

EASTERN ACADEMIC  
HEALTH SCIENCE  
NETWORK

STAKEHOLDER RESEARCH

LOCAL FINDINGS 2019

## BACKGROUND

During summer and autumn 2019, an independent survey was undertaken of England's 15 Academic Health Science Networks (AHSNs). This research was commissioned by NHS England and NHS Improvement, and the Office for Life Sciences (OLS) to explore and evaluate the views of AHSN stakeholders. The research will support commissioners in their reviews of AHSNs, and to provide independent feedback to AHSNs from their stakeholders that include NHS organisations, researchers, private companies, government organisations, patient and public groups and voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations.

Savanta ComRes, an independent research organisation, undertook the evaluation. With input from AHSNs and commissioners, Savanta ComRes developed and ran a 10-minute online survey and subsequently conducted 30-minute telephone interviews with up to 10 stakeholders for each of the 15 AHSNs and for the National AHSN Network.

A national report collating the feedback and key themes from across all AHSNs, can be viewed on the AHSN Network website: [www.ahsnnetwork.com/ahsn-network-stakeholder-research](http://www.ahsnnetwork.com/ahsn-network-stakeholder-research).

This report summarises stakeholder feedback and themes specifically related to Eastern AHSN.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 A key strength of Eastern AHSN is the way it builds relationships with its stakeholders. Like many other AHSNs, stakeholders are complimentary of its **communication** approach, the **connections** it is able to provide with the NHS and industry and the way they work **collaboratively** with different partners.
- 2 Some suggest that Eastern AHSN should consider **the consistency of communication** with their stakeholder, who also point out that clinicians, nurses and CCGs could have a better understanding of the AHSN's role.
- 3 Stakeholders are keen to see Eastern build on its successes by replicating work across the region, work more closely with CCGs, ensure all stakeholders have a personal point of contact and connect stakeholders with other AHSN regions.

## OVERVIEW

Stakeholders have **broadly favourable impressions** of Eastern AHSN. This is primarily due to the AHSN's **communication** approach which stakeholders point out is particularly **responsive and open**. Stakeholders reference the positive impact Eastern AHSN has, such as through its work with the local physio-therapy department, DynamicHealth, to fund training as part of the ESCAPE-pain project. Considerations going forward are also

discussed, commonly in relation understanding of the role of Eastern AHSN in the local health and care sector and comments around their consistency of communication. **Opportunities for the future** are suggested to be replicating work across the region and working more closely with STPs and CCGs.

## WHO WE SPOKE TO

Nine stakeholder groups were identified, and across these, 183 stakeholders identified by Eastern AHSN were invited to take part; 45\* completed the online survey from 21st August to 16th September 2019. This represents a response rate of 25% which is in line with the industry average for this type of survey. In addition to the online surveys, Savanta ComRes conducted follow-up interviews with 8 stakeholders between 9th September and 13th November 2019, who put themselves forward to discuss their experiences further. Specific quotas were not set for the stakeholders interviewed as interviewees were self-selecting and interviews were dependent on stakeholders' availability and feasibility of bookings.

*Findings marked with an asterisk (\*) indicate a base size of less than 50.*

Type	# SURVEYED	% SURVEYED	# INTERVIEWED
Health or social care provider	14	31% (-6)	4
Private company or industry body	13	29% (+13)	2
Research body or university	5	11%	-
Individual patient or member of the public	4	9%	-
Patients group or public group	3	7%	1
NHS Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)	2	4% (-8)	-
Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)	2	4%	-
Local government or Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)	1	2%	1
National government, agency or Arms Length Body (ALB)	1	2%	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>45*</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>8</b>

Thinking about your role and organisation as it relates to your engagement with AHSNs, which of the following best describes your organisation? *Base: All stakeholders answering on behalf of Eastern AHSN (n=45\*).*  
 Percentage point difference to the average survey response rate where difference is more than 5 (n=1,155)

