, originally to work in the Department of Medicine and Health. She joined the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences in 2017. She is a nutritionist and qualified dietitian and was trained at KCL.

Carolyn's primary research interests lie in the domain of physical activity (+/- diet) interventions in children which aim to prevent obesity, promote healthy growth and reduce inequity.
Although some of this work is focussed on the UK, specific projects in high, low and middle-income countries, including Sweden, Malaysia and Qatar, form part of this portfolio of research. Her research focuses on three main areas:
1. The collation of evidence of the effectiveness of interventions that aim to promote physical activity (+/- healthy diet), prevent obesity and promote healthy growth, and promote equity in children. Methods and types of evidence used vary – from Cochrane systematic review and meta-analysis methods to novel scoping review methods, and from grey literature and information to unpublished data on equity factors collected by trialists.
2. The development and translation of community-based interventions to promote physical activity (+/- healthy diet), prevent obesity and promote healthy growth, and promote equity in children, for high, low and middle-income countries. Frameworks (e.g. the ADAPT guidance), alongside mixed and creative methods that value meaningful involvement of children, teachers and parents, steer this work.
3. Exploring the relationship between physical activity and dietary patterns in preschool and young children to better understand interactions and how these may be moderated by equity factors and child growth. An emerging line of enquiry explores the time points (age of children) of deviance from physical activity and dietary recommendations and policy implications.

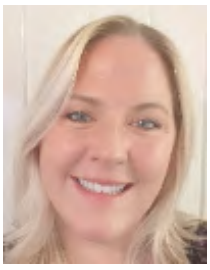
Our Administration Team



Mrs Suzanne Boyd
Institute Manager

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Suzanne is responsible for the day to day running of the Wolfson Institute, dealing with matters pertaining to HR, finance, committee support/management, project support and Fellowship support. She is also responsible for the Institute website and social media accounts. She support meeting and diary requests for the Institute Directorate and manages the ECR funding Scheme. In 2025. she will be managing the Fellowship Fund.



Jules Finn
Administrative Support (Thursday)

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Jules assists in the day to day running of the Wolfson Institute, dealing with matters pertaining to ECR committee support and the fortnightly newsletter. She assists in event mamagement and planning. Jules also supports the Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience and the Biophysical Sciences Institute.

Our Fellowship and Early Career Researchers

Fellows

The Wolfson Institute's Fellows come from a diverse range of disciplinary and professional backgrounds across Durham University and organisations with which we collaborate. Fellowship is open to all academic and research staff of the University who subscribe to the Institute's aims and undertake and publish research using an Institute affiliation. The purpose of Fellowship is to create a research community that subscribes to the Institute's aims and has the opportunity to share in its activities, resources, support and collective reputation.
As an Institute, we are committed to supporting our Fellows' research endeavours, and by keeping us informed this offering can be maximised:

- Research Showcase Opportunities:
- Leverage the WRIHW as a platform to promote and develop your research within the University, local communities and organisations, nationally and internationally.
- Digital Profiling Opportunities: Feature your research across the WRIHW website and Twitter page, as well as at health-focused events within the University and the wider regional community.
- Professional Designation: You are invited to use the formal title of Fellow of the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing in your professional profile, CV and email signature.
- Support and Advice Services: Gain access to our Directorate and Admin support for dedicated advice.
- Exclusive Events: Enjoy invitations to Fellows-only events designed to foster deep connections and collaborative opportunities within our community.



Early Career Researchers

At the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing (WRIHW) we include a focus on the importance of nurturing its early career researcher (ECR) community. Our ECR community mirrors the interdisciplinary commitment of the WRIHW, with PhD students in anthropology illuminating a brighter side to ayahuasca tourism in South America, peers in bioscience ironing out some truths about dementia, and a wide variety in-between. Improving health and wellbeing is not restricted to a particular academic discipline, and neither are we.

The main goals of the ECR committee are:

- To increase the sense of community between ECRs within the WRIHW
- To increase the visibility of ECRs within the WRIHW, and to wider audiences
- To offer ECRs within the WRIHW opportunities to develop their research, CV and understanding of what a career in research can look like

Our ECR Network is designed to cultivate a sense of community among Early Career Researchers and research-enabling staff at Durham University who are interested in health and wellbeing research. We aim to encourage a diversity of ideas, practices, and approaches while recognising and nurturing the unique experiences, skills, and competencies that each individual can contribute.

At the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing, we define an Early Career Researcher broadly. This includes undergraduates and students in taught postgraduate programmes who are curious about advancing to postgraduate research, PhD students, postdoctoral research assistants, teaching fellows interested in research, new or established postdocs and academic staff transitioning to independent researchers. We also welcome technicians and professional support staff who want to contribute their ideas and knowledge to the development of research on health and wellbeing.

Looking ahead, the Institute is also beginning to explore how it might further strengthen the doctoral research environment around health and wellbeing, including through conversations about future doctoral training opportunities. Additionally, our vibrant ECR committee are developing plans for a mentoring scheme through which ECRs may be supported by Wolfson Fellows, which will help to foster relationships across career stages and disciplines. We also hope to create more regular opportunities for Fellows and ECR Members to come together through events and shared activities, with the aim of strengthening connections, increasing engagement and contributing to a supportive and collaborative research environment.

Professor Brian Castellani's work during the reporting period has focused on three interconnected areas: environmental health, healthcare workforce resilience, and international partnership-building. Through collaborations across the UK, Japan, South Africa, and Europe, he has advanced research on the health impacts of environmental change, including extreme heat and urban coastal health, while supporting comparative research and early-career researcher development. He has also continued to work with the World Health Organization and NHS partners on applying complexity-informed approaches to healthcare workforce resilience, contributing to Durham's ambition to re-establish itself as a WHO Collaborating Centre. Alongside this, Brian has strengthened Wolfson's international research network through partnerships with universities and organisations across Europe, Japan, South Africa, Canada, and the UK. Together, these activities are helping to position Wolfson as a leading hub for interdisciplinary, policy-relevant research addressing complex health and wellbeing challenges at local, national, and global levels.

World Health Organization (WHO Europe): Complexity, Health Workforce Resilience, and Systems Thinking

During 2025–26, Professor Brian Castellani led Wolfson's collaboration with the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (WHO Europe), particularly through the Unit of Health Workforce and Health Services under the leadership of Tomas Zapata and Cris Scotter. The collaboration focuses on healthcare workforce resilience, systems thinking, and the application of complexity-informed approaches to workforce planning and health-system strengthening.

Drawing on expertise developed through the Wolfson Research Institute, the Durham Research Methods Centre, and wider international research networks, Brian contributed complexity-informed approaches to workforce resilience, participatory systems mapping, Theory of Change development, and health workforce planning. The collaboration is grounded in a shared recognition that many contemporary workforce challenges cannot be understood or addressed through conventional forecasting and planning approaches alone, but require greater attention to the complex, adaptive, and interconnected nature of health systems.

A major focus during the year was Brian's participation in the WHO Europe Health Workforce Planning Collaborative in Copenhagen. The two-day event brought together workforce planners, policymakers, and health-system leaders from multiple countries to explore how workforce planning systems can remain adaptive, resilient, and sustainable under conditions of uncertainty and change. The collaboration also extended into wider international workforce-planning initiatives, including a multinational partnership involving WHO Europe, Sweden's National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen), regional health authorities, universities, and healthcare leaders.



Another important contribution involved participation in the WHO Europe HEROES programme. Brian contributed to this work alongside Dr Jennifer Badham of the Durham Research Methods Centre.

The collaboration also created significant opportunities for international research development. Working closely with Cris Scotter, Professor Jonathan Wistow (Co-Director of the Wolfson Research Institute and Durham Research Methods Centre), and Gareth Rees, Brian is co-developing an international comparative research programme examining healthcare workforce resilience across multiple countries.

A further highlight of the year was Brian's invited keynote contribution to the WHO–NHS seminar series Working for Health 2030: Embracing Complexity – Systems Thinking for Health Workforce Strengthening.

Looking ahead, Brian leads the development of Durham University's application to become a WHO Collaborating Centre focused on complexity, complex systems thinking, and healthcare workforce resilience. The formal documentation has now been submitted and a decision is anticipated before the end of 2026.

UK–Japan Collaboration on Extreme Heat, Health, and Visual Complexity through RENKEI

During 2025–26, Professor Brian Castellani led the development of a growing UK–Japan collaboration focused on extreme heat, public health, prevention, and interdisciplinary approaches to health and wellbeing. The collaboration has been developed through the UK–Japan RENKEI network, a British Council initiative that supports long-term collaboration between partner universities in the United Kingdom and Japan.

