Corporation Pop

Digital health that works: why human-centred design is the missing piece in NHS digital transformation.

Digital transformation in healthcare succeeds only when people can and want to use the tools provided.

This white paper explores why human-centred design is critical to the NHS 10-year Plan, showing how usability, accessibility, and trust turn ambition into outcomes. Drawing on real-world case studies, it offers practical guidance for commissioners and providers who want digital health that truly works.

White paper: 15 mins

Content

Abstract

This white paper explores the role of human-centred design in delivering the digital transformation ambitions of the NHS 10-year Health Plan for England. While the plan sets out significant goals for digital access, automation, and integrated care, the success of these initiatives depends on whether patients and clinicians can use the tools effectively.

Drawing on Corporation Pop's experience in user-focused digital health design, the paper outlines how design-led approaches improve adoption, trust, and outcomes. It offers practical guidance for commissioners and highlights the risks of overlooking usability in the rush to go digital, whether in the NHS or the wider digital health sector.

Introduction

The NHS 10-year Plan sets out an ambitious digital agenda: a revamped NHS App, integrated patient records, AI-driven services and digital-first care. These ambitions are both necessary and overdue. However, one factor threatens to undermine this transformation: poor user experience.

Digital health tools are only effective when users want to use them, not just once, but repeatedly. Adoption is driven by trust, clarity, and ongoing usefulness. If a platform is confusing, inaccessible, or doesn't integrate seamlessly into clinicians' workflows, engagement will quickly drop, no matter how innovative the technology behind it is.

This white paper argues that human-centred design is the missing link between digital ambition and real-world outcomes.

It also demonstrates how Corporation Pop's approach and experience align with the NHS's priorities, making us a strong partner for any organisation delivering digital health, from Trusts to startups, and from public services to private platforms.

The challenge for digital health in 2025

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital health tools across the NHS. Services that had resisted digitisation for years were suddenly available via apps, video consultations and online portals.

Many of these were rolled out at speed, often without adequate user research, testing with real patients and clinicians, or consideration of how uptake would be sustained.

The results were mixed:

- **For clinicians**
  Some tools reduced pressure, while others created additional administrative work.
- **For patients**
  Digital systems sometimes improved access, but in other cases caused confusion or led to disengagement.
- **For the system as a whole**
  Uptake varied widely, with some platforms thriving and others being quietly phased out within months.

A recurring issue has been the mismatch between design and reality. Digital tools that don't align with clinical capacity or patient expectations can unintentionally make workloads heavier rather than lighter. In some cases, practices that adopted digital triage systems found demand outstripped their ability to respond, leading them to scale back or revert to more traditional models.

This pattern highlights a broader lesson: success in digital health is not simply about building new platforms. It depends on ensuring they are usable, inclusive and embedded in everyday practice. Only then can they deliver measurable improvements in health outcomes and support the long-term goals of NHS digital transformation.

The NHS 10-year plan

The NHS 10-year plan sets out three key shifts:

- **From hospital to community**
- **From analogue to digital**
- **From sickness to prevention**

At the heart of the NHS 10-year Health Plan for England is a clear and urgent commitment to digital transformation. The plan outlines a vision for a modernised health service that is more accessible, more efficient and more proactive in its approach to care. It's a vision shaped by three overarching shifts: moving care closer to home, embedding digital by default and prioritising prevention over reactive treatment.

The second shift, from analogue to digital, is central to almost every other goal in the plan. It includes the creation of a reimagined NHS App as the default gateway for services, empowering patients to manage appointments, view records and access personalised health advice in one place. This ambition goes beyond convenience; it's about giving patients agency and reducing administrative pressure on frontline staff.

Integration

Digital transformation also includes the development of integrated, real-time patient records. These systems are intended to break down silos between services and settings, ensuring that information follows the patient and supports faster, safer decisions. The plan recognises that clinicians need access to complete and up-to-date data to do their jobs effectively, and that patients benefit from not having to repeat their story at every turn.