## INTERPRETING THE RESULTS

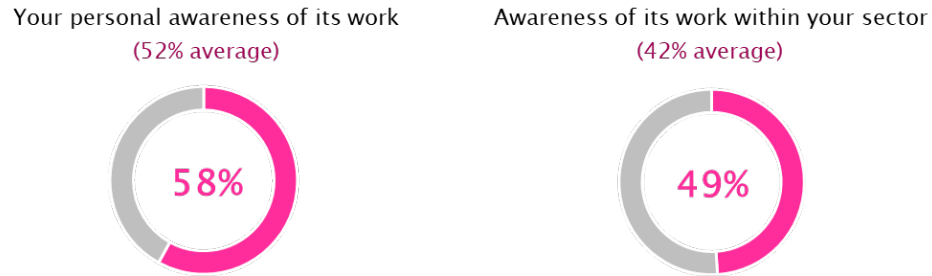
The report includes quantitative findings from the online survey and qualitative findings from interviews with local stakeholders. **The number of online survey respondents are too small to draw reliable conclusions from.** Additionally, comparisons between local survey data and the average across all AHSNs nationally are not necessarily statistically significant meaning higher or lower assessments of an individual AHSN in comparison to the national response rate may be due to the 'play of chance'. Findings from the online survey at the

level of an individual AHSN should therefore be **treated as indicative only** and used with caution.

Insights are based on an aggregated analysis of interviews with participating Eastern AHSN stakeholders. Therefore, themes described may not necessarily reflect the views of those answering and are not generalisable to all stakeholder types. For instance, **interviews were not conducted with research body or university stakeholders, national government, agency or ALBs, CCGs or those taking part as an individual patient, member of the public or as a VCS.**

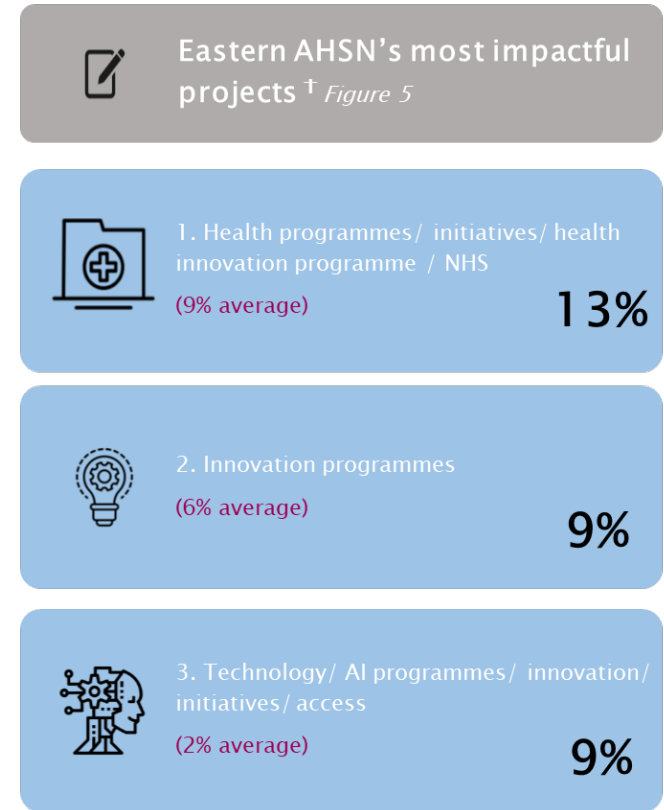
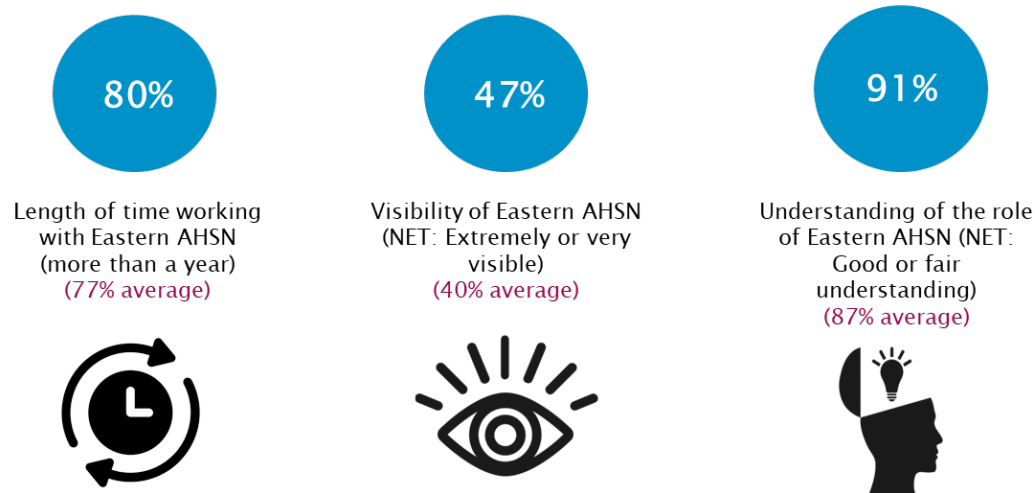
Each local AHSN report has been reviewed by a representative at the AHSN to verify the accuracy of insights and interpretations presented in each report. Savanta ComRes held **30-minute calls** with the representative to collect and incorporate such feedback. AHSNs only saw the findings in the report and not raw data collected in fieldwork.