During the year, Brian built on Durham University's leadership role within the RENKEI network to strengthen collaboration with fellow RENKEI partner universities, including Ritsumeikan University and Kyushu University in Japan and the University of Leeds and Newcastle University in the UK. A central objective of this work was the development of early-career researchers through existing institutional relationships within the RENKEI network, while also creating new opportunities for collaborative research on extreme heat, public health, prevention, and related health challenges facing both countries.

A key activity during the year was Brian's visit to Japan in July 2025 as part of an ongoing RENKEI collaboration on extreme heat and health involving partner universities in the UK and Japan. The visit contributed to the development of collaborative research, researcher exchange, and early-career researcher support across the network. Building on this work, Durham University hosted the team in March 2026 for a two-day workshop supported by RENKEI collaboration funding, the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing, and the Durham Research Methods Centre.

The workshop focused on extreme heat and health and enabled the further development of a collaborative research article and the preparation of a funding proposal to support future work. Although a subsequent application to the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation was unsuccessful, the process helped strengthen the collaboration and identify future opportunities for joint research and funding development.

A central objective of the collaboration has been the development of early-career researchers through existing RENKEI university partnerships. The project has created opportunities for researchers from Durham, Leeds, Newcastle, Ritsumeikan, and Kyushu to build international networks, collaborate on shared research challenges, participate in workshops and exchanges, and contribute to the development of future research proposals and publications.

The collaboration has also continued to evolve beyond its initial focus on environmental health. During June 2026, Brian returned to Japan to work with colleagues at Ritsumeikan University and Kyushu University to further develop the network and explore future research opportunities. At Ritsumeikan University, discussions focused on the next phase of the extreme heat and health programme and future funding opportunities, including a potential resubmission to the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation.

At Kyushu University, Brian is working with Professor Jan Lauwereyns to explore new interdisciplinary connections between health and medical humanities, psychology, complexity sciences, and visual methods. Particular attention is being given to visual complexity and the potential contribution of innovative visual approaches to understanding uncertainty, resilience, perception, and human experience.

Looking ahead, the collaboration is well positioned for further development. Future plans include comparative UK–Japan publications, renewed funding applications, continued support for early-career researchers, and the expansion of interdisciplinary work spanning environmental health, prevention, health and medical humanities, and visual complexity.



Nelson Mandela University: Place, Environmental Justice, Public Health, and Just Transitions

During 2025–26, Professor Brian Castellani continued to develop Wolfson's collaboration with Nelson Mandela University, South Africa, through his role as Visiting Professor. The collaboration is centred on place, environmental justice, public health, social cohesion, and just transitions, bringing together colleagues from Durham University and Nelson Mandela University to explore how complexity-informed approaches can support healthier, more sustainable, and more equitable communities.



The collaboration is led primarily through Brian's work with Professor Andrea Hurst, Gary Koekemoer, and Harsheila Riga at Nelson Mandela University. The Visiting Professorship provides an important institutional foundation for this work, supporting ongoing collaboration in research, publication, mentoring, and international exchange between the two universities.

A major activity during the year was Brian's visit to Nelson Mandela University in September 2025. Hosted through the Chair in Identities and Social Cohesion, the visit included the second Social Complexity Retreat, building on an earlier retreat held at Durham University. The retreat brought together a transdisciplinary group of scientists, social scientists, artists, and philosophers to explore how complexity-informed approaches can be used to address real-world social, environmental, and health challenges.

During the visit, Brian also delivered a public lecture, From Assemblages to Tangles, which explored visual complexity as a method for understanding complex social and health challenges. The lecture examined how visual approaches can contribute to interdisciplinary research on wellbeing, social cohesion, resilience, environmental change, and human experience.

A further focus of the collaboration has been the development of comparative research on place, environmental justice, public health, and community transitions in South Africa and the United Kingdom. Working with colleagues including Andrea Hurst, Gary Koekemoer, Jonathan Wistow, and John Bothwell, Brian contributed to a series of conference presentations examining how place-based inequalities, governance arrangements, environmental pressures, and historical conditions shape the health and wellbeing of communities.

The collaboration was further strengthened through participation in an international environmental health conference in Rhodes, Greece, where members of the Durham and Nelson Mandela University team presented three conference papers arising from their joint work.

Looking ahead, the collaboration is expected to expand through new publications, institutional partnerships, and research funding. A future proposal is being developed under the leadership of Dr John Bothwell (Durham University), with a focus on environmental change, place, sustainability, and just transitions, and is expected to target funding opportunities through the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). Building on his Visiting Professorship, Brian and Professor Jonathan Wistow are scheduled to return to South Africa in September 2026 to further strengthen links between Durham and South African partners.

During the reporting period, Professor Barbara Bechter has played a leading role in advancing interdisciplinary health-related research, developing collaborative funding initiatives, and strengthening engagement across academic, policy, and practitioner communities. Her work spans NHS workforce health and wellbeing, the social and health impacts of polycrisis, and the application of innovative methodologies, including generative artificial intelligence and computational ethnography. Through a combination of research leadership, grant development, stakeholder collaboration, and the organisation of high-profile interdisciplinary events, these activities have contributed to Durham University's strategic priorities in health, wellbeing, and inequalities, while fostering new partnerships and opportunities for research impact.

NHS Workforce Research Investigating the Interplay Between Workforce Reforms, Diversity, and Health & Wellbeing

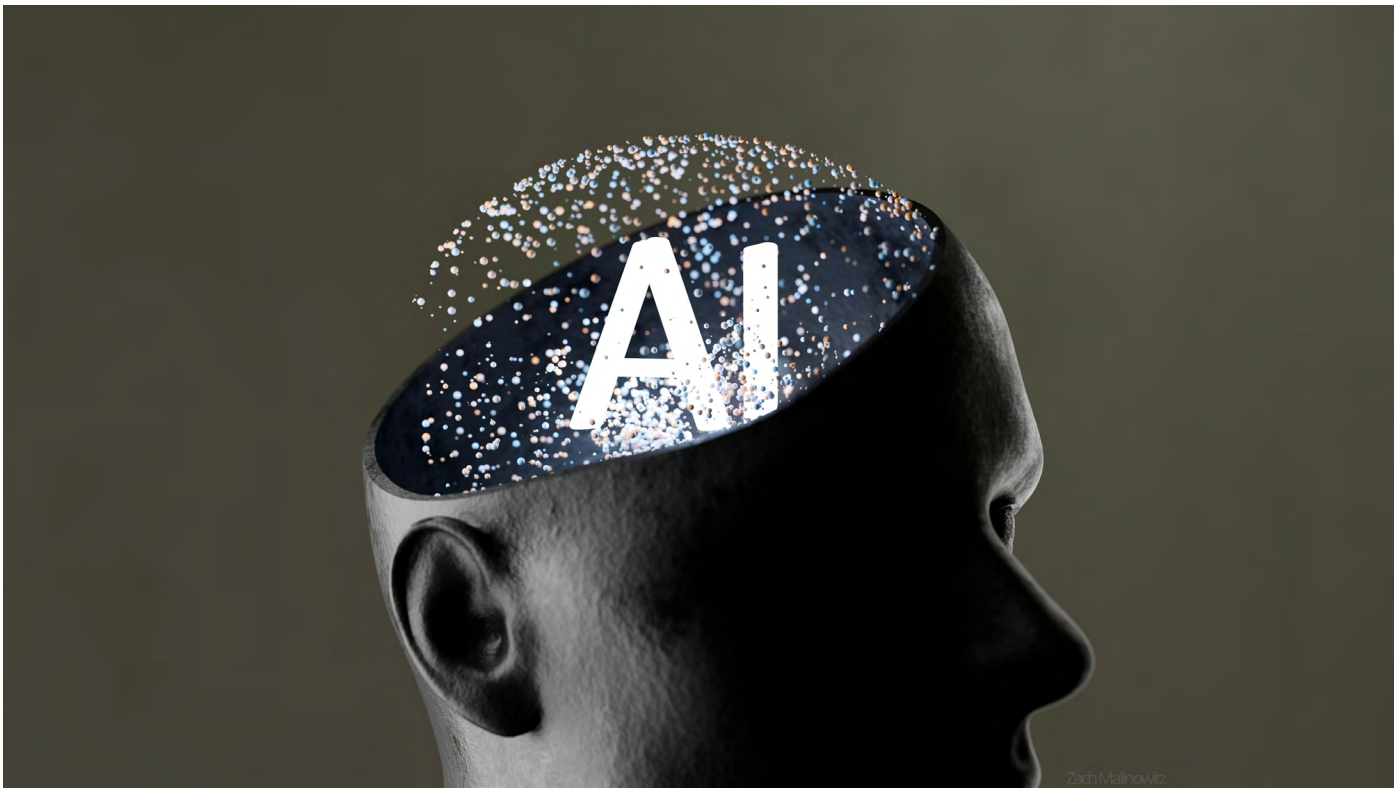
Aligned with Durham University's strategic emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches to improving health and reducing inequalities, Barbara Bechter has led and developed a portfolio of research projects addressing critical determinants of health outcomes. A central focus is workforce health and wellbeing, particularly within the NHS. The ongoing NHS workforce research collaboration examines how workforce reforms and increasing diversity shape working conditions, staff wellbeing, and organisational resilience across national, regional, and NHS Trust contexts. This work conducted by and interdisciplinary team of researchers at Durham University Business School (DUBS) with contributions from Accounting (Professor Amir Michael), Human Resource Management and Employment Relations (Professor Barbara Bechter; Professor Bernd Brandl) responds directly to persistent challenges such as staff shortages, sickness absence, and retention. It analyses how workforce composition interacts with local organisational environments to influence health outcomes.

