The public’s celebration of the NHS’s 70th birthday this year has reaffirmed its importance to the health of our families and friends, but looking forward, the NHS faces major challenges, especially in technology, writes Keiron Salt.

In health and across local services, digital transformation is a top priority now being written into strategies, according to new research. But in healthcare, the vision is not being realised fast enough.

Since the launch of the NHS 70 years ago, major changes have taken place that challenge the financial sustainability and quality of care the health service can deliver. Health and social care secretary Matt Hancock recently stated: “The biggest risk is not doing digital transformation.”

Life expectancy is 13 years longer than it was in 1948. Expenditure on the NHS has risen substantially. Growth in health expenditure has far outpaced the rise in both GDP and total public expenditure: each increased by a factor of around 4.8 over this period.

In health and across local services, digital integration is slow. While 75% of respondents saw greater collaboration between health and social care providers as one of the top three benefits of the new network (HSCN), only a minority have a firm plan in place for managing this transition.

The vast majority (68%) of NHS trusts plan to integrate their IT systems with other local health and care systems within the next couple of years as part of their migration to the new Health and Social Care Network (HSCN). Only a minority have a firm plan in place for managing this transition.

**HSCN can act as a springboard for digital innovation**

As well as charting digital progress generally, we wanted to explore how trusts plan to use HSCN as a springboard for greater transformation – for example, by rolling out more mobile collaboration and/or using the cloud to make it easier to adopt new ways of working.

While 75% of respondents saw greater collaboration between health and social care providers as one of the top three benefits of the new network, almost half of organisations were still at the ‘scoping’ stage and had not really moved their plans forward.

**Short-term steps can drive progress towards long-term goals**

Given the pressures on NHS budgets, as well as the practical barriers trusts have highlighted, the best approach is to keep long-term objectives in mind when formulating the transitional steps.

**Empowering those at the forefront of care is critical**

Having clinical and other frontline care stakeholders, not to mention chief executive officers, driving and collaborating together on initiatives will give the needed focus on patient outcomes.

This will generate a more empowered multi-disciplinary team to develop and deliver the most benefit beyond the current boundaries.

Enhanced mobility, 4G, wi-fi and 5G can allow individuals to access and update information from wherever and whenever they need to, saving busy staff from returning to their offices.

Faster connectivity in and out of the home combined with connected medical devices (the Internet of Things) means that care information can be captured and shared between citizens and health professionals in real-time, facilitating preventive care and putting the citizen at the centre.

Improved connectivity and collaboration can allow multi-agency teams to work together beyond the walls of traditional care settings to form a care-ecosystem to deliver the best care. It enables new digital channels to keep patients and their families informed about care plans. The ability to fund and truly transform the NHS is essential if it is to continue to enhance people’s lives over the next 70 years.

The ‘technological revolution’ will only succeed if it is decisive, supports transformational change to key patient outcomes and preventative care while empowering frontline staff.

Keiron Salt is chief information officer, health for BT.