

Board development session case study: ensuring collective responsibility and getting closer to user needs



Herefordshire and Worcestershire
Health and Care
NHS Trust

Starting point

Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust (HWHC) is the main provider of mental health and learning disability services across Herefordshire and Worcestershire. It also provides community nursing and therapy services in Worcestershire. The trust currently employs around 5,000 staff across the two counties.

For some years the trust has remained digitally mature, relative to its neighbours and system partners. In 2017 the trust was accredited global digital exemplar (GDE) status and has been rated “good” by the CQC three years in a row.

But by 2021 there were concern amongst board leaders that the trust was now becoming a victim of its own success and was not prioritising digital as it had before. A chief information officer (CIO) had recently been appointed, but it was important that the board took collective ownership of the agenda and not leave it to the CIO for sole responsibility.

Clinical engagement in digital also remained a challenge, despite some improvements in recent years. For example, the pressures placed on services during the pandemic meant it was difficult for staff to create the headspace to engage with new digital tools. HWHC’s leaders observed how staff were not clamouring digital changes, despite clear frustrations; it was felt that too many accepted poor IT services and simply had created their own workarounds.

The board recognised significant challenges at system level too, where there were sometimes polarised conversations with system partners about which IT programmes to use. HWHC’s leaders were keen to understand how they could work better together as a system and reconcile organisational differences.

The trust took part in a Digital Boards development session in October 2021 as it sought to address these challenges.

Digital Boards development session

In preparation for the session, interviews were held with the trust chair, chief executive, CIO, medical director and one of the non executive directors (NEDs). During these conversations, it was determined that there were broadly two camps on the board: those already converted and more

confident in the digital agenda, and those less confident and less aware of the digital opportunities, but who nonetheless remained openminded.

Following these interviews, the NHS Providers and Public Digital team reviewed several key trust documents, including GDE blueprinting publications and the original Herefordshire and Worcestershire STP digital strategy.

A bespoke four-hour agenda was designed and agreed with the trust. One of the trust's clinical psychologists was invited to share their experiences developing a new patient portal for HWHC's older mental health patients. Among other things, the agenda included a short discussion with Fiona Edwards, chief executive of Frimley Health and Care ICS and a former mental health trust chief executive, along with a strategic update from the trust CIO and the NED interviewed as part of the pre-work.

During the session, the board agreed to four specific actions they as leaders could take forward to address their challenges and further exploit digital opportunities:

1. **Hold conversations with ICS partners to understand where there were blockers for further digital development across the system.** This could include improving the understanding of user needs of services more holistically.
2. **Learn from the work at Frimley Health and Care ICS on remote monitoring by speaking and visiting the ICS's digital team.**
3. **Go with the energy:** Seek out clinicians in the trust who are excited about digital and turn them into digital ambassadors. More actively promote digital successes to demonstrate the art of the possible (e.g. the old peoples' mental health services patient portal).
4. **Ensure that digital is fundamental to all aspects of board meetings and the board's way of thinking by building it into all items on the agenda.**

What has been the trust's response?

In the three months since the development session, the board has accelerated a number of digital initiatives.

"The session energised the board. We were open minded going into this, but the whole board is now converted. Digital is now considered as part of all board discussions, alongside other cross cutting and strategic issues such as patient safety, workforce and finance." **Mark Yates, chair**
Collective responsibility and understanding opportunities

The board agreed the session had increased their confidence in assuring the delivery of digital programmes and increased their understanding of the conditions for successful transformation. They are confident that digital has now been elevated to the same status as workforce and finance. It has become a key area of oversight, with board leaders actively seeking digital opportunities and considerations as part of all strategic discussions. They are determined that digital will not be siloed at board level.

Beyond board meetings, the trust execs and NEDs have also challenged themselves to probe staff about their digital experiences. There is a sense that too many staff are resigned to poor IT provision.

Alongside questions of wellbeing, trust leaders are now asking staff how they're experiencing digital services in order to genuinely understand the problems they face.

HWHC's leader reflected how the session demonstrated why and how the trust board could work across the ICS on the digital agenda. Following the board session, the HWHC chair is driving conversations with his counterparts across local services and asking the new ICS chair how digital will be central to system planning.

Empowering teams

"There is now a direct link from the execs down to the troops. My teams are motivated and empowered to get on and deliver improvements. There is engagement right across the trust."

David Brown, chief information officer

One of the consequences of the increased recognition of digital at board level has been to empower digital and IT teams working across the trust. Many IT staff now report feeling appreciated and noticed by trust leaders.

Digital and IT is being more actively discussed across all parts of the organisation. Across all board sub-committees, digital ways of working are explored in depth and decisions are being made. Before this was confined to the digital sub-committee.

And the change is emerging at all levels within the trust. Frontline staff, outside of the IT team, increasingly feel empowered to surface issues and talk about ideas and opportunities. For example, during conversations with nursing leaders, the HWHC CIO was queried directly about why trust employees need to keep using paper on the trust's wards. Staff are actively pushing for more digital practices and processes, and are voicing their priorities. This is another example of how trust leaders are improving their understanding of what their staff users need from new digital ways of working. The CIO is looking to build on this progress with the medical director by asking staff directly for feedback on digital as part of annual appraisals.

What next?

The trust want to understand how they can further embed a digital culture across the organisation. At the moment, digital feedback is more common in mental health than community services. Therefore, there is work to do to understand how to expand this progress across the trust's disparate services. HWHC leaders will be looking to attend further Digital Boards events and access resources to help further their learning.

The board are keen to keep learning from trusts too and have already reached out to Alder Hey to discuss the children hospital's innovation hub. The trust will also look to conduct the visit to Frimley ICS that was agreed to during the board session.