

# WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL DIGITAL STRATEGY?

***Building a digital strategy* details the different steps in developing a digital strategy. Here we outline the components of good digital strategy and set out key questions for all board leaders to reflect on as part of their oversight and assurance role.**

Based on their experience working with governments, corporations and large public sector organisations, the Public Digital team has compiled a list of key characteristics that indicate good digital strategy. We believe much of this can apply to the NHS.

## Signs of a good digital strategy

- **Integrated.** To succeed, digital transformation can't just be a bolt-on. Digital should be integral to system and trust-level strategies and business plans. It is an enabler for wider improvement.  
[Croydon council's digital strategy explains how it will enable the council's corporate plan, supporting six key themes.](#)
- **User centred.** Digital transformation should address the most important needs of patients, service users and staff.  
[The NHS Business Services Authority's digital strategy has put users at its heart.](#)
- **Useful to teams.** Digital strategies can't detail everything you're planning to deliver. Instead, focus on providing guiding principles to help people make the right decisions.  
[The Royal Borough of Greenwich settled on six principles that guide all their digital transformation.](#)
- **Mainstream.** The best strategies are widely understood and widely adopted. Successful digital transformation in healthcare depends on close alignment across many teams, not just the IT department.  
[In order to more effectively communicate their strategy, the Ministry of Justice published their digital strategy in the form of a blogpost.](#)
- **Realistic.** It is important to build trust – many staff have experience of being let down by the promise of new technology. Talk about what you've already delivered and set realistic goals.  
[The 2013 Government digital strategy is clear on the progress it intended to build on.](#)
- **Focused.** A good digital strategy is selective. Making trade-offs is difficult but essential to free up the bandwidth required for digital transformation.

## Signs of a bad digital strategy

- **IT-driven.** Digital transformation is enabled by technology, but to truly succeed it needs to be led by chief executives, not chief information officers. Good digital strategy focuses more on outcomes for patients and staff than technical changes.
- **Cookie-cutter.** Learn from other organisations, but focus on the context of your trust and system and the needs of your users.
- **Focuses on unproven tech.** Cutting edge technology like artificial intelligence has huge potential in healthcare. But organisations should first prioritise fixing the basics, and a good digital strategy should be open about this.
- **Vague.** A digital strategy should set some clear, measurable objectives alongside a credible plan for delivering on them. The ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘when’ – as well as the ‘why’.
- **Too long-term.** Technology moves fast: there’s not much point in trying to build a static 10 year digital strategy. Aim for a 1-5 year time horizon, aligned to your trust’s strategic plan, with a constant review cycle built-in.
- **Reads like a wish list.** Good digital strategy acknowledges that it won’t fix everything at once and certainly can’t solve everyone’s problems instantly. It should be clear what is being prioritised, and equally what isn’t.

## Questions for boards

We have suggested a short list of questions that board members – both executives and non-executives – may find useful to evaluate their trust’s digital strategy. The answers should prompt discussion and help those board members less involved to assure that the strategy is on track.

- 1 How integrated are your digital and business strategies?** You should have a clear vision for how digital will help to realise your clinical and operational objectives. Trusts with less experience of digital transformation may benefit from a separate digital strategy to focus on getting the basics right. Over time, trusts should aim for a more embedded approach to digital.
- 2 Does your digital strategy have a succinct mission that is understood across the trust?** For your digital strategy to succeed, you’ll need to engage your entire organisation in new ways of working. Having a simple, clear and consistent message about your digital aspirations will help. Everyone on the board should recognise this mission and understand what sits behind it. For example, Cumbria, Northumberland Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust is known as the “**work from anywhere trust**” which is **repeated throughout their work**.
- 3 Do you understand your users and their biggest needs?** Your digital strategy should focus on fixing your biggest problems. All trust boards seek the views of their patients and service users, from patient stories at board meetings to floor walks across the organisation. Digital should be no different. Many boards are now looking at how they incorporate feedback about digital services – from both staff and service users –

to identify the pain points and problems their digital strategy needs to solve. This will require boards to put equality, diversity and inclusion at the heart of their approach.

- 4 Do you know what digital services you are operating and how they are performing?** It is important for the board to understand where the trust is on its digital journey. This requires an awareness of existing digital services, what volumes they are operating, how they are performing, how they relate. This will help give you a clear view on what you need to fix, and – crucially – where to start.
- 5 What are you *not* prioritising in your digital strategy?** The NHS is facing huge challenges over the coming years, and many trusts lack the funds to make large investments in digital transformation. Your digital strategy will need to be clear about the trust's priorities and any trade-offs. Board members will want assurance that the strategy's ambitions are achievable and understand what has been de-prioritised to free up capacity to deliver on its priorities.
- 6 Have you committed to realistic and tangible actions?** The best strategies turn ambitions into firm commitments with clear ownership. Chief digital officers/ chief information officers and chief clinical information officers have an important coordinating role to play, but successful digital transformation requires ownership by clinical and operational leaders.
- 7 How will you know if your digital strategy is working?** Effective strategy relies on strong feedback loops. It will be important to set up the right checkpoints and identify some indicators that will help you understand whether your strategy is working, and where you need to change course.
- 8 Can you explain how your organisation's digital strategy aligns with your system strategy?** [NHS England and NHS Improvement has placed digital at the heart of system working](#). Each trust board will need to collaborate with system partners to set a shared vision for digital and agree how to deliver joint initiatives like the shared care record that will help drive the best outcomes for the population.
- 9 How will your organisation change to enable digital transformation?** Digital ways of working can run against the grain of how large organisations operate. Think about how your planning cycles, incentives, finance and governance processes may need to change to enable a more agile way of working.
- 10 What could go wrong?** From project failure to cyber security incidents and outages, it is inevitable that some things will go wrong. Board leaders should make sure the right systems are in place to reduce these risks and promote a culture of learning, not blame. As digital becomes more important to the delivery of care, this is a patient safety issue.