



**Mental Health  
Network**  
NHS Confederation

# Maximising the potential of digital in mental health

September 2023

# About us

The NHS Confederation is the membership organisation that brings together, supports and speaks for the whole healthcare system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The members we represent employ 1.5 million staff, care for more than 1 million patients a day and control £150 billion of public expenditure. We promote collaboration and partnership working as the key to improving population health, delivering high-quality care and reducing health inequalities.

The Mental Health Network represents providers from across the statutory, independent and third sectors. We work with government, regulators, opinion formers, media and the wider NHS to promote excellence in mental health services and the importance of good mental health.

We help shape and challenge national policy and legislation affecting our members. We make sense of the broader political and policy environment, and provide members with up-to-date news and analysis. We also work to identify and spread good practice and innovation in the mental health sector.

# Key points

- Digital technologies, platforms and applications are a reality within the delivery of mental health care pathways in England, and have an important role to play in improving the mental health of the population and the delivery of health services.
- However, there are still barriers holding back progress, meaning that digital isn't being fully utilised in tackling the biggest problems that mental health providers, commissioners, policy makers and the public face.
- To do nothing is not an option. If we don't make more progress we miss a key opportunity to make improvements to mental health services such as improving access; providing early intervention and prevention at scale; implementing new ways of reaching people; and helping to meet the demand supply gap; and at the same time opening up access so that inequalities in access to healthcare and support for mental health are reduced.
- The NHS Confederation's Mental Health Network explored the current challenges and opportunities the mental health sector faces in developing and using digital products and services now, and the sector's ideas for what can help in the immediate and longer-term future.
- This report identifies current activities across national policy and strategy and makes suggestions as to how work on digital mental health can further maximise its potential and increase its contribution to mental healthcare and population mental health.
- For digital to be an effective enabler for mental health services and towards improving population mental health, three principles are fundamental to future work: collaboration, clarity, and coordination between stakeholders.
- From these principles, there are a range of building blocks needed for digital to be maximised in mental healthcare and population mental health, including a focus on building a shared

narrative around needs-led solutions rather than technology led; working effectively within new and evolving local governance infrastructures such as integrated care systems (ICSs); and tackling inclusion and working together to build a modern, fit-for-purpose regulatory system.

- This report highlights practical and achievable suggested discussion points that aim to bridge this gap and make a difference. They include a call for a wider and deeper national conversation on digital mental health and its future and consider developing effective ways of scaling digital mental health solutions in local and national solutions.
- The Mental Health Network is committed to working with our members and partners to continue this conversation and support collaborations that maximise the potential for digital mental health to make a real difference to people, families and communities.

# Introduction

Digital technologies, platforms and applications are a reality within the delivery of mental healthcare pathways in England. The COVID-19 pandemic saw an explosion in the use of, and interest in, digital innovations and how they can meet population needs either caused or exacerbated by lockdowns and social distancing. Many of these solutions are now a part of the wider healthcare landscape focused on improving the mental health of the population and the delivery of health services. However, challenges remain in how digital is described; how innovation, research and development is supported; and how clarity is given to the system on the role and place of digital mental health. Work is underway to help meet these challenges but we heard that, alongside this, more clarity, coordination and collaboration is needed to make the desired impact.

Digital has the potential to play a much more significant role in meeting additional unmet need in a way that traditional service models cannot. It can make operations and services more efficient, for example through electronic patient records; it can deliver services in ways that widen access and enable earlier interventions; and it can support people while they are on a waiting list for care or treatment. To realise this potential, collaboration and partnerships between the statutory, voluntary and independent sector are critical to success. Success will also rely on engagement and co-production with people who use mental health services, and members of the public more broadly.

“As far as I’m concerned, there are only three challenges facing most first-world health systems. They are equity, access and digital – in that order. And the reason why they are in that order is that if digital isn’t helping you with the first two, then why are you using it?” **Lord Victor Adebowale, Chair, NHS Confederation.**

## Why digital mental health?

We know from evidence that greater use of digital mental health technology provides key opportunities and benefits, including but not limited to:

- 1. Improved access:** Digital mental health solutions can overcome geographical barriers, making mental health services more accessible to people in remote areas, those with limited mobility, and those who would prefer not to have in-person visits. Digital mental health platforms, such as telemedicine apps, online counselling services, and clinically moderated peer support platforms, allow people to access mental health support through smartphones, tablets, or computers. These platforms can provide secure communication channels between patients and mental health professionals, ensuring privacy and convenience.
- 2. Early intervention and prevention:** Digital tools can enable early detection of mental health issues by tracking patterns in behaviour and mood. Through data analysis, these tools can identify signs of distress and provide timely interventions, preventing conditions from worsening. Digital mental health tools, like mobile apps and wearable devices, can collect and

analyse user data to detect early signs of distress. Machine learning algorithms can identify patterns in user behaviour, emotions, and engagement, triggering proactive interventions or providing personalised coping strategies.

**3. Closing the demand-versus-supply gap:** The demand for mental health services exceeds the available supply. Digital mental health technology can help bridge this gap by offering scalable solutions that reach a larger number of individuals simultaneously, and at lower cost. Digital mental health solutions can offer self-help resources, such as guided meditation and stress management apps, which empower individuals to manage their mental health independently. Additionally, virtual support groups and peer-to-peer platforms can foster a sense of community and reduce the burden on mental health professionals.

