A short guide to digital and data in the NHS

DIGITAL BOARDS

Trust boards are
collectively responsible for the digital agenda.
New board members will therefore need to quickly bring themselves up to
speed on the key terms, challenges and national policies.

Key concepts

While this list is not exhaustive, here are some of the key concepts and terms that will often be referenced during board discussions on digital.

- **Electronic patient records (EPRs)**: a digital system for managing a range of clinical information so that it can be easily accessed by clinicians, patients and other professionals. EPRs are often the foundation stone of digitisation in the NHS and can increase safety, staff satisfaction and data quality.

- **Shared care records**: include information from a range of care settings, such as primary, secondary and social care as well as local communities. Sometimes referred to as Local Health and Care Records.

- **Federated Data Platform**: the national programme that gives local systems the option to extract data – as long as there is a lawful basis – from shared care records across the NHS to be hosted on a "federated" platform". The intention is to share operational and planning data to inform interventions and foster collaboration. Each trust and integrated care system (ICS) will have their own federated platform which will work alongside their existing systems.

- **Core infrastructure**: the essential investment and work needed to run a basic IT service, such as WiFi coverage, fixing broken technology, replacing hardware or running a support desk.

- **Interoperability**: the ability of systems, organisations and people to exchange and make use of information in order to operate safely and effectively. Interoperability can be thought of in terms of technical (data that's in a readable format, such as sharing an Excel spreadsheet), semantic (shared meanings, such as a clinical term that could be interpreted differently) and organisational (alignment of people and teams).

- **Convergence**: the concept of consolidating different technology systems across the health service, to improve interoperability and simplify data sharing and usability.

- **Virtual wards**: a type of remote patient monitoring that are a safe and efficient alternative to NHS bedded care. Virtual wards support patients who would otherwise be in secondary care to receive care and treatment they need in their own home. This includes either preventing avoidable admissions, or supporting early discharge out of hospital.

- **Digital inclusion**: as defined by NHS England as having the necessary skills, connectivity and accessibility which enables people to use digital services.

- **Software as a service (SaaS)**: an increasingly popular way of delivering digital products, whereby suppliers deliver software online via a web browser (known as cloud based delivery), as opposed to installing software on individual devices/ payment is received on a subscription basis for licenses, rather than a one off purchase, which impacts how payment is accounted for (either revenue or capital).

Why is digital different in health?

It is often asked why the NHS isn't as digitally advanced as other sectors. While the gap is sometimes exaggerated, it's worth recognising some of the unique challenges faced in the health sector:

- **Clinical safety can't be compromised**. As the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges have noted, there is a potential tension between a technological attitude of "move fast and break things" and the ethical principle of "do no harm" in healthcare.

- **Personal health data is incredibly sensitive**. There are strict information governance protections in place which require greater effort to collect, manage and process data.

- **The NHS is large and complex**. There are about 1.2 million NHS employees working across the country. The size and scale of the health system leads to tension between variation and standardisation, and innovation and centralisation.

- **Investment and recruitment is difficult**. Like any public sector body, funding can come in peaks and troughs. In times of "famine" it can be hard to justify investment in digital over more nurses or ambulance fleet. Agenda for change also makes it challenging to recruit new digital and data skills.

National policies and further reading

As a board member, it will also be important to familiarise yourself with recent national policy and guidance that has been published by the Department of Health and Social Care and its national bodies.

What good looks like. NHS England's digital framework outlines seven success factors for digitally enabled care for trusts and ICSs. This includes 'Well-led' which urges board-level ownership and accountability for digital, as well as appropriate governance of digital and data strategies, clinical input, engagement with service users and coordination with wider ICS strategy. Read our summary here.

A plan for digital health and social care. Consolidates recent national guidance into a single action plan and outlines the central initiatives being taken by NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care. Find a breakdown of important milestones described in the plan and what this means for providers here.

Data saves lives. Highlights key principles laid out by the Department of Health and Social Care for data transformation within the NHS and the commitments to achieve this vision. Find out more here.

The Topol Review. Led by Dr Eric Topol, this sets out recommendations for preparing the healthcare workforce to deliver digital over the next 20 years including the evolving use of digital technologies, the implications on professional skills, education and training for building a modern workforce within the NHS. Find the full report here.

Who does what. Framework providing an overview of the role of trusts and ICSs in digitally enabled transformation, describing national support mechanisms, principles and standards. Find the full guidance here.

Finding out more

The Digital Boards programme, delivered in partnership with Public Digital and supported by Health Education England and NHS England, has engaged board members from across the provider sector.

Scan the QR code to find out more.