



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

POLICY STATEMENT

TRANSFORMING HSC PATHOLOGY SERVICES

Executive Summary

1. HSC Pathology services underpin all HSC Clinical services, providing a range of diagnostics within the laboratory setting, with an estimated 70-80% of patient diagnoses and around 95% of all clinical pathways, depending on a pathology result. The service in Northern Ireland costs around £100 million to deliver each year and employs over 1,100 staff, providing a 24/7 service.
2. Pre-pandemic, HSC Pathology Services faced significant challenges due to rapidly changing demand, demography, technology, treatment and clinical practice. Reform of Northern Ireland Pathology Services was recognised as a Departmental transformation priority in the 2016 strategy document *Health and Wellbeing 2026 – Delivering Together*, and plans were being made to address these challenges through a range of comprehensive reforms to management structures, information systems and service delivery.
3. Furthermore, the New Decade, New Approach agreement in 2020 committed a restored Executive to the reconfiguration of hospital provision “to deliver better patient outcomes, more stable services and sustainable staffing”. As pathology underpins the vast majority of patient pathways through primary and secondary care, transformation of HSC Pathology services is considered to be a key enabler for the delivery of this commitment.
4. However, the global pandemic put these transformation plans temporarily on hold. COVID-19 has placed further unprecedented demands on HSC pathology services, which are primarily responsible for providing the Pillar 1 SARS-CoV-2 testing response in Northern Ireland. Targeted short term investment in this area and the regional coordination of efforts by the Pathology Network and clinicians, scientists and laboratory staff has enabled Pathology Services to meet the ongoing challenges of the pandemic. In addition, the growing demand for and increasing importance of pathogen sequencing and virus surveillance has expanded the scope of the service even wider and heightened the need for a modernised, fit for purpose service.
5. Efficiently managed, well-resourced and modern pathology services are vital to the ongoing effective delivery of the COVID-19 testing strategy and are a key enabler to the success of HSC Rebuild Plans and service transformation priorities, including the Elective Care Framework and the Cancer Strategy.
6. Reform of Pathology services would also present an opportunity to generate significant savings for reinvestment, in order to equip these vital services to continue to underpin our HSC system for the future.
7. The Department’s vision is the delivery of modern, sustainable, world-class Pathology services through a single, regional HSC Pathology Services delivery vehicle which:
 - Works in partnership with other HSC organisations;
 - Meets current and future quality and regulatory requirements;
 - Is supported by modern information systems and infrastructure;

- Responds to changes in demand through effectively managing regional capacity;
 - Supports wider HSC clinical services through new models of clinical care and new targeted treatments;
 - Adopts new ways of working and innovative technologies;
 - Makes efficient use of available resources;
 - Retains and promotes the NIBTS brand; and,
 - Provides attractive career pathways and training for staff.
8. Subject to appropriate approvals, legislation as required, and available funding, the Department supports the transformation of HSC Pathology Services in line with the following key policy commitments:

Commitment 1: Configuration of HSC Pathology Services

The delivery model for HSC Pathology Services will continue to provide urgent and non-urgent laboratory testing on an integrated basis on the existing hospital sites, subject to: further consideration within the context of any future reconfiguration of hospital-based services; and, associated business case appraisal.

Commitment 2: A Single, Regional Management Structure for HSC Pathology Services

The future functions for the planning, management, governance, finance and workforce management for HSC Pathology Services will be located in a new single regional management structure. The Department's working assumption is that this could be in the form of a health services Special Agency, to include NIBTS, subject to business case appraisal of all potential options for the new structure and available funding for any new investment requirement.

Commitment 3: A Single, Regional Northern Ireland Pathology Information Management System (NIPIMS)

The Department supports the replacement of current laboratory information systems with a single, regional NIPIMS as a key enabler of modern, world-class Pathology Services. The NIPIMS Programme will continue to be taken forward by the e-Health Strategic Programme Board and HSC Business Services Organisation (BSO) subject to business case approval and available funding.

Commitment 4: Service-led Pathology Transformation Initiatives

The Department supports the Programme of regional transformation initiatives, led by the Pathology Network in partnership with HSC Trusts, which are aimed at addressing existing service challenges and enabling wider service transformation by delivering the following:

TRANSFORMING HSC PATHOLOGY SERVICES

- a regional Pathology Workforce and Training Plan;
- regional standardisation of laboratory processes to underpin the information management system and the creation of a single management structure;
- a regional Quality and Regulatory Framework for HSC Pathology Services; and,
- a long-term Clinical Effectiveness Strategy.

1. Document Purpose

This policy statement sets out the Department of Health's (DoH) vision for the transformation of Pathology Services across the Health and Social Care (HSC) system.

It describes the Department's commitment to the establishment of a new single regional management structure that will be responsible for the planning, management and delivery of all HSC Pathology Services, and to a range of complementary, service-led transformational initiatives.

Collectively, these initiatives aim to increase the quality, resilience, efficiency and sustainability of Pathology Services in the face of significant challenges. Evidence indicates that doing so has the potential to generate significant savings for reinvestment in service delivery. This will be achieved through effective regional management of demand and capacity, reduction in unwarranted variation and risk, and improving career pathways for staff.

The policy statement is intended to guide a regional, collective approach to transforming Pathology Services in the context of the Department's wider HSC transformation agenda, as set out in the Ministerial strategy document, *Health and Wellbeing 2026 - Delivering Together*¹ (2016).

This document therefore represents the Department's response to:

- The 2016/17 public consultation *Modernising HSC Pathology Services – Proposals for Change*²; and,
- The recommendations of the 2018 Project Assessment Review (PAR) external assurance exercise.

It also acknowledges and reflects the vital ongoing role of HSC Pathology Services in the effective delivery of the Department's COVID-19 testing strategy, and the critical enabling role of these services in the Department's COVID rebuilding and service transformation priorities, including the Elective Care Framework and the Cancer Strategy.

2. Introduction

Pathology – the study of disease – is the bridge between science and medicine which underpins virtually every aspect of patient care, from diagnostic testing and treatment advice to the use of cutting-edge technologies and the prevention of disease. Pathologists and Healthcare Scientists work with a range of healthcare professionals in different settings to diagnose, treat and prevent illness.

¹ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/health-and-wellbeing-2026-delivering-together>

² Consultation documentation including analysis by the Pathology Network/Health and Social Care Board: [Transforming Health and Social Care Pathology Services - HSCB \(hscni.net\)](#)

Around 70% of all patient diagnoses, and around 95% of all clinical pathways, rely on patients having access to efficient, timely and cost effective pathology services.

Pathology Services in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, HSC Pathology Services are currently provided on a 24/7 basis by around 1,100 staff working across five HSC Trusts and the Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service (NIBTS), and covering a wide range of clinical and scientific disciplines.

Collectively, these services are responsible for a range of functions within the laboratory, and the provision of direct patient care. This includes the analysis of blood, tissue and other samples collected from patients, production of reports and clinical advice leading to diagnosis, monitoring the effectiveness of treatment, assessment of the likely future course of disease and the patient's prospects for recovery, testing for bacteria or viruses for direct patient care and public health purposes. In addition, NIBTS is responsible for the collection of blood that is voluntarily donated by the public, and its preparation and supply for use in hospitals, as well as a range of specialist regional tests.

The Northern Ireland Pathology Network is a regional, HSC-led group established in 2009 and comprising management, clinical and scientific representatives from all relevant HSC bodies, pathology disciplines, academia, and professional bodies. It continues to play a vital role in promoting consensus and consistency in the planning and delivery of HSC Pathology services, and providing advice on the best way to commission pathology services.

Transforming Pathology Services

Pathology services in Northern Ireland, and worldwide, face significant challenges and opportunities due to continual changes in demand, demography, technology, treatment and clinical practice. The global pandemic has placed unprecedented demands on pathology here, with the HSC service primarily responsible for providing the Pillar 1 SARS-CoV-2 testing response in Northern Ireland. Targeted short term investment in this area and the regional coordination of efforts by the Pathology Network and clinicians, scientists and laboratory staff enabled Pathology Services to meet the ongoing challenges of the pandemic. In addition, the growing demand for and increasing importance of pathogen sequencing and virus surveillance has expanded the scope of the service even wider and heightened the need for a modernised, fit for purpose service. Given their critical importance to the delivery of care, despite often being unseen by patients, it is vital that HSC Pathology services are designed, planned, managed and delivered in a way that is reliable, efficient and effective.