**Awareness (NET: Extremely or very aware) Figure 1**



**KEY**  
 '% average' indicates the average score across all AHSNs

**Knowledge and Visibility Figure 2**



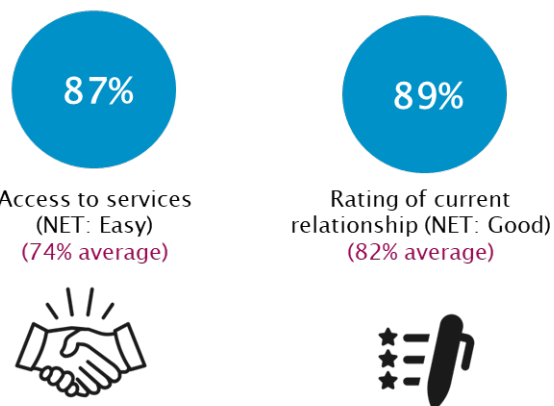
† Open text box question

**Figure 1** – Q. Overall, thinking about Eastern AHSN's work, how would you describe...? Base: Eastern AHSN stakeholders (n=45\*)

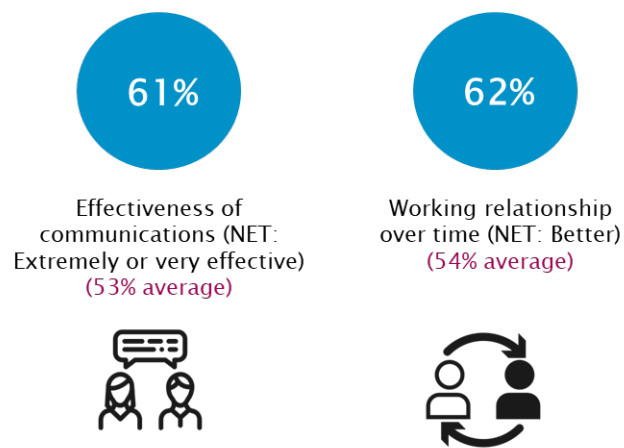
**Figure 2** – Q. And approximately how long have you worked with Eastern AHSN? Q. Thinking about its overall visibility and any engagement you may have had, how would you rate the visibility of Eastern AHSN in its local area? Q. How would you rate your understanding of the role of Eastern AHSN? Base: Eastern AHSN stakeholders (n=45\*)

**Figure 5** – Q. Which Eastern AHSN initiative, programme or support service would you say has had the greatest impact on your organisation's ability to meet its objectives or your ability to meet your own objectives? Base: Eastern AHSN stakeholders (n=45\*)

### Working with Eastern AHSN *Figure 3*



### Communication with Eastern AHSN *Figure 4*



### MOST NOTABLE FACTOR DRIVING POSITIVE EVALUATION OF EASTERN AHSN<sup>†</sup>

*Figure 6*  
Improved relationships/ good relationships over time/ established work relationships with relevant people  
(29% average)

<sup>†</sup> Open text box question



### TOP RECOMMENDATION FOR EASTERN AHSN<sup>†</sup>

*Figure 7*  
Align/ engage/ involve wider across industries/ collaborations to promote industry/ products and services/ economic growth  
(7% average)

**Figure 3** – Q. Overall, how easy did you find it to access Eastern AHSN services? Q. Overall, how would you rate your working relationship with Eastern AHSN? How did you first find out about Eastern AHSN? Base: Eastern AHSN stakeholders (n=45\*)

**Figure 4** – Q. Thinking back over the period of time you have been working with Eastern AHSN, would you say your working relationship has gotten better, worse, or is about the same? Q. Which, if any, of the following ways does Eastern AHSN currently communicate with you? Q. How would you rate the effectiveness of Eastern AHSN's communications? Base: Eastern AHSN stakeholders (n=45\*)