Methodologically, the project is strongly interdisciplinary, integrating expertise from human resource management, health economics, institutional theory, and data analytics. It combines longitudinal secondary datasets, including NHS workforce statistics and staff surveys, with qualitative, co-produced research involving stakeholders and Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE). The team's work is supported by seed funding from DUBS to further develop the project and explore funding opportunities to expand the research as well as research opportunities for early career researchers (ECRs). The research is expected to generate evidence to inform workforce policy and practice, particularly in relation to improving staff wellbeing, reducing turnover, and strengthening organisational resilience.



Using Generative Artificial Intelligence to Understand Regional Polycrisis Experiences

In parallel, Barbara Bechter coordinated a team of researchers that have advanced methodological innovation through a pilot project focused on the analysis of “polycrisis” experiences. This work led by Dr Francis McKay (Research Associate, Population Health Sciences Institute Newcastle University & Research Portfolio Lead Health Determinants Research Collaboration Gateshead Council) in collaboration with researcher at the Department of Computer Science at Durham University (Professor Noura Al Moubayed; Dr Suncica Hadzidedic) addresses the need to understand how overlapping economic, social, and health crises generate complex and often hidden vulnerabilities, particularly in regions such as North East England. The project develops integrated approaches combining qualitative, lived-experience research with computational tools, specifically generative AI. Within this framework, AI is positioned as a research assistant augmenting human analysis. The project team established the foundation for scalable, AI-assisted methodologies capable of analysing multi-scalar crisis dynamics, with ongoing refinement required through iterative testing and ethical evaluation.



Inequalities in Resilience – Hidden Precarities and Policymaking in a Time of Polycrisis

Building on above’s lived-experience work with computational tools, a place-based polycrisis-focused project has been developed through a Nuffield grant application, currently awaiting outcome. This project shifts analytical focus from national and global scales to local, place-based experiences of communities. It investigates how compounding crises, including the pandemic, cost-of-living pressures, and public service strain, produce patterns of “hidden precarity” and “inequalities in resilience.” The research is interdisciplinary, integrating public health, social and psychological theory, public policy, and computer science. Researchers from various fields are involved, such as Anthropology (Dr Francis McKay; Dr Jordan Mullard), Computer Science (Professor Noura Al Moubayed; Dr Suncica Hadzidedic), Education (Professor Nadin Beckmann), Psychology (Professor Fuschia Sirois), and Sociology (Professor Barbara Bechter; Dr Jonathan Wistow). Given the strong focus on lived experiences, the team closely collaborates with external partners including Durham Community Action, Newcastle City Council, Gateshead Council, and Durham County Council. A key methodological contribution is the use of computational ethnography (Dr Francis McKay), combining qualitative fieldwork with Large Language Models to enable “big qual” analysis of narrative data. This approach enhances both analytical scale and contextual depth, supporting the development of transferable frameworks for vulnerability assessment and prevention-oriented policymaking. Across these projects, a consistent emphasis is placed on co-production with stakeholders, integration of qualitative and quantitative data, and the use of advanced analytical techniques to generate policy-relevant evidence.

Jonathan Wistow is Co-Director of the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing (WRIHW) at Durham University and serves as Strategic Research Lead for Wider Determinants of Health and Well-being within the County Durham REACH (Research and Engagement Across Communities for Health) partnership. Working across academia, local government, and the voluntary and community sector, his work focuses on addressing health inequalities and improving population health through research, evidence-informed policy, and community engagement.
His research and leadership have centred on understanding and tackling the wider determinants of health, with a particular emphasis on reducing unfair and avoidable differences in health outcomes experienced by disadvantaged communities. Throughout his career, he has championed collaborative approaches that bring together researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and communities to co-produce evidence that can drive meaningful social change.

Recent achievements reflect both his academic leadership and wider contribution to public health.
In recognition of his sustained impact on the field, he was awarded Honorary Membership of the Faculty of Public Health, recognising exceptional service and contribution to public health.
He was also recently appointed as a Trustee of Academics Stand Against Poverty, supporting its mission to mobilise academic expertise in tackling poverty and advancing social justice globally.

County Durham REACH (Research and Engagement Across Communities for Health)

County Durham REACH is a partnership between Durham County Council, Durham Community Action and Durham University, established to strengthen research, evaluation and community engagement across County Durham. The partnership was developed following collaborative work undertaken through the NIHR Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) application process. Although the HDRC bid was unsuccessful, partners recognised the value of sustained collaboration and the importance of building research capacity, capability and infrastructure across the local system.

The partnership's overarching aim is to develop a sustainable approach to research and evaluation that supports evidence-informed decision-making, strengthens collaboration between sectors, and ultimately contributes to reducing health inequalities across County Durham.



Key Achievements and Successes

Since its establishment, REACH has made significant progress in creating the foundations required for a research-active and learning-focused public health system.

Building Capacity and Infrastructure
A dedicated operational team has been established, bringing together expertise from Durham County Council, Durham Community Action and Durham University. This has enabled the partnership to develop practical mechanisms for supporting research and evaluation activity across organisations.

Notable achievements include:

- Completion of a Public Health workforce training needs assessment and development of a targeted training programme.
- Delivery of whole-team training in pragmatic evaluation and health economics.
- Establishment of a Public Health Evaluation Steering Group to improve the quality and consistency of evaluation activity.
- Development of processes to support evidence generation and learning across public health programmes.

Strengthening Community Involvement

A major focus of REACH has been ensuring that communities are meaningfully involved in research and evaluation.
Key developments include:

- Establishment of a Community Involvement Steering Group.
- Development of a Community Involvement Framework to support practical and accessible participation in public health research.
- Securing an NIHR Public and Community Partnerships Award to work with young adults and young parents in Tow Law, exploring barriers and enablers to community involvement in research.
- Development of innovative approaches to community engagement, including plans for digital resources, podcasts and v ideo content.

Research and Innovation

Through extensive partner consultation, REACH identified 64 areas of research interest which have been synthesised into five strategic themes:

- Loneliness and social isolation
- Mental health
- Financial wellbeing and poverty
- Behaviour change and evaluation methods
- Enablers and measures of effectiveness

These priorities are now being progressed through Supporting Practice, Research and Innovation Groups (SPRIGs), creating a platform for collaborative research development, evidence review and future funding opportunities.



Collaborative Research and Funding Success

REACH has successfully supported the development of research and evaluation projects and contributed to successful funding applications. The partnership has also strengthened links between researchers, practitioners, policymakers and communities, creating opportunities for co-produced research that directly addresses local priorities.



Why the Partnership Has Been Successful

Several factors have underpinned the success of REACH:

- Strong commitment from all three partner organisations.
- A shared focus on addressing the wider determinants of health and reducing inequalities.
- Integration of academic expertise, public sector leadership and community insight.
- Investment in workforce development and research capability.
- Genuine commitment to community involvement and co-production.
- A flexible approach that balances strategic long-term development with responsiveness to emerging funding and policy opportunities.

Importantly, the partnership has moved beyond individual projects to create the infrastructure, relationships and culture necessary for sustainable evidence-informed practice.

Looking Ahead

The next phase of REACH will focus on translating this strong foundation into increased research activity, greater community impact and enhanced external funding success.

Priorities for the coming year include:

- Launching and expanding the Supporting Practice, Research and Innovation Groups.
- Developing a knowledge mobilisation strategy to ensure research findings are accessible and useful for practitioners, communities and decision-makers.
- Establishing clear governance, ethics and publication frameworks to support high-quality research activity.
- Creating a proof-of-concept model for future research and evaluation projects.
- Developing and submitting further collaborative funding applications.
- Expanding community co-researcher approaches and embedding the Community Involvement Framework across future projects.

As REACH continues to mature, the partnership is well positioned to become a nationally recognised model for collaborative, place-based research that connects academic excellence with community priorities and public health practice. Through continued partnership working, REACH will contribute to generating the evidence needed to tackle health inequalities and improve health and wellbeing across County Durham.