The size of the opportunity for each benefit depends on several factors, such as support for innovation; procurement ability; policy and agency understanding and support; technological advancements; public awareness and regulatory support. We set out a summary table of the key benefits, opportunities and challenges later in the report. As technology continues to evolve and awareness improves, the impact of digital solutions in improving the delivery of mental health services and population mental health can grow significantly. The size of the opportunity for each benefit and the role of digital technology in tackling them will continue to expand as technology advances. However, it's crucial to ensure that digital mental health solutions are evidence based, user friendly, and maintain high standards of data privacy and security.

There is a significant amount of work taking place looking to utilise digital in mental health services in order meet the challenges providers face in improving the country's mental health and delivering more accessible and effective care, treatment and

support. However, we need to go further to truly maximise the potential of digital. There is great potential and a willing range of partners and stakeholders to seize the opportunities provided. This now requires greater national and local co-ordination, clarity about the direction of travel and the purpose and evidence for digital, and greater collaboration across a range of sectors and disciplines. Without this, we will miss an opportunity to make progress at scale and pace, open up greater access to care and support and play our part as a leading force in international digital mental health.

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...this report captures the sector's view on the building blocks that would enable further progress in developing and applying digital solutions to meet modern mental health needs

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As the voice of NHS-funded mental health and learning disability service providers and commissioners, we wanted to explore the current challenges and opportunities the mental health sector faces in using digital products and services and develop a set of practical ideas for what can help in the immediate and longer-term future.

Based on engagement with statutory, voluntary and independent sector leaders, this report captures the sector's view on the factors – building blocks – that would enable further progress in developing and applying digital solutions to meet modern mental health needs. We believe these building blocks will position digital as an effective enabler in improving mental health and the lives of people living with and recovering from mental health problems. As set out in [our vision for the future](#), this would also serve to reduce the postcode lottery of care to ensure that speedy access to high-quality help is secured.

Our aim is to stimulate further conversations and action across the mental health sector with local, regional and national partners. We will work together to advocate for more attention, focus and



action on digital mental health, to enable digital to play its part in responding to the many challenges and opportunities that exist.

This report is for those interested in supporting change and innovation in mental health and to making a difference to people, families and communities through digital solutions and innovations. For those in policy, digital is a key part of the next stages of national and local strategy. For mental healthcare providers and commissioners, digital is a key component in the ecosystem of care and support. For people and communities, digital can give greater access to support, a greater sense of agency and control, and can help with improving the co-ordination and delivery of care based on need.

## What do we mean by digital?

The term 'digital' can mean many things to many people. Given the complexity and scale of this topic, we agreed definitions to set parameters for the conversations we held.

In health and social care, digital means using electronic technology and data to support health and wellbeing, service delivery and transformation to improve outcomes for people.

Digital healthcare has three main purposes:

1. Supporting people to interact with health and care and to look after their health and wellbeing.
2. Organising and providing services effectively, including supporting professionals delivering individual care.
3. Creating intelligence for service improvement, innovation, research and precision healthcare by making use of the enormous power of data and analysis.

There are overlaps and complexities in defining these areas of digital healthcare. Each area will require different focus and interventions to ensure they are fit for purpose and creating the right impact, with steps forward in one area likely to benefit others. Different parts of a pathway, system or service will also need a different approach, and digital can offer different benefits. Progress in all three areas is important for the potential of digital to impact the experience and outcomes of people accessing health and care and the wider mental health needs of a population.

The findings of this report are extensive enough to complement and support all of these areas. Our particular

area of focus is on the delivery of digital services and supporting population mental health.

## Context

There is a demand-supply gap in mental healthcare, seen in growing waiting lists, inequalities in health, and in access to care, treatment and support. More people than ever are seeking help for their mental health, and this is likely to continue for some time following the collective trauma of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis. Shortages of mental health workers of all types have held back expansion and reform, leaving services in persistent crisis mode. In quarter 4 of 2022/23, there were 112,497 full-time-equivalent vacancies across the whole NHS, and almost a quarter of these (26,837 or 23.9 per cent) were within mental health. There is also a growing need for greater action and investment upstream in prevention, early intervention and community-based care to improve the mental health of the population and improve care and support services.

From the response to the pandemic, we know the role digital can play in supporting services, systems and people to transition to new ways of working to meet the challenges we face. Important lessons and learning can be built on, alongside a chance to broaden and build the research and evidence base, develop key standards, assessment processes and improved regulation.

## Opportunities, benefits and challenges

### Opportunities

1. **Increased accessibility:** Digital mental health solutions can reach a broader population, including those in remote areas

and underserved communities, improving access to mental health support.

2. **Personalisation:** Technology allows for personalised interventions based on individual needs and preferences, leading to more effective and tailored mental healthcare.
3. **Data-driven insights:** Digital tools can collect and analyse vast amounts of data, providing valuable insights into mental health trends, treatment outcomes, and user behaviours.
4. **Cost-effectiveness:** Digital mental health interventions often have lower overhead costs than traditional in-person therapy, making mental healthcare more affordable for many individuals.
5. **Early intervention and prevention:** Technology can detect early signs of mental health issues, enabling timely interventions and prevention strategies before conditions worsen.

## Benefits

1. **Improved treatment outcomes:** Digital mental health interventions, when evidence-based, can lead to positive treatment outcomes and better overall mental wellbeing for users.
2. **Reduced stigma:** Online platforms may reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health support, as individuals can access help discreetly from the comfort of their own homes.
3. **Scalability:** Digital solutions have the potential to scale rapidly, allowing mental health resources to reach a larger audience in a short period.
4. **Diverse modalities:** Digital mental health encompasses various modalities such as mobile apps, virtual reality and online

therapy, catering to different needs and preferences.

5. **Value for money:** Through direct cost savings, avoiding additional costs by intervening earlier and allowing for increased reach and ongoing support between clinical interventions, digital mental health services have shown to provide positive economic benefits and a return on investment.

