Rt Hon Victoria Atkins MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Wes Streeting
Shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

Thursday 11 January 2024

Open Letter to Secretary of State and Shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

Dear Secretary of State

The elected leaders of Digital Health Networks, an independent community of best practice and collaboration representing local NHS digital leaders, are sending you this open letter to recommend five pragmatic digital priorities for the NHS in 2024.

The five digital priorities call for sustained focus on fundamental basics of IT infrastructure, developing a digitally skilled workforce and providing much greater stability and need for predictability on funding and policy initiatives.

Against the backdrop of intense pressure on NHS services and funding it is essential to maintain investment and focus on delivering the core IT infrastructure, networks that doctors and nurses rely on every single day to deliver safe and effective care.

1. **Financial Predictability, Governance and Trust:**
The first priority is for greater predictability of national funding and policy initiatives and a reduction in chronic short-termism on digital, which severely hampers the ability of local NHS IT leaders to plan and deliver improvements to the NHS through digital. EPR Funding is a significant concern.

2. **Consistent Focus on Getting the Basics Right (Smart Foundations)**:
The second priority is for a consistent focus on 'getting the basics right', ensuring staff have access to the reliable laptops, networks and Wi-Fi needed to do their job in a modern NHS. This comes under the 'Smart Foundations' of NHS England's 'What Good Looks Like'.   Failure to invest in digital basics is failing clinicians delivering care.

3. **Workforce Development and reducing Digital Burnout through improved User Experience:**
The third priority focuses on workforce-related issues, such as the Digital Data and Technology (DDaT) workforce plan, training, and digital literacy amongst staff, which is a major concern. It also emphasises the need to ensure the onboarding process for new staff, and HR systems, are up to date and user friendly.

4. **Data, Shared Records and Interoperability:**
The fourth priority calls for greater focus on data quality, data asset management, data sharing, standards and data infrastructure. Data driven insights (FDP) and leveraging AI capability require good data asset management and support to deliver Trusted Research Environments.

5. **Greater sharing of Skills, Knowledge and Experience:**

The fifth priority is for much greater sharing of skills, knowledge and experience on digital across the NHS.

The detailed description of the five priorities is attached.

Currently a slew of ultra short-term national initiatives, often announced without prior notice and sometimes requiring local leaders to bid against a pot of money, mitigate against effective planning.

Significantly, none of the priorities are for a particular technology or platform but are instead about allowing effective planning, governance, infrastructure, workforce development, focusing on user experience, data quality and reinforcing mechanisms to enable sharing of skills and knowledge. All of these require more measured policy making and sustained focus.

Our key message to the Secretary of State, and Shadow Secretary of State, is that the NHS fortunately has many highly able and experienced local digital leaders. They should be trusted and empowered to develop and implement locally relevant and appropriate strategies.

If adopted by national policy leaders in 2024, working in partnership with local NHS digital leaders, the recommended measures would unquestionably better enable the NHS to adopt digital technologies to help improve patient care.

As a group we offer you our support and would be very happy to discuss with you and your team how any of the five priorities could be effectively implemented.

The priorities were identified at an in-person meeting of the elected advisory panels of the CCIO, CIO and CNIO networks held in London on 8 December.

With a General Election looming and a possible change of government we have also copied in the Shadow Secretary of State for Health, CEO of NHS England and chosen to publish this as an open letter.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Jones, Chief Digital Information Office, Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS FT and Chair, Chief Information Officer Network

Dermot O'Riordan, Chief Medical Information Officer, East Suffolk and North Essex NHS FT (Ipswich and Colchester) and Chair, Chief Clinical Information Officer Network

Simon Noel, Chief Nursing Information Officer Network, Oxford University Hospitals NHS FT and Chair, Chief Nursing Information Officer Network