

Digital Critical Friends Work Programme 2026/27

July 2026

1. Purpose

The Digital Critical Friends (DCF) programme is the Wessex Secure Data Environment's standing public involvement group. It provides independent public challenge, advice, and assurance, helping ensure that the SDE continues to earn and maintain the public trust needed to use NHS data for research.

This document sets out the DCF work programme for the remainder of 2026/27. It identifies the main areas where DCFs can contribute, how that involvement will take place, and an indicative timetable for activity over the coming months.

2. The role of Digital Critical Friends

DCFs are central to the Wessex SDE's Community Involvement and Engagement (CIE) approach. They provide the standing public scrutiny that supports the SDE's governance, while also helping shape wider community involvement, communications, and public assurance activity.

As the SDE has matured, so too has the role of the group. DCFs are no longer simply asked for views as members of the public. Through their experience of the SDE they are increasingly able to review emerging policies, research proposals and governance issues before decisions are made, helping identify public concerns early and strengthen the quality of decision-making. They are an integral part of the team, and this is reflected in their involvement across the SDE's governance structures.

The DCF programme therefore sits within the wider Community Involvement and Engagement model that also includes targeted engagement with specific communities, project-based involvement, and wider public outreach. Together these activities help maintain the SDE's social licence by ensuring that public perspectives continue to shape how the service develops.

3. Developing the work programme

This work programme has been developed from three sources:

- the Wessex SDE's mission, vision, and organisational objectives;
- the Communications and Community Involvement and Engagement Strategy for 2026/27; and,
- discussions with DCFs about where they believe they can add the greatest value.

Those discussions highlighted several emerging priorities, including AI-enabled research, the role of the Wessex SDE within a wider NHS research infrastructure, and the principles that should govern research, platforms and partnerships operating both within and beyond the SDE.

The aim is not to review every aspect of the SDE equally. Instead, the programme focuses effort where public scrutiny, challenge and co-design are most likely to strengthen public trust, improve decisions and help communicate public benefit.

4. Using this document

The following section describes each proposed area of work in more detail. For each topic we outline why it matters, the contribution Digital Critical Friends can make, and how their involvement will support the wider work of the SDE.

Not every topic requires the same level of involvement. Some will be explored through Town Hall discussions, small ad hoc review groups, or more substantial multi-session projects. Some topics may also involve partnership working with wider community groups or voluntary and community sector organisations where additional perspectives are needed.

This topic-based programme of work complements ongoing involvement of the DCFs in SDE governance structures, principally the Wessex SDE Board and Wessex Data Access Committee.

The final section sets out an indicative programme of activity for the remainder of 2026/27, including planned Town Hall meetings, focused review sessions, and other opportunities for involvement.

5. Priority areas for DCF involvement

The topics below represent the main areas where we will collaborate with Digital Critical Friends to provide co-design and scrutiny input during 2026/27. Each topic has been selected because public involvement can make a meaningful difference. In some cases that means helping shape new policies or approaches before decisions are made. In others it means reviewing public-facing information, testing whether communications are clear, or helping demonstrate the benefits being delivered through NHS data-enabled research.

To help plan the year's activity, each topic is marked according to the primary type of involvement we expect it to require. This helps ensure that Digital Critical Friend time is used proportionately and that more substantial issues receive the level of discussion and scrutiny they need.

T = Town Hall (discussion involving the whole Digital Critical Friends group)

F = Focus Group (a small group of three or more members exploring a specific issue)

P = Project (a larger piece of work involving multiple focus group sessions over time)

C = Community Outreach (activity involving, or led by, a community, patient, or voluntary sector organisation outside the Wessex SDE, with DCFs helping to shape or support the work)

A. AI-enabled research (T)

Artificial intelligence has the potential to transform health research, but it also raises important questions for policy and public trust. Terms like AI and 'machine learning' are used loosely to describe a range of technologies. These are not all the same, and people may have different expectations depending on the type how it is being used. For example, there is a key distinction between 'AI analysis tools' that are used within the SDE, and the use of the SDE to train AI algorithms that will then be used in the real world.

Together, we will explore what the public would expect in terms of safeguards, what information people need to feel confident, and how AI research should be explained. The aim is to help the Wessex SDE develop AI-enabled research in a way that reflects public expectations from the outset, rather than responding to concerns afterwards.

B. Research inside and outside the Wessex SDE (T)

As the Wessex SDE grows, it is increasingly involved in a wider health research ecosystem. Research studies will not always follow the same route; there will be opportunities to work with partner organisations, or for work to be conducted fully or partially in other secure research environments. That may include private companies.

This raises important public questions: Where are the boundaries of the SDE? When and how is it acceptable for research projects, data processing, or governance to happen outside these boundaries?

DCFs will help define the principles that should always remain true, so that the NHS can continue to say, with confidence, that patient data is being used responsibly and under appropriate oversight.