During 2025–26, Professor Mark Stoutenberg's work focused on strengthening connections between healthcare systems and communities through applied public health and implementation science. In the North East, his work through Wolfson, ARC North East and North Cumbria, and Fuse supported collaborative research addressing real-world health needs and inequalities. Internationally, he advanced research on integrating physical activity into healthcare systems, including a major implementation study across 35 primary care practices in the United States, while contributing to scientific and capacity-building initiatives across Europe. His longstanding partnership with the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa continues to develop community-based approaches to chronic disease prevention and pathways to care. Together, this work strengthens Wolfson's contribution to applied, internationally connected research spanning healthcare and community settings.



Connecting Healthcare and Communities: From Evidence to Implementation

Professor Mark Stoutenberg is a Co-Director of the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing and Professor in the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences. His public health work sits at the intersection of healthcare and community systems, with a focus on the translation of evidence into routine practice using an implementation science lens. Much of his work examines how healthcare and community organisations can be better connected to improve health and reduce inequalities.

Within North East England, Mark contributes to public health research through the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration North East and North Cumbria (ARC NENC) and Fuse, an NIHR Centre for Translational Research in Public Health. Through these regional partnerships, he works across academic, healthcare, public health and community settings to support research that is responsive to real-world needs and capable of informing practice and policy.

This same focus extends internationally where his work spans the clinic–community continuum: from helping healthcare systems connect patients with community-based opportunities for physical activity, to examining how underserved populations can be connect with healthcare and other essential services. Across these settings, his research focuses on understanding how effective interventions can be adapted, implemented and sustained within complex health systems.

Integrating Physical Activity into Healthcare Systems: From Clinics to Communities

One major strand of Mark's research focuses on how physical activity can be more effectively integrated into healthcare systems, particularly through connecting patients from clinical settings with appropriate physical activity support in their communities. He applies implementation science frameworks to understand how these pathways can be implemented, improved and sustained within real-world health systems. Through more than a decade of work in this area, including his longstanding role with Exercise is Medicine (EIM), Mark has become a recognised international expert and is regularly invited to contribute to capacity-building and scientific initiatives around the world.

During 2025–26, this work included several major international activities:

- Implementing clinic–community pathways at scale. In May 2025, Mark was part of the launch of a five-year, $3.5 million NIH R01 project spanning 35 Prisma Health primary care clinics in the greater Greenville, South Carolina region. As one of the project's main investigators, Mark is developing and applying an implementation facilitation-based strategy to optimise the EIM Greenville model, with the ultimate goal of increasing referrals from primary care to community-based physical activity programmes.
- Sharing expertise and building international capacity. In September 2025, Mark organised a half-day pre-conference workshop at the HEPA Europe Conference in Kaunas, Lithuania, bringing together academics and practitioners to share experiences on integrating physical activity into health systems. In October, Mark served as the co-Scientific Organiser for the 2nd International Conference on Exercise is Medicine in Athens, Greece, where he also delivered a keynote on adapting the EIM model to support healthy ageing.
- Building a European network for health-system integration. In October 2025, Mark coordinated the submission of the PATHS (Physical Activity inTegration in Healthcare Systems) proposal, an EU COST Action involving 83 collaborators from 26 European countries. Although the proposal was not funded, its development brought together a substantial multidisciplinary network around the shared challenge of embedding physical activity within European health systems.
- Strengthening the evidence base for physical activity integration. Mark's research during the year examined multiple points along the integration pathway, including standardising physical activity assessment within healthcare for older adults, using electronic health record data to identify patients eligible for referral, the cost-effectiveness of supervised exercise therapy for adults with chronic conditions, and approaches to connecting healthcare professionals, exercise professionals and community resources to support healthy ageing.

Together, this work reflects a broader programme of research aimed at moving physical activity beyond individual clinical advice towards its systematic integration within healthcare. Through this work, Mark is helping to shape the emerging international agenda for integrating physical activity within healthcare systems.





From Communities to Clinics: Strengthening Community-Based Pathways to Care

A second strand of Mark's research examines the other side of the clinic–community continuum: how community-based approaches can identify people at risk of chronic disease and connect them with supportive care. Through a longstanding partnership with the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits U) and the Wits Health HUBB in Johannesburg, South Africa, Mark and colleagues train community health workers to conduct preventive home-based health screening in under-resourced communities. Their screening of nearly 120,000 people in Soweto community settings has identified substantial numbers of individuals with elevated blood pressure shifting the focus to what happens next. Together, they are developing pathways to connect individuals with community health clinics, pharmacies, and local lifestyle modification programmes, while exploring the potential of mobile health approaches to extend reach.

During 2025–26, Mark continued to develop this programme of work through research, capacity building and international collaboration. In August 2025, as a member of the Scientific Advisory Committee, he travelled to Johannesburg for a week of advisory activities associated with the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development at Wits U. During this time period, Mark and his doctoral student, Hillary Banjo, published research examining the acceptability of web-based health modalities among people with hypertension, extending the programme's focus from identifying unmet health needs towards understanding how people in underserved communities might access different forms of ongoing care.

In September 2025, Mark joined colleagues from Spain (Heather Rogers, BioBizkaia Health Research Institute) and Germany (Juliane Koeberlein-Neu, University of Wuppertal) in submitting a British Council UK–Spain Springboard Award proposal focused on chronic disease prevention in under-resourced communities. This collaboration expanded into a multinational Horizon Europe proposal submitted in April 2026 through a joint call with the Global Alliance for Chronic Diseases. Led by Professor Lisa Ware at Wits University and involving researchers from South Africa, the UK, Spain and Germany, the proposed research sought to extend the community health worker model beyond home-based screening in providing more comprehensive support for people with hypertension and their families.

Together, this work complements Mark's research on integrating physical activity into healthcare by approaching the clinic–community interface from the opposite direction. Rather than asking how healthcare systems can connect patients with resources in their communities, this programme asks how community-based systems can identify health needs and create effective pathways into care. Across both strands, Mark's work focuses on strengthening the connections between healthcare and communities so that people can access the support they need, wherever that support begins.

Amir Atapour-Abarghouei is Associate Professor in Computer Science at Durham University and Co-Director of the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing, where he helps shape cross-faculty strategy at the intersection of artificial intelligence, health, environment and societal impact. His research sits broadly across computer vision, machine learning and artificial intelligence, with work spanning medical image analysis, robotics and autonomy, biodiversity and environmental monitoring, agriculture, transport and safety-critical systems.

A particularly important part of Amir's work is building bridges between technical innovation and pressing health and wellbeing challenges. Recent funded projects reflect both the breadth of his research and the increasing demand for AI that can operate robustly in complex real-world settings. Within Wolfson, Amir is especially committed to supporting early career researchers and helping create an environment in which ambitious interdisciplinary work can thrive. He is involved in coordinating the Institute's ECR Network, which has grown into a lively and supportive community for health-related doctoral researchers and early career academics, and he sees this as one of the most important foundations for Wolfson's future. He is keen to create easy routes into collaboration, mentoring, peer support and shared opportunities, particularly for colleagues whose work crosses disciplinary boundaries or connects academic research with public, clinical and community impact. His aim is for Wolfson to be known not only for excellent research, but also for being a place where promising researchers are actively brought into conversations, partnerships and leadership opportunities at an early stage.

FARMAR: Artificial Intelligence, Robotics and Resilient Agriculture

During 2025/26, Durham University developed a major new international partnership through FARMAR, a Horizon Europe Marie Skłodowska Curie Staff Exchanges project that will formally begin in October 2026. FARMAR brings together artificial intelligence, computer vision, robotics, agriculture, crop science, economics, sociology, law and other disciplines around a common challenge: how advanced technology can support more resilient agriculture while remaining grounded in the knowledge, needs and working practices of farmers. The project is coordinated at Durham University and is led by Dr Amir Atapour-Abarghouei, Co-Director of the Wolfson Research Institute, with Dr Olena Riabinina, a Wolfson Fellow, as Co-Lead.

The partnership has substantial international reach. It brings together 19 organisations across 14 countries, including the United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Germany, Ukraine, France, Türkiye, Finland, Viet Nam, Malaysia, Thailand, Cabo Verde, Italy, Canada and Japan. Participating institutions include Czech Technical University in Prague, the University of Surrey, the Technical University of Munich, Middle East Technical University, Tampere University, Vietnam National University of Agriculture, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Khon Kaen University, the University of Alberta and Kyushu University. The consortium also includes agricultural, legal and robotics organisations, which helps research questions to be considered from technical, practical, economic and societal perspectives.

The core idea of FARMAR is to record heritage and local farming practices and translate this knowledge into operations that agricultural robots can understand and perform. Rather than developing autonomous systems in isolation, the project places farmers and farm managers at the centre of the process. Researchers will work with them to decide what practices should be captured, how they should be represented, and the geographical, temporal, legal and intellectual property boundaries within which the technology should operate.

