

Learnings from working with integrated care boards on digital transformation

The **Digital Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) programme**

(funded by NHS England as part of their Digital Academy programmes and delivered by NHS Providers, NHS Confederation and Public Digital) has been running since 2022 when ICSs first came into being.

All health and care services are people-based but at every level, they are fundamentally powered by digital: from the tools staff use through to patients' and service users' access to booking appointments and everything in between.

With this in mind, the aim of the programme was to equip system leaders with a level of knowledge and curiosity about digital so they could ask the right questions and confidently make decisions that would push the digital agenda forward. Digital tools and ways of working are intrinsic to the transformation of services and the delivery of better outcomes for patients, clients and staff.

The programme came to a close in July 2025. As ICS leaders look ahead to how best to support their care systems to deliver health and care in England in line with the 10-year plan, we reflect on the key considerations they should focus on, based on our work across the programme.

Understanding digital enables leaders to effectively harness its power

ICS leaders do not have to be experts in digital, but it is essential that they understand how to leverage the new opportunities it presents to achieve better outcomes for patients and staff. Leaders need to know:

- the right questions to ask so they are aware of challenges, understand potential risks and communicate effectively at all levels
- how to support an open and collaborative culture so that teams can share, learn and deliver without top-down control

Read these resources for questions to be asking on [system digital strategy](#), [managing risks such as cyber attacks](#), [ensuring equity in digital services](#) and [how to maximise digital for productivity](#).

Leaders need to confidently understand and be able to talk about the key concepts that underpin successful digital transformation:

- 1 Digital is not technology (nor is it IT).** In the health and social care context, digital is about the delivery of healthcare services by applying the culture, processes, and operating models of the internet era to meet evolving expectations. Technology is secondary.
- 2 Healthcare will be improved if we design for and with real people.** Organising the design of services around the user, not the institutions, technology or existing systems will enable well designed services that meet the needs of patients and service users.
- 3 Good healthcare services are inclusive** meaning they are accessible and usable for everyone, and they do not create or exacerbate inequalities. Digital is only one enabler of inclusive services and needs to be considered alongside other ways of delivering care - for example face to face and telephone.
- 4 Starting small reduces risk and enables faster delivery of the right thing.** Taking a test and learn approach allows teams to test their assumptions on a scale that has less negative impact if they are wrong and allows them to adapt and change their approach to meet an agreed outcome.
- 5 Cross-service teams deliver more value, more quickly.** Adjusting mindsets to think about healthcare as end-to-end services rather than disconnected areas of clinical expertise means a more joined-up experience for patients, service users and staff. Doing this well means bringing together expertise from across operational, administrative, clinical and social care to make decisions together.
- 6 Governance needs to balance empowerment with guardrails.** Leaders should provide the guardrails that support teams to deliver better outcomes whilst allowing them to decide how to do it. Good governance supports, trusts and empowers. It doesn't seek to control.

Related resources

- BRIEFING: [Five traits of effective ICS digital leadership](#)
- BRIEFING: [Harnessing digital to deliver system ambitions](#)
- BRIEFING: [Understanding what users need means getting closer to what they experience](#)
- BLOG: [The digital road to preventative care](#)
- BLOG: [How to take a test and learn approach to transformation](#)
- TOOLKIT: [10 principles for effective prioritisation](#)
- PODCASTS: [The Digital Shift](#)

Creating meaningful, cross-system change is hard

Creating meaningful and lasting cross-system change that benefits all is extremely challenging. This is particularly true in an environment like the NHS where there can be a high degree of uncertainty – there are frequent changes in (or threats to) government funding, as well as ever-changing health, social, and economic priorities. To be a successful leader in the health sector and continue to make progress, navigating change is a non-negotiable skill.

This starts with creating cross-system teams that have the capacity and skills to respond rapidly to change and continuing to fund them appropriately so they can deliver the right thing more quickly. In times of financial distress, the organisations that both make up and lead health and care ecosystems struggle to offer sustained and recurring funding for digital teams but investing in digital capability is strategically fundamental to future delivery. That capability may already exist in different parts of the system, from health to voluntary sector to local authority – being able to bring this together to solve a specific problem or towards an agreed outcome can be very powerful.

Another essential step for leaders to take to speed up the move from analogue to digital is to fix the IT basics. For example, many health and care organisations still face fundamental challenges like unreliable Wi-Fi access, multiple logins for connected tasks, and a foundational lack of understanding and compliance with cyber safety. Time and effort spent getting these basics in place means teams across the system are better positioned to take advantage of – and make informed decisions about – advanced technologies like artificial intelligence (AI).

Relevant resources

- PODCAST: [How leaders can navigate change whilst driving forward the digital agenda](#)
- BLOG: [Developing a digital blueprint for success](#)
- BRIEFING: [Breaking down the system digital transformation challenge](#)
- PODCAST: [Health on the Line - simpler, faster, services](#)

Building trusted relationships creates alignment and effective collaboration

In the Hewitt Review, Rt Hon Patricia Hewitt recognised that *"In many cases, incentives have encouraged leaders to think about their organisation's interests without regard for the wider system. [However] new, partnership based structures for ICSs, including the statutory duty to co-operate, recognises that problem and reinforces the need to place the interests of patients and the public first."*

Since the publication of the review, every ICS we've worked with has recognised that digital is a key lever for achieving alignment and collaboration, and that delivering successful transformation of services hugely depends on having trusted relationships between partners in the health and care system.

The value in sharing and collaborating is enormous – not only does it help avoid duplication of effort, but it also gives teams the opportunity to look sideways and see where they might connect, find alignment, make timely decisions on investment and ultimately serve patients and staff better.