**Figure 6** – Q. You indicated that you have a good working relationship with Eastern AHSN and/or your working relationship has gotten better over the period of time you have been working with them. Why do you say this? Base: Eastern AHSN stakeholders who say this (n=40)

**Figure 7** – Q. If you could make one recommendation for improvement for the local AHSN or the National AHSN Network to focus on in the next three years, what would this be? For example, is there a service you think should be expanded, or a new offering that should be explored or delivered? Base: Eastern AHSN stakeholders (n=45\*)

# AREAS OF STRENGTH AND GOOD PRACTICE

## COMMUNICATION IS CONSIDERED ‘EASY’

A key strength of Eastern AHSN cited by stakeholders is their open communication approach. Several interviewees highlight the speed in which Eastern AHSN staff respond to queries, commenting on the fact that they are contactable through various platforms and that they follow up their initial communication with additional support.

*“We were always able to email and say, ‘We’re coming across this problem’. You get really quick responses. You could ring up the project leader whenever. They **didn’t micro-manage it but they facilitated every problem** to make it not a problem, so it was just a really easy way of working with them really.”*

Health or social care provider

*“With Eastern it’s a very open communication channel. Phone calls, text messages, face-to-face meetings, Skype calls. I can’t think of a way that way that we don’t communicate with them. I’d say **out of each of [the AHSNs], Eastern have the clearest chain of communication.** They seem really switched on, they get meetings organised very quickly, they get the key stakeholders round the table, whenever you ask them a question, they come back. If you start down the route of building a proposal, they build it quickly. It’s nothing but positivity about them.”*

Private company or industry body

Stakeholders’ positivity towards Eastern AHSN’s communication is supported by results in the online survey where 61% of stakeholders that receive communications from Eastern AHSN rated it as extremely or very effective (compared to only 5% who rate it as slightly or not at all effective). In addition, the majority of Eastern AHSN stakeholders reported communicating with the AHSN through direct or group emails (71%), one to one meetings (62%), face-to-face workshops (60%) and email newsletters (60%). This demonstrates the various formats the AHSN uses to communicate with stakeholders.

## TREATING EVERYONE AS ‘EQUAL PARTNERS’

In addition to effective communication, stakeholders value the way in which Eastern AHSN approach working with them. They describe the AHSN as working “*collaboratively*”, being “*willing to listen*” and treating their relationship as “*an equal partnership*”. This rings true across a range of stakeholder types, including patient or public groups, health or social care providers and local government or LEPs. In particular, Eastern AHSN’s investment in the patient perspective is felt by patient stakeholders to be unique in the health sector.

*“They organise **regular stakeholder meetings** where everybody could come together and discuss things. They would take all the points from it and then go through the actions, but all the **actions were then delivered collaboratively**. At no point do I remember them saying, ‘Well, we’ve discussed it enough. This is what it’s going to look like.’ It was really important to them that **everybody was on board** and because of that, they got really good commitment around the process because people owned it so they had a say in it.”*

Health or social care provider

*“They’re always willing to listen to our ideas and likewise homes and within our own occupational health pathway, within we’re willing to listen to them, and we work together to help each other meet targets and demands. They’ve been working closely with us, as a local authority, and the local physio–therapy department, ‘Dynamic Health’ to **fund individuals in order to be able to train up in time for the ESCAPE–pain project**, and we’re now looking to work with them to potentially develop ESCAPE–pain within either retirement or assisted living–based the District Council. They’re helping us support that and giving us resources, which we wouldn’t necessarily have access to.”*

Local government or LEP

### BEING PARTICULARLY ‘WELL–CONNECTED’

Although a strength of AHSNs nationally, stakeholders in the Eastern region are particularly likely to mention the value of Eastern AHSN’s signposting facilities. Stakeholders from private companies or local government describe Eastern AHSN as a useful bridge to working with the NHS and with other AHSNs across the country. This has enabled them to access new funding opportunities, specialist expertise and well–rounded knowledge as well as helping them find the right people in the NHS.

*“They helped fund some re–development work and also this health economic analysis and then they put out to tender and got us **links with the Kent, Surrey, Sussex [AHSN]** and have now got us **linked with the Yorkshire [AHSN]**, so they’ve helped us grow and give us an opportunity that wasn’t available when I’ve approached other AHSNs.”*

Private company or industry body

*“We’ve worked with our local AHSN on a couple of projects, one involving our phase four cardiac rehab route. I think the **close link the AHSNs have with the NHS in the contact within some of the higher ups within the local NHS trust**. I think that’s really benefitted us, in terms of making sure that we can knock down all the right doors.”*

Local government or LEP



This finding is further evidenced by the online survey which found Eastern AHSN stakeholders were most likely to say the AHSN's relevancy to their role or sector (18%) and their networking opportunities (16%) have had the greatest impact on their ability to meet their or their organisation's objectives.