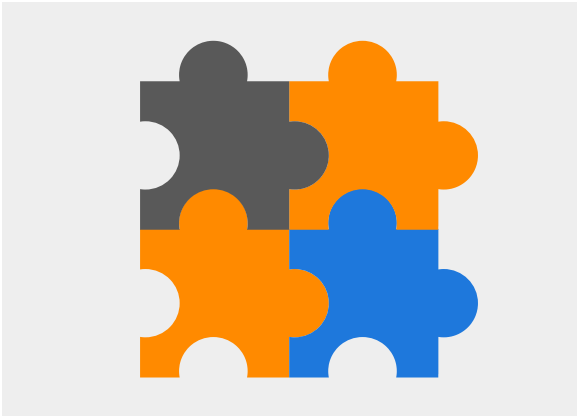
Automation

Automation and artificial intelligence are expected to streamline clinical workflows and reduce unnecessary admin. From AI-assisted triage to intelligent scheduling and document processing, the aim is to free up time and resources. Done well, this could significantly ease pressure across the system.

Accessibility

Finally, the plan envisions a new approach to accessing services, one where people start their journey digitally, through self-referral and simplified digital front doors. This shift is about improving access, particularly for those with busy lives, limited mobility, cognitive issues or language barriers, while also easing the load on GP reception desks and phone lines.

These ambitions are bold and necessary, and their success will depend on design that works in practice, not just on paper. That's a lesson for both the NHS and any organisation building digital health tools. If systems are hard to use, poorly integrated, or fail to gain trust, they won't deliver the impact they promise.

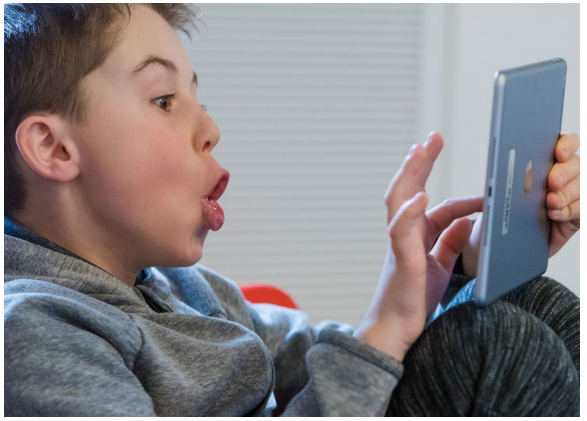


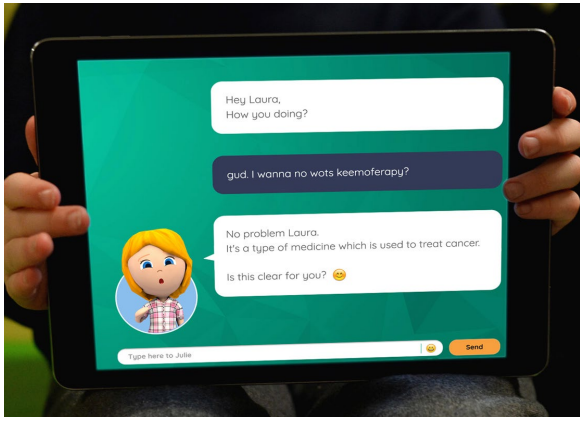
Aligning with value-based care

Digital health products succeed when they're not only clinically sound but also designed in ways that people actually want to use. This matters because healthcare systems are moving towards a system of value-based care, where outcomes, not activity, are the measure of success.

A tool that aids compliance, or helps a patient better manage a long-term condition, doesn't just improve individual wellbeing. It also eases pressure on services, cutting the need for repeat appointments or costly interventions.

This is where thoughtful design adds real value. By making digital tools part of people's daily routines, adoption rates rise and outcomes improve. That leads to measurable cost savings for commissioners and providers, and better experiences for patients.





"Corporation Pop helped us meet our strict timeline. Their flexibility and professionalism stand out, along with the high quality of the end product."

Dave Pearson
Chief of Staff- Group Medical Director's Team, Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust

Where design makes the difference

Technology can only take the NHS so far. The final stretch of adoption, satisfaction and clinical benefit, relies on experience.

Human-centred design involves:

- Understanding the goals, constraints and contexts of both patients and professionals
- Designing interfaces that support real-world clinical workflows
- Prioritising accessibility, inclusion and ease of use
- Testing early and often with actual users

This approach turns digital tools from burdens into assets. It ensures that digital health products, like the NHS app, work for people with limited digital skills, that AI triage is trusted by patients and that record systems don't add to the cognitive load of clinicians. Design isn't the final polish applied to a digital health product. It's the foundation on which its success rests. While technology provides the infrastructure, it's design that determines whether a tool is adopted, understood and trusted by the people who use it.