ICSs are complex ecosystems and the challenge for system leaders has been to design governance and ways of working which empower teams to break out of their silos and collaborate across systems within certain guardrails (for example, clear standards and design principles).

Relevant resources

- BRIEFING: [From competition to collaboration – the power of digital as a lever](#)
- PODCAST: [Bringing together digital and quality improvement](#)

Data remains a source of untapped potential

The transformative power of data, while acknowledged by ICS leaders we've worked with, often remains largely untapped. From improving patient and staff experiences, to improving population health management, to gaining insight and improving efficiency – smart use of data as an integral part of the digital agenda can unlock significant patient and staff benefits across the system.

However, there are often systemic, cultural and technical challenges which prevent meaningful progress.

Foremost among these challenges is a fundamental gap: ICSs often lack the foundational elements needed to access and utilise high-quality, consistent, and integrated data across their complex systems. Data is often fragmented, poor quality and not easily accessible. Even when electronic patient record (EPR) systems are in place, the integration of datasets is very difficult, and usability is often an afterthought.

There are also major hurdles in creating suitable data sharing agreements. Trust and bold leadership are needed to broker collaborative data partnerships which use information governance to enable rather than restrict good practice.

We've seen a number of good examples of ICSs who are overcoming these challenges and are now able to translate data into actionable insights and strategic decision making to solve problems at pace. They've focused on the gaps between their organisations and services and where better sharing of data can help bridge those spaces. They've found pragmatic solutions that help them build momentum rather than designing and waiting for perfect data architectures and solutions.

Investing in the right infrastructure, skills and capabilities needed for good data-driven decision making will also lay the foundation for explorations into using AI.

There is a lot of interest and excitement about AI and how it might be used in health care. ICSs may feel under pressure from colleagues and vendors to act quickly, but as with any investment of money and strategic focus, potential AI solutions should be considered on the basis of strategic needs and evidence. We've heard mixed levels of understanding and certainty about AI among ICS leaders, which is not surprising in an emerging and rapidly changing field. Getting the digital and data foundations in place is a solid first step in preparing to explore AI.

Relevant resources

- TOOLKIT: [How leaders can use data to improve decision making](#)
- PODCAST: [The role of digital and data in improving patient safety](#)
- BRIEFING: [Five lessons learned for approaching AI](#)
- BRIEFING: [A short guide to digital and data in the NHS](#)

Next steps

Alignment is the immediate action for all system leaders

ICSs need to operate as conveners rather than commanders, relying on strong, collaborative relationships. However, this strength often fails to convert into well-articulated and unified digital strategies. At a high-level, leaders are likely to agree on the importance of broad outcomes but individual organisations within a system can often remain focussed on their own priorities.

This is the biggest opportunity for all ICSs to act on immediately. By developing a shared, compelling vision for digital that prioritises patient and staff needs, they can create a vehicle for change. This strategic alignment will help ICS leaders to prioritise their resources and say 'no' to initiatives which don't contribute to the vision.

Alignment is also an essential component of dealing with the very real threat of a cyber attack. There is sometimes a lack of understanding of the implications of digital work beyond 'technology projects'. This extends to cyber security and can lead to a limited understanding of any system-wide cyber risk.

There are a number of practical steps ICSs can take to familiarise themselves with their responsibilities and ways to protect themselves and their system to deal with cyber incidents. The risk and the opportunity is all in their ability to collaborate across organisations and partnerships, which hinges on a unified approach.

Relevant resources

- BLOG: [Leveraging digital transformation to tackle the system-wide productivity challenge](#)
- BRIEFING: [Digital transformation and the productivity and efficiency challenge](#)
- BRIEFING: [How integrated care systems can make the most of their digital strategy](#)
- TOOLKIT: [10 principles to help effective prioritisation of your digital agenda](#)
- BRIEFING: [Developing a useful integrated care system digital strategy](#)
- PODCAST: [How to prepare for a cyber attack](#)
- BRIEFING: [Keeping your integrated care system safer from cyber attacks](#)

Effective, digital-era leadership is needed to help ICSs navigate an uncertain future

Across the many ICS sessions we have delivered, and the hundreds of conversations we've had with ICS leaders, it's clear there is a varied digital maturity in systems, in contrast to more established disciplines such as clinical safety or financial rigour.

Each ICS has their own operating context - a favourite phrase of ours is 'once you've seen one ICS, you've seen one ICS' - but a consistent and sustained approach to developing digital-era leadership will help them all.

Digitally mature ICSs not only understand but believe strongly that digital underpins the delivery of all services. They are adept at creating consensus, building momentum, motivating and inspiring people around them and are comfortable with uncertainty. Ultimately, they create the space for others to deliver and be creative.

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Finally, to navigate the changing future ahead for both the NHS and local government, digital-era leadership will help them adapt to and lead change when they need to. A powerful approach ICSs should take to leading change is understanding where their influence and collaborative strength, statutory duties and strategic commissioning responsibilities can be applied. These hard and soft levers of change are at the core of successful digital transformation.

Relevant resources

- BLOG: [Five traits of effective ICS digital leadership](#)
- PODCAST: [Leading the shift from analogue to digital: the art of the possible for NHS leaders](#)
- PODCAST: [How senior leaders in the health sector can confidently lead their organisations in the shift from analogue to digital](#)
- BRIEFING: [Supporting ICS leaders to harness the potential of the digital agenda](#)
- BRIEFING: [Driving the digital agenda: creating the right conditions for success](#)

There are also further resources on digital leadership available to all health and care system leaders including from the [NHS England Digital Academy](#), [Local Government Association](#), [NHS Providers](#) and [NHS Confederation](#), which are available to anyone to help them increase their confidence, capability and understanding of how to lead digital well.