Faster care for patients, less admin for NHS staff and new AI skills for key industries as Barnsley Tech Town takes next big step

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People and businesses in Barnsley will gain AI skills and benefit from shorter hospital waiting lists through new government pilots in the UK's first Tech Town.

- Hundreds of local businesses and residents in Barnsley set to gain practical AI skills through government funding
- Barnsley Hospital NHS Foundation Trust will begin deploying AI tools to cut waiting lists, missed appointments and admin burden on staff
- Ground-breaking schemes tested in Barnsley – the UK's first tech town - could be rolled out nationwide

People in Barnsley set to benefit from shorter hospital waiting lists and fewer missed appointments under a new pilot scheme being trailed in the UK's first tech town. Residents and local firms will also have the chance to gain AI skills thanks to a new Government fund.

The 2 pilots will demonstrate how AI can support both local workers and frontline services, building a blueprint that can be used by communities across the country.

As part of this, local SMEs in key industries like manufacturing - as well as residents who may not typically have the confidence or resources to use AI - could receive targeted training through a new £800,000 AI Upskilling Challenge Fund. From manufacturers looking to boost productivity, to voluntary groups supporting older residents who may lack confidence with technology, the training will be designed to reach people and businesses who might otherwise be left behind.

In the coming weeks, organisations including innovative firms, SMEs, non-profits and community organisations will be invited to pitch ideas for how they would provide this training – with successful applicants receiving a share of the funding.

Alongside this, a new 'Healthcare Living Lab' will be created by Cisco through its Lister Alliance collaboration. This includes reducing missed appointments, improving outpatient flow, supporting decision-making and cutting time spent on paperwork. Through trialling these tools in a real hospital environment, the Living Lab will generate evidence on what works for staff and patients, helping to shape how similar approaches could be adopted across the NHS.

By focusing on the places, industries and people who stand to gain the most, these pilots will show how AI can deliver real benefits in towns and public services across the UK.

Science and Technology Secretary Liz Kendall said:

> When we named Barnsley the UK's first Tech Town, we made a promise to the people there – that this wouldn't just be a title, but a real commitment to making AI work for their lives and their community.
>
> Today we're delivering on that promise by giving local businesses and workers the tools and confidence to embrace AI as well as deploying AI in Barnsley Hospital to help cut waiting lists and ensure NHS staff spend less time on paperwork and more time with patients.
>
> Barnsley is showing the rest of the country how we can use tech to build a future that works for all.

Councillor Sir Stephen Houghton CBE, Leader of Barnsley Council, said:

> This will be the first real example of Tech Town in action in Barnsley, supporting the healthcare and business sectors.
>
> We've already started to revolutionise healthcare with our Health on the High Street project, and the Living Lab will now take this a step further by reducing pressures on staff, giving them new skills and making it easier for them to provide the best possible care for patients.
>
> The AI Upskilling Challenge Fund will play a crucial role in helping residents build future-ready skills, adapt to technological change and remain competitive in an evolving labour market, while also allowing employers to future-proof their operations through the tailored support available, delivering on 2 of the key missions in our Inclusive Economic Growth Strategy.

Upskilling hundreds of businesses across Barnsley

Proving that the benefits of this technology can reach every community, not just the biggest cities, the AI Upskilling Challenge Fund is designed to ensure bespoke and in-depth AI training reaches businesses and individuals that might not otherwise access it or require more personalised support.

It will open for applicants in May 2026, with a particular focus on SME organisations, aiming to support hundreds of businesses and the local community in Barnsley from the summer.

The fund builds on the government's work with industry partners to equip 10 million UK workers with essential AI skills and its commitment to ensure that the economic opportunities of AI are shared across the whole country.

Edward Naylor, Chief Executive of Naylor Industries said:

> The AI Upskilling Challenge Fund represents a significant opportunity for Barnsley's businesses to build the skills and confidence needed to adopt AI in ways that genuinely reflect local priorities and sector-specific challenges.

> By providing access to high-quality, targeted training, this fund will help ensure that progressive employers can fully understand and benefit from the potential of AI, strengthening productivity, resilience, and long-term growth across our local economy.

A Living Lab for the NHS

From April, Cisco will work with the local community to scope out a 'Healthcare Living Lab' in Barnsley as part of the Lister Alliance innovation collaboration. It aims to bring together start-ups, SMEs, NHS partners and academia to test ready-to-use AI tools designed to tackle real challenges in hospital settings.

By freeing up NHS staff so they can spend more time on patient care, the intention is to provide local residents with more time with clinical staff, reduced missed appointments and shorter waiting lists.

Cisco also intends to make free digital skills training available to healthcare staff through the Cisco Networking Academy. Courses will focus on improving digital literacy, encompassing areas such as cybersecurity and AI basics. This builds on engagement with the workforce to identify skills gaps and supporting people's confidence in using a digital NHS – directly linking to the broader Tech Town initiative.

Sarah Walker, Chief Executive, Cisco UK and Ireland, said:

> We are committed to helping everyone in the UK benefit from a more digital society. That is why we are proud to be a part of the Tech Town initiative.
>
> Barnsley has the potential to provide a blueprint for how technology can improve the lives of people across the UK, and healthcare is foundational.
>
> From wait times to missed appointments, we look forward to bringing the collective expertise of Cisco and the Lister Alliance innovation collaboration to Barnsley to help address some of the most prominent challenges faced by NHS trusts across the UK.

Notes to editors

The AI Upskilling Challenge Fund will open for applicants in late Spring 2026, with recipients expected to be identified by the summer.

The Cisco Lister Alliance Living Lab pilot will begin at Barnsley Hospital NHS Foundation Trust in April 2026. Priority use cases include improving outpatient experiences and the management of waiting lists.

As part of the Living Lab, free digital skills resources will be made available to NHS workers in the Trust.

The skills programme for NHS staff will be underpinned by the Cisco Networking Academy.

Barnsley Tech Town was announced on 3 February 2026, positioning Barnsley as the UK's first government-backed Tech Town and a national blueprint for AI adoption in communities.

Tech Town supports Barnsley 2030: Barnsley Council's long-term plan to build a prosperous, better, fairer and more inclusive town.

https://www.gov.uk/government/news/faster-care-for-patients-less-admin-for-nhs-staff-and-new-ai-skills-for-key-industries-as-barnsley-tech-town-takes-next-big-step