FARMAR recognises that technological performance alone will not determine whether agricultural robotics succeeds. The programme therefore includes work on agricultural economics, farmer trust, accessibility, legal frameworks, data governance and the social conditions that influence adoption. It will examine whether new systems make financial sense for farmers, how traditional knowledge should be protected when it contributes to commercial artificial intelligence and how interfaces and working practices can support effective collaboration between people and machines.



This combination of agricultural resilience, crop and soil health, human factors and responsible technology gives FARMAR a clear connection to the wider health and wellbeing agenda. Resilient food production, healthy crops and soils, sustainable rural economies and the ability of communities to adapt to environmental and economic pressures are important upstream determinants of health. Within the Wolfson Research Institute, the project therefore provides an opportunity to connect artificial intelligence and robotics with environmental health, food systems, wellbeing and the social dimensions of technological change.
Looking ahead, the project will move from consortium development into a programme of international staff exchanges, joint experiments and collaborative publications. These secondments are central to the Marie Skłodowska Curie model and will allow PhD researchers, postdoctoral researchers and academic staff to spend time with partner institutions, learn techniques outside their home discipline and develop new research relationships. For Durham and Wolfson, FARMAR creates a long-term international network around responsible artificial intelligence, sustainable agriculture, food systems and resilient communities, with the potential to generate new research, funding and impact well beyond the initial project.



NEWBEE: Pollinators, Sustainable Agriculture and Intelligent Monitoring

During 2025/26, Durham University also developed NEWBEE, a Horizon Europe Marie Skłodowska Curie Staff Exchanges project focused on the possible increased use of wild bees in agriculture. The project brings together pollinator biology, ecology, agriculture, artificial intelligence, computer vision, robotics, food science, economics, law, policy, history and public engagement. Its central aim is to understand where wild pollinators contribute to agriculture, how their abundance and diversity might be supported, and what ecological, economic and social conditions would be required for these approaches to be used responsibly. NEWBEE is also coordinated at Durham University and is led by Dr Olena Riabinina, a Wolfson Fellow, with Dr Amir Atapour-Abarghouei, Co-Director of the Wolfson Research Institute, as Co-Lead.

NEWBEE is a global partnership involving 16 organisations across 12 countries: the United Kingdom, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Belgium, Moldova, Spain, Bulgaria, Viet Nam, Argentina, Portugal, Italy and Japan. The consortium includes institutions such as Czech Technical University in Prague, BeeLife European Beekeeping Coordination in Belgium, the Spanish National Research Council, the University of Sussex, Vietnam National University of Agriculture, Newcastle University, the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança and the University of Tsukuba. Partners also include organisations with expertise in agricultural practice, technical solutions for beekeepers, law, policy and engagement with farmers.



The scientific programme begins with the development of robust camera and artificial intelligence systems capable of monitoring pollinators under field conditions. The aim is to identify which wild bee species visit crops and to understand their activity patterns in realistic agricultural environments. This creates a direct link between computer vision and ecological research, which allows pollinator behaviour and biodiversity to be studied at a scale that would be difficult to achieve through manual observation alone. Additionally, ecologists, agricultural researchers and practitioners will explore how different environments and farming approaches affect pollinator populations. The consortium will then evaluate the consequences for both crops and surrounding ecosystems, including how pollinator diversity, health and abundance influence fruit size, yield, nutritional or chemical content, and wider ecological relationships. The project also considers pollinator behaviour at the level of individual insects. Researchers will investigate the sensory and behavioural factors that attract different pollinators to crops and how these interactions might be better understood or supported. This work creates further opportunities to combine insect neuroscience and behaviour with artificial intelligence, computer vision and robotics, linking Durham expertise across disciplinary boundaries.

As with FARMAR, NEWBEE extends beyond the biological and technical questions. The consortium will examine the economics and legal frameworks associated with using wild pollinators in agriculture, compare the potential business case with existing approaches such as managed honeybees, and consider how practices might differ between countries. Work on farmer trust, public engagement and social acceptance will explore the concerns of farmers and landowners and develop accessible materials and policy guidance to support informed decision making. The project will also consider cultural and historical perspectives on pollinators, crops and regional food practices.

NEWBEE has a particularly strong connection to health and wellbeing. Pollinator biodiversity is closely tied within the project to crop production, crop quality, ecosystem health and the resilience of food systems. By examining fruit yield and nutritional or chemical content alongside pollinator health and abundance, the research connects biodiversity directly with questions that matter for food security and nutrition. More broadly, maintaining healthy ecosystems and sustainable agricultural landscapes supports environmental health and the long-term wellbeing of communities. This makes NEWBEE highly relevant to Wolfson's interdisciplinary interest in the biological, environmental and social determinants of health.
NEWBEE will move into an active programme of international secondments and collaborative research. PhD researchers, postdoctoral researchers and academic staff will be able to work within partner institutions across Europe and beyond, gaining experience in different disciplines, ecosystems, crops and research methods. The ambition is to build a lasting international network connecting pollinator science, sustainable agriculture and intelligent technologies, while generating new evidence on how biodiversity can contribute to resilient, healthy and sustainable food systems.

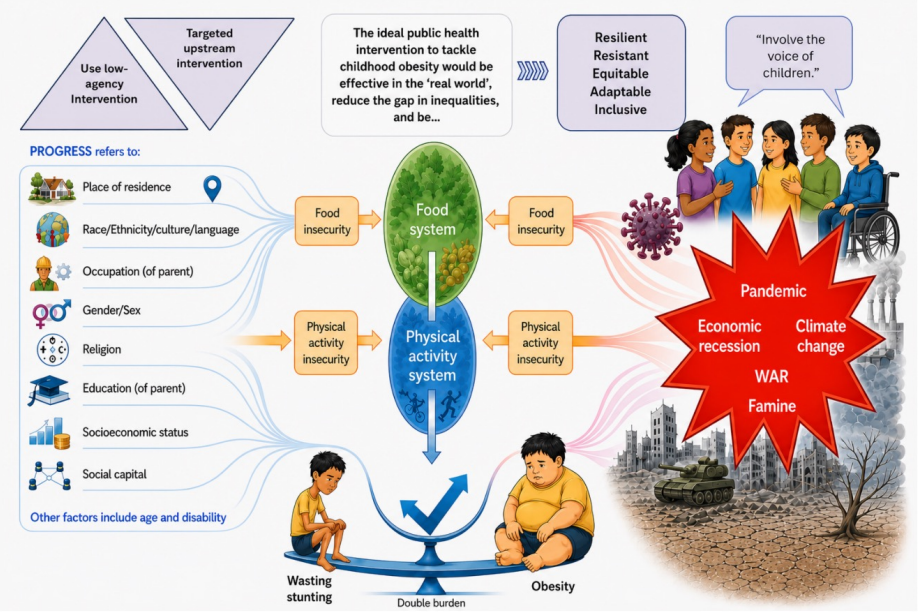


During the reporting period, Professor Carolyn Summerbell has played a leading role in advancing public health research at Durham University through her executive role as a member of the management rwithin NIHR's School for Public Health Research. New collaborations have been fostered between academics at Durham from very different disciplines and other Universities and agencies leading to success in grant capture.

Her own research has included a focus on implementation and sustainability science in relation to interventions that aim to promote physical activity, healthy diets and health equity in early childcare educational settings in LMIC countries, including Malaysia and Qatar. These countries are experiencing high and accelerating levels of childhood obesity alongside wasting and stunting which is driving policy change in these countries. Closer to home, she is involved in ongoing research and policy discussion around one of the Governments flagship initiatives, the HAF programme, to improve life chances for disadvantaged children through school holiday clubs which offer physical activities and healthy food. Together, these activities have contributed to Durham University's strategic priorities in child health, wellbeing, and inequalities, while fostering new partnerships and opportunities for research impact.

Using implementation and sustainability science to understand how health promotion interventions 'play out' in the real world

Implementing and self-sustaining health promotion initiatives once formal implementation support diminishes remains a persistent challenge for teachers. In Malaysia and Qatar, accelerating childhood obesity rates alongside coexisting forms of malnutrition (including obesity, stunting, and wasting), due to low and unpredictable levels of physical activity and unhealthy diets, have prompted national strategies and increased emphasis on relevant school-based health promotion efforts. This policy work has recently extended to the early years with a focus on early childhood educational settings and Carolyn has contributed to a Lancet commissioned review on this topic, expected to be published by the end of 2026.