Understanding users

At its core, human-centred design begins with listening. Understanding what patients need, how clinicians work and what real-world constraints exist is essential. This isn't simply about conducting research; it's about approaching each product as a tool that must fit into someone's life or workflow without friction.

Design for the real world

Design also shapes trust. Users make up their minds fast. If the language feels off or the navigation doesn't work first time, they'll close the tab, especially when they're anxious or under pressure. In healthcare, where stakes are high and users are often under stress, clarity and reassurance matter more than novelty or visual flair. Good design supports decision-making, builds confidence and reduces cognitive load, particularly for users who may be navigating unfamiliar digital environments.

Accessibility

Accessibility and inclusion are non-negotiable. The NHS serves a population with a wide range of abilities, languages and levels of digital literacy. Tools that ignore this diversity (even unintentionally) risk reinforcing health inequalities. Design-led approaches ensure that barriers are identified and removed early, rather than patched over after launch.

Ongoing testing

And crucially, good design doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's a process of iteration, informed by real feedback from actual users. The most effective digital health products are those that have been tested, challenged and refined multiple times, not just approved and released. Prototypes, usability testing and co-creation are the methods through which products become useful, usable, and sustainable.

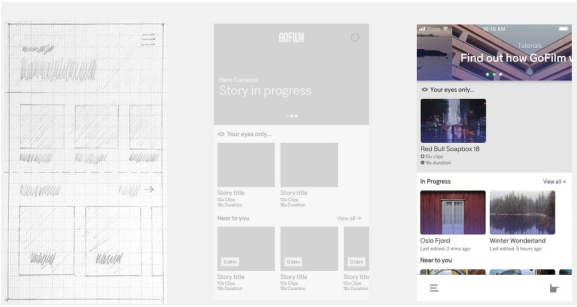
These are the reasons why human-centred design is not a luxury or a bonus. It is the difference between a system that adds value and one that adds friction. It's what turns digital health from a theoretical solution into something that genuinely works in practice.

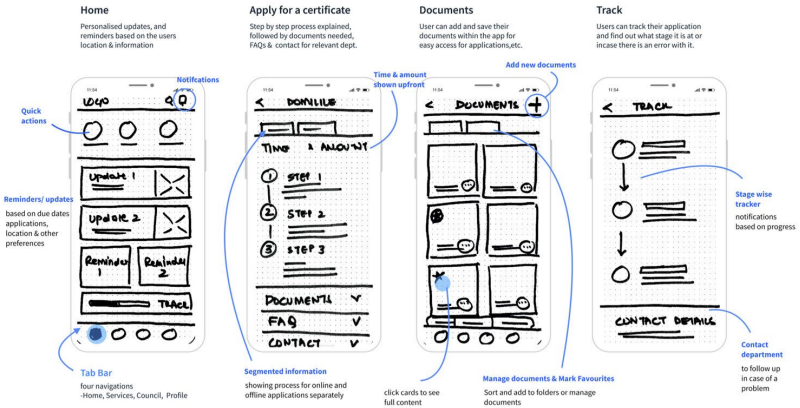
What good looks like: Corporation Pop's approach

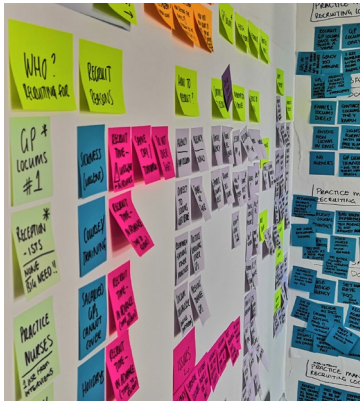
Corporation Pop brings over 30 years of experience in digital design, with a strong track record in healthcare. Our approach is grounded in a commitment to collaboration, iteration and compliance, and above all, to the real needs of patients and clinicians.