## Challenges

1. **Privacy and security:** Handling sensitive mental health data requires robust privacy measures to protect users' confidentiality and prevent data breaches.
2. **Regulatory compliance:** Adhering to healthcare regulations and standards can be complex, particularly when dealing with cross-border data sharing and tele-health services.
3. **Digital divide:** Not everyone has equal access to digital technology, potentially leaving some individuals without the opportunity to benefit from digital mental health interventions.
4. **Quality, efficacy and managing risk:** The market is flooded with mental health apps and solutions, but not all are evidence-based or effective. Ensuring the quality and efficacy of digital mental health tools is essential, alongside the ability to manage and respond to risk effectively.
5. **Therapeutic relationship:** Some people may find it challenging to establish a therapeutic relationship with digital tools, as they lack the face-to-face interaction that traditional therapy offers.

Addressing these challenges and maximising the opportunities and benefits requires collaboration among stakeholders, including mental health professionals, technology developers, policymakers, users and communities. Investing in innovation and research to validate the effectiveness of digital mental health interventions

and setting clear guidelines for their deployment can lead to a more successful integration of technology in mental healthcare. Additionally, bridging the digital divide and addressing data privacy concerns are crucial steps in ensuring equitable and secure access to digital mental health resources for all.

## The policy landscape

While we identified a significant amount of activity already underway to support digital to be an effective enabler for delivering high-quality mental health services and to support population mental health, our findings also highlighted that more needs to be done to maximise digital's contribution in these areas. We heard that more coordination and clarity is needed on what is happening and where, alongside more opportunities for collaboration. The image in Annex 2 links to a summary of what is already underway and in the public domain, to help build shared knowledge and understanding of the digital mental health landscape and to highlight the platform that can be built on.

The policy landscape is fast-paced and changing. In April 2022, the government in England opened a consultation to the public and interested stakeholders to inform the development of a cross-government ten-year mental health and wellbeing strategy. In January 2023, it was announced the responses would be incorporated into a major conditions strategy, including mental health as one of six conditions, with an interim strategy published in August 2023. The Spring Budget 2023 announced investments into digital mental health, and recommendations were made in the Hewitt review of ICSs for how digital tools and apps can play a vital role in enabling ICSs to improve population health outcomes. See Annex 3 for more detail on these developments.

The question is not can digital help meet these challenges, but how. A 2023 joint [NHS Confederation and Google Health report](#) explored the role of technology in managing, improving and

supporting health and wellbeing. It found that across all age groups, 72 per cent would use technology to avoid a hospital admission, with a similar proportion happy to use technology to monitor their health and share information and data with their doctors.

In the conversations and discussions we held, people were clear that the benefits outlined above can be realised by working on the key building blocks set out in the next section. By acting on these levers of change, more progress can be made at pace and scale locally and nationally. It is essential that at all levels of the system - local, regional and national - now work more closely together to support digital to be an integral part of the ecosystem.

## Methodology

We held a number of focused conversations with leaders across the mental health sector, with experts by experience and occupation included in our engagement (see Annex 2), to capture their views on digital mental health, their key priorities, what holds them back and what they would like to see next in this space. Alongside these conversations we held an online roundtable of 20 participants, hosted by the NHS Confederation's chief executive Matthew Taylor, to explore in more depth the principles, themes and suggested actions that came up in our conversations.

# Three guiding principles

From our conversations, we heard that for digital to be an effective enabler for mental health services and towards improving population mental health, there is a need for three principle foundations to guide future work: collaboration, clarity and coordination between stakeholders.

People were clear in our conversations that if we get these three core principles right, then the landscape for the future looks more promising. When taken collectively, these can help drive the culture change required to support the adoption and scaling of new technologies for the benefit of people's mental health and the delivery of mental health services.

Any work taken forward from here should have these three principles in mind.

## Collaboration

We heard that the sheer scale and complexity of the organisations and individuals involved in designing, delivering, commissioning, procuring, assessing and researching digital mental health services, mean that collaboration of effort and purpose is very challenging. People felt that finding ways to encourage and reward collaboration of effort and purpose would be helpful, as would finding ways to make collaboration across sectors easier.

Increased collaboration would ensure that the expertise across the mental health and digital sector, in statutory, voluntary and independent organisations, can be more fully utilised towards meeting the needs of mental health service providers, their staff, patients and populations.



We feel there is a role here for the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and NHS England (NHSE) to help develop ways of supporting greater collaboration at national, regional and local levels. We are keen to help explore what these could be.

## Clarity

We heard that people do not always know what is being done in the digital mental health space. Our respondents were unsure whether activity, funding and efforts are of benefit to people, populations and the system, or whether or not they are helping to reduce exclusion and inequalities. There is also uncertainty about how providers, commissioners and stakeholders know what is being developed, offered, commissioned, provided and bought, and whether they are effective, safe and of high quality.

Increasing clarity around what is happening in the digital mental health space and sharing this through accessible channels can help ensure that people are well informed and up to speed in a dynamic and fast-moving arena. Clarity also helps in providing mental health commissioners, providers and the general public with greater confidence that digital innovations and interventions are of high quality, safe and effective, are able to make a positive impact on mental health, and help reduce health inequalities.

## Coordination

We heard that initiatives and innovations in the digital mental health space are not always coordinated between national, regional and local stakeholders. This results in less impact and reduced opportunities for learning and for sharing both the good and not-so-good experiences. While pockets of good practice and innovation do exist, it would be extremely valuable to ensure

that all parts of the mental health sector are able to share and learn from practices and experiences.