## POINTS FOR EASTERN AHSN TO CONSIDER

### CONSISTENCY OF APPROACH

Whilst most stakeholders are very positive about their experiences communicating with Eastern AHSN, some health or social care providers suggest in interview discussions that they do not have a clear a main point of contact. Looking forward, Eastern AHSN may therefore wish to monitor that all stakeholders are aware of their designated point of contact and are happy with the established communication pattern to ensure the already positive relationships are maintained.

*"I was talking to a colleague who works for the NHS South of England the other week and she said, 'oh, I think my main point of contact is so and so.' And I said, 'well, I don't really know who mine is."*

Health or social care provider

### UNDERSTANDING OF EASTERN AHSN AMONG HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE PROVIDERS

In addition, whilst many stakeholders describe close partnerships with Eastern AHSN, a minority in the health and care sector suggests its role could be better understood. One stakeholder describes how you either "*know everything or don't know anything*". Whilst some acknowledge in discussions that this is inevitable due to their size, others feel a lack of understanding among these audiences could lead to a "*lag in the innovation adoption flow*" and can risk preventing ideas getting delivered. This finding suggests that Eastern AHSN may wish to consider the extent to which it balances more communication to boost understanding with resource available.

*"If you know about them, you know everything about them, and if you don't know about them, you don't know anything. Now I am aware of them, I see their promotions in lots of different things, but before that I wouldn't have had a clue."*

Health or social care provider

*"As a clinician, I had no understanding of their role and, the clinicians are the ones with the barriers. Having clinicians and management aware of their role, to better understand those barriers means instead of there being the lag in that innovation adoption flow, they are the ones who are early adopters and are keen to give things a go."*

Private company or industry body

# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

A range of areas to focus on in the future were cited by Eastern AHSN stakeholders, which tend to mirror national challenges for the AHSN such as navigating the complex health and care system, ensuring sufficient resources are in place and demonstrating their impact. In addition to this, region-specific focal areas cited by stakeholders also include:

## REPLICATING POSITIVE WORK ACROSS THE REGION

Stakeholders in the interviews also reinforce the importance of sharing examples of best practice from the work the Eastern AHSN is achieving so that other parts of the region may benefit from similar ideas.

*“Even if we had some great examples from Cambridge, that’s very good and all very well for Cambridge but we need to go out and see how that kind of activity can change throughout the likes of Colchester because things are slightly different outside of Cambridge. So, the examples could be replicated.”*

Health or social care provider

This was also raised in the online survey. When asked to make one recommendation for improvement in the Eastern AHSN to focus on in the next three years, one in ten (9%) Eastern AHSN stakeholders mentioned increasing visibility and engaging more across the region. This is significantly higher than the proportion of respondents who raised this nationally (3%).

## BALANCING RESOURCE ACROSS PROJECT LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT

Two stakeholders also discussed their thoughts around how Eastern AHSN can continue to support them effectively. They presented views concerning extent to which Eastern AHSN should be the main point of contact for partners.

*“There is quite a lot being passed around. So, you don’t want to get passed around. You want one person who can get all the answers and come back.”*

Health or social care provider

*“The balance is, you know, do you help organisations bring in income and make links with industry and create projects across East Anglia, or are you the project that you invite partners to join in with? That’s the balance they’re going to have to tread quite carefully or else they’ll lose the good will of the region because people will see them as for themselves rather than for them.”*

Private company or industry body

# SUMMARY OF POINTS FOR THE AHSN TO CONSIDER

Across interviews conducted, the following points emerged for Eastern AHSN to consider:

- ✓ Ensure and monitor that stakeholders **know their personal point of contact** to direct all their queries to at the AHSN.
- ✓ Consider **the extent to which Eastern AHSN should grow the understanding of its role among the health and care sector**, and the best approach in which to do this.
- ✓ Consider the **level of involvement in projects** in relation to resources available.
- ✓ **Continue to signpost stakeholders effectively**, particularly private company or industry body stakeholders who highly value the support in navigating the health and care system.
- ✓ Share best practice of **how their work is positively impacting patient outcomes** across the region.