

Staff Wellbeing

How can we create a more sustainable, collaborative culture within healthcare environments? Author - Alice Green



Author Bio

Alice is passionate about improving healthcare environments through high quality design. She is both an Architect and an Interior Designer with over 12 years' healthcare design experience. Alice is a Healