Briefing

HM Government UK Life Sciences Vision

Background

The UK Government published the Life Sciences Vision setting out a 10-year strategy for the life sciences sector. The strategy intends to build on the sectors successes in response to COVID-19, including the development of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, to tackle current and future health challenges.

The paper has been co-developed with business and sector experts alongside the Department of Health and Social Care, BEIS and No.10 and follows on from the 2017 Life Sciences: Industrial Strategy.

What's the Vision?
A key focus is on the potential of collaboration between the life sciences sector, the wider NHS, academics, health research charities and regulators to speed up the development and delivery of new drugs, diagnostics, medtech and digital tools.

Four themes are identified as being key to driving this agenda:

- Building on the new ways of working that have emerged during the pandemic to address other health challenges
- Building on existing strengths including science and clinical research infrastructure, genomic and health data
- Supporting the NHS to adopt and embed innovative technologies
- Creating the right regulatory and business environment

The paper identifies 7 disease or technology specific health challenges, with a focus on major causes of morbidity, that it is suggested could be better addressed through this collaborative approach:

- Improving translational capabilities in neurodegeneration and dementia.
- Enabling early diagnosis and treatments, including immune therapies such as cancer vaccines.
- Sustaining the UK position in novel vaccine discovery development and manufacturing.
- Treatment and prevention of cardiovascular diseases and its major risk factors, including obesity.
- Reducing mortality and morbidity from respiratory disease in the UK and globally.
- Addressing the underlying biology of ageing.
- Increasing the understanding of mental health conditions, including work to redefine diseases and develop translational tools to address them.

The key role of the NHS, governance, investment and access to finance in delivering the strategy is also emphasised as 'preconditions of success'. These are expanded on below:

NHS as an innovative partner – the NHS is seen as integral to the delivery of the Life Sciences Vision. Embracing and promoting innovation and learnings from COVID-19 to improve care and drive research. The research focus aligns with the recent Future of UK Clinical Research Delivery.

Maintaining and growing investment in Life Sciences research – Government ambition for the UK (Government, Industry and Philanthropy) to invest 2.4% of GDP in research and development by 2027 is seen as critical to success.

Simplifying governance and oversight of NHS health data – high quality health data is one of the key drivers of Life Sciences research/ innovation and improved health outcomes. State aim to improve governance of and access to NHS health data while making it more secure.

Access to Finance – drawing on the City of London's status as a global financial hub to support the growth and innovation of UK Life Sciences companies.

The Vision sets out the UK competitiveness in Life Sciences in relation to science and research (universities, research publications & clinical research), operating/business environment (attractive market for investment) and access to new medicines and technologies (noting ongoing NICE methods and process review).

Strategic Goals

Build on the UK's Clinical Research, Genomic and Health Data capabilities – focussing on integrating clinical research, genomics and health data to develop new medicines and technologies and test and trial them at scale.

The strategy commits to working through the through the UK Clinical Research Recovery Resilience and Growth programme to embed clinical research across the NHS. It also notes the role of medical research charities in ensuring future clinical research reflects the diversity of the population.

Health data is a core theme throughout with a focus on making data more easily accessible and 'research-ready'. There is a particular focus on the potential of NHS health data to the Life Sciences sector. The need to build public confidence and trust around how health data is used, including 'red lines' around the use of data and promoting transparency, is also clearly articulated.

The Life Sciences sector is also presented as important to the Governments 'levelling up' agenda through economic growth, addressing healthcare challenges and high-skilled jobs.

Improve access to and uptake of new treatments and technologies – building on the Accelerated Access Collaborative (AAC) and the NICE methods review with a focus on collaboration between the NHS, NICE, MHRA and NIHR.

Another stated aim involves making the NHS 'clearer and simpler' including potential opportunities for commercial innovation offered by Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) and changes to the National Tariff System.

Further embedding digital health technologies is also noted with reference to a new framework for reimbursing these products and more clarity around the approvals process and commissioning decisions.

Research and innovation are presented as ongoing priorities within key strategic documents such as the NHS People Plan and for ICSs/ Trusts.

Innovative Licensing and Access Pathway (ILAP) – focussing on reducing the time taken for innovative medicines to come to market. Launched in Feb 2021, ILAP utilises expertise from MHRA, NICE, Scottish Medicines Consortium (SMC) and NHSE&I through a single platform.

UK diagnostic capabilities post-COVID – post-COVID focus on earlier diagnosis through prevention and prediction. Utilise NHS Test & Trace infrastructure, innovative testing techniques and expanded research and clinical trial capacity. DHSC will set out future diagnostics strategy later in 2021.

Health challenges

Improving translational capabilities in neurodegeneration and dementia – development of a hub and spoke translational research model alongside existing UK Dementia Research Institute (UK DRI). Faster and safer access to new treatments and tech through the MHRA. Joined up with existing programmes and funding.

Enabling early diagnosis and immune therapy for cancer, including vaccines – focus on at scale cancer diagnostics, immune-oncology and cancer vaccines. Forthcoming UK-US Bilateral Cancer Summit announced during the G7.

Development manufacture and use of vaccines – building on the role of the collaborative Vaccines Task Force to prevent and treat non-infectious diseases.

Prevention and treatment of cardiovascular disease, including obesity – research innovative interventions to address major causes of heart disease, specifically obesity.

Reducing mortality and morbidity of respiratory disease – more effective treatments for Asthma, better understanding and treatment of COPD, improve diagnostics and monitoring to provide earlier access to treatments.

Diagnostics, therapeutic and medtech interventions for ageing – address multimorbidity through a focus on care pathways and therapeutic interventions.

Therapeutic and technological opportunities to meet mental health needs – acknowledgement of the significant unmet mental health needs and potential for new treatments and technologies. Notes the association with additional chronic physical co-morbidities.

Goal to bring together industry partners and academics to improve understating of and treatments for mental health disorders and individual disabling symptoms.

Next steps

The Vision will be followed by detailed implementation plans later in the year, which will run alongside the Comprehensive Spending Review process.

This strategy makes clear that learnings from COVID-19 are seen as the basis for addressing other long term health challenges and underpinning the growth of the UK Life Sciences sector over the next decade. Specific references are made to the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine development, NHS Test and Trace capabilities and the Vaccines Task Force.

Reference to NHS health data is a recurring theme and one that is likely to be of particular interest to medical research charities and others in the sector. As recently as last month, there was significant kick back around plans to upload GP patient records to a central database.

Considering the Life Sciences Vision and accompanying government strategies and projects, the Alliance is looking at how best to support research focussed members now and in the future. There has been radical change in the Life Sciences and medical research sector in recent years driven by Brexit and the pandemic amongst others.

Please contact Sam Mountney, Policy and External Affairs Manager (sam.mountney@neural.org.uk) if you would like to discuss potential Alliance actions in this space.