As part of this work, we will explore opportunities to engage directly with other organisations in the NHS and private sector involved in the wider research ecosystem.

C. SDE-to-SDE data sharing and data movement (P)

As the NHS Research SDE Network becomes more connected, researchers will increasingly work across more than one SDE. This raises important questions about how data moves between trusted environments, how responsibilities are shared, and what safeguards should always remain true.

Working with the Thames Valley and Surrey (TVS) SDE and other Southern SDE Partnership colleagues as part of a national programme, DCFs will help explore what matters most from a public perspective. Together we will consider how multi-SDE research should be explained, what public assurances need to remain consistent across the Network, and how the NHS can demonstrate that patient data continues to be used safely, transparently and under appropriate oversight, even where more than one Secure Data Environment is involved.

Note: The exact scope of work will be defined by TVS SDE in due course as they are leading this project for the national team.

D. Refreshing the Digital Critical Friends programme (P)

As the SDE continues to grow, so too must the Digital Critical Friends programme. We will work together to recruit and support new members, improve onboarding, review how people move into governance roles such as the Board and Data Access Committee, and ensure the programme continues to reflect the communities it

serves. The aim is to build on the group's experience while bringing in new perspectives and maintaining a healthy, sustainable programme for the future.

This project will include review of DCF recruitment materials, involvement in training and onboarding, and supporting changes to roles in the group.

E. Patient notification and public-facing information (F)

Most people will first encounter the Wessex SDE through a leaflet, poster, or website rather than a research study or policy document. These materials therefore play an important role in building trust. They should provide simple, accessible starting point with explanations that answer the questions most people have. But they should also make it easy for those who want to know more to find progressively more detailed information. This "start simple, dig deeper" approach underpins the SDE's wider transparency model and recognises that different people want different levels of detail.

DCFs will help review both the structure and the content of these materials, as well as what is needed and proportionate in terms of accessible or Easy Read versions.

F. Researcher toolkit review (F)

Researchers also need clear guidance about public expectations. The SDE's researcher toolkit explains not only how to use the SDE, but also the standards expected when working with NHS data.

Whilst this document is principally aimed at researchers. Digital Critical Friends will help review this guidance from a public perspective, ensuring that the messages given to researchers are consistent with what patients and the public would reasonably expect.

G. Annual Report and benefits realisation (F/T)

The Annual Report is the SDE's main public account of what it has achieved during the year. However, the quality of that report depends on the information and evidence collected throughout the year. As the Senior Leadership Team develops the SDE's performance measures, Digital Critical Friends will help review whether these reflect the things that matter most to patients, communities, and the NHS. Together we will consider whether we are collecting the right evidence now to demonstrate public benefit later. The aim is to ensure that the Annual Report reflects not simply what is easiest to measure, but what the public would regard as meaningful evidence of success and value.

H. "You said, we did" and closing the feedback loop (T)

People are more likely to stay involved when they can see that their contribution has had an influence. Throughout the year, DCFs will help review how the SDE reports back on public involvement, ensuring that it is clear what people told us, what changed as a result, and where suggestions could not be taken forward and why. This helps strengthen transparency, accountability, and trust by showing that public involvement genuinely influences how the SDE develops.

I. Case studies and impact stories (F)

Research can often feel abstract until people see a real example of how NHS data has helped answer an important question or improve care. DCFs will help shape how research stories are told, ensuring that case studies are credible, balanced, and relevant to public audiences. As well as reviewing case studies there may be opportunities to contribute to them or help the SDE advocate using them.

J. Wider Community Involvement and Engagement (C)

The Digital Critical Friends provide standing public involvement, but some questions need wider or more targeted conversations. During the year we expect to support initiatives such as the Connect-D public panel, a youth involvement programme with LifeLab, and other engagement linked to specific communities or research programmes. DCFs will help shape and participate in these activities, ensuring that wider public insight is connected back into SDE governance and decision-making rather than remaining isolated.

Note: The exact programme of work here will be defined by partners.

K. Emerging policies, governance, and project scrutiny (F)

Over the past two years, DCFs have developed a detailed understanding of how the Wessex SDE operates. This allows the group to do something increasingly valuable: review important policies, governance changes and research proposals before decisions are made.

Throughout the year we will invite the group to provide informed challenge on emerging issues, helping identify potential concerns early and strengthening the quality, transparency, and public assurance of SDE decision-making. This will involve review of the SDE's Health Research Authority and submissions, but exact timings and topics are not yet clear as these emerge from service needs and the national programme context.

6. Standing roles and project-based involvement

The DCF programme combines a small number of standing roles with flexible opportunities to contribute throughout the year. This approach provides continuity where it is needed, while allowing members to become involved in topics that match their interests, experience, and availability.

Over the past two years, the programme has evolved alongside the Wessex SDE. During the mobilisation phase, a larger number of standing groups helped establish public involvement across different areas of the service. As the SDE has matured, many of these activities have become part of normal ways of working.