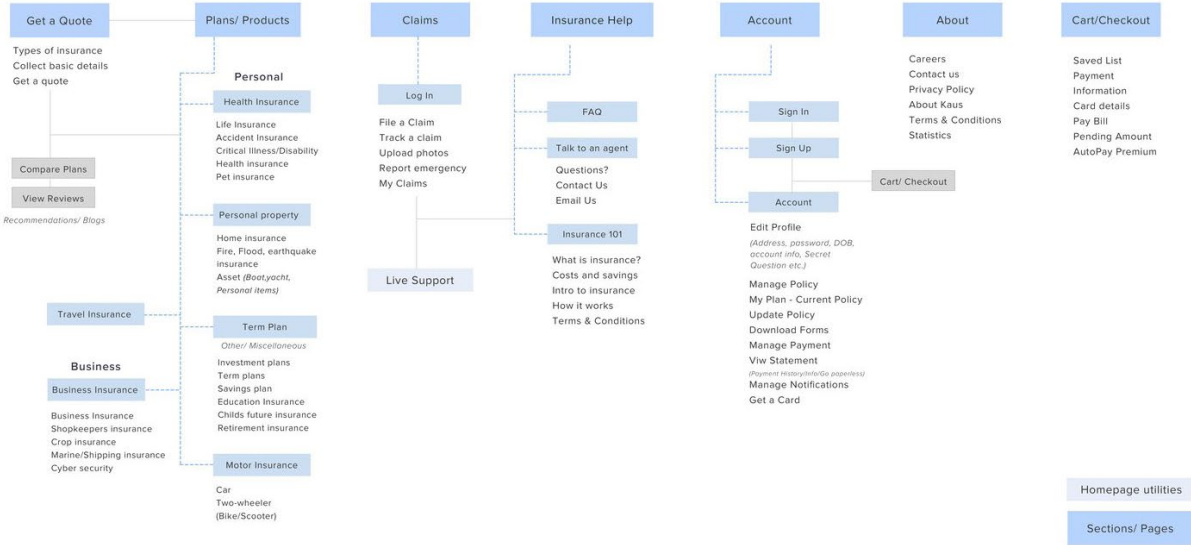
We begin by working closely with service users and clinical staff to understand needs in context. This includes user interviews, workshops and on-site observation to gather insight into behaviours, expectations and constraints. These findings directly inform our design process, which focuses on rapid prototyping, usability testing and co-creation.

We test early and often, gathering feedback from users and refining the product iteratively to ensure clarity, accessibility and effectiveness. At every step, we ensure compliance with NHS standards and accessibility regulations.









> "Corporation Pop really believed in what we were trying to achieve and had a vested interest in getting the best possible outcomes. We like that they held our hand throughout the entire process and we never felt like we were just a number or product to them."

Jan Smith
CEO, HealthyYou Ltd

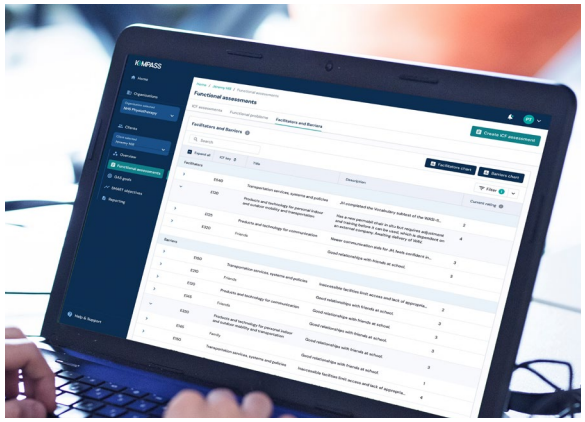
Recent case studies

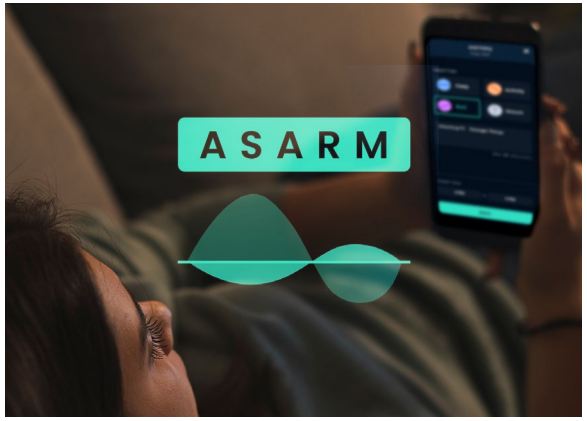
Our projects vary in scale and focus. Some involve rethinking large healthcare services and making them easier to access, while others centre on creating sensitive, supportive tools for people at vulnerable points in their lives. What links them is an emphasis on clarity, empathy and practical usefulness.

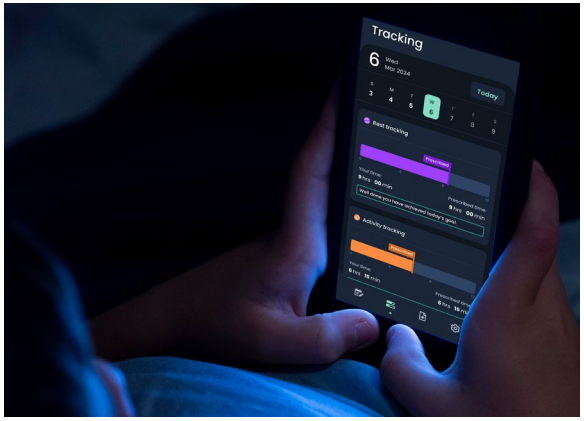
For example, Kompass is a rehabilitation platform we redesigned to help patients and clinicians set and track goals collaboratively. It streamlines the experience without losing the nuance required in recovery-focused care. Following a thorough UX audit and clinician co-design, we reorganised the platform's information architecture, clarified navigation, and prioritised key functions. This resulted in streamlined workflows, clearer goal-setting paths and automatic outcome reporting that saves clinicians valuable time.

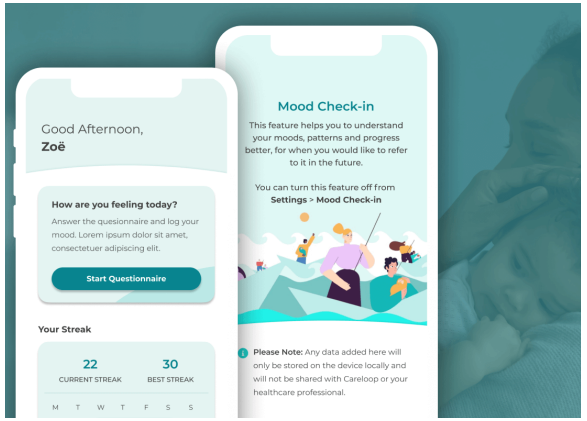
In the case of ASARM, we helped a children's hospital digitise an intensive programme for chronic fatigue syndrome, transforming it into a structured, accessible experience, for both patients and clinicians, while maintaining its therapeutic integrity. By replacing time-consuming paper diaries with a secure, serverless app and clinician portal, ASARM reduces administrative burden, improves data clarity and supports informed treatment decisions in real time.

We've also worked on emotionally sensitive projects like Careloop, an app to support new parents experiencing postnatal depression. Our work involved developing a gentle, intuitive interface that reduces anxiety and builds trust in moments of vulnerability. We introduced simple onboarding, mood tracking and flexible use, so parents could engage on their own terms and feel supported rather than pressured.









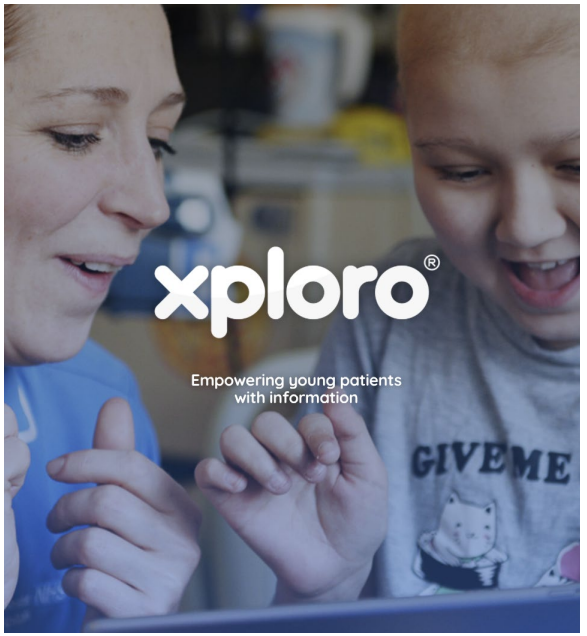
Recent case studies

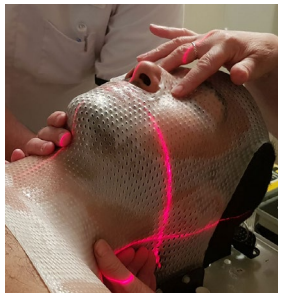
Meanwhile, with Xploro, we brought gamification and augmented reality to healthcare education, making hospital experiences less frightening for children with serious illnesses. Built on user research and tested with our Expert Advisory Board (children aged 10–16), Xploro combines AR walkthroughs, a chatbot designed especially for kids, interactive games and mood tracking, all proven to reduce anxiety and increase health literacy among young patients.

