

A plan for digital health and social care

NHS England (NHSE) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) have published *A plan for digital health and social care* which sets out a vision for a digital future for leaders in health, social care and technology sectors. The plan seeks to support digital transformation of health and social care by:

- 1 consolidating the disparate set of previous national guidance into a single action plan for decision makers, and
- 2 improving collaboration between partners across the health and care system to develop and scale digital solutions by clarifying the role of NHSE/DHSC in supporting partnerships.

Below is an overview of the plan's vision and action plan, followed by discussion of its implications for trust leaders. For any questions or to offer input regarding any part of this briefing, please contact adam.wright@nhsproviders.org and margaret.steward@nhsproviders.org.

NHSE/DHSC's digital ambition

The first section of the plan outlines central actions being taken to achieve a digitally integrated health and care system by 2025. These actions are categorised across four fronts:

1) Equipping the system digitally for better care

Provider trusts and social care organisations will need strong foundational technologies in place, such as digital health and care records, to ensure people have access to the right data at the right time.

The plan sets out ambitions to:

- **Digitise health and social care records.** NHSE/DHSC expect all integrated care systems (ICSs) to have the technical capability in place to achieve the digital maturity set out in the *What good looks like* framework by 2025 and for 80% of health and social care providers to have digital social care records in place by March 2024.

- **Join up health and care records.** NHSE/DHSC's ambition is for digitised and joined up health and social care records resulting in a life-long digital health and care record for individuals that supports and informs coordination of care. All relevant teams within an ICS (including within Primary Care Networks, third sector organisations, pharmacies, optometrists and Community Diagnostic Centres) are expected to have safe and appropriate access to an individual's complete digital records in real-time by March 2025.
- **Digitally support diagnoses.** To improve accuracy and efficiency of diagnostic processes and limit unnecessary duplication of diagnostic testing, NHSE/DHSC will invest in new digitally enabled diagnostic capacity, including image-sharing and clinical decision support based on artificial intelligence (AI) and automation of repetitive manual tasks with robotic process automation (RPA). The NHS AI lab is investigating where AI can be deployed and scaled to support health and care professionals safely and effectively.

2) Supporting independent healthy lives

The plan sets out how it will strengthen national digital health channels and support adoption of new digital health technologies:

- **Enhance national digital channels to put NHS services in people's pockets.** The functionality of the NHS App and NHS.uk will be enhanced to help people better manage their health, with the ambition to expand this to social care in the future. This includes giving users access to their health record, the ability to manage hospital appointments and support to help prevent needs from arising or escalating (i.e. blood pressure management, vaccine bookings and reminders and targeted digital health checks). NHSE/DHSC will work to lower the access and uptake barriers to these channels and ensure alternative routes and service offers are available.
- **Scale digital self-help, diagnostics and therapies.** NHSE/DHSC will work with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) to put in place policies for accreditation and scaling of safe and effective digital health technologies.

3) Accelerating adoption of proven tech

NHSE/DHSC will promote adoption of health technologies and commits to:

- **Support a systemisation of research and development (R&D) partnerships between innovators and frontline teams.** NHSE/DHSC will support collaborations between NHS organisations and industry, scale current best partnership practice and work with regulators to accelerate the spread of proven technologies. This includes supporting NHS organisations with commercial negotiations and leveraging the purchase of some technologies at scale.

- **Buy technologies better across health and social care.** NHS accreditation of products involves setting and enforcing technical, cyber security and sustainability standards, and ensuring products are interoperable and clinically safe. NHSE/DHSC will also consolidate digital and IT procurement frameworks to simplify and improve the procurement process. NHSE/DHSC has made available a list of assured suppliers and draft standards and capabilities for digital social care records.

4) Aligning oversight with accelerating digital transformation

The plan addresses the wide range of baseline digital maturity levels among provider trusts and between ICSs. NHSE/DHSC will drive acceleration of digital progress through:

- **Use of regulatory levers.** NHSE/DHSC are exploring options to increase the formal mechanisms for overseeing the delivery of NHS digital priorities. NHSE/DHSC will endeavour to signal the priority position of digital, identify non-negotiable digital capability standards, and explain how compliance will be monitored and supported. ICSs will be benchmarked against the *What good looks like* framework and evaluated through upcoming digital maturity assessments (expected in Autumn 2022).
- **Enforcing technical standards.** To ensure interoperability between systems, NHSE/DHSC will enforce their published standards and capabilities for digital health and social care. The Health and Care Act 2022 has strengthened the statutory power of NHSE/DHSC to enforce technical standards among healthcare providers (including private providers).
- **Supporting basic digital foundations for social care.** This will be supported by the £150m investment over 3 years announced in the DHSC white paper *People at the heart of care*. The investment will allow social care providers to build foundational digital capability including high speed connectivity, digital skills within the workforce and cyber resilience.

