NHS **Employers**
Part of the NHS **Confederation**

STAFF EXPERIENCE:
ADAPTING AND
INNOVATING
DURING COVID 19

Yasmin, Level 3 Carer

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed a significant burden on the NHS workforce and brought staff experience into sharp focus.

While the importance of supporting NHS staff to yield better outcomes for patients has long been recognised, the pandemic has forced employers to critically re-examine how they support the whole experience of NHS staff.

Employers have acted quickly and effectively to facilitate a supportive, compassionate, and positive experience that prioritises staff experience and wellbeing. This work has highlighted good practice to learn from and build on.

INNOVATION

Despite the relentless pressures of COVID-19 on NHS trusts, we have seen innovation, transformational change, and real improvements to enhance the experience of staff. Some of these changes are shared in this resource and may serve to strengthen local approaches and inform future practice in supporting staff experience.

This resource will:

1. provide an overview of key examples from within some NHS organisations relating to NHS staff experience arising from the COVID-19 pandemic
2. showcase those NHS trusts that have adapted and innovated during this time.

Front cover: Bibian, Staff Nurse

Taking a joined-up approach

For NHS trusts that have achieved successful staff experience outcomes at pace, collaboration was a key driver. Staff experience interventions have greater effect when staff work together, across disciplines, as part of a shared vision.

For example, **Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust** established a 30-person multi-disciplinary reference group which included representation from different ethnicities, ages, bandings, teams, and departments across the trust. Collaboration was a key principle that enabled the trust to use key skills and expertise and take a staff-led approach, so the final support offer was made for NHS staff by NHS staff.

Taking this joined-up approach led to a comprehensive staff experience strategy that is jointly owned by all.

Consider:

- How can you join up disparate elements of staff experience?
- How can you work in partnership with colleagues, either inside or outside your trust, to take action on staff experience at pace?
- Which interventions could treat the root cause of staff experience related issues and embed long-lasting change?

Ronnie, Mental Health Nurse

Promoting a culture of wellbeing

We have already seen the impact of trauma, burnout, and rising sickness absence levels on our NHS workforce since the pandemic began. COVID-19 has highlighted the need to invest in a comprehensive health and wellbeing strategy that covers a range of wellbeing needs.

For example, ensuring that staff have access to facilities for their basic needs such as sleep, hydration, nutrition, and breaks, and are empowered to make use of them as part of their overall self-care.

Cornwall Partnership NHS Foundation Trust introduced a fortnightly wellbeing hour to offer dedicated time for their staff to invest in their wellbeing. It was well received by staff who reported they felt 'less stressed', 'calmer' and 'more equipped to face a challenging patient'. The initiative also sent a positive message to all staff that 'we are now practicing what we preach'.

Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust developed a comprehensive mental health support offer for staff, building on existing services, to ensure staff could access the support they needed.

Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust implemented a three-phase model to support the specific wellbeing needs of staff through the critical, aftermath and recovery phases of the pandemic as they responded to the different peaks of the virus.

To maximise the impact of any health and wellbeing strategy, leaders must cultivate and foster cultures that provide permissions for self-care, encourage open and honest conversations about wellbeing, and enable staff to seek support when needed.

One of the greatest barriers that **North Bristol NHS Trust** faced was creating a cultural shift to encourage staff to make use of support. This changed once they based their wellbeing campaign on a key message: caring for you means better care for patients.

Regular and ongoing evaluation of health and wellbeing interventions and workforce data will provide evidence.

Consider:

- How can you develop a robust health and wellbeing strategy that can be ramped up or down at pace depending on demand?
- Have you considered the spectrum of health and wellbeing needs in your strategy?
- What further steps can you take to create cultures that normalise wellbeing conversations, and to remove any stigmas that prevent staff from seeking support?

Sonnet, Staff Nurse

Gaining insight through staff engagement

NHS trusts have approached the challenges of engaging with staff during COVID-19 by implementing a range of innovative and thoughtful methods of gathering staff feedback and addressing the issues raised.

The trusts that achieved successful feedback were adaptable in their approach and sought to strengthen staff engagement in their organisations.

Trevor, Stock Controller

Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust wanted to explore how staff were feeling during the pandemic. The trust created a living history project to record videos, photos, and written submissions of staff's experiences of living and working through COVID-19. Using the insight gained, the trust committed to a set of actions via its 'You said, together we did' campaign.

To inform and shape the wellbeing strategy in preparation for a second wave, **Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust** refreshed its local survey to include 16 questions focusing on how the trust had supported staff through the pandemic.

Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust issued a survey to capture ongoing learning from the organisation's response to the pandemic. The survey gathered insights into the activities that should end in response to the immediate pandemic; should amplify as they have future potential; should be let go of as they are now unfit for purpose; and which activities that had been put on hold should re-start, as they are now needed.

Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust created a rainbow installation at its main site as a place for patients and staff to thank people for their efforts during COVID-19. The rainbow helped sustain staff morale, create a sense of unity and shared purpose, and ultimately came to be a highly visible symbol of staff appreciation.

Consider:

- How can you build upon your current approach with other methods to gain deeper insight into staff thoughts and feelings?
- How will you effectively feedback to staff about changes made as a result of their input?
- What creative and sustainable methods of appreciation can you implement?

Prioritising equality, diversity and inclusion

One of the most concerning factors of the pandemic has been the disproportionate impact it has had on staff from minority groups, including LGBTQ+ staff, those with disabilities, and black and minority ethnic communities (BME).