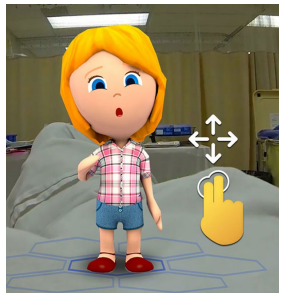
And in MindYourself, we designed a wellbeing app for health and social care staff that offers immediate support in high-pressure environments. Its design includes intuitive symptom checkers, quick tools for stress and fatigue and signposting to help – purpose-built for healthcare professionals to use when they most need it.

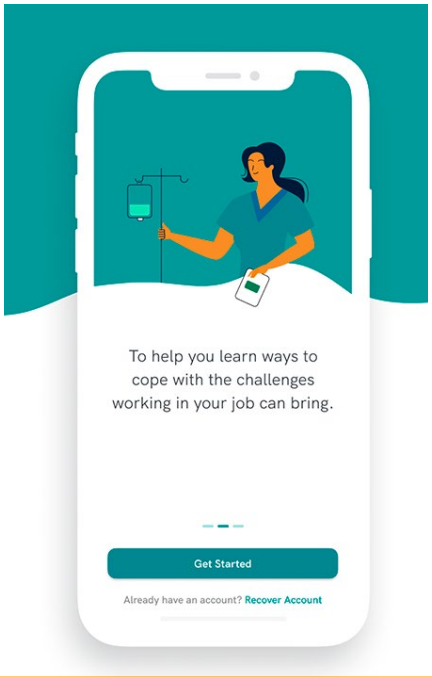
Design that fits into real life

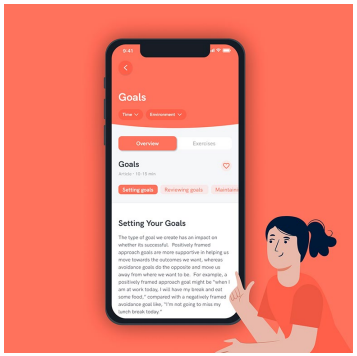
Each of these projects demonstrates how thoughtful design leads to products that are not only functional, but genuinely useful. These are tools that slot into people's lives and improve outcomes without adding complexity. This approach increases the chances that tools become part of people's daily routines, rather than something that's tried once and dropped.











How to commission digital health products that work

Commissioning a digital health product isn't simply about choosing a supplier or picking a platform. It's about making a series of early decisions that can make or break whether the final product actually gets used.

We've seen the same mistakes happen again and again. These five principles help avoid them.

Start with people, not features.
Before you think about functionality or platforms, speak to the people who will actually use the thing: patients, clinicians and admin teams typically. The best digital products aren't built around stakeholder wishlists or boardroom assumptions, they're built around real user needs. That means understanding people's goals, frustrations, habits and constraints. What gets in the way of care? What could make their lives easier?

Research should go deeper than surface-level surveys: talk, observe and listen. When you build around lived experience, you end up with something that's relevant, usable and far more likely to succeed.

Bring design in early.
Good design starts with structure. That means involving designers from the beginning, not after the strategy is already set. Whether it's mapping patient pathways, clarifying language, or stress-testing assumptions, design thinking adds value long before a wireframe is drawn. It helps spot gaps, surface contradictions and prevent complexity from spiralling.

The earlier design is involved, the easier it is to build something that works, and the less likely you are to end up designing your way out of someone else's decisions.

Prototype, test, repeat.
Don't wait until development is complete to find out if something works. Build early prototypes. Share them with users. Watch where they get stuck. Fix it. Then test it again.

It's cheaper to catch a problem on paper or in a clickable demo than it is in a live product. Early testing helps you avoid expensive rewrites, delays and damage to user trust. It also gives your team space to explore alternatives and solve issues while they're still small.

This isn't about slowing things down. It's about speeding up learning. The goal is to uncover what doesn't work before it's baked in and to make continuous improvements based on real feedback. It's faster and cheaper to learn early than to fix later.

Make accessibility non-negotiable.
Digital health must work for everyone. That means designing with accessibility in mind from day one – not as a compliance box to tick later.

Aim to meet at least AA standard of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). This includes colour contrast, meaningful alt text, semantic HTML, proper heading structure and full keyboard accessibility for websites and apps.

Consider the needs of users who may be sensitive to motion or have cognitive impairments and give them control. Building accessibility in early avoids costly retrofits later and leads to more usable, inclusive products for all.

Choose partners who understand the human side.
Digital health tools succeed or fail based on whether people want to use them. That means working with partners who prioritise research, design and user testing as much as technical delivery.

They should also understand how digital tools need to integrate with existing systems and clinical workflows, because even the best-designed product will fail if it can't fit in.

Look for collaborators who listen, challenge assumptions and value iteration. Technology is important, but it's human insight that shapes useful, trusted products. Choosing the right team early can mean the difference between a tool that sits unused and one that genuinely improves care.

"We appointed Corporation Pop having received a personal recommendation from a mutual contact. The team were a delight to work with and delivered on time, on budget and above expectation."

Zoë Blake
CEO, Careloop Health

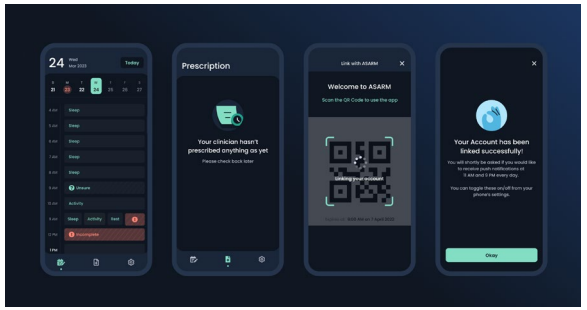
Conclusion: Digital health must be human

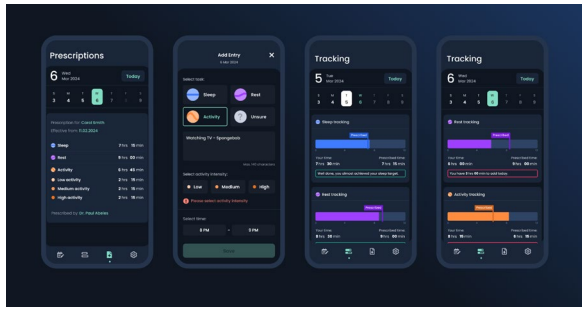
The NHS 10-year Plan sets an ambitious course for digital transformation – one with the potential to improve care, reduce strain on services and empower patients like never before. But these goals will only be realised if digital tools are designed with the people who use them in mind. Without human-centred design, even the most innovative technology risks falling short.

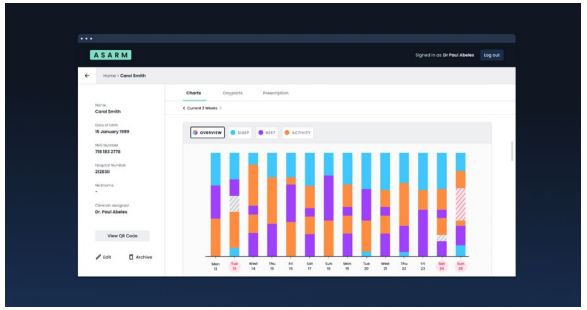
As digital health evolves, emerging technologies like AI-driven triage, remote monitoring and personalised medicine will become increasingly central to care delivery. Staying ahead means building solutions that are flexible, scalable and, above all, designed around people and ready to adapt as needs and technologies change.

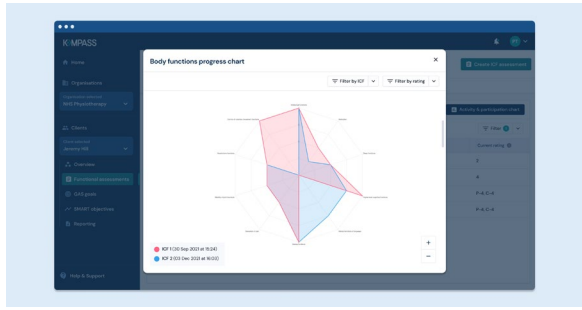
Corporation Pop brings decades of experience crafting digital health solutions that work in the real world. We combine deep sector knowledge with a focus on usability, accessibility and iterative testing to deliver products that clinicians and patients actually want to use.

