



Community Hospitals Association

PLAIN ENGLISH SUMMARY

The Role of UK Community Hospitals During the COVID-19 Pandemic

September 2022

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT?

This report describes the role of community hospitals during the pandemic from the point of view of those working in these hospitals.

Community hospitals are small hospitals, often in rural and remote areas. They provide local health services for their communities. During the pandemic, there was media coverage about the larger hospitals and particularly Intensive Care Units (ICUs). However, the role of the community hospitals and their input during the pandemic was overlooked in the national press. We wanted to fill this gap.

This two-year project was planned to encourage staff and managers working in community hospitals to tell us what they did during the pandemic. We wanted to hear about any improvements that had made.

The project was carried out by the Community Hospitals Association (CHA) which is a voluntary organisation that promotes community hospitals in the UK. We decided to carry out this project after being contacted by staff in community hospitals who wanted to tell us about what they were doing. We also found out about good practice during the pandemic through our annual Innovations and Best Practice programme. We wanted to build on this and find out what else had been happening across the UK. We were pleased to be given funding for this project from the Health Foundation, Q Exchange.

The CHA was delighted that 20 organisations agreed to be part of the project. 85 staff were interviewed either individually or in small groups. Staff were asked about what good changes had happened under three themes: practice, people and planning.



WAYS OF SHARING AND LEARNING THROUGH CASE STUDIES

At the end of the interviews the staff were asked what would be useful case studies to share with other community hospitals from their experiences and achievements. The staff, with the project team, agreed on 31 case studies. A full list of these is at the end of this paper. 11 of the 31 case studies were written up in depth.

We believe that community hospitals made an important contribution during the pandemic. Staff described how the hospitals offered wards that were used flexibly, and how they offered urgent care centres to keep people away from accident and emergency centres, and how they developed ways of adding to their care. Staff spoke of new technologies and remote working, such as offering virtual outpatient clinics when almost all NHS clinics were closed.

Staff also spoke of the small but significant changes that helped patients and their families. We can learn a lot from the small new things that helped patients such as offering patients and relatives knitted hearts (to keep them connected), giving patients with COVID-19 ice-lollies to help with their drinking, sore throats and lack of taste, and offering activities to isolating patients such as quizzes through an Alexa. A number of staff said that the pandemic had made other services understand the role of the community hospital and its importance, in a way that they had not been before.

One in-depth case study describes the development of a team of clinical staff with support and extra training so that they could become Advanced Practitioners and offer

more services. Another full case study showed the benefit of extending clinical and management support to their community hospitals so that they could work fully 7 days a week. This enhanced service, with senior clinical and managerial staff on 7 days a week helped to reduce patients stays in hospital. Another full case study describes how a Trust listened to staff and responded quickly to need, using a weekly staff survey called Corona Voice.

There were many new ways that staff worked to support patients and their relatives during this very difficult time.





Examples included special arrangements for families to have compassionate visiting arrangements to patients who were dying, at a time when NHS hospitals were closed to visitors.

New ways of supporting staff and their health were described in the case studies, as COVID-19 was impacting on them personally and when they were in work. Technological developments became an important part of care, when visits could not be made to the patient's home prior to them going home from hospital. This showed in the imaginative uses of virtual services.

We are delighted to be able to share the case studies as widely as we can.

ONE OF OUR ADVISORY GROUP SAID:

“ The case studies tell a wonderful story of how Community Hospitals improve lives for people and community.



WHAT ARE THE FEATURES OF COMMUNITY HOSPITALS?

THERE ARE SIX WORDS THAT HAVE BEEN USED A LOT BY STAFF. THESE WORDS HELP TO DESCRIBE COMMUNITY HOSPITALS AND WHY THEY ARE SO HIGHLY VALUED BY THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITIES. THEY ARE **RESILIENT, FLEXIBLE, RESPONSIVE, INTEGRATED, CREATIVE & COMPASSIONATE.**

FEATURE	DESCRIPTION
● RESILIENT	<p>Staff shared their experiences with us openly, and we have noticed that certain words were used a lot. For instance, “resilient” was used to describe how strong the service and the staff were. One person said <i>“resilience – it should be at the top of every job description.”</i></p> 
● FLEXIBLE	<p>Staff spoke about being “flexible”. We heard of community hospitals changing quickly to meet needs, and staff having to cope with very different situations and services.</p>
● RESPONSIVE	<p>Another quality was how “responsive” the community hospitals were. They created special COVID-19 wards or moved a cancer service from a General Hospital so that vulnerable patients could be treated locally.</p>
● INTEGRATED	<p>Staff spoke of the way they all worked together. One person said, <i>“I am not saying that we were not strong before, but COVID strengthened us.”</i> They told us about better ways of working between General Hospitals and community hospitals so that they were working more closely together in a way that was “integrated”.</p>
● CREATIVE	<p>The imagination of staff was inspirational. There were many examples of staff being imaginative and “creative” to make patients feel more comfortable or talk to families.</p>
● COMPASSIONATE	<p>Staff told us what they did for patients who were ill or dying which showed special kindness and care. Community hospitals and their staff offer a local, personalised service that is “compassionate”.</p>

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF OUR COMMUNITY HOSPITALS?