While it has highlighted inequalities and compounded the emotional, mental, and physical health impacts for many of our frontline colleagues, it has also encouraged a more inclusive approach to supporting staff.

Ozan, Sterile Services

The COVID-19 vulnerable health clinics instigated by **East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust** provided a safe space for supportive conversations, which were also used to support the risk assessment process to create more inclusive conversations around wellbeing and ensure BME staff knew what support was available to them.

At **Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust**, the wellbeing reference group was prompted to do an equality impact assessment of all interventions, after learning that the hairdressers brought in to give haircuts on site were not skilled in dealing with afro-textured hair. This prompted the trust to bring in new hairdressers that met the needs of all staff, including minority groups.

Using Microsoft Teams has driven an increase in engagement with BME and LGBTQ+ networks at **Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust**. In one of the trust's internal events, the chief executive spoke about inequalities and racism, and took questions from staff. The trust reported that the sharing and support offered in the sessions was as effective as previous face-to-face events.

Consider:

- Have you implemented an equality impact assessment across all staff experience activities to explore if they have potential to inadvertently exclude groups of people?
- Have you created tailored spaces for minority staff groups to discuss the unique staff experience issues they are facing and understand their specific support needs?
- Are you engaging with minority staff networks to co-create and co-deliver staff experience interventions or activities?

Supporting new ways of working

A major shift for many NHS trusts has been the requirement for staff to work from home and the need to adopt digital technology into their daily working lives.

Changes to working practices were also created by redeploying staff away from their usual roles, staff required to shield, or those returning to work after a period of absence. This presented new challenges to supporting the experience of staff working remotely.

To tackle the immediate issue of people feeling isolated and disconnected while working remotely, **Birmingham and Sandwell Mental Health Foundation trust** created a 'Stories to Connect' virtual event, which allowed remote-working staff to reflect on their experiences through poems and stories at the end of each day.

After tackling the challenges of making sure people had the equipment and skills to work from home, **Hertfordshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (HPFT)** created the HPFT Working Differently Guiding Principles. The principles were designed to help staff navigate the challenges created by working remotely and encourage a supportive and compassionate conversation. They included reminders that staff were not simply working from home, but were 'at home, during a crisis, trying to work', and that success would not be measured the way it used to be.

HPFT also held virtual coffee mornings for staff that were shielding to help them stay connected and in touch with their colleagues. Parents were supported to work flexibly as they managed childcare responsibilities during school closures. New training in the form of bite-sized videos helped managers support and manage their teams remotely, with a focus on compassionate leadership and wellbeing. Livestreamed Q&A sessions with the trust's chief executive and board saw hundreds of staff attend. All the activities contributed to 95 per cent of staff saying **HPFT** cares about their wellbeing in the July 2020 staff survey: a 7 per cent increase from the year before.

Lisa, Senior Paramedic

Consider:

- How can you use digital technology to facilitate connectivity between staff as they navigate remote working practices?
- How can you implement flexible working practices to support the individual needs of your workforce?
- Consider what staff experience activities can be delivered virtually to benefit those staff not working onsite?

Reaching staff through good communication

At the start of the pandemic, with so much to communicate in a short space of time, it became essential that key information was communicated in a timely and digestible way.

Staff were already under enormous pressure and often working even longer hours. Getting messages to harder-to-reach staff groups, including remote and community-based workers, also became a bigger challenge as the fast-changing situation and high stakes meant everyone needed to be informed of the latest updates and changes.

Trusts used a range of activities to deliver their messages, from digital Q&A sessions to floor-walking, alongside existing communications channels.

Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (SPFT) created a variety of channels to communicate with staff, including an app with a dedicated wellbeing section, podcasts, blogs, and webinars. The diversity of channels allowed staff to engage with information in the way that suited them best.

Consider:

- How can you ensure messages are easy to digest, to ensure clarity and avoid information overload
- What alternative ways of communicating can you use to make your messages more accessible?
- How can you use a range of communication methods to promote staff experience interventions to more staff, and target those hard-to-reach staff?

Olufemi, Desktop Engineer

Leading through a crisis

Visible leadership at all levels has been a critical success factor throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and has had a significant impact on staff experience.

Those in leadership roles were squeezed by demands from below and above, compounded by requirements to manage new ways of working, re-deployed staff and mounting demands.

Line managers were called on to lead their teams in challenging, uncertain, and unfamiliar environments.

North East London NHS Foundation Trust recognised it was crucial that the additional impact on leaders was acknowledged and extra support provided. It piloted a project providing support through 30-minute phone calls to managers every three weeks, in addition to the usual support available. The calls focused on increasing resilience, self-care, emotional support, re-framing of challenges, building positive relationships and helping their teams do the same. The pilot was so successful it has been rolled out to all managers with 80 per cent of managers who participated, saying they were listened to and understood.

Consider:

- How can you equip leaders and line managers to support their teams compassionately and practically throughout the pandemic?
- What support is available to look after those in leadership roles?
- How can leader's role model the importance of self-care and help create cultures that enable staff to seek support if needed?

Jane, Reablement Support Worker

All photos kindly supplied by the **Norfolk and Waveney Health and Care Partnership**.
The images are from the Partnerships We Care Together campaign to document the experiences of frontline and support service staff during the pandemic in 2020.

To view more images, go to: 🔘 **wecaretogethernw**

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