For 2026/27, we are simplifying the structure. A small number of standing roles will provide continuity in governance and public representation, while most involvement will take place through time-limited projects linked to live policies, research, communications, and engagement activity. This gives members greater flexibility to contribute where they can add the most value.

Role	Typical membership	Purpose
Town Hall	All DCFs	The main forum for learning, discussion, and review of SDE priorities, research, emerging issues, and the annual work programme. We will bring a regular structure to these meetings which is outlined below.
SDE Board	2	Provide a public perspective on the strategic direction, priorities, and performance of the Wessex SDE.
Data Access Committee (DAC)	4	Provide public scrutiny of live data access requests, ensuring that research proposals meet expectations around public benefit, transparency, and the responsible use of NHS data.
DCF Ambassadors	Flexible	Represent the SDE or DCF group at conferences, meetings and public events, support wider engagement activity, and help communicate the work and impact of the Wessex SDE.

Town Hall meetings

Town Hall meetings are the main forum for bringing the DCFs together. As the Wessex SDE has matured, we want these sessions to become increasingly focused on discussion, learning and public influence, rather than simply providing programme updates.

While each meeting will be tailored to the issues at the time, we expect most Town Halls to follow a broadly consistent structure:

- **Strategic update (approximately 15 minutes)** – a member of the Senior Leadership Team or invited expert will introduce an important areas of the SDE's work, providing context and an opportunity for questions.
- **Digital Critical Friends update (approximately 15 minutes)** – members will share reflections from recent activity, including the Board, Data Access Committee, project work, community engagement, or other areas of involvement.
- **Substantive discussion or learning (approximately 60 minutes)** – most of each meeting will be dedicated to a single topic requiring public discussion, scrutiny, or co-design. Wherever possible, supporting papers or background reading will be circulated in advance so that time together can focus on discussion rather than presentation.

This format reflects a wider shift in the way the DCFs programme operates. Rather than using meetings primarily to share information, we want to create more opportunities to explore complex issues, generate insight and influence live decisions. The topics discussed will be drawn from this work programme, alongside new priorities and opportunities that emerge during the year.

The format should be seen as a guide rather than a fixed agenda. Some meetings may require more time for discussion, while others may respond to emerging issues or significant developments within the Wessex SDE. Our aim is to use the group's collective knowledge and experience where it can make the greatest contribution to the development of the service.

Project-based involvement

Alongside these standing roles, DCFs will be invited to take part in focused pieces of work throughout the year. These may involve a single Town Hall discussion, a small focus group, a multi-session project or participation in wider community engagement activity, depending on the topic.

Participation will normally be voluntary and based on members' interests, experience, and availability. This approach allows the SDE to bring together the right people to explore the right questions at the right time, while ensuring that public

involvement remains proportionate, meaningful, and focused on the areas where it can have the greatest impact.

7. Indicative programme and timetable

This work programme will be delivered across the remainder of 2026/27. The timetable below is intended as a roadmap rather than a fixed schedule. Some activity will depend on national programmes, regulatory requirements, partner timelines, and the availability of draft materials for review.

The aim is to give Digital Critical Friends a clear view of the likely programme of activity, while retaining enough flexibility to respond to emerging SDE priorities and opportunities where public insight can add value.

Quarter	Focus	Likely DCF activity
Q2: July-September 2026	Agree the work programme and begin practical review activity	- Finalise the DCF work programme - Begin review of patient information and public-facing materials, including information about choices and opt-outs - Start researcher toolkit review - Develop first research case studies - Begin targeted community outreach activity where partner projects are ready - Begin planning for DCF refresh, recruitment, and onboarding - Produce or review an initial “You said, we did” update - Use the August Town Hall to explore the research pipeline, future opportunities and emerging partnership or commercial themes
Q3: October-December 2026	Move into deeper scrutiny and benefits work	- Explore AI-enabled research and research tools - Consider boundaries for research inside and outside the SDE

		• Contribute to SDE-to-SDE data sharing and data movement work, subject to the TVS-led national programme timetable • Review how the SDE is measuring success, including public benefit measures • Support Annual Report planning • Continue case study and impact story review • Continue targeted community outreach activity and review emerging insight where available • Develop DCF onboarding and support materials
Q4: January-March 2027	Reporting, evaluation and next-year planning	• Review Annual Report content • Review “You said, we did” reporting • Support DCF programme refresh and onboarding • Evaluate the work programme • Agree priorities and activity for 2027/28

Alongside the planned activity above, DCFs will continue to contribute through standing governance roles, including the SDE Board and Data Access Committee. They may also be invited to review emerging policies, HRA updates, governance changes, or project materials as these arise during the year. This activity is not fixed to a single quarter because it will depend on regulatory requirements, national programme timelines, and the development of live SDE projects.