

Health Innovation Navigator 2

Ensuring Equitable Digital Healthcare:

Can I trust it?

October 2026

Health Innovation West of England

Intended audience:
Innovators, product designers, product managers, user experience designers, clinical safety leads, commissioners

Reading time:
5-10 minutes

At a glance

Three things to know

- Trust is the outcome; trustworthiness is what creates it.
- Users often decide whether to trust a service before they begin using it.
- Transparency, visible support and clear communication improve adoption and retention.

Building trust through trustworthiness

Trust is the confidence people develop when they see evidence of that trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness refers to the actions, behaviours and features that demonstrate a service is safe, transparent, reliable and responsive to people's needs.

Trustworthiness comes first; trust is earned through consistent experience over time. People's perceptions of trustworthiness are shaped by their previous experiences of health and care services, public institutions and digital technology. For many individuals and communities, particularly those who have experienced exclusion, discrimination, stigma or harm, trust cannot be assumed. Historical and ongoing experiences, such as racism in health and care, health and care injustices, concerns about surveillance, insecure immigration status, or fears about how personal information may be used, can lead to caution towards health and care services.

As a result, many people assess a service's trustworthiness before deciding whether to engage with it. They look for evidence that it is transparent, safe, accountable, representative of diverse



communities, provides meaningful control over personal data, and responds to people's needs and concerns. Trust is not created by a single feature or communication campaign. It develops through every interaction a person has with a service, from first impressions through to long-term use.

Demonstrating trustworthiness is particularly important in digital health and care. When people see clear evidence that a service is safe, inclusive and designed with their interests in mind, they are more likely to engage with it. Health and care professionals are also more likely to feel confident recommending and supporting its use.

Without clear evidence of trustworthiness, people may choose not to engage, even when they have the skills, devices and connectivity needed to access digital services. This can reinforce existing health inequities and subsequent inequities and limit the reach and impact of otherwise well-designed innovations.

Find out more about health and care injustices and experiences of racism in the Further Reading section of this Navigator.

Myth:
"If we build it well, everyone will trust it equally."

Reality:
It's relational and it depends on who's experiencing the innovation and their previous experiences. The same digital tool can be trusted by one group and not trusted by another.

How innovators demonstrate trustworthiness

Transparency

Users want to understand why information is collected, how it will be used and what happens next.

Innovators can:

- ✓ Clearly explain what the service does and who runs it.
- ✓ Use plain, accessible language.
- ✓ Be open about how data is collected, used and protected.
- ✓ Explain what happens to data and continuity of care if the service changes ownership or stops operating.

Support

People are more likely to engage when support is visible, accessible and easy to access in the digital tool.

Innovators can:

- ✓ Provide support throughout the user journey and make it easy to find.
- ✓ Have a telephone number as well as a chatbot option.
- ✓ Have videos of regular troubleshooting as well as written instructions.
- ✓ Only promise support that can be sustained over time.

Credibility

Credibility is built when users can easily verify who is behind a service, how it is regulated and whether it can be trusted.

Innovators can:

- ✓ Display relevant certifications, quality marks and regulatory approvals.
- ✓ Clearly identify the organisation responsible for the service.
- ✓ Explain the quality assurance, clinical safety and governance processes in place.
- ✓ Explain the clinical, technical and lived experience expertise involved in development.

Control

People want to understand their choices and feel confident they remain in control of their information and interactions.

Innovators can:

- ✓ Use clear consent processes.
- ✓ Allow users to manage their information preferences.
- ✓ Make it easy for people to leave the service if they choose.
- ✓ Explicitly state that they can change their mind about previously consented preferences.

Accountability

People need to know they can raise a concern, get help when something goes wrong, and leave the service if they choose.

Innovators can:

- ✓ Provide visible routes for feedback, complaints and support.
- ✓ Communicate promptly about incidents, errors or data breaches.
- ✓ Ensure people know how to challenge decisions.
- ✓ Learn from feedback and demonstrate improvements.

Compounding experiences

People's past experiences of health and care, public services and digital technologies shape their willingness to trust a new service.

Innovators can:

- ✓ Recognise that trust may vary between individuals within communities.
- ✓ Work with trusted organisations and community partners.
- ✓ Design with an understanding of previous barriers and experiences of exclusion.
- ✓ Invest time in building relationships and confidence over time.

