

Bridging the digital gap in UK healthcare

How to empower NHS patients and staff through technology and skills



A close-up portrait of an elderly woman with short, wavy grey hair, wearing round gold-rimmed glasses and a light blue button-down shirt with a white collar. She is smiling gently at the camera. The background is a soft, out-of-focus indoor setting.

There's digital progress
in the NHS, but are we
leaving people behind?

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing blue scrubs, is looking directly at the camera. She is holding a tablet computer. The background features a white background with a large red and pink graphic element on the left and a blue graphic element on the right.

There's digital progress in the NHS, but are we leaving people behind?

In 2022, [NHS England officially merged with NHS Digital](#) to help transform working practices, find efficiencies and improve patient outcomes. The move highlights the ongoing transformation of the operating model and culture, putting data and digital technology at the heart of the NHS.

These changes hold immense promise, but they also raise critical questions for healthcare leaders:

- How can they use technology to empower patients and staff and ultimately improve health outcomes?
- How can they ensure equitable access to these new digital tools so patients and staff don't get left behind?
- With the rapid pace of change, how can they develop a sustainable digital-first culture within the NHS workforce?

Together with Censuswide, we set out to answer these questions. We surveyed 1,000 senior decision-makers in public healthcare, across clinical, IT and administrative staff to learn more about how the sector is responding to changes and how technology can contribute to better staff and patient outcomes.

While 84% of decision-makers believe the pace of technology adoption is happening fast enough to meet the increasing patient demand, there are still concerns.

86% of respondents call for further investment in digital skills for the NHS workforce, suggesting that leaders recognise the risk of some being left behind.

Meanwhile, a proportion of patients are being excluded from reaching critical support services because they don't have the tools or skills to access them.

In fact, 34% of NHS decision-makers believe that closing this digital gap could take up to a decade.

This report delves into these challenges and opportunities, exploring what the road ahead looks like for decision makers looking to cultivate a digital-first culture and make healthcare accessible to everyone.



A photograph of a man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a white lab coat over a green shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. He is standing in a pharmacy or laboratory setting, with shelves of products and another person in a white coat visible in the background. The lighting is bright and modern.

Making digital care
accessible to all

Making digital care accessible to all

The **digital divide** is the gap between people in society who have full access to digital technologies (such as the internet and computers) and those who don't. **21% of the UK population** don't have the basic digital skills to use the internet and this can prevent them from accessing the services they need. If patients are unable to use them, new digital healthcare tools can't fulfil their purpose.

Unfortunately, due to the cost-of-living crisis, the divide is only worsening. 32% of NHS leaders believe it has significantly impacted the accessibility of digital healthcare services.

So how can we use technology to build a more equitable NHS that can reach all patients?



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We need to stop vulnerable people becoming digitally isolated due to its impact on their independence. I know an elderly person who ended up in hospital because they couldn't reach their doctor by phone to order repeat medication. This acute admission put extra pressure on the NHS, and impacted their independence which could've been avoided if the person had the digital access and skills to order their prescription online.

Sharon Sanders,
Digital Inclusion Program Manager,
Bradford Council



Bridging the digital gap

The NHS App emerged as a cornerstone in the move to integrated patient care, and adoption substantially increased from 2020 onwards as more patients accessed online services.

But not every patient has the ability to access the app. Uneven patient registrations are particularly evident in areas with the most economically disadvantaged practices, where [uptake lags by 25%](#).

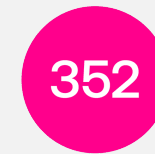
Resolving this inequality hinges on patients having access to the right technology, training and skills to effectively interact with NHS services.

92% of the healthcare leaders surveyed agree. They see improvement of digital skills as crucial to enabling proactive and preventative care. By empowering patients to manage their health through digital tools, we create a win-win: increased patient engagement and improved healthcare outcomes.

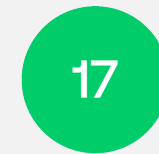


Our [Connect More programme](#) is an example of a way organisations can play a role in boosting digital inclusion and make an impact in communities. Virgin Media O₂ employees can volunteer at hospital and local surgery drop-in sessions, and support with digital skills training. These digital hubs support both patients and staff with the skills and confidence they need to use everyday technology.

Thanks to this programme, [The Park Medical practice](#) in Greater Manchester has seen an increase of 352 repeat prescriptions ordered via the NHS App per month. The practice estimates that this has saved around 17 hours a month, equating to two working days.



repeat
prescriptions



hours
a month



working
days

Such initiatives align perfectly with calls from The [Ada Lovelace Institute](#) for long-term funding for digital inclusion initiatives, such as the [donation of tech devices](#), mobile and internet data plans and digital literacy training.

Bridging the digital divide requires a collaborative effort from healthcare providers, tech partners and policymakers. [Connect More](#) is an example of how effective initiatives need input from all parties.

Working together, we can amplify our efforts and make a meaningful impact in the communities that need support.



Key actions for decision-makers:

- **Lead by example** and manage digital initiatives in your community, such as digital literacy training and resources for patients.
- **Collaborate with tech partners** to better understand how to bridge the digital divide in your community.
- **Think patient-first** when rolling out new solutions. Will everyone be able to access them? Are they user friendly? Are there guides or support you can offer to help patients use them? Do staff feel confident using the solutions?

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We must think outside the box. It's absolutely within the gift of providers to provide digital access at points where people are using healthcare services. Virgin Media O₂ Business provided over 400 hours of support and skills training in the past 12 months through our Connect More programme, but there's still more we can do. As we digitalise, upskilling the population is vital to providing equal access to healthcare.

Mark Burton, Health & Social Care Lead, Virgin Media O₂ Business



Prioritising digital
training for NHS staff

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A digital divide also exists for NHS employees. The pace of new digital tools being rolled out across the NHS has resulted in some workers feeling overwhelmed.

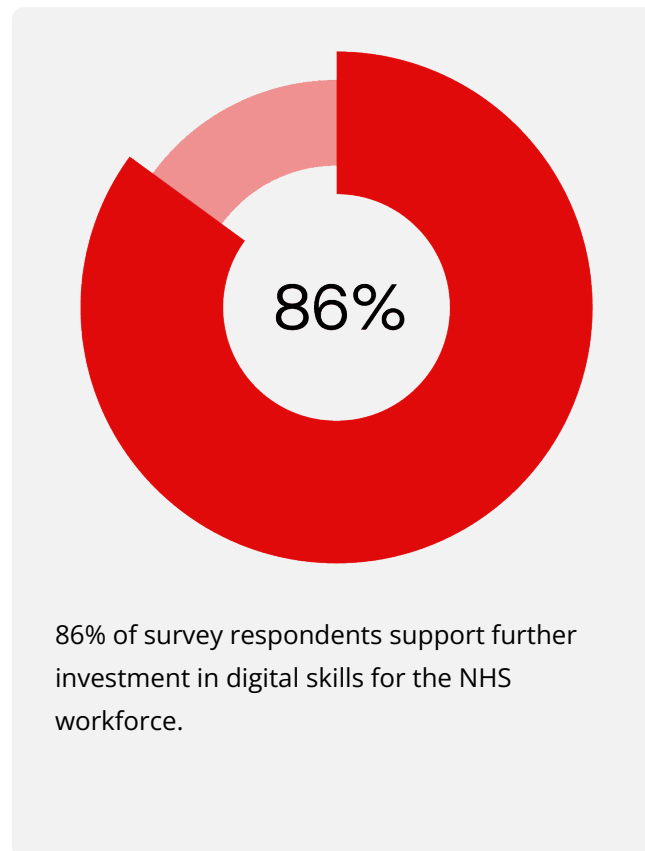
Over half (61%) of respondents believe that digital skills are crucial to an extent for NHS staff. That's because investing in digital tools is only one piece of the puzzle. The NHS workforce need the knowledge, expertise and confidence to make the most out of these tools, otherwise they risk going underutilised.





Training to ensure staff and end users have access to digital healthcare services has become critical. As technology has become more sophisticated, some professionals are unable to operate it efficiently.

Graham Walsh, Medical Director, Health Innovation



From our [Public Sector Tech Untapped](#) report, we found that 25% of healthcare respondents believe their teams don't have the digital skills to use new technology or are resistant to the training required.

This is a cultural divide that needs to be overcome. There can be resistance to the adoption of tech solutions, particularly when they are perceived as achieving administrative goals at the expense of patients' needs.

39% of health professionals don't yet appreciate the importance of upskilling. This reluctance can hinder progress and make it harder to implement the kind of robust and routine training required.

One solution is to employ 'Digital Champion Networks' – whereby NHS organisations utilise early tech adopters from across generations with the specific aim of winning buy-in for technological transformation. Through peer-to-peer learning, these digital champions can help colleagues undertake digital learning, development or training.

The NHS doesn't have to face this challenge alone. Tech partners are ready and waiting to support.

The Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust's digital transformation journey serves as a testament to how partnership can make this happen.

With our support, the trust embarked on [a new digital strategy](#) to replace their legacy tech, implement [Software Defined-Wide Area Network \(SD-WAN\)](#) cloud-based infrastructure and improve digital knowledge of patients and staff by creating digital hubs.

Better connectivity, digital education and smarter processes made all the difference: clinical staff saw improved application performance, were able to record and share patient information seamlessly, experienced improved job satisfaction and were empowered to provide quality patient care.





Key actions for decision-makers:

- **Talk to your employees** about how they use tech, where their resistances may lie and where the priority 'quick wins' are.
- **Identify 'digital champions'** who can help bridge skills and access gaps across generations and gain buy-in for tech-enabled shifts.
- **Ensure staff are trained and confident with technology** so that they see the value it can bring them and patients.