Summary – action plan for delivery

The plan consolidates a number of commitments made in several national documents over the last few years, alongside some new targets. These cover the same three broad categories set out by the *NHSX delivery plan* in December 2021: digitise, connect, transform. The below includes several highlights but for a full breakdown see [Appendix A](#) of the plan:

Digitise

- The plan confirms that annual digital maturity assessments will be carried out, linked to the *What good looks like* framework. It also restates the aim that all NHS trusts will have an electronic patient record system (EPR) in place by March 2025. As confirmed in the spending review, ICSs will receive

around £2bn in total over the next three years to help trusts reach a minimum level of digital foundations (with an initial focus on those organisations without an EPR). There are also ambitions to carry out work with EPR suppliers in order for ICSs to “buy with confidence”.

- A further £25m funding is available this year to scale up use of digital social care records, alongside falls prevention technology (in addition to £3m of funding each year to fund “local hands-on support” that will enable these changes). NHSE/DHSC will publish an expanded assured supplier list and draft set of standards required for social care record suppliers.
- A Cyber Security Strategy for Health and Social Care will be published in Winter 2022 alongside the intention to fund dedicated cyber staff in each ICS and NHS region. They will be supported through a national training programme and peer networks.
- Best practice on funding cloud adoption will be published in July 2022.
- On workforce, the plan refers to NHSE’s response to the *Leadership for a collaborative and inclusive future* report from General Sir Gordon Messenger and Dame Linda Pollard and Health Education England’s long term workforce plan. In the short term, the plan commits to the cocreation of a national digital workforce strategy (to be published March 2023), the creation of a new membership body for Digital, Data and Technology professionals, and the continuation of existing digital leadership programmes, including NHS Providers’ **Digital Boards** support offer for trust leaders.
- The plan suggests only a minority of NHS trusts have achieved the level of digitisation needed for safe and effective care, and as a consequence will be exploring how to embed digital into wider NHS oversight arrangements. This will include implementing the recommendations of the **report from Laura Wade-Gery**, exploring how digital could be embedded into the NHS Oversight Framework (expected March 2023), work with the Care Quality Commission (CQC) to agree a process for embedding digital maturity in their assessment framework, as well as considering adding a condition to the Provider Licence.

Connect

- The plan repeats the recent commitments made in the DHSC’s *Data saves lives* publication, including the intention to codevelop a data pact setting out mutual expectations for the public and health and care system.
- NHSE/DHSC will also publish “Who does what” which will set out the respective roles played by NHSD, NHSE, the regional teams, ICSs and frontline organisations in delivering a “target data architecture that enables data to flow freely and speedily between health and social care providers”. This will also set out the national policy on EPR convergence and enable the transition

from “a largely heterogenous current state to a target state underpinned by convergence, standards and APIs, national technology platforms and federated secure data environments”.

- A final version of the standards and interoperability strategy will be published in September 2022.
- There are also commitments to roll out a new, more accessible, web-based version of the Summary Care Record by December 2022, redevelop the NHS Spine, and develop the Federated Data Platform (that builds on the NHS Covid-19 data store) to support population health management and capacity planning.

Transform

- The plan reiterates NHSE/DHSC’s ambition to make the NHS App a “digital front door” to the NHS. The plan includes a roadmap ([Appendix B](#)) that sets out how the app will evolve over time.
- Work is underway with NICE and the technology industry to accelerate the approval process for new digital health products. This will include introducing a NICE Early Value Assessment (EVA) to look at promising new products. There are also commitments to accelerate the adoption of proven technology, by systematising technology R&D partnerships, streamlining contracting methods and creating a “central hub to support ICSs and NHS trusts to invest time and energy in building long-term partnerships with suppliers”.
- The plan repeats the ambition to scale virtual wards and digital monitoring of vital signs. There is also a desire to define a full digital delivery programme for screening transformation (with preliminary results expected this summer).
- NHSE/DHSC also want to “enhance and extend” national referral platforms so that ICSs can reduce outpatient appointments and follow ups by at least 25%. There is also the intention to develop new pathways to help clear the backlog of long-waiting patients on non-admitted pathways such as dermatology, respiratory, cardiovascular, rheumatology, and increase the use of digital pre-assessments.
- By May 2023, NHS England will produce a framework for NHS action on digital inclusion.