Increased coordination at the national level would ensure that providers at the regional and local level were better equipped to make decisions around digital mental health, aligned to national guidelines and systems. This could enable more choice and access for patients and providers and more benefits to accrue to local population health systems.

We feel NHSE can play even more of a leadership role in co-ordinating work across the digital mental health sector, and we make suggestions on this in the next section based on what we heard from our partners and stakeholders. We see these as helpful building blocks on which to base future work.

# Seven building blocks for the future

In this section, we outline the main themes that arose in our conversations and discussions and suggest what might help to take these forward as key principles and a series of seven connected building blocks. These blocks aim to build on the three key principles to address how we can harness the benefits of digital mental health, overcome the challenges or identify the levers and opportunities that can be addressed.



## Developing a compelling narrative

**For patients and the public to have confidence in digital and reap the full benefits it can offer, we need to improve the narrative that explains how digital is used in healthcare.**

NHS, voluntary and private sector leaders all agreed that the purpose of digital innovations within mental health is to improve

services, solve challenges, meet the needs of the population and achieve better outcomes for people in their lives and in their recovery. The benefits set out can only be achieved if they are targeted towards the area where digital can be most effective and meet need. It's helpful when outlining this need to identify if it is focused on digital patient data or digital services delivering support, as this may influence how it is designed and by whom. When there is a compelling narrative and the positive impacts of a new innovation are clear, then it supports the cultural shift to ensure the innovation is adopted as people can see the value and feel like their views have been considered. It's not the digital technology element that matters, what really matters is the purpose, utility and impact of the digital innovation or service. This helps move to design- and needs-led solutions, rather than technology-led solutions.

## Making progress

What can help is early collaborations between services, commissioners, people with lived experience, providers and local, regional and national planners. Creating these collaborative opportunities locally and nationally is an important part of the future landscape. There is a lot to build on the role of Academic Health Science Networks (AHSNs) and, together with NHSE's transformation directorate and mental health team, there are ways to improve collaboration to bring digital innovations to scale. This also includes the need to develop and enhance work that improves the digital literacy of health and care providers as well as the public, and considers how to overcome the cultural barriers to adoption and scaling of digital innovations.

### Spotlight: Using digital innovations to reduce the autism assessment waiting list in Humber

In 2019, Humber Teaching NHS Foundation Trust CAMHS Services in East Riding and Hull partnered with Healios, a digital healthcare services company that specialises in the delivery and integration

of online mental health, autism and ADHD services with NHS teams.

The partnership was part of a waiting list reduction project triggered by the two-year waiting list for autism assessments consisting of 800 children and young people. Its aim was to make services more accessible and decrease the time families were waiting for assessment.

From the start of Hull's new autism assessment pathway in September 2019 to January 2020, around a third of assessments were undertaken by Healios, with an average Healios waiting time of 27 days from referral to first session. Currently, the Hull team is working towards an 18-week target.

This successfully implemented pathway care model with an integrated online provider has demonstrated future ability for Hull CAMHS to achieve NHS England's four-week access and waiting times for an autism assessment.

Other benefits through the partnership include:

- increased clinical capacity due to recruitment and partnering with Healios
- an increase in the number of children assessed per month from an average of less than 15 to an average of 33.

United in the shared need for their population, Hull CAMHS Team, Healios and charity partners are now working together to deliver a seamless and innovative pathway for children, young people and their families.

## Harnessing lived experience

**Not enough is being done to harness and bring together the expertise of people with lived experience and those across the**

## **statutory, voluntary and independent sectors.**

Digital innovations and products should be co-designed using the expertise of people with lived experience of mental ill health, and experts by occupation across the statutory, voluntary and independent sector. We heard that this should be seen as a core element of service development and delivery, with lived experience and public views embedded from the start and developed as part of a service design process focused on the impact and outcomes that the digital services are aiming to achieve. This will help avoid digital solutions being seen by as an additional layer, or something extra to be built on the side of a service. We heard examples of good practice in involving those with lived experience and local communities, building this into the DNA of digital development is crucial.

## Making progress

Finding ways to harness lived experience will be key. For example, the benefit of increased accessibility will be more likely to be achieved if services and initiatives are designed in partnership with people with lived experience of using mental health services. One suggestion is that any standards developed would include standards around lived experience in design, development and delivery. The [NHSE Digital Mental Health team](#) has a suite of guidance and resources on inclusive digital transformation which will be useful in building engagement into any design process.

## Using the opportunity of integrated care systems

**Leaders want to participate in an ecosystem of partners with shared aims to use digital to meet the needs of their populations, but more is needed for this to be a reality.**

Integrated care systems offer a unique opportunity to set the cultural and practical tone for digital innovation and delivery. As a collection of partners tasked with planning and delivering joined-up health and care services to improve the lives of people who live and work in their area, they can define what is needed to meet a local population's health needs and how digital can help enable this. This could and should cover the full range of digital services and digitisation, from interoperability to commissioning population-wide preventative digital interventions.

No one digital product will be able to meet all the needs of a system, but in combination with other services and support and as part of a wider ecosystem of partners and stakeholders that sits alongside a system, digital has a key role to play. The challenges are well known, including reducing growing inequalities, the challenge of demand outstripping supply, meeting the needs of people waiting for services, improving workforce capacity issues and reducing care staff burnout.

There is a clear appetite for more collaboration and partnerships across the system to learn from what is working, what's not working and finding new ways of bringing all voices to these conversations. The importance of these being led by experts within the field of mental health was identified as critical in the establishment and delivery of an effective ecosystem of partners, and will help ensure the benefits of digital are realised.

## Making progress

Integrated care systems can be leaders for digital mental health, and using digital to meet the needs of their population's mental health. They have the unique opportunity to harness scalability for their populations, and the benefit this will realise. This will require greater national co-ordination, action to embed digital in planning guidance, and a willingness from commissioners and providers to work together to ensure that any digital services being used locally can fit into the local ecosystem of care and support. The

Hewitt review helps and the calls are welcome for each ICS to have both data and digital champions who also meet as part of a wider national board.

## Spotlight: Greater Manchester ICB and Kooth - The power of a long-term commissioning strategy and whole population approach to digital mental health provision

Early intervention and prevention can have a positive impact on an adult, child or young person's mental health and may prevent problems from becoming worse, especially when waiting for treatment. This is why the implementation of an effective digital mental health provision is vital within any integrated care board (ICB) mental health support offering. However, the services must be evidence-based and have positive direct and indirect benefits to the population and health system.

When it selected Kooth in 2022, the NHS Greater Manchester ICB became the first ICB to adopt a whole-population approach to the commissioning of digital mental health services. It ensured that all residents had access to confidential, safe, and personalised digital mental health support - approximately two million people from aged ten, throughout life, and across all ten of its boroughs.

The original decision to embed Kooth into the ICB's offering was simple: its services are clinically robust and designed to work seamlessly alongside other established NHS mental health services. As a result, NHS Greater Manchester ICB was able to unlock multiple care pathways, ensuring that patients seeking support for mental health had somewhere to go that matched their specific needs. This includes being able to access some services outside the normal 9am to 5pm hours.

Early this year, a long-term strategy was also added to this innovative whole-population approach. In June, Kooth became the longest-commissioned contract the NHS in Greater Manchester



has ever made for its mental health services. This is seen as a significant and important step towards continuing to deliver the mental health care that the ICB believes the population of Greater Manchester deserves.

"Kooth is a great resource for feeling less alone in dealing with your mental health. Being anonymous allows you to express your feelings freely." [Read more.](#)

## Increasing the focus on inclusion

**Digital services should be designed in a way that recognises the challenges faced by those excluded from accessing the internet or who don't have the skills, interest or capabilities to engage in digital services.**

Digital inclusion is about making sure that everyone has the capability to use the internet, access data and associated technology to do things that benefit them day to day. Alongside access to internet and devices, the importance of digital skills to be able to easily navigate and engage in an increasingly digital world must not be underestimated. It cannot be assumed that everyone has these skills. Ensuring this is addressed either nationally or as part of any digital innovation is essential in ensuring digital doesn't exacerbate inequalities, but instead reduces them. The benefits and opportunities of digital mental health will not be fully realised if sections of the population are excluded from accessing it.

## Making progress

Our conversations proposed different ways of tackling digital exclusion. One that resonated was helping to ensure that key digital services can be accessed through free data packages, as

they do for some national digital services in New Zealand. Another was to look at existing initiatives that are making a difference at the local or system level, and looking to support other systems and providers to adapt and adopt these.

### Spotlight: Delivering home care with digital support for staff and service users in Ireland

An award-winning homecare service has enabled a mental health service provider in Ireland to deliver all the same elements of its inpatient programmes to people's homes. Delivered remotely, the service has provided the highest levels of one-to-one support.

The introduction of homecare provided service users with the option to access a high level of care and support when attending in person was not optimal.

The organisation's IT department played a key role in enabling the successful implementation of the service, with practical support for both staff and service users. To overcome challenges of digital literacy or other access issues arising for people using the service, a service user IT (SUITS) helpdesk was established to respond to technology queries.

Key benefits and outcomes:

- Continued and comprehensive support for service users delivered virtually.
- Robust IT support for staff and service users, addressing digital literacy.
- Multi-channel communications campaign to raise awareness of the service.

[Read the full case study](#)

## Creating learning opportunities

**A more collaborative and partnership-focused environment, learning from international examples, would be welcome.**

Learning from countries that are further ahead and applying the good practice in our own context would be a positive step forward. Helping service providers understand what works, and why, will help the sector overcome challenges such as overcoming the digital divide and ensuring privacy concerns are addressed. In Scotland, a national Digital Mental Health Innovation Cluster brings together partners from across the system on a regular basis to ‘gather and share global and local insights, identify and develop innovative products and services while building knowledge to overcome key challenges for mental health and wellbeing.’

## Making progress

There is an appetite for a similar model in England to the Scottish Digital Mental Health Innovation Cluster, and plans are underway to establish a digital mental health innovation working group, to be initially facilitated by NHS England. The NHS Confederation’s Mental Health Network also works with international partners through the International Initiative for Mental Health Leadership (IIMHL) and eMental Health International Collaborative (eMHIC) to share good practice and facilitate learning between countries and systems. A number of digital innovations were shared in a recent case study series exploring International Innovations in Mental health.

## Supporting innovation, research and development

**Simplifying the current system of innovation, research and development would be helpful and would enable stakeholders to have a better knowledge and awareness around what is available to support innovations and research in digital mental health.**

We heard the current system is complex and there was a general lack of awareness of the range of digital tools, technologies and services available, alongside what was in the development and research pipeline. Quality, efficacy and how to manage risk was identified as a key challenge in our conversations, with the market flooded with mental health apps and solutions, but not all are evidence-based or effective. People called for a way of co-ordinating and harmonising effort on research, development and innovation (RDI). This could be a role for AHSNs as they move to the next stage of their development.

## Making progress

One idea we heard that might be useful was a hub or platform where funders, providers and individuals could understand what is happening, by whom and with what timeline, as this would help provide clarity. This could also help publish findings on digital innovations and interventions.