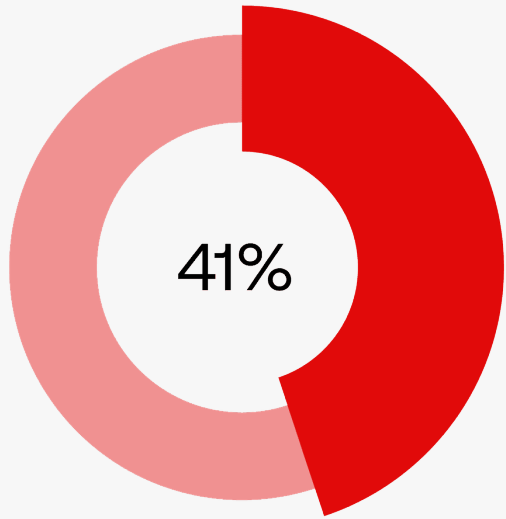
Building a 'digital-first'
culture

Building a 'digital-first' culture

With a significant proportion (34%) of NHS professionals saying it will take up to 10 years to close the digital divide in healthcare, there is obviously a need to ramp up solutions that bridge the gap. A few key obstacles appear to be in the way of a digital-first culture in the NHS.

Overhauling legacy systems is a massive undertaking and can potentially bring with it a lot of disruption. And concerns about maintaining the same standard of care with new solutions can foster a sense of trepidation.





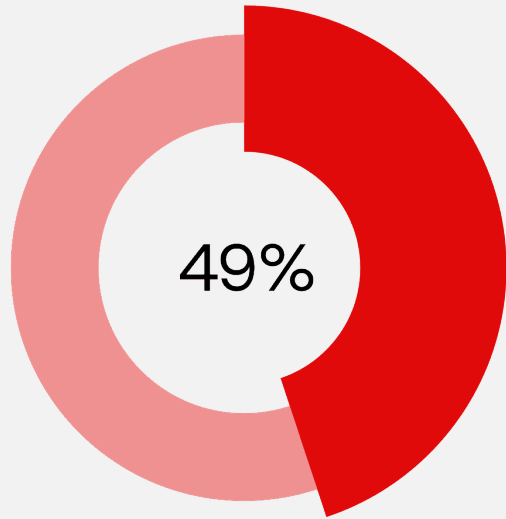
41% of respondents cite resistance to change as a significant barrier.

Technology providers play a crucial role here. They can work with you to create an implementation plan that makes taking on new technology as seamless as possible. They can also identify [secure network solutions](#) that adhere to strict protocols and data privacy regulations.

Additionally, providers can offer ongoing technical support and guidance to demonstrate to NHS staff the value that effective use of new technology can bring to them and to patients.

This all requires open communication and transparency between NHS stakeholders. By clearly outlining the benefits and addressing concerns related to new technologies, they can all be actively engaged in the digital transformation journey.





Funding constraints are another obvious barrier, with 49% identifying limited investment holding them back. The financial commitment and navigation of budgetary limitations can understandably be difficult water to tread.

In our [Public Sector Tech Untapped](#) report we found that 96% of respondents in the healthcare sector said their trust had some element of inefficient technology, and 42% have difficulty integrating new technology with existing systems.

To address this, work with your technology suppliers to prioritise and evaluate your current tech stack and identify areas where existing technology can be optimised or leveraged more effectively – especially where staff can be upskilled on existing tools.

Focus on getting the most out of your existing technology before scaling further. This avoids unnecessary spending and allows for a more controlled approach to new technology adoption.

Promoting positive tech dialogue and having first-hand experience of how to operate new solutions, alongside exploring alternative funding models like public-private partnerships, can help pave the way for sustainable investment.





Key actions for decision- makers:

- **Ensure staff understand** how and why improved tech leads to better patient outcomes.
- **Use your digital champions** to help upskill and support staff with the shift to more digital tools.
- **Evaluate your IT stack** and identify the priority areas that can be modernised while getting the most out of what you already have.

What's next for the
healthcare sector?



What's next for the healthcare sector?

With the NHS experiencing rapid transformation, now is the time to take stock of objectives, ensure everyone is brought on the journey and confidence is instilled in patients and staff.

By prioritising digital inclusion, fostering open communication and adopting a strategic approach to technology investment, the NHS can embrace a future where technology empowers patients, improves care delivery and contributes to a healthier population.

The NHS needs [integrated connectivity](#) across the whole ecosystem. Connectivity that's ready for anything, whether it's a tough night shift, an emergency call-out or a busy day of frontline care.



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If the health sector is going to make a real difference to population health, we must move beyond the siloes and look at it from total integration. A modern world requires integrated care, and to enable that we need to have the infrastructure and skillsets in place. There needs to be equality across all systems and across all end users so that everyone can access the best care, in the best way.

Mark Burton, Health & Social Care Lead, Virgin Media O₂ Business

Key actions for decision-makers:

- **Think patient-first** when rolling out new solutions. Will everyone be able to access them? Are they user friendly? Are there guides or support you can offer to help patients use them?
- **Ensure staff are trained and confident with technology** so that they see the value it can bring them and patients.
- **Prioritise initiatives** that address the digital divide in your community such as digital literacy training and resources for patients.
- **Talk to your employees** about how they use tech, where their resistances may lie, and where the priority 'quick wins' are.
- **Lean on your tech partners** to maximise the efficiency of your existing tech and identify the new investments that will provide the most value.

Explore our care-ready connectivity solutions designed to meet the evolving needs of the healthcare sector.

Ready to empower your staff and improve patient outcomes?

