

CASE STUDY

Step Into Your Future – Using Virtual Reality to Inspire the Next Generation



IDENTIFYING THE NEED

Across Highland communities, many young people are unsure about their next steps after school, with limited understanding of the 350+ careers available within health and social care. Traditional career talks rarely provide the depth or realism needed to help pupils picture themselves in NHS roles. This challenge is particularly noticeable in remote and rural areas, where access to real clinical environments is limited.

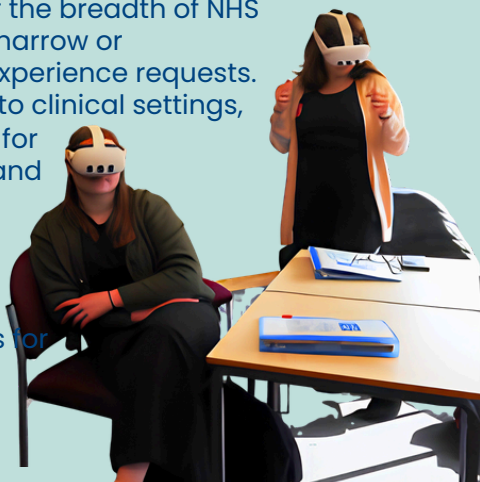
We recognised the need for an innovative, scalable approach that could reach more young people and give them meaningful insight into NHS careers.

THE CHALLENGE ON THE GROUND

Young people reported feeling uncertain about the world of work and disconnected from real NHS roles. Barriers included:

- Distance and travel limitations, restricting access to in-person career experiences.
- Low awareness of the breadth of NHS roles, resulting in narrow or unrealistic work-experience requests.
- Limited exposure to clinical settings, making it difficult for pupils to understand day-to-day tasks.

This contributed to unequal access to career learning, limiting opportunities for pupils across the region.



HOW WE RESPONDED

With support from the NHS Highland Charity, Sara Smith and Megan Glass from the NHS Highland Employability Team developed an immersive career exploration project.

On 25 February 2025, the proposal was pitched live to a Dragon's Den-style panel in Inverness, securing funding to bring Virtual Reality (VR) into NHS career education.

The project enabled:

- The rental of VR headsets and access to the Care Reality FLO simulation platform.
- Delivery of VR-enhanced Career Inspiration sessions to 25 S4-S6 pupils, alongside hands-on workshops led by NHS practitioners in Inverness, Caithness and Fort William in June 2025.

Pupils described VR as highly engaging and realistic:

"It was good to have a go at activities you couldn't do in person."

"VR felt like it was happening in real life."

The ability to "step into" the role of a practitioner enabled deeper understanding of the responsibilities, pressures, and rewards across a wide range of roles.

THE CHANGE WE ACHIEVED

Feedback from pupils was overwhelmingly positive:

- 92% said VR helped them understand clinical tasks and how their skills aligned with NHS careers.
- VR was seen as comparable to real-life workshops in helping pupils picture themselves in NHS settings.
- Most pupils found the technology easy to use, even without prior experience.

There were some challenges, such as occasional motion sickness, adjusting to wearing the headsets, and issues with Wi-Fi connectivity.

The team was eager to share the learning from this project. Findings were communicated to the Employability & Widening Access Oversight Group and will influence future engagement strategies. Additionally, they are presenting a poster at the NES Annual Conference in April 2026: "Opening Doors to Careers in Health and Social Care for Students in Remote and Rural Areas."

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

Building on this success, the Employability Team hope to pilot VR-only workshops in remote areas, enabling equitable access to high-quality career learning regardless of location. A 12-month project is being developed to support school pupils and individuals furthest from the labour market, ensuring that "if you can see it, you can be it" applies to all young people across the Highlands.

By integrating immersive technology with compassionate, place-based support, NHS Highland continues to open doors to rewarding careers while helping shape the workforce of the future.