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New centre to address challenges of digital citizenship

A new £9m research centre, which will allow citizens across the country to grasp the possibilities of the digital revolution, has been announced.

The Centre for Digital Citizens (CDC), led by Northumbria and Newcastle Universities, will explore how digital technologies can support areas such as public health and wellbeing, community engagement, citizen safety and technology-enhanced lifelong learning.

The project has been funded with £3.7m from the Engineering and Physical

Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), with matched funding from Universities and Industry Partners. The new centre will bring together 28 academics and 18 post-doctoral researchers across the two universities.

The CDC will work with citizens to co-design technologies to support and evaluate 'smart' and 'data-rich' living in urban, rural and coastal areas across the North East of England and beyond.

The technological innovations will be co-created between a network of academic, industrial, public and third sector partners, with citizens supporting the co-creation and delivery of research.

The project will be working in partnership with local and global organisations including Newcastle City Council, NHS Digital, International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and BBC R&D.

What are digital citizens?

The Centre for Digital Citizens will focus on four critical challenges that have wide-ranging implications for the future of digital citizenship:

- **The Well Citizen:** Looking at how we can use shared and publicly available data to inform our personal and community health and wellbeing.
- **The Safe Citizen:** Examining digital harms and the role of algorithms and other data technology to support fair and secure societies.
- **The Connected Citizen:** Designing the next-generation of citizen-led digital public services.
- **The Ageless Citizen:** Looking at the life-long role technology can play supporting learning opportunities for people young to old.

[Professor Pam Briggs](#) of Northumbria University, who co-directs the Centre, said: "This new Centre illustrates both institutions' commitments to being Civic Universities, where our projects will take a place-based approach and be

responsive to the needs of communities across the North East.

“The North East is a region where people experience wide-ranging disparities in terms of socio-economic status, geographical and social connectivity, health outcomes and care needs, and evidence suggests reliance on digital services can amplify such divides.

“Our Centre aims to respond to these issues and create digital services that empower communities instead.”

Professor David Kirk, who is overall lead of the Centre at Newcastle University, said: “As the world becomes more digital, it is vital that people feel supported by the technology around them.

“The Centre for Digital Citizens will allow us to explore how citizens and communities can be a part of the design of innovative technologies that work better for them, from finding ways to use shared personal data to creating citizen-led digital public services.

“Both Newcastle and Northumbria have expertise in participatory design and co-creative research, allowing us to work with people to deliver these technologies and create new innovations for the Digital Economy that empower citizens.”

Cllr Joyce McCarty, Deputy Leader, Newcastle City Council said: “It's great to see two universities in Newcastle collaborating on this programme around how emerging technologies can support citizens. The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated digital transformation in the North East, and we need to make sure that digital public services are inclusive and designed with the people using them in mind.

As one of the partners to the Centre for Digital Citizens, we're looking forward to exploring some new and innovative approaches to digital citizenship with the research team, the other organisations involved, and with communities.”

EPSRC Executive Chair, Dame Professor Lynn Gladden, said: “New and emerging digital technologies will have a profound impact on many aspects of our lives, from our health and wellbeing to our work and leisure time.

“The investment announced today will not only support new ways of capitalizing on this opportunity but will also help to ensure that those using these new technologies are safe while doing so.”

The project aims to act as a catalyst for future innovation-focused Digital Economy activity, as there are plans to develop the pilot projects into further collaborative bids, venture capital pitches, spin-outs and social enterprises.

The Centre for Digital Citizens is one of six centres announced today as part of a £29m investment from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the body which incorporates the EPSRC.

The centre will launch on 1 November, and will build on a substantial joint legacy and critical mass of Digital Economy funded research between Newcastle and Northumbria universities, developing the work demonstrated in the highly successful Social Inclusion for the Digital Economy (SIDE) hub, Open Lab’s Digital Civics Centre for Doctoral Training and the former Digital Economy Research Centre (DERC).

Within Northumbria, this Centre also brings together experts in psychology, computer science, design and business who have longstanding experience of conducting Digital Economy funded research, and forms a key part of the University’s new *Human and Digital Design* multidisciplinary research theme.

This University-wide strategic initiative focuses on designing and understanding socially responsible technologies, with the aim to increase their adoption through engagement with industry, public and non-profits as well as policymakers.

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