

Board development session case study: improving assurance of digital at board level



Starting point

Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (Hampshire Hospitals) provides clinical services to approximately 550,000 people across Hampshire and west Berkshire, employs 7,800 staff and has an annual turnover of £540m. The trust is a part of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Integrated Care System (ICS). In 2018 Hampshire Hospitals became fast followers in the national Global Digital Exemplars programme.

In 2020, the trust's strategic vision for digital care was renewed, and focused on establishing an integrated EPR, ensuring technically enabled staff and interconnecting systems. Prior to the Digital Boards development session, the board found it difficult to maintain a focus on digital transformation while balancing the trust's competing strategic priorities. There was a clear desire for the board to adopt a data-driven mindset. The trust had recently been granted seed funding to build a new hospital and to redevelop its Royal Hampshire County Hospital site, as part of the health infrastructure plan (HIP 2) and they were keen to use this opportunity to mature their digital infrastructure, as part of demonstrating a return on investment.

In September 2020, the Hampshire Hospitals' board participated in a bespoke Digital Boards development session to help them to achieve their digital strategic vision.

Bespoke Digital Boards development session

To prepare for the development session, the NHS Providers and Public Digital team reviewed the trust's digital strategy documents and conducted a series of interviews with individual board members including the chair, chief executive, chief finance officer, chief clinical information officer, company secretary and the director of people. This insight was used to develop a bespoke agenda for the board that centred around establishing collective board ownership of digital, demonstrating the conditions needed for successful digital transformation, and sharing insights from exemplars across other sectors and from within the NHS.

During the three-hour virtual session, the board developed a shared understanding of the definition and implications of digital and were presented with a series of questions to ask their

teams to assure themselves about the pace, progress and health of their digital transformation programmes. The board also explored what makes a good digital strategy by doing a deep dive into an out of sector example from the Government Digital Service. Throughout the session the board had opportunities to reflect on what they heard and discuss ways in which the board could better support the digital agenda.

By the end of the session, the board had collectively agreed upon several practical actions to take forward. These included asking for and responding to user feedback on their IT systems, consolidating disconnected digital business cases into a unified digital strategy and learning from and replicating the 'quick wins' achieved by other organisations.

Impacts of the development session – the board's response

In the 18 months since the Hampshire Hospitals' board participated in a Digital Boards development session, the board has driven digital progress in six main areas.

Formation of an executive digital committee. The Trust have developed an executive digital committee, with non-executive attendance. The change means the executive team are better informed and well positioned to understand the needs of the organisation. The chief executive chairs the committee, and this strong engagement at the highest level reinforces a digital culture and signals to the wider organisation its strategic importance as a key enabler.

Strengthening the digital voice at board. In the past, digital and IT sat under the chief finance officer, but this has now moved to the chief medical officer's portfolio, with the improvement team. The change is helping to clinically embed digital ways of working across the organisation, and digital conversations at board meetings are now rooted in clinical need. The trust's chair has also seen a clear shift in the level of engagement across the board, with executives and non-executives asking questions, seeking assurance and probing opportunities. In addition, the board has deliberately appointed a technologist as a non-executive director to better support digital conversations at board level. The clinical leadership has strengthened the confidence in the organisation that digital transformation is being prioritised to improve the quality of patient care.

System level digital strategy. The board is committed to ensuring Trust digital strategy is informed and coherent with the strategic vision for system working within the Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICS. For example, the trust has worked with their system partners to implement a single maternity system that will meet the needs of Hampshire Hospitals as well as system partners. Scaling technology systems across a wide geographic footprint is not a trivial task and requires careful stakeholder alignment, to support the developing system working. At Hampshire Hospitals, regular digital committee discussions are held with system partners. A planned ICS elective hub on one of the Trust's sites is seen as a further opportunity for system digital collaboration.

Balanced risk taking and assurance of digital.

The board is able to more effectively assess and take appropriate risks. Digital assurance has become front and centre, with half of the board participating at the trust's assurance committee. By improving their oversight of the risks, the board feel more confident in gaining assurance of significant digital decisions. It has also meant that the board themselves recognise the trust is in

need of further investment in technical expertise to ensure their systems are stable after the rapid development seen during the Covid19 pandemic.

Driving forward impactful digital initiatives. The intense operational pressures of the last two years have accelerated innovation at the trust, which has been welcomed by the board. Hampshire Hospitals, along with the Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICS are committed to a 'best of breed' digital architecture approach, which has given the trust the flexibility to consider and evaluate a range of products and suppliers while keeping a sharp focus on patient safety and achieving impact. Examples of recent technology advancement at the trust include:

- upgrade of existing systems including cardiology PACS system
- procurement of advanced kit such as robotic surgical equipment
- end user computing
- a new blood tracking system
- TeleHealth programme to support virtual health hub
- new whiteboards deployed across the trust sites
- improvement of e-correspondence
- capital bid to level-up their digital infrastructure.

Combining digital, improvement and transformation teams. Hampshire Hospitals has recently united their quality improvement academy and training programme, trust transformation programme and IT project manager teams together. By combining these teams, the trust is reducing duplication, creating opportunities for collaboration and improving problem solving by taking advantage of the diverse skillsets. For example, the new improvement team are now making changes to processes that are immediately integrated into the new electronic patient record by the IT development team. And similarly, roll-out of new digital technology and processes by the IT team is complimented by close collaboration with the improvement team. The chief executive highlighted the new integrated improvement team, which sits under the chief medical officer, as a growing and powerful part of the trust's structure.

Looking to the future

As the trust looks to design services for a new hospital, the board aims to maintain a digital mindset and focus on the strategic drivers for digital transformation. There is renewed energy and a stronger foundation for digital moving forward, built from the increased confidence and capability of trust leadership. The trust is bidding for capital funding from NHS England and Improvement that they hope will allow them the resource to move farther and faster in their digital transformation.

"Now the board has a shared understanding of digital that is quite strong. Digital is recognised and has good buy-in from the board. The board is regularly discussing digital enablement for programmes already in place and are exploring how digital, along with people and infrastructure, are enablers for joining up clinical strategies as we prepare for a new hospital." Steve Erskine, chair