There are a number of agencies and funding bodies involved in investing in and supporting RDI. If these efforts were brought together as a 'mission' approach, more progress could be made. We have seen this model applied effectively in the funding of £42.7 million investment into mental health research more broadly, by NIHR and the Office for Life Sciences.

## Spotlight: Mindset extended reality (XR) for digital mental health programme

Programmes like the UKRI Mindset are examples of coordinated research calls that developers and providers can engage in to

improve and innovate. The programme aims to grow the UK's nascent immersive digital mental health sector by:

- investing in projects that deliver immersive digital mental health therapeutics, including virtual reality (VR), remote touch and mobile gaming
- creating a supportive ecosystem that will help companies bring these innovations to market.

The programme's objective is to encourage fusion between the immersive technology sector and formal mental health providers. This is so that more people with mental health needs can be treated more quickly through immersive digital mental health therapies.

Read more about the [immersive digital mental health programme](#)

## Focusing on regulation, standards, quality and safety

**We heard from our conversations that now is the time to focus further on regulation, safety and quality in the digital mental health space, with opportunity for engagement in this being essential.**

Regulatory compliance was identified as a key challenge, recognising that adhering to healthcare regulations and standards can be complex, particularly when dealing with cross-border data sharing and tele-health services. Our stakeholders want to see an articulation of a national approach to setting up and establishing a regulation, assessment and quality system; one that is not separate from an overarching digital health regulation system, but as a key component of this overarching system. This was identified as an important step that would allow the benefits of digital to be realised at scale.

There is a lot already to build on in mental health including [the Digital Technology Assessment Criteria \(DTAC\)](#), [NICE's Early Value Assessment \(EVA\) for Medtech](#), [Orcha's accreditation of digital health solutions](#), [the upcoming MHRA Innovative Devices Access Pathway](#), and new funding from the Wellcome Trust of £1.8 million to the MHRA and NICE, to explore regulation of digital mental health tools over the next three years. What can help moving forward is, in addition to the work on technical standards, privacy and security, there is a system that supports standards and assessments for usability.

## Making progress

There is a need for minimum standards, co-designed by the mental health sector and public, for quality, safety and privacy of applications being used as part of a public service around mental health. This would include defining what is or isn't a clinical device, and setting out which interventions or innovations would require greater or less regulatory rigour.

We also heard that this should be evenly split between protection of data and cyber security, and patient safety. Currently, regulation feels heavily weighted to data and cyber security as opposed to safeguarding and risk management.

While it shouldn't be ignored, there are significant challenges in regulating what has been termed the 'wellbeing market'. The public as consumers can and will decide what and how they consume in this space. It's important to recognise that innovations happen alongside the continuing development of traditional services. In theory there is nothing wrong with open access to a range of digital services. The issue becomes sharpened when taxpayers' money is being used to purchase services in this arena. It is here where commissioners need to be satisfied with the evidence, impact and safety of broader wellbeing offers. What can help in this space is some of the assessments such as Organisation for the Review of Care and Health Apps (ORCHA),

which provides an independent assessment of services, NICE's early value assessments and NHS England's digital technology assessment criteria (DTAC).

## Spotlight: NICE's early value assessment (EVA) for MedTech

Guided self-help digital cognitive behavioural therapy for children and young people with mild to moderate symptoms of anxiety or low mood: early value assessment

NICE has undertaken a pilot using the new early value assessment (EVA) process, exploring the guided self-help digital cognitive behavioural therapy for children and young people with mild-to-moderate symptoms of anxiety or low mood.

EVA guidance rapidly provides recommendations on promising health technologies that have the potential to address national unmet need. NICE has assessed early evidence on these technologies to determine if earlier patient and system access in the NHS is appropriate while further evidence is generated.

This is a positive example of how EVAs could be part of a wider system of regulation, and help providers understand the evidence base around digital tools and products to make an informed decision on services to commission.

## Making progress

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# Suggested discussion points for future exploration

There is a significant amount of work taking place looking to utilise digital to improve mental health services and meet population mental health needs. However, we know we need to go further to truly maximise the potential of digital. Through the discussions we have had during this project, we have seen great potential and a willing range of partners and stakeholders ready to seize the opportunities provided.

This now requires greater national and local co-ordination; clarity about the direction of travel and the purpose and evidence for digital; and greater collaboration across a range of sectors and disciplines. With clear national leadership from NHSE and DHSC and a focus on greater co-ordination of effort, collaboration and clarity on future direction, digital can be a key component in the mental health ecosystem. There is an opportunity in England to make progress at scale and pace, open up greater access to care and support, and play a part as a leading force in international digital mental health.

From the principles and building blocks identified from our conversations and discussions, and building on the work that has taken digital mental health to this point, we have developed a set of discussion points for further exploration with system players that may help move things to the next stage.

- 1. Create further opportunities for a wider and deeper national conversation on digital mental health and its future.** Building on existing forums led by DHSC and NHSE, and with support from local government and the national voluntary sector, a singular national conversation would enable all stakeholders to

come together and consider what is needed to move forward and how to achieve NHSE's digital priorities for mental health. Involving the public and people with lived experience in this would be essential. This would also be a good opportunity to look at what other countries are doing in this space, to gather learning from a global perspective.

2. Consider clarifying **digital's place in the overall mental health ecosystem of care and population health**. We see this as a key role for NHSE to consider including digital mental health in existing guidance and planning. This could include co-designing specific guidance for ICSs. This would build on the aims and priorities of the long-term plan, but going wider to embrace digital as a key embedded part of the future local systems.
  