To better understand if, how and why preschool teachers, implement and sustain interventions which aim to promote physical activity and healthy diets, Carolyn, building on similar work in a large European project, has worked with researchers and policy influencers in both Malaysia and Qatar. This work has focussed on teachers as ecological agents of educational change and the role of "champions" as key agents in bridging the gap between research and policy. Her goal is to find out if, how, and why some intervention components, particularly those which aim to promote physical activity and limit sedentary behaviour, are more (or less) likely to succeed.
Using this research as case studies, Carolyn is contributing to the work of the Cochrane Equity Group in their development of guidance on the conduct and reporting of equity factors in such studies.

She is building on this work with colleagues at the University of Newcastle in Australia to develop guidelines on how best to conduct and report sustainability studies.

Using creative and participatory methods that emphasise children's agency to reveal new insights on the lived experience of children living in poverty

Fuse launched the Creative Research, Involvement and Dissemination Community of Practice (CoP) in January 2026. Carolyn was Deputy Director of Fuse from 2017-2025 and has championed this CoP.

This network explores arts-based and innovative methodologies in public health research, patient and public involvement (PPIE), and non-traditional knowledge sharing across its member universities.

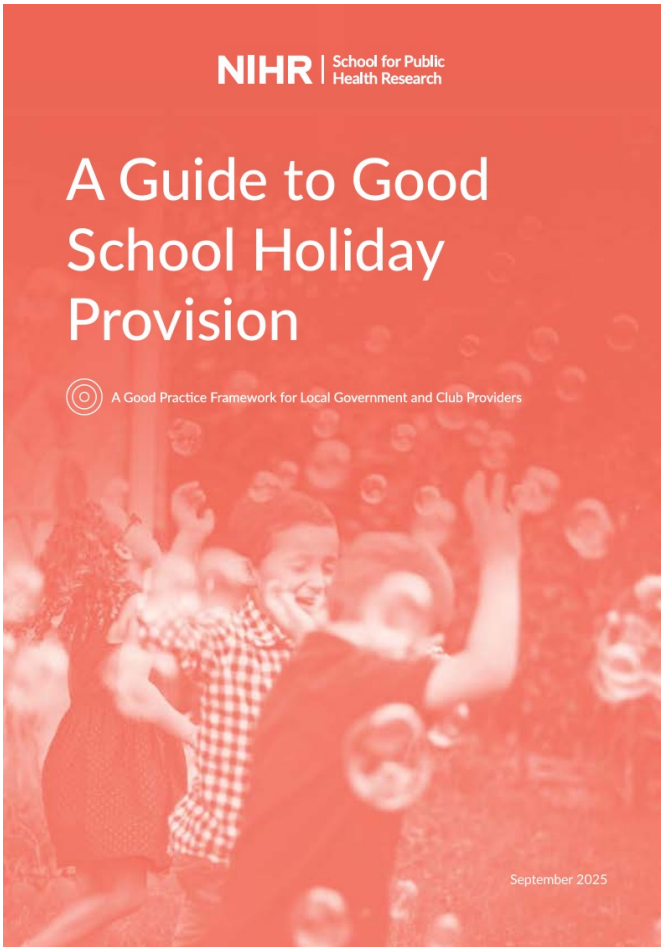
Carolyn has applied these methods to research speaks to the Government's top priorities – child poverty, child health, and levelling up.

The school holidays can magnify inequalities for children who do not have supportive social networks around them and who cannot access the same activities and opportunities as their more affluent peers.

Whilst the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme exists to support these children during school holidays, offering free physical and enriching activities and healthy meals, only around 20% of these children are making use of these funded holiday clubs.

Using creative and participatory methods that emphasise children's agency we were able to reveal new insights on the lived experience of children living in poverty and their experience with the HAF programme, with a special emphasis on SEND children. This research was part of a programme of work that progressed to a best-practice framework for providers, now a key resources recommended by DfE. The Governments ongoing funding of HAF programme is not secure and seeking ways to better support disadvantaged children in the school holidays is an ongoing focus of Carolyn's work





Durham Research Recognised in New WHO Childhood Obesity Guidelines

Research led by WRI Associate Director Professor Carolyn Summerbell and colleagues in Durham University's Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences has been recognised in newly published World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines on the integrated management of obesity in children and adolescents.

The guidelines draw on several internationally significant research outputs from Durham, including three Cochrane systematic reviews examining obesity prevention interventions for children and young people, alongside evidence from the NIHR-funded ESSCOPE project. Together, these studies have helped strengthen the evidence base informing global policy and practice in childhood obesity prevention.

While the WHO guidance focuses largely on the management and treatment of obesity, it also includes a notable emphasis on physical activity, particularly in relation to equity and disability. The inclusion of these themes reflects the growing influence of research highlighting the importance of accessible opportunities for physical activity in supporting children's health and wellbeing.

The citation of Durham-led research within WHO guidance represents a significant achievement, demonstrating how research conducted in the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences is contributing to discussions and decision-making at the highest international level.

For Professor Carolyn Summerbell and her collaborators, this recognition highlights years of work dedicated to understanding how best to prevent obesity in childhood and improve health outcomes for future generations.

Professor Charlotte Clarke has focussed on developing and sustaining key strategic partnerships as well as her engagement with a number of research projects. This includes representing the University with the Northern Health Sciences Alliance, Health Innovation North East North Cumbria, the NIHR Research Support Service, Fuse, the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration (ARC), Reach and with regional partners such as County Durham & Darlington NHS Foundation Trust (please add website links for some of these). Her own research addresses the experiences of those living with dementia and with frailty.



Dementia in the outdoors: Exploring mechanisms of engagement

Dementia in the Outdoors is a Canadian research initiative exploring how nature-based outdoor programs support the inclusion and well-being of people living with dementia. This multi-site participatory project brings together researchers, community partners, students, and people with dementia across three locations: Thunder Bay, Vancouver, and Chilliwack. In Thunder Bay, the project centres on Dementia Gardens: A Place to Grow, a native plant garden co-created by the North West Dementia Working Group (NWDWG) and CERAH at Lakehead University. The study aims to understand how outdoor innovations foster social, relational, and environmental citizenship for people with dementia. Funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the project is led in Thunder Bay by Dr. Elaine Wiersma.



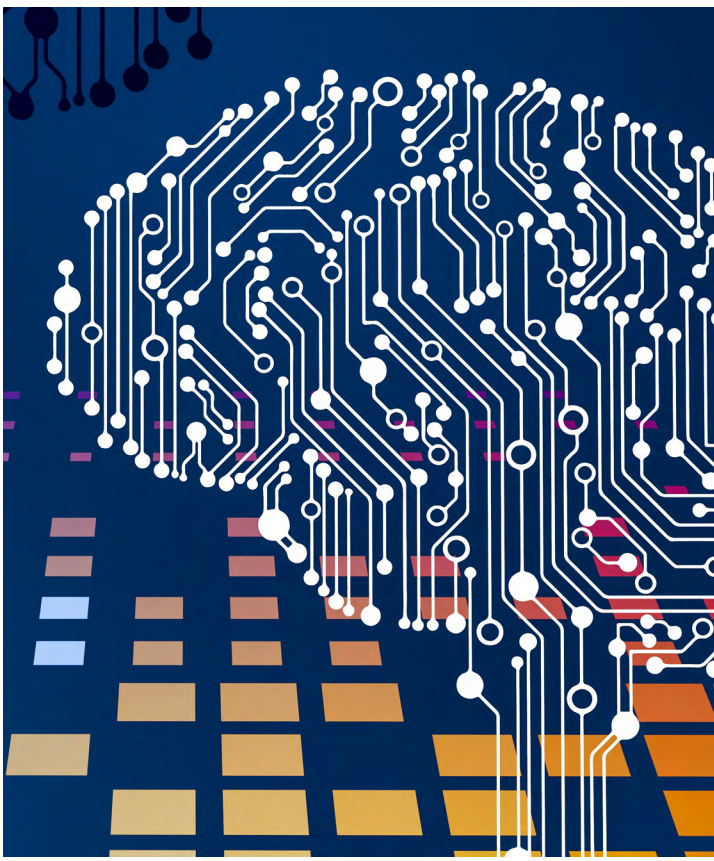
Harnessing knowledge of lifespan biological, health, environmental and psychosocial mechanisms of cognitive frailty for integrated interventions (CFIN).

The primary aim of the Cognitive Frailty Interdisciplinary Network (CFIN), led by Professor Carol Holland (Lancaster University) is to promote collaborative, multidisciplinary research that moves along the pathway from basic laboratory studies through to having a real impact on lives. The focus is on research that addresses the challenge of alleviating the development of age-related cognitive frailty and related reduced healthspan, (years, or proportion of one's life spent in good health) and poor quality of life. Cognitive frailty is defined as a variable condition characterised by simultaneous presence of physical frailty and age-related cognitive impairment, but the exclusion of existing dementia.