NHS Providers’ view

NHS Providers welcomes the consolidation of multiple national guidance into a single vision for the future. Trusts recognise the importance of digital transformation as an enabler for improving patient outcomes, service recovery and achieving the strategic objectives of their organisation and across ICSs. The plan does not raise new digital priorities, but rather clarifies the role of the centre in supporting digital transformation across the health and care system and consolidates the numerous previous national guidance, aiming to provide a more coherent direction of travel for trust leaders.

The plan sets out ambitious targets for a ‘digitised’ and ‘connected’ health and care system by March 2025, however it does not fully address the major barrier to achieve this – the limited resources available and the inability of trust leaders to take a long-term strategic approach to digital investment given the lack of multiyear funding commitment. In recent spending reviews, the DHSC was allocated £2bn capital for digital delivery – a portion of this investment will go towards three-year ICS funding allocations to support delivery of NHSE/DHSC’s flagship commitment on frontline digitisation and EPRs. Trust leaders would welcome further clarity over what funding support is available and when and how it can be used by trusts to reach the vision for care described in the plan.

Those trusts already committed to multiyear EPR contracts will anticipate NHSE’s national policy on EPR convergence. As ever, we recommend the national team and ICSs consult and engage with a range of trust leaders so the policy reflects the different needs across the sector. ICSs may also need support to fulfil their roles in co-ordinating across a system effectively, in close partnership with individual providers. NHS Providers looks forward to representing the views of members in these national level discussions.

Trust leaders will have reservations over the ongoing discussions between NHSE and the CQC to review regulatory approaches. The result of this review, along with the strengthened statutory power granted by Health and Care Act 2022, will have consequences for how the ambitions set out in *A plan for digital health and social care* will be enforced. Trust leaders recognise the importance of digital ways of working in the safety and effectiveness of care, and so remain keen to engage with NHSE/DHSC to ensure that a measured and constructive approach to the oversight of this work is achieved. NHSE and CQC regulatory levers must be carefully used when encouraging the pace and priority position of digital progress.

While there is a need to establish high standards and promote best digital practice, there is a risk that excessive oversight will overburden trusts. Trusts are driving digital progress while at the same time managing competing priorities, and doing so with already thin resources. In addition to clear guidance, trusts will also need to maintain appropriate autonomy and flexibility to advance digital while best caring for the populations they serve. NHS Providers are keen to engage with trusts to understand their perspectives and ensure these views are represented as NHSE/DHSC investigates formal mechanisms for overseeing delivery of NHS digital priorities.

Support for trust leaders

Our **Digital Boards** development programme is delivered in partnership with Public Digital and is designed to support boards in leading the digital transformation agenda. The programme is commissioned by Health Education England as part of their Digital Readiness Education programme and is supported by NHS England and NHS Improvement.

Digital Boards aims to build board understanding of the potential and implications of the digital agenda and increase the confidence and capability of boards to harness the opportunity that digital provides through board resources, webinars, peer learning and free board development sessions for individual trusts. To learn more, please get in contact with a member of the team at digital.boards@nhsproviders.org.

We will also soon be launching a new digital leadership support offer for ICS leaders, in partnership with the NHS Confederation and Public Digital, and supported by Health Education England and NHS England and NHS Improvement. If you would like to find out more about this offer, please contact adam.wright@nhsproviders.org.

NHS Providers' press release

Responding to the plan for digital health and social care, published by NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care, the interim chief executive of NHS Providers, Saffron Cordery said:

"We welcome this plan which rightly signals digital transformation as a high priority within the NHS, and aims to set out a clear national vision for a digital future, consolidating previous national guidance.

"It also provides a much needed clearer plan of action for trust leaders as they support digital transformation in their organisations and their local systems. Trust leaders recognise the role digital tools will play in recovering elective performance and supporting the workforce sustainably.

"The focus on patient experience and empowering patients to be more involved in their care and data is particularly welcome, and the plan also rightly recognises the role of NHS England in supporting commercial negotiation with technology suppliers and leveraging purchasing power at scale. We welcome the commitment to produce a new framework for NHS action on digital inclusion, which has rightly risen up the agenda since the sector's response to the pandemic.

“The investment previously announced in the spending review will begin to help trusts address some of the digital basics and foundations, however trust leaders continue to feedback that funding remains one of the largest issues. Therefore, the department should accelerate the ways this funding reaches the frontline.

“While providers will understand the need to increasingly factor digital maturity into the centre’s regulatory approach, this oversight needs to be proportionate and appropriate given the number of priorities trust leaders are tasked with.”