3. To drive collaboration in innovation, NHSE to continue establishing a national innovation working group, bringing together all interested stakeholders. This group could then work in a similar way to the Scottish Government's National Mental Health Digital Innovation Cluster, which brings together cross-sector organisations for sharing, learning and development.
  
4. **Bring together the leading research and development funding agencies to agree a programme of research and innovation priorities for digital mental health**. As part of this, it would be helpful to include the development of a central portal of information on digital mental health; current, past and future research; and innovation opportunities. This could be explored by AHSN's and UKRI alongside NHSE and DHSC.
  
5. **Provide clarity on existing regulatory processes**, in alignment with a centrally designed policy framework in development by NHSE and NICE, and agree a national process for establishing a modern and proportionate regulatory system with the main

bodies engaged and involved, including the MHRA.

6. Consider how to develop an effective way of **scaling digital mental health solutions** in local and national solutions. This would also add value by focusing on culture change and supporting adoption, implementation and change management of innovations. We see NHSE and AHSNs with a key role to play in taking this forward.

The Mental Health Network is keen to play a supportive role in maximising the potential of digital mental health to make a real difference to people, families and communities, including through further exploration of the topics in this report and the recommendations made. We remain committed to supporting our members in exploring how digital services and innovations have impact and improve outcomes for population mental health, people with mental health problems and serious mental illness.

We see this report as a step in a longer-term collaborative journey. The next step is to bring stakeholders and partners together again with national policymakers, NHSE transformation directorate and mental health leaders in a second roundtable discussion to explore in more detail the findings and suggestions and develop more specific plans for taking the building blocks forward collectively.

# Annexes

## Annex 1 - Who we spoke to

- Association of Directors of Adult Social Services
- Department of Health and Social Care - digital mental health leads
- Healios
- Hub of Hope
- Kooth
- Local Government Association
- Mental Health Network's Digital Mental Health Forum
- Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
- NHS England's Digital Mental Health Team
- NHS London
- The Royal College of Psychiatrists' Informatics Committee
- Rethink Mental Illness
- Scottish Association for Mental Health SAMH
- South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust
- Togetherall
- Wellcome Trust


## Annex 2 - Work underway in the digital mental health landscape


This image links to a summary of work underway in the digital mental health landscape:

Work underway in the digital mental health landscape

A summary of what is already underway and in the public domain, to help build shared knowledge and understanding of the digital mental health landscape and the platform that can be built on.

Organisation	Initiative
Department of Health and Social Care	<b>A plan for digital health and social care.</b> This strategy published in June 2022 and includes a three-year strategy for digital transformation in healthcare. “Emerging examples in mental health demonstrate how digitally-enabled interventions can be used to augment care pathways to provide productivities to release clinician time for care, while enabling a more personalised and responsive care offering in between traditional care contacts.”
	<b>Data Saves Lives: Reshaping Health and Social Care with Data.</b> This strategy was published in June 2022 and sets out ambitious plans to harness the potential of data in health and care in England, while maintaining the highest standards of privacy and ethics.
	<b>Case for Change and Strategic Framework: Major Conditions Strategy.</b> In August 2023 the Department for Health and Social Care published this policy paper setting out a summary of what they learned through the engagement period so far and sharing next steps. The strategy focuses on six groups of conditions: cancers, cardiovascular disease (including stroke and diabetes), musculoskeletal disorders, mental ill health, dementia, and chronic respiratory disease.
	<b>Office for Life Sciences</b> (part of the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology). The Office for Life Sciences champions research, innovation and the use of technology to transform health and care service. The Life Sciences Council set up an advisory group in November 2022 to provide initial proposals to government on the regulation of medical devices in three priority areas: international recognition, routes for innovation, and system capacity. Their priorities were published in March 2023.





1 - Work underway in the digital mental health landscape

## Annex 3 - Recent developments

### Major Conditions Strategy

In April 2022, the government in England opened a consultation to the public and interested stakeholders to inform the development of a cross-government ten-year mental health and wellbeing strategy. This was part of a commitment to improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes, particularly for people who experience worse outcomes than the general population. A number of interactions and discussions followed that also focused on the role of digital technologies as part of the next stages of national policy and delivery.

In January 2023, the government announced that the work from this consultation would be incorporated into a major conditions strategy, aiming to set out the standards people should expect in the short term and over a five-year timeframe to help with six major health conditions, including mental health. While abandoning the cross-government mental health and wellbeing strategy was a disappointment to many in the mental health sector, the major conditions strategy provides an opportunity to see mental health and mental illnesses as one of a number of interrelated health conditions across physical and mental health. The inclusion of mental health can help with the aim to cement the integration needed between physical and mental health.

In August 2023 the Department for Health and Social Care published the policy paper Major Conditions Strategy: Case for Change and our Strategic Framework, which sets out a summary of what was learned through the engagement period so far and shares what the DHSC plans to do next. The strategy focuses on six groups of conditions: cancers, cardiovascular disease (including stroke and diabetes), musculoskeletal disorders, mental ill health, dementia, and chronic respiratory disease. The policy paper sets out three cross-cutting system enablers to underpin the strategy and its implementation. Digital technologies and innovation are one of these enablers, alongside research and leadership. The strategy intends to take a whole-person approach, respond to multi-morbidities and give parity to physical and mental health together. It is extremely positive to see digital recognised as a key enabler to the success of this strategy, as we heard from NHS Confederation members that it is important that digital is seen as a key component in all national and local system planning and delivery.