The issue of age-related cognitive frailty is a major societal challenge in terms of its increasing impact on quality of life in our ageing populations, but it is also a challenge in terms of bringing together research from diverse fields. Currently, much research on ageing takes place within disciplines. We are thus beginning to learn much about the biological mechanisms of the ageing process, the psychological and neurophysiological processes of cognitive ageing and the external environmental, social or personal health behaviour factors that impact on the development of frailty or cognitive decline in humans. Despite this wealth of knowledge already available on cognitive ageing, there has been little discourse and knowledge exchange between disciplines such that there has been little progress in recent years in finding multi-dimensional interventions to prevent, rehabilitate, or reduce progress in cognitive frailty in later life. This network aims to bridge the gaps between basic, clinical and social science research to foster the translation of the scientific understanding of ageing.

Northern Health Futures Hub (NorthHFutures).

Northern Health Futures (NorthHFutures) is a collaborative digital health hub that addresses unmet health and care needs of populations in the North East and North Cumbria (NENC) region of the UK. The Hub is led out of Open Lab in the School of Computing at Newcastle University. The Hub facilitates responsible research, innovation and training on healthcare technologies and digital health, as well as funding and facilitatating responsible cross-sector health-tech design research, innovation, training, and knowledge exchange.



The NorthHFutures hub brings together:

- 8 UK universities, with six located in NENC
- 7 regional NHS Foundation Trusts plus NENC Integrated Care Board
- 50+ core partners across industry, health & care, public & voluntary sectors
- £7m programme (£4.17m EPSRC and UKRI supported)

Funded by UKRI/EPSRC until July 31st 2027, NorthHFutures has established a pioneering ecosystem that empowers people to engage and lead in digital health initiatives. We take a community-centred approach and are committed to humanising health-tech by championing equity, participation, and investment across the region. Our main focus is to deepen research involvement in digital health research by the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector.

The Hub practices participant-led user research and evaluation of tools and resources to strive for the design of useable and useful technologies and services.

The Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing & the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration North East and North Cumbria

The NIHR Applied Research Collaboration North East and North Cumbria (ARC NENC) is a major regional partnership bringing together the North East and North Cumbria's six universities (Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland, Teesside and Cumbria), hosted by the Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear (CNTW) NHS Foundation Trust. Funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), the ARC began a new five-year phase in April 2026, supported by £15.3 million in NIHR funding. The vision of the ARC NENC is to achieve "better, fairer health and care at all ages and in all places" through applied research that responds to the region's most important health and care challenges.

As a core partner, the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing provides an important connection between the ARC NENC and Durham Unviersity's wider interdisciplinary health and wellbeing research community. Professor Mark Stoutenberg, Professor & Co-Director of the Wolfson Research Institute, serves as Durham's Principal Investigator for the collaboration and is a member of the ARC Executive Team, where he leads the Research Inclusion cross-cutting theme.

NIHR | Applied Research Collaboration North East and North Cumbria

Wolfson's involvement in the ARC NENC includes significant investment in developing future research capacity. A new ARC-funded Research Fellow will join Durham in a 4.5-year position hosted by the Department of Sociology, and will become a key member of the Wolfson research community. Beginning 2027–28, the ARC NENC and Durham University will jointly support three PhD studentships (one fully funded through ARC NENC, two jointly supported through Durham-matched studentships). Together, these posts will strengthen Wolfson's involvement in ARC NENC and our capacity to undertake applied health and care research while creating connections across disciplines, institutions and the wider regional health and care system.

Participation in ARC NENC also creates opportunities for Wolfson researchers and fellows to become involved in collaborative applied research. The ARC's work is organised around five research themes: Addressing Inequity in Health and Care Systems; Care Improvement and Safety; Prevention, including Multiple Long-Term Conditions; Supporting Children, Women and Family Health; and Workforce Inclusion and Innovation for Impact. Researchers can connect with these themes, contribute expertise to emerging projects and collaborations, and engage with SIP (Special Interest Project) funding calls and other ARC activities.

Through the ARC NENC, the Wolfson Research Institute is playing a key role contributing to a region-wide infrastructure designed not only to generate high-quality research, but to translate evidence into meaningful improvements in health and care across the North East and North Cumbria.



The Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing & Fuse

Fuse, The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, established in 2008, plays a pivotal role in transforming health and wellbeing and reducing health inequalities through world-class research and its translation into policy and practice. Durham University, through the Wolfson, is a founding member of Fuse, a collaboration of six universities across the North East and North Cumbria (NENC) working with policy, practice, local government, NHS, the voluntary sector and public partners. Wolfson fellows have key leadership roles in Fuse (Crossley, Chazot, Darling, Dodd-Reynolds, Noone, Summerbell). Fuse has built a public health research ecosystem that connects researchers, policymakers, practitioners, public contributors and communities.

Fuse has created opportunities for Wolfson fellows to collaborate across disciplines and sectors to help ensure that their research is informed by real-world challenges and that evidence can more easily move into policy and practice. The core Fuse infrastructure offers support with research capacity building, public involvement and engagement (PIE), and knowledge exchange and impact. Making research accessible beyond academia is central to Fuse's mission and this includes a focus on creative approaches. Watch this engaging two-minute video to find out How Fuse is creatively communicating research. One example of a new initiative for 2026 is the launch of the Community of practice on Creative Research, Involvement and Dissemination, set up by researchers (led by a Wolfson fellow) and practitioners with VCSE partners.

How Fuse has supported Public Engagement and Impact: highlights from the last year

- Balbir Singh, a Wolfson Fellow acknowledged in the Kings Honours List 2026, for his work with Paul Chazot on the Unmasking Pain project.
- Collaborative project with Beamish museum, "Our South Shields: Thanks for the Memories" supporting older people living with dementia in the North East.
- Dissemination of a Zine and Animation on LGBTQ+ inclusion in physical activity spaces - JASPA project
- Publication of a freely available toolkit to deliver good school holiday provision to support those responsible for delivery of the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme.
- Inclusion of Fuse funded research in World Health Organisation Childhood Obesity Guidelines

How Fuse has supported PIE

- Co-designing research with lived-experience contributors (Chazot, Walker, Dodd-Reynolds).
- Collaborating with communities and partners through events and workshops, including the Elders Council (Noone) and Unmasking Pain project (Chazot).
- Involvement with the Fuse public partner network and links with Durham Community Action, Investing in Children and Pioneering Care Partnership (Zheng, Vancleef, Chazot, Walker, Dodd-Reynolds).

fuse The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health

Through Fuse, Wolfson fellows benefit from access to funding opportunities, studentships, fellowships and a rich network of expertise offered by the prestigious National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) School for Public Health Research (SPHR) - a partnership of nine leading Public Health Centres across the UK. Fuse membership in the NIHR SPHR has recently been extended by 2 years until March 2029, taking this funding period to 7 years. SPHR membership provides funding through the NIHR Three Schools collaboration: School for Primary Care Research, School of Social Care Research and SPHR. The funding of opportunities available 2027-2029 are currently (October 2026) being finalised. NIHR have informed us that the three schools will not continue after 2029, but that public health remains one of their funding priorities. We are currently waiting to hear what the new landscape will look like after 2029.

Highlights of Wolfson's involvement with SPHR in the current funding period

- Wolfson fellows, across 9 academic departments and 2 faculties, have been involved in 9 funded SPHR projects: collaborating with nine national research centres. These highlight Wolfson fellow's strengths in innovative qualitative research, for example co-creating inclusive solutions with marginalised communities, advancing physical activity equity for children and LGBTQ+ youth, shaping school active environments, informing holiday food programmes, understanding perceptions of ultra-processed food, integrating law and public health, and addressing structural inequalities through sustainable travel.
- Wolfson fellows have been involved in research funded by the NIHR Three Schools Prevention Programme including awards and fellowships relating to mental health and dementia.

Our Events in 2025 and 2026

9th Annual ECR Conference

19th June 2026



The Wolfson Early Career Researcher (ECR) Conference 2026 provided a powerful reminder that health and wellbeing research is at its most impactful when it refuses to stay in a single lane. Bringing together researchers from across Durham University, the conference showcased the remarkable breadth of work being undertaken by early career researchers and highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing some of society's most pressing challenges.

Organised by the Wolfson Early Career Researcher Committee, a community of PhD students and postdoctoral researchers dedicated to supporting and nurturing ECRs across all departments, the conference aims to celebrate the diverse range of health and wellbeing research taking place at Durham University while fostering new interdisciplinary connections and collaborations.