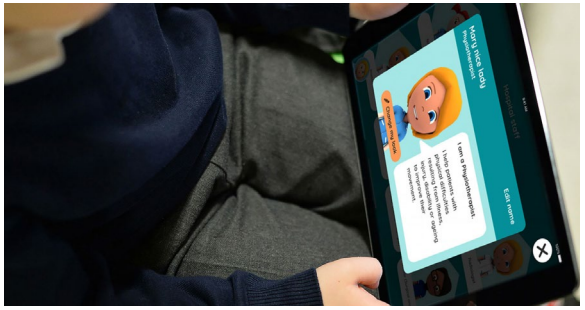
If your organisation is ready to turn digital ambition into outcomes that matter, partnering with a team that understands both technology and human behaviour is essential. We're here to help make that happen.



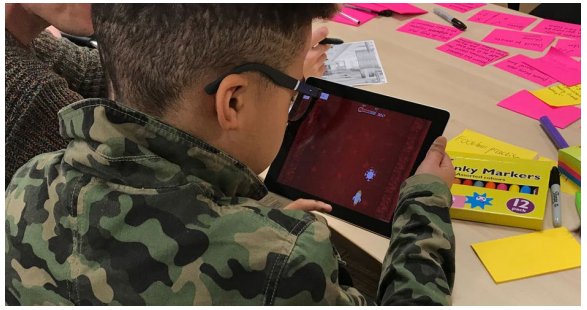


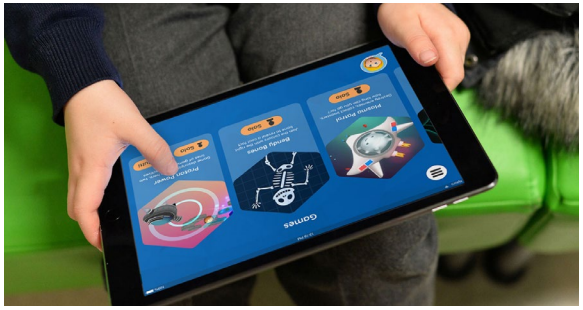






> "We're impressed with their implementation of technology and innovative solutions."
>
> **Lead Consultant Clinical Psychologist**
> Royal Manchester Children's Hospital





About Corporation Pop

Corporation Pop is a Manchester-based digital design and development studio with over 30 years of experience. We work with NHS Trusts, health startups, and education bodies to create digital health products that are grounded in research, shaped by users, and built to last.

We design and develop apps, websites, VR and AR experiences and offer standalone UX research, audit and design services. Our work is compliant with NHS digital and accessibility standards, and always tailored to the people who use it.

To learn more or start a conversation, visit: corporationpop.co.uk.

Our longstanding partnership with Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust (MFT) – one of the UK's largest acute Trusts – has seen us support a variety of digital transformation initiatives.

We've also worked with entrepreneurs and early-stage companies, helping them translate clinical insight into scalable, patient-focused digital tools. Xploro, an international platform for children with serious illness, began life as one of our in-house projects. We continue to work closely with them as their product evolves.

In collaboration with Health Education England (HEE), Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), and Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), we designed and built a suite of resources to help school-aged children explore careers in health and care, including interactive content on the human body.

Trusts and organsiations we have worked with:

- Careloop Health
- CTC Physio
- Gable Systems
- Greater Manchester West Mental Health NHS Trust
- Havas Lynx
- HMR Primary Care Academy
- Kompass
- Koku Health
- Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust (MFT)
- Health Education England (HEE)
- Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU)
- Manchester Surgical Skills and Simulation Centre
- MindYourself
- NIHR Manchester Biomedical Research Centre (BRC)
- Northumbria NHS Trust
- Promptly Health
- ProReal
- Royal Manchester Children's Hospital (RMCH)
- Saint Mary's Assisted Reproduction Treatment
- Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust
- The Christie NHS Foundation Trust
- Xploro

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