We studied the notes of the interviews and the case studies carefully and thought about how we might learn from this project and what we might say about the future of community hospitals.

Staff said that the best way to make the most of their community hospital was to trust them to make local decisions. Many staff and local managers were given discretion to make local decisions that were appropriate to their hospital, and this was felt to be of great benefit to the patients, the community and the service.

Another way to make the best use of the community hospital, according to staff, was to have good leadership. In many cases staff felt well supported and appreciated the way that the service was led from the top. It was important to have confidence in leaders, as providing care in the pandemic was new for everyone. Good communications were central to success.

We heard from staff that they believed that their community hospital was a community asset. They spoke of the affection and support for the hospital from local people. Support from the community was shown from local volunteers, community groups and businesses, all of whom who gave so much. All staff spoke of the meals and gifts given by their communities, contributions of items such as masks, visors and alcohol gel, and singing from schoolchildren from outside the hospitals. Community funding for nice gardens for staff and patients helped make safe spaces at a difficult time. Seeing and encouraging community support, through things as volunteering and

IN ORDER TO MAKE THE MOST OF OUR COMMUNITY HOSPITALS WE NEED TO BE:

- 1 Making Decisions Locally
- 2 Benefiting from Excellent Leadership
- 3 Recognising Community Hospitals as community assets
- 4 Looking after our staff

fundraising, helps to make the most of the community hospital.

We also heard about the way to make the most of their community hospitals and services was to look after staff. The pandemic showed how important it is to support staff to feel well. Staff can only look after patients if they are looked after themselves. Staff spoke of the new ways they supported each other using WhatsApp groups. They also spoke of their organisational support, such as getting an extra day off to “do something special for you.”



SO WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT ABOUT COMMUNITY HOSPITALS DURING COVID-19?

Through this project, staff working in UK community hospitals have shared with us many inspirational examples of how they have cared for patients in their community hospitals during the pandemic. They have spoken of the challenges and difficulties and shared their appreciation of the support they were given.

Thank you to the staff for being so open and honest with us, and for sharing their thoughts and experiences with us.

It was moving to see how much good practice came out of such a dark time.

We have new knowledge about what went on in the many small local hospitals throughout the UK, all of whom played their part in different ways. We hope that by drawing attention to these good practices that there will be a stronger appreciation of the role and contribution of community hospitals.



A FINAL WORD GOES TO A MEMBER OF STAFF WHO SAID:

“Community hospitals are brimming with expertise often untapped! The pandemic demonstrated the true place for them as a major team player in community care provision. Let’s be brave in the development of these wonderful places. Let’s get it absolutely right for our communities.”



CASE STUDIES

WE HAVE GROUPED THE CASE STUDIES BY THE 3 THEMES: **PRACTICE, PEOPLE AND PLANNING**.
THE CASE STUDIES CAN BE READ IN MORE DETAIL
ON THE [CHA WEBSITE](#)

1 Practice



PRACTICE	CASE STUDY
ENHANCED CLINICAL SUPPORT	Enhanced care model
	Relocating Cancer Care
	Rehabilitation During COVID-19
	Supporting hospital discharge
	Advanced Practice Team
	Advanced Clinical Practitioners
	Pre-assessment triage for Minor Injuries Units
	Managing transfers of patients on Oxygen
COMMUNICATIONS	Creating a communications Open Door
VIRTUAL SERVICES	Virtual outpatient clinics
	Virtual home assessments
	Virtual Nurses Station
ENHANCED PATIENT CARE	Using Alexa in care of patients with dementia
	Ice-lollies for patients with COVID-19
	Cleaning to music

2 People



PEOPLE

CASE STUDY

SUPPORTING STAFF

Corona Voice staff survey – supporting staff

Transformation Thursday

SPEaC Happy App

Writing on the Wall

Increased GP support

West Sussex Chat

CARE FOR PATIENTS & FAMILIES

Knitted heart

Hearts of Care

Local community support

Compassionate visiting

3 Planning



PLANNING

CASE STUDY

LOCAL MANAGEMENT

Keeping our community safe

Community support

Senior Team Huddles

Managers as Buddies

LEADERSHIP

System impact of organisational innovation

Leadership & autonomy enabling a 7 day service





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