Throughout the day, attendees were treated to an engaging programme that included a keynote address, research presentations, flash talks and poster sessions. Researchers shared work spanning an impressive range of fields, including mental health, social systems, medical imaging, ageing, chronic illness, technology, biology, culture and many other areas connected to health and wellbeing.
What stood out most was the strength and diversity of the community. The research presented demonstrated that health is not solely about clinics, treatments or healthcare settings. Rather, it is shaped by people, bodies, environments, institutions, technologies and lived experiences. This broad perspective was reflected in the richness of the discussions and the enthusiasm with which participants engaged across disciplinary boundaries. The conference highlighted how interdisciplinary approaches can generate innovative ideas, create meaningful partnerships and inspire new ways of thinking about complex health and wellbeing challenges.

The success of the conference is a testament to the dedication of the organising team and the enthusiasm of all those who participated. Special thanks go to the Wolfson ECR Committee for helping to create such a thoughtful, collaborative and inspiring event.
Events like this showcase the strength of Durham University's research community and the exciting future being shaped by its early career researchers. If this year's conference is anything to go by, that future is exceptionally bright.

Conference Award Winners

The conference concluded by recognising several outstanding contributions from across the day's presentations:

Best Talk - Kate Marks and Team
Moving Social Work: Co-producing Physical Activity, Wellbeing, and Social Work Practice Innovation across Disciplines
An interdisciplinary research project exploring how co-produced approaches can enhance physical activity, wellbeing and innovation within social work practice.

Best Flash Talk - Melody Bishop
Mapping the Transition to University for Students with Long-Term Physical Health Conditions
Research examining the experiences and challenges faced by students with long-term physical health conditions as they transition into university life.

Best Poster - Fazlina Narasid
Development of the Malaysian Cultural and Creative Art (MYCAT) Module in Studying the Relationship Between Creativity and Mental Health Among Undergraduate Students in Malaysia and the United Kingdom
An innovative project investigating the connections between creativity, cultural expression and mental health across international student populations.

Congratulations to all of our winners and presenters, and thank you to everyone who contributed to making the Wolfson Ninth Annual ECR Conference 2026 such a successful celebration of research, collaboration and community.

Our Events (continued)

Wolfson Event Showcasing Health Research at Durham Business School

At the faculty-wide health research presentation on November 18, 2025. Professor Olga Epitropaki (Deputy Executive Dean Research at the Business School welcomed the audience. At this event Professor Charlotte Clarke (Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Health) and Executive Director in the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing) introduced Health at Durham and the Wolfson Research Institute for Health & Wellbeing to colleagues within Durham University Business School.
The event highlighted the breadth of health-related research within the Business School, with academic staff presenting ongoing projects. Numerous research centres were represented (Centre for Leadership & Followers; Centre for Consumers & Sustainable Consumption; Operations Management Group; Durham Enterprise Centre; International Centre for Public Accounting; Centre for Research on Organisations, Work & Society), and 14 colleagues from the Business School presented their health-related research projects.
Funding opportunities were introduced by Colleagues from Research and Innovation Services (RIS) contributed by outlining research support mechanisms, facilitating cross-faculty connections, and identifying opportunities for collaboration and funding. The event included structured discussion and Q&A sessions, thus promoting exchange across disciplinary and institutional boundaries.

Research Workshop on Inclusive Workforce Strategies

Co-organised with the Centre for Research on Organisation, Work & Society (CROWS), on 11 June 2026. This workshop is designed to bring together academic researchers, NHS partners, and workforce practitioners to examine challenges and opportunities related to inclusive workforce strategies across healthcare and related sectors. It aims to connect research evidence with professional practice, identify collaborative research opportunities, and explore future funding priorities, particularly in partnership with NHS organisations.



Wolfson event at DUBS: Linking ECR funding opportunities and creative methods in health research and implementation for greater impact.

On 12 March 2026, a further event hosted at the Business School focused on early and mid-career researcher funding opportunities and the use of creative methods in health research. Contributions included an introduction to Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, Professor Carolyn Summerbell (Deputy Director of Fuse 2015 - 2025) from the Department of Sport and Exercise Science introduced Fuse and funding opportunities offered especially for early career researcher.
At this event also Professor Paul Chazot (from the Department of Biosciences Durham University) and Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing Fellow Balbir Singh MBE presented their triple award-winning unmasking pain project. Their presentation of the project was accompanied by dancer Sanchita Mazumdar, who showed with her performance the transformative power of art in health research (www.livewellwithpain.co.uk).
This event foregrounded the role of creativity and the arts in health research, including a performance component demonstrating the impact of artistic approaches. It also facilitated discussion on behaviour change and explored funding opportunities with Fuse and the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), supporting capacity building among researchers.

Our Events (continued)

Planetary Health Workshop

The Planetary Health Workshop, held on 16 March 2026 in the Mountjoy Interdisciplinary Space, brought together 35 academics and professional services staff from across Durham University. The event aimed to explore the breadth of planetary health research at Durham, assess organisational strengths and challenges, and identify opportunities for future cross-disciplinary collaboration.

The workshop featured 12 academic talks spanning 10 disciplines, showcasing Durham's diverse expertise in planetary health–related research:These presentations highlighted current research activity, emerging methodologies, and the potential for integrating disciplinary perspectives.

Key areas of discussion

Workshop discussions surfaced a wide range of interconnected issues central to planetary health. These included:

- Human engagement with nature
- Monitoring systems and data needs
- Public health and environmental determinants
- The need for clear metrics, particularly across different scales
- Human access to natural processes, especially water
- Integrating engagement with governance structures for wider societal impact
- Negative health impacts arising from degraded natural systems
- Physical processes shaping human–nature interactions
- Critical reflection on human relationships with the natural world
- Embedding planetary health across university education and research
- Developing economic valuation approaches for processes not traditionally monetised
- Cross-disciplinary collaboration and breaking down disciplinary silos
- Legal frameworks relating to human driven climate impacts

These areas demonstrated a consistent recognition of the complex interplay between environmental systems, human health, and societal structures.

Emerging Strategic Themes

Discussions highlighted the importance of strengthening multilevel governance and whole-process thinking by linking global frameworks with locally experienced realities and fostering a global-to-local-to-global perspective. Participants emphasised the need to consider impacts across multiple scales, from local communities to national and international levels, while promoting more integrated approaches that break down siloed narratives. This included aligning climate and biodiversity agendas and broadening the focus beyond energy transition to encompass nature conservation, resilience, and adaptation across interconnected challenges such as climate change, food production, water scarcity, and air pollution. There was also recognition of how dominant mindsets and ideologies can shape research approaches and influence the framing of problems and potential solutions. Participants expressed a strong commitment to advancing planetary health research and practice at Durham, with a shared sense of responsibility to push the boundaries of interdisciplinary research, enhance societal impact, and deepen understanding of the complex relationships between human health, planetary health, and environmental change. The supportive atmosphere of the new Mountjoy Interdisciplinary Space was also highlighted as an important enabler of collaboration, reinforcing the value of shared environments for meaningful cross-disciplinary engagement.



Our Events (continued)



Wolfson ECR Network Mentoring Programme: A Valuable and Successful Initiative for Early Career Researchers

The Wolfson Early Career Researcher (ECR) Network Mentoring Programme, led by Wolfson Executive Director Professor Charlotte Clarke, proved to be a highly successful professional development opportunity for early career researchers. Designed to provide small-group mentoring sessions for registered members of the Wolfson ECR Network, the programme created a supportive and engaging environment in which researchers could gain valuable insights, broaden their perspectives, and strengthen their professional networks.

A key strength of the programme was its carefully structured format. Working in groups of up to six participants, ECRs were given the opportunity to engage directly with Professor Clarke and benefit from her extensive leadership experience within academia and research. The intimate group setting encouraged open discussion and enabled participants to raise questions relevant to their own career development, while also learning from the experiences and perspectives of their peers.

The sessions allowed mentees to explore a wide range of topics, from career progression and leadership to navigating challenges within the research environment. The emphasis on dialogue rather than formal presentation ensured that discussions remained relevant to participants' needs and interests.

Professor Clarke's role as mentor was instrumental to the programme's success. Drawing on her own professional journey, she responded to questions through practical advice, personal storytelling, constructive feedback, and the sharing of valuable information. Her willingness to discuss experiences openly helped create a welcoming atmosphere in which participants felt comfortable seeking guidance and reflecting on their own career aspirations.

The programme also highlighted the importance of peer learning. While participants benefited from Professor Clarke's expertise, they were equally encouraged to contribute their own insights and experiences. This collaborative approach fostered a strong sense of community among members of the Wolfson ECR Network and reinforced the value of mutual support among researchers at similar career stages.

Feedback from participants demonstrated the value of the mentoring experience. Researchers appreciated the opportunity to gain direct access to senior leadership, discuss issues that mattered to them, and learn from both the mentor and fellow ECRs. Many participants left the sessions with increased confidence, clearer goals, and a stronger understanding of how to navigate their research careers.

Publications in 2025 and 2026

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