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Fostering the future of healthcare: What digital maturity means for ICBs

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In the government's 2023 mandate to NHS England, Health Secretary Steve Barclay emphasised the importance of levelling up digital maturity. But what does that mean for Integrated Care Boards (ICB) and their individual trusts? To find out, we recently hosted a workshop at the Nuance UK Healthcare Council event. NHS stakeholders from across the country came together to discuss exactly what digital maturity will look like for them, and what they need to drive transformation at the trust and ICB level.

Digital technology is transforming every industry. In healthcare, it's helping reduce inefficiencies, tackle backlogs and improve patient outcomes and services. However, the fast pace of digital transformation has also created digital silos and pockets of innovation that are not yet widespread. The good news is that there are many digital transformation success stories across the NHS; the challenge is how to turn these into the default approach.

Levelling up the digital capabilities for hospital trusts is now a major focus for the NHS. The NHS England Transformation Directorate states that levelling up "will support local systems and trusts to improve both individual patient outcomes and service delivery, ensuring that services can digitise, connect, and transform, irrespective of geography".

But there's one big question on the mind of many NHS stakeholders: "What does digital maturity mean for me and my team?"

So,we invited Digital Health's Jon Hoeksma to host a workshop at the Nuance UK Healthcare Council, focusing on what digital maturity means for Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) and their individual trusts. Here's a quick overview of what was discussed at the event, along with three key questions we put to our workshop guests.

1. What does digital maturity mean in the context of an ICB?

Integrated care systems include organisations at different levels of digital maturity. One of the first steps for an ICB is to map out digital maturity across its system.

Leading the first of three breakout discussions, National Digital Primary Care Nurse Lead Helen Crowther helped the group define exactly what digital maturity looks like at the ICB level.

"In a digitally mature ICB, care records are digitised across every provider organisation," Helen explained. "That gives care providers, support staff, and even patients themselves an integrated view of patient health profiles, contextualised with other data that's relevant to care delivery."

To help trusts and ICBs understand exactly what their digital maturity efforts should be moving towards, the NHS has laid out its own definition of What Good Looks Like. The group discussed how—while providing a strong basis for digital transformation—decision-makers must also look beyond this framework and specifically consider how digital maturity can impact patients and population health.

"When working towards digital maturity, it's important to keep the end goals in mind—improving healthcare outcomes, reducing inequality, and enabling patient education," said Helen. "Those goals will naturally guide ICBs to make digital decisions that increase the visibility, accessibility, and integration of patient data, and help create clear care pathways for all patients."

Jon Hoeksma also highlighted the importance of digital leadership: "Sourcing leading perspectives, insights, and skills from large partners and providers is a good starting point for improving digital maturity across the NHS. But crucially, it can't stop there. Few ICBs have recruited digital leads from outside the provider space, so it's important to ensure that the digital decisions made by those leaders are correct in the context of each ICB."

2. What does digital maturity mean within a single NHS trust?

In the second breakout discussion, CCIO at Royal Manchester Children's Hospital, Peter-Marc Fortune refocused on how digital maturity can differ at the single trust level, versus across a multifaceted integrated care board.

"The biggest difference when you're trying to improve digital maturity across a single NHS trust is that things are a lot simpler—or at least, they should be," he said. "There are fewer ways of working, stakeholders, systems, and pathways to consider, so the key to success is keeping things simple."

But that doesn't mean trusts can afford to ignore coordination and interoperability. Whether you're working with a single trust or across an ICB, to effectively foster digital maturity, everyone should have a consistent definition and view of:

- How success should be measured
- The common goals you want digital maturity to help you achieve
- Workflows and pathways that need to be supported digitally
- Local and board-wide healthcare and patient priorities

3. What are the three most important dimensions of digital maturity for an ICB?

In the final breakout discussion, Dr Jay Mehta, GP Registrar and former CMIO at Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust led a group discussion on the three most important dimensions of digital maturity for ICBs to focus on:

1. **Levelling up:** Reaching digital maturity is a collective journey. Even when leaders have a strong idea of how they want to transform, they must focus on bringing everyone along with them—providing training opportunities to level up digital skills alongside new capabilities.
2. **Interoperability:** Many of the digital challenges faced across integrated care systems today stem from poor interoperability between systems and solutions. As boards drive digital

maturity, they must design for interoperability and lay a foundation for consistent management of things like patient records.

3. **Usability:** Usability must sit at the forefront of every digital decision made by ICBs today. If new tools and practices aren't designed around real patient and practitioner workloads, they simply won't be adopted. And without widespread adoption of leading capabilities, teams can't foster widespread digital maturity.

Final thought: Digitisation doesn't automatically equal digital maturity

Levelling up digital maturity is essential, and it was great to see conversations like this happening among leaders and influencers in our industry. There's a clear need for NHS trusts and ICBs to get the basics right first, but there's also a risk that organisations are simply digitising current manual processes.

With the power of technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and generative AI, there has never been a better time for the healthcare sector to move beyond eliminating paper and truly transform care. If you missed our first and second UK Healthcare Council sessions, I'd recommend going back to explore how these technologies will really impact day-to-day healthcare delivery.

Looking ahead, I can't wait to speak to more stakeholders from ICBs across the country as they explore how to foster digital maturity in ways that help streamline clinical documentation workflows, improve patient-clinician relationships, and consistently improve the quality of care delivered across their system.

Tags: Digital healthcare, Digitisation of the NHS

About Dr. Simon Wallace

Dr. Simon Wallace is the Chief Clinical Information Officer (CCIO) of Nuance's Healthcare division in the UK and Ireland. Simon has worked as a GP, hospital and public health doctor in Brighton and London. His interest in health informatics began in the 90s when he spent a year at the King's Fund investigating the impact of the internet on shared decision making between patients and their healthcare professional. For the past 15 years, he has worked for a range of organisations including Bupa, Dr Foster, Cerner Corporation and GSK across a range of technologies which include electronic patient records, telemedicine, mobile health and lifestyle devices. Simon has a keen interest in the voluntary sector, recently completing a 7 year term as a Trustee for Fitzrovia Youth in Action, a children and young people's charity based in London.

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