Representation

Trust increases when products have been developed, tested and evaluated with diverse communities who will be the end users of the product.

Innovators can:

- ✓ Involve diverse communities and people with lived experience throughout design, testing and evaluation.
- ✓ Share decision-making and demonstrate how feedback has shaped the product.
- ✓ Assess who benefits, who may be excluded and how inequities can be addressed.
- ✓ Build long-term, trusted relationships rather than one-off engagement activities.

Myth:
"Trust is mainly about data security"

Reality:
Data security is important, but users also build trust through clear communication, visible support, transparency and positive experiences.

What trust and trustworthiness look like for...



Innovators

Demonstrate trustworthiness and build user confidence.



Patients

Confidence that digital healthcare is safe and trustworthy.



Patient-facing staff

Confidence recommending and supporting the use of digital tools.



Clinicians

Trust in digital tools to support better care and outcomes.



Operational staff

Digital services that are easy to support and maintain.



Commissioners

Greater confidence in equitable adoption, reducing implementation risks.



Strategic leads

Confidence that digital transformation improves access, outcomes and equity.

How trust and trustworthiness support NHS innovation and adoption

Adoption	Users are more likely to register and begin using the product when they trust it.
Engagement	Clear guidance and accessible support reduce uncertainty and help diverse users successfully navigate digital pathways.
Retention	Positive early experiences encourage continued use and reduce early drop-off.
NHS implementation	Products that demonstrate transparency, trustworthiness and accessible support are more likely to meet regulatory and assurance requirements, making them easier for NHS organisations to adopt across diverse populations.
Scaling	Building trust from the outset creates stronger real-world evidence, supports commissioning decisions and enables products to scale confidently across different healthcare settings.

Ask yourself:
Would a first-time user immediately understand who we are, why we are asking for their information, what we do with their information and where they can go for help?

Maintaining trust and trustworthiness over time

Trust takes time to build but can be lost quickly. Changes to a service, poor communication, reduced support or unclear data practices can undermine confidence and lead people to disengage. Maintaining trust requires ongoing attention, particularly as services evolve.

To build and sustain trust:

1. Provide easily accessible notices when making significant changes to your innovation.
2. Clearly communicate incidents, explain what happened and outline what actions are being taken.
3. Engage stakeholders and communities regularly to understand concerns and changing needs.
4. Provide clear routes for escalation of safeguarding concerns or complaints.
5. Ensure people can access human support when needed.
6. Be transparent about when AI is used and for what purpose.
7. Collect only as much data as is needed.
8. Act on feedback and demonstrate how it has informed improvements.
9. Practice consent processes that support informed choice.
10. Adapt innovations to local communities and contexts.

How I can demonstrate trust is being built

Consider measuring and evaluating:
- User understanding of data use and consent
- Confidence in raising concerns
- Awareness of available support
- Number of support requests
- Adoption and engagement across different demographic groups

Case study: Listening to build trustworthiness

Research undertaken by ERIC, The Children's Bowel & Bladder Charity, supported by Health Innovation West of England, explored the experiences of young people and teenagers accessing school toilets. Bladder and bowel health can be difficult for young people to talk about. To help overcome these barriers, the project invested time in building trusting relationships and creating safe opportunities for young people with lived experience to share their views. The project demonstrates trust is essential when engaging people on sensitive topics. When people feel listened to, respected and understood, they are more willing to share their experiences and help shape meaningful improvements to services.

More information about this research can be found here:
www.eric.org.uk/voices-for-change-report

Where to go next

Navigator 3: Ensuring Equitable Digital Healthcare: Can I access it and use it in everyday life?
Explore how accessibility, digital confidence, connectivity and real-world circumstances inform more equitable digital healthcare.

Further reading for Navigator 2
- NHS Race and Health Observatory: Digital Apps and Reducing Ethnic Health Inequalities – www.nhsrho.org/research/digital-apps-and-reducing-ethnic-health-inequalities
- Divided: Racism, Medicine and Why We Need to Decolonise Healthcare by Dr Annabel Sowemimo - www.annabelsowemimo.com/books
- Unheard: The Medical Practice of Silencing by Dr Rageshri Dhairyawan - www.drrageshri.com/books
- CDC: About The Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee - www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/about/index.html