The key elements the strategy will focus on using data and digital technology as a system enabler include:

- improving information through electronic patient and social care records

- optimising the use of data and AI for screening, diagnosis, treatment and management
- making use of early value assessment to enable adoption of effective technologies
- improving the NHS App to enable better access to digital therapeutics
- deploying digital approaches inclusively
- supporting innovators through the AHSNs to enable the health and social care system to adopt well-evidenced transformational health-tech innovations at sufficient pace and scale.

## NHS England Priorities for digital mental health

NHS England's digital mental health team launched a set of priorities for digital mental health in June 2022. The priorities were developed to amplify the role of digital in supporting delivery of the commitments made under the NHS Long Term Plan for Mental Health, between now and 2024/25 and beyond.

The development of the priorities was heavily informed by engagement with people across the mental health system, with their experience and insights directly informing the priorities, the ambitions and activities that sit beneath. Over 250 individuals were engaged directly in workshops and interviews and another 700+ stakeholders responded to an online survey. These processes engaged over 300 service users and 200 mental health clinicians.

Published on NHS Futures, the priorities remain a live document on a collaborative platform that enables open discussion, allows

timely feedback from regional and local colleagues, and the opportunity to share learnings across the country.

## Spring Budget 2023

The government announced in the Spring Budget 2023 that it will take steps to modernise and digitise mental health services in England. Mental health will share in a total of £310 million in funding over the next five years (alongside musculoskeletal and cardiovascular conditions).

For mental health, the broad direction of travel for the investment will comprise a series of developments, including:

- assessing and providing wellness and clinical-grade apps free at the point of use
- piloting cutting-edge digital therapies and digitising the NHS Talking Therapies programme
- embedding tailored employment support within mental health services in England, expanding the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) scheme
- helping to ensure that digital resources such as apps for management of mental health are readily available, so that more people can easily and quickly access the support that is right for them.

## Hewitt review

The report of Patricia Hewitt's independent review of ICSs made recommendations for digital that are relevant generally and to mental health specifically.

Hewitt believes that digital tools and apps can play a vital role in enabling ICSs to improve population health outcomes and



acknowledges the opportunities to be gained by new digital and data technologies.

The report deals with both data and digital and there is a focus on how data and digital tools can support a shift to the prevention of ill health.

Central to the review is the pivotal importance of addressing inequalities and empowering people through digital tech. There is a clear recommendation for people to own their own health records. Giving people more ownership of their own care to help holistic, preventive and integrated care and helping to modernise care pathways. Patient portals and patient-facing tools give people opportunities to be active in their own care and support.

On the NHS App, Hewitt recommends building on the existing work of NHS England, where the NHS App should become an even stronger platform for innovation, with the code being made open source to approved developers as each new function is developed.

## NHS Long Term Workforce Plan June 2023

The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan 2023 covers a 15-year assessment of the workforce that will be needed for the future and provides a costed plan of how we develop the current NHS workforce to meet the future challenges.

Commissioned and accepted by the government, it provides a costed plan for how the NHS will develop to meet existing and future demand and challenges and support the health and wellbeing of the population. Over £2.4 billion has been committed to fund additional education and training places over the next five years, on top of existing funding commitments.

The plan sets out the strategic direction for the long term as well as short-to-medium-term actions to be undertaken locally,

regionally and nationally. This includes how digital and technology will be used to train and retain staff, as well as reform ways of working to help modernise the NHS and meet future requirements.

While numbers of roles focused on digital, data and technology have not been included in the plan, NHS England is preparing a separate digital data and technology workforce plan and look forward to it being published soon.

## Annex 4 - Further case studies and illustrative examples

### 1. Early mental health intervention and rapid-access pathways

Local authorities, NHS providers and commissioners in Shropshire began working with partner organisations, including online mental health support community Togetherall, to provide innovative and immediate access to mental health support that complements existing local NHS pathways to support early intervention measures and offer instant access support routes.

Key benefits and outcomes:

- Scalable, whole-population and early intervention support.
- Three-quarters of members say they found Togetherall tools helpful.
- Over 70 per cent of Togetherall members say the resource is helpful while on a waiting list or post discharge. Over half of Shropshire residents who accessed Togetherall used the service outside standard hours.
- 24/7, active clinical moderation and supervision with robust safeguarding case management procedures, tailored to local place needs.

Read the [full case study](#).

## **2. Scoping digital support for children and young people's mental health**

The average wait for a child to receive support from specialist mental health services in 2020 was more than a year. This average figure masks significant regional variation and has been further exacerbated by the pandemic. In order to better support young people with their mental health, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) might be able to deploy digital offers at various points of their pathway, whether this is while they are waiting for an initial assessment, support during treatment or maintaining wellbeing after treatment.

The Oxford AHSN has been working with commissioners and providers in the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West (BOB) ICS to support transformation of services for children and young people's mental health, with a particular focus on scoping digital support.

An initial report including 22 potential digital innovations was presented to BOB ICS colleagues. The information gathered from interviews with the creators of these products has been added to a spreadsheet that allows ICS colleagues to navigate and interrogate this material to identify potential products based on local needs.

“The collaborative working relationship with the Oxford AHSN has enabled a detailed review of digital approaches and possibilities, alongside the engagement of practitioners and young people who will be utilising these approaches. This is an important step in informing us as we review our use of digital solutions with an aim to improve timely access to information, support and interventions for children, young people and their families.” Dr Mairi Evans, clinical director for children, young people, families, all age eating disorders and learning disabilities, and senior responsible officer for CAMHS at BOB ICS.

[Find out more.](#)

### **3. NHS England's digital mental health team's priorities for digital mental health coordinating and collaborative workspace**

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[Find out more.](#)

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