Notwithstanding the progress made by the Pathology Network, it is acknowledged that the fragmented nature of the current management arrangements serves to limit effective regional decision making. This has impeded progress required to improve the quality of HSC Pathology Services in the context of the above challenges and posed challenges for the regional coordination efforts of the pandemic response.

A comprehensive three-pillar portfolio of transformation Programmes including (i) a Blueprint to reform management structures; (ii) a single, regional information system; and, (iii) complementary transformation projects, aim to equip our Pathology Services to meet these challenges now and in the future. These are reflected in the Policy Vision and Policy Commitments below.

The diagram at **Appendix 1** illustrates the relationship between these Programmes, leading to legislation, as necessary, in due course to establish a new regional management structure, which will assume overall responsibility for HSC Pathology Services.

Patients, blood donors and clinical service users would not be directly impacted by these proposals, however it is envisaged that they will benefit from resultant improvements in quality, safety and sustainability of these services.

Achieving these aims will also contribute to much-needed wider transformation across our health and social care system, as set out in *Delivering Together*.

3. Strategic Context

Delivering Together

In 2016 the Department published the Ministerial strategy document *Health and Wellbeing 2026 – Delivering Together*, a ten year approach to transforming Health and Social Care in response to the report produced by an Expert Panel led by Professor Bengoa. Action 6 of *Delivering Together* stated that the Department will: “start a programme of service configuration reviews” which will be “clinically led, working in partnership with those that use the services.” Pathology Services was included on the list of priority areas for review.

New Decade, New Approach

The *New Decade, New Approach* agreement in 2020 committed a restored Executive to the reconfiguration of hospital provision “to deliver better patient outcomes, more stable services and sustainable staffing”. As pathology underpins the vast majority of patient pathways through primary and secondary care, transformation of HSC Pathology services is considered to be a key enabler for the delivery of this commitment.

Elective Care Framework

The recently published *Elective Care Framework – Restart, Recovery and Redesign* sets out the Department’s five year plan to reduce the backlog of patients currently waiting for assessment and treatment in the HSC and how the Department proposes to invest and transform services to meet population demands in the future. The Framework includes actions to support the Pathology Network in ensuring that HSC Pathology Services are equipped to support delivery across all relevant Rebuild programmes, in line with the modernisation and transformation of HSC Pathology Services. This will include continuing to support the delivery of COVID-19 testing

across the HSC while ensuring routine laboratory services are restored; and continuing the programme of HSC Pathology Transformation to improve long term resilience.

Cancer Recovery Plan

The Department's Cancer Recovery Plan, *Building Back; Rebuilding Better* published on 24th June 2021, includes a commitment that sustainable, high-quality pathology services are available to address backlogs arising as a consequence of COVID-19 and to address rising demand for pathology services. This will be achieved through the Pathology Network and key actions include increasing workforce, expediting senior scientific training, and prioritising the introduction of new equipment and technologies such as digital pathology.

In addition, in August 2021 the draft Cancer Strategy was published for public consultation. The Cancer Strategy considers ways to transform cancer care and improve support for patients along the whole cancer pathway, including pathology and the creation of early diagnostic centres.

4. Background

Public Consultation

The *Delivering Together* commitment led to a public consultation (Nov 2016-Feb 2017) on a number of service improvement proposals developed by the NI Pathology Network and Health and Social Care Board (HSCB). The proposals aimed to address known issues and challenges, and centred around: the consolidation of sites for non-urgent tests; improving the pathology infrastructure including laboratory information systems; and, reforming the regional management structure for HSC Pathology Services.

