

Developing a useful ICS digital strategy

What makes a useful digital strategy at a system level?

Working closely with systems across the country to deliver our **Digital ICS programme** has shown us that integrated care systems (ICSs) are at different stages of their digital maturity. Those different levels of maturity are reflected in the range of digital strategies we've seen.

What do we mean by a 'useful' digital strategy?

To be useful to your system your digital strategy needs to set the ambition, enable you to focus your decision making and prioritisation, and align your organisations and teams towards a clear vision.

Wherever you are in your digital journey, here are five top tips for making sure that your digital strategy achieves these goals.

1

Use the development of your strategy as a tool to strengthen your relationships in the system

The process of creating a system digital strategy together is as valuable as the strategy itself. Co-creation, equal participation, honest discussion and creating space to disagree and commit amongst partners is vital to ensure that the digital strategy is built on firm foundations of alignment and collaboration.

There will be common needs across the system, but to meet those needs you will need a high level of agreement and trust around standardisation and **interoperability**.

Key questions to ask as you begin developing your strategy are:

- Who needs to be in the room as an active participant?
- Who might lead on what?
- What's best done at a system level?
- What's best done at an organisation level?

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough ICS have developed their strategy with health and care partners and public representatives, highlighting their intention to collaboratively work with system partners to align and deliver on their ICS ambitions.

2

Build a strategy that helps you say 'no' in the right way

ICSs are faced with huge prioritisation and capacity challenges and decisions – there is a lot to do and not enough money or time to do it. A useful digital strategy will enable you to say 'no' to things that aren't a current priority. This will provide assurance to the board that the strategy is achievable whilst also articulating to your workforce and service users why you aren't doing some things.

- What's most important for your system now?
- How will you know what available central funding will help you achieve your visions and outcomes, and what will distract you?
- How will you say 'no', collectively?
- How will the design of your governance allow you to make prioritisation decisions rather than avoid them?

The Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS strategy sets out a framework of principles and goals that will support the ICS digital priorities. It also clearly articulates what the strategy will not do.

3

Create alignment around clear and compelling outcomes for users

There will be obvious priorities in every system that you need to deliver – for example improving patient access, developing your shared care record and creating a shared data platform. Your strategy needs to be clear on what the tangible outcomes will be for users as a result of delivery. Clearly articulating what will be different for users as a result of the work will help you create a compelling vision for the future that everyone can align on.

- What will be different for patients, staff and citizens? What are their biggest pain points now?
- What do you need to do to enable collaboration in the system? Key blockers are often the basics such as single sign on, shared Wi-Fi or data sharing agreements. Being able to collaborate easily and provide better joined up patient care is a compelling outcome for the people who work in your system.

Cheshire and Merseyside Health and Care Partnership have an ambitious and clear mission: "We will be the most digitally advanced and data driven ICS in England by 2025". This mission is supported by a clear list of strategic principles and critical success factors.

4

Base your strategy on evidence not assumptions

To really deliver value and be useful to you, your strategy must be rooted in meeting your specific users needs. To know your specific user needs for your system, you will need to work with partner organisations who know these problems and user needs best. Equally, learning from others' best practice is helpful to challenge your thinking and any assumptions you're making.

- Is your strategy based on evidence from your users?
- Have you and your partners been able to have an honest conversation about the problems and opportunities in your system?
- Are you talking to other system leaders and reading their digital strategies?
- What's good, what's less clear? How did they develop them?
- How will you take the learning from others and apply it to develop your own strategy?

Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICS conducted significant system-wide engagement to co-create their strategy. This included 98 interviews, working groups and a project governance structure with representation from all system partners.

Make the digital strategy the collective responsibility of the board

While many integrated care boards (ICBs) will have a specific digital lead, it is the responsibility of everyone on the board to collectively own digital. That means knowing enough about digital, data and technology to be able to shape and oversee the development of your digital strategy. For example:

- Do you collectively understand what data you need and why, and where it's coming from?
- Can your board talk confidently about the improvement for users you expect to see from your digital strategy?
- Are you able to have informed and thoughtful conversations about topics such as digital inclusion, cyber security and artificial intelligence?
- Do you understand how your digital strategy is contributing to improving outcomes, tackling inequalities, enhancing productivity and supporting social and economic development?
- How will you know if your strategy is working?

Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire ICS articulate their leadership role as: "Together, we are greater than the sum of our parts. We will operate a governance model that promotes our unique collective value, is facilitative in nature and supports delivery of our Digital and Data strategy".

Our offer

The **Digital ICS programme** is a free support offer designed to support all ICB and ICS leaders to better harness digital transformation to enable delivery of system ambitions.

The Digital ICS programme is delivered by NHS Providers in partnership with the NHS Confederation and Public Digital, and supported by NHS England as part of their NHS Digital Academy.

Through bespoke development sessions, events and resources, the programme gives ICB and ICS leaders access to digital transformation experts, peer learning and expert facilitation.

The programme is an extension of the NHS Providers' **Digital Boards programme** for NHS trust leaders.

To find out more, read our [programme overview](#) or contact us at digital.ics@nhsproviders.org

The digital development session for our ICB was thought provoking and excellent.

It is really important that all system colleagues, ICBs and ICPs have the opportunity for this free and bespoke learning and development.

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