Project Assessment Review (PAR)

Whilst supportive of some aspects of service reform, the outcome of the consultation was inconclusive in respect of the proposals to separate urgent and non-urgent work, as well as the nature of a new regional management structure for the service. The Department subsequently arranged for a Project Assessment Review (PAR) to be carried out to provide recommendations on the way forward.

This exercise confirmed widespread support for the need to modernise pathology services within a new regional management structure and enabled by a single Northern Ireland Pathology Information Management System (NIPIMS). Furthermore it concluded that the proposal to separate urgent and non-urgent work should be subject to further review in the light of the wider context for reform of hospital services at an appropriate point in the future. The PAR recommendations thus informed the subsequent direction of travel and the policy commitments set out below.

5. Policy Vision

The Department's vision is the delivery of modern, sustainable, world-class Pathology services through a single, regional HSC Pathology Services management structure which:

- Works in partnership with other HSC organisations;
- Meets current and future quality and regulatory requirements;
- Is supported by modern information systems and infrastructure;
- Responds to changes in demand through effectively managing regional capacity;
- Supports wider HSC clinical services through new models of clinical care and new targeted treatments;
- Adopts new ways of working and innovative technologies;
- Makes efficient use of available resources;
- Retains and promotes the NIBTS brand; and,
- Provides attractive career pathways and training for staff.

6. Policy Commitments

Subject to appropriate approvals, legislation as required, and available funding, the Department supports the transformation of HSC Pathology Services in line with the following key policy commitments:

Commitment 1: Configuration of HSC Pathology Services

The delivery model for HSC Pathology Services will continue to provide urgent and non-urgent laboratory testing on an integrated basis on the existing hospital sites, subject to: further consideration within the context of any future reconfiguration of hospital-based services; and, associated business case appraisal.

Any decisions about the siting of laboratory services should also be taken in the light of experience and evidence emerging from pathology service reconfiguration in other jurisdictions.

Such decisions are best taken within a regional management structure, with the aim of providing the optimum model that meets service and patient needs in the context of any reconfiguration of hospital services. In no way should they be considered as a prior means of effecting the rationalisation of other services including Emergency Department (ED) provision.

Commitment 2: A Single, Regional Management Structure for HSC Pathology Services

The future functions for the planning, management, governance, finance and workforce management for HSC Pathology Services will be located in a new single regional management structure. The Department's working assumption is that this could be in the form of a health services Special

Agency, to include NIBTS, subject to business case appraisal of all potential options for the new structure, and available funding for any new investment requirement.

A decision to create a new Special Agency would require legislation to dissolve the current NIBTS Special Agency and to establish the new Agency, whose functions would be set out in directions from the Department. This would be for the consideration of the Health Minister and Assembly.

It is envisaged that the benefits of a regional management structure will include:

- Replacing fragmented management and accountability arrangements with a single regional decision-making body;
- Improved arrangements for recruitment, training, career development, retention and to remove the current competition for staff between Trusts; and,
- A streamlined approach to the various accreditation and regulatory requirements.

In preparation for this, a detailed and inclusive planning Programme will now be taken forward, in partnership with stakeholders and with oversight by DoH, with the primary objective of producing a detailed Blueprint for the new regional management structure.

The Blueprint will include a business case, transition plan and recommendations for the optimum operating model and management structure, including:

- The future employment arrangements for the pathology workforce
- The need for, and detail of, any Service Level Agreements (SLAs) between HSC organisations for estate management purposes; and
- How the new regional management structure will integrate and deliver services in conjunction with other HSC organisations.

The following planning assumptions and principles will guide the development of the Blueprint:

- The current functions of the Pathology Network will be incorporated within the new regional management structure in due course, in order to continue to provide a forum for regional engagement, coordination and provision of advice by management, clinical and scientific leads from across the HSC;
- In the meantime, the Pathology Network Board and its Specialty Fora will continue to provide their vital coordination and advisory role on ongoing Network business and issues across all pathology specialties in NI and the rest of the UK;
- Chief Executives of relevant HSC organisations (i.e. Trusts and NIBTS) will retain responsibility for delivering their business as usual pathology services until such time as these transfer to the new regional management structure;
- While potentially in the future the pathology service might have a regional employer there will be no detriment to the current general terms of employment and pension arrangements for the pathology workforce arising from any future reorganisation;

- The new regional management structure will manage the continued delivery of laboratory services through the physical laboratory infrastructure as currently provided by the HSC Trusts and NIBTS;
- The Programme will be inclusive and facilitate input from staff across all HSC Trusts, NIBTS and all pathology specialties;
- The Programme will establish a mechanism to facilitate ongoing engagement with stakeholders including the HSC pathology workforce and trade unions and professional bodies which represent them; and
- The Programme will develop appropriate links with the NIPIMS Programme and other transformation initiatives in order to plan for the cohesive transition of their ownership to the new regional management structure in due course.

Commitment 3: A Single, Regional Pathology Information Management System (NIPIMS)

The Department supports the replacement of current laboratory information systems with a single, regional NIPIMS as a key enabler of modern, world-class Pathology Services. The NIPIMS Programme will continue to be taken forward by the Digital Health and Care NI Strategy Board and HSC Business Services Organisation (BSO) subject to business case approval and available funding.

Across the HSC currently, the ability to provide clinical service users with an integrated electronic report from a variety of pathology test results is limited by the existence of multiple information systems with varying functionality and connectivity.

Available evidence indicates that replacing these with a single, regional NIPIMS will deliver significant improvements in quality and cost effectiveness, reduce the risk of error, and equip services to meet future demand. This would be in keeping with the key enablers for the progress made in other parts of the UK and further afield.

The NIPIMS Programme will facilitate the adoption of new technologies and clinical practices, including digital pathology and vein to vein blood tracking. Such developments form part of the vision of the world-class service to which we aspire, as they reduce the criticality of the co-location of consultants with laboratories and facilitate economies of scale while maintaining clinical relationships.

Progress to implement NIPIMS must be supported by continuous and strenuous efforts by HSC organisations to achieve harmonisation and standardisation of laboratory processes, and to continually strive to reduce unwarranted variation in practice.

In due course it is envisaged that the new regional management structure will assume ownership and responsibility for the new NIPIMS. The Blueprint and NIPIMS Programmes will therefore collaborate as required to produce a NIPIMS transition and implementation plan.

Commitment 4: Service-led Pathology Transformation Initiatives

The Department supports the Programme of regional transformation initiatives, currently underway and led by the Pathology Network in partnership with HSC Trusts, which are aimed at addressing existing service challenges and enabling wider service transformation by delivering the following:

- a regional Pathology Workforce and Training Plan;
- regional standardisation of laboratory processes to underpin NIPIMS and the creation of a single management structure;
- a regional Quality and Regulatory Framework for HSC Pathology Services; and,
- a long-term Clinical Effectiveness Strategy.

These initiatives collectively form the third important 'pillar' of HSC Pathology Transformation, alongside the Blueprint and NIPIMS Programmes. In due course it is envisaged that the new regional management structure will assume ownership and responsibility for these initiatives.

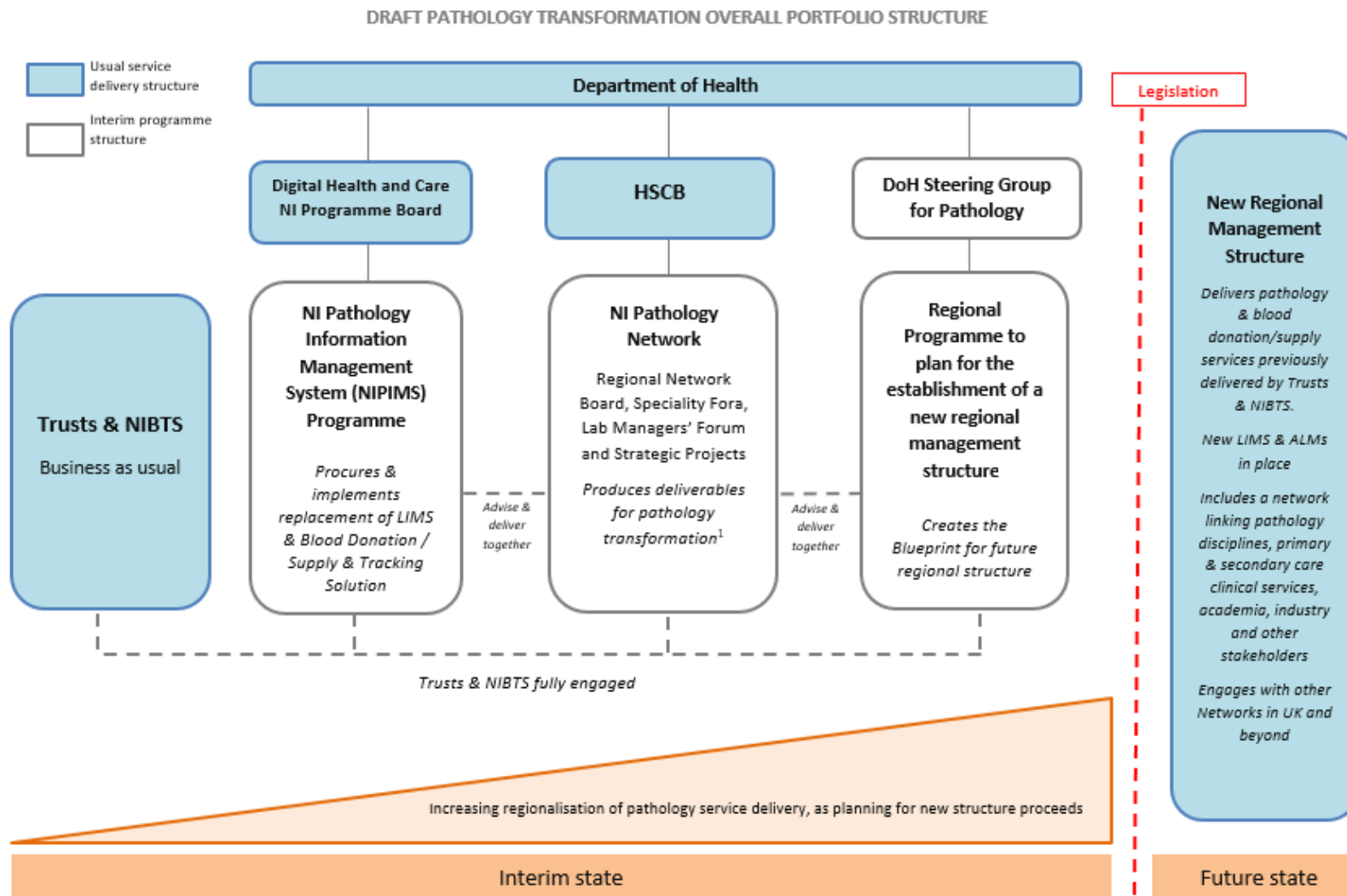
7. Desired Transformation Outcomes

Based on available evidence from the rest of the UK and elsewhere, the transformation of HSC pathology services as described above is anticipated to deliver the following outcomes:

- Improvement in service quality through agility to respond more quickly and decisively to changing quality requirements, technology, standards and processes;
- Opportunities for the reduction of risks and costs;
- Improvement in career pathways and training for staff through improved staff retention and succession planning;
- Reduction of management overhead incurred by mandatory UKAS and MHRA compliance (currently replicated across five Trusts and NIBTS);
- Improvement in regional optimisation of demand on pathology services, coupled with effective regional management of capacity;
- Reduction of unwarranted variation and duplication leading to the creation of safer services for patients and more efficient use of HSC resources;
- Enhancement of ability to support wider HSC clinical services in the provision of new models of care; and,
- Improvement in safety, timeliness and cost effectiveness of the sample transport and logistics function for HSC Pathology services (including delivery of blood and components).

Efficiently managed, well-resourced and modern pathology services are also vital to the ongoing effective delivery of the COVID-19 testing strategy and a key enabler to the success of HSC Rebuild Plans and service transformation priorities, including the Elective Care Framework and the Cancer Strategy.

Appendix 1



1. The deliverables are the objectives agreed within the Pathology Transformation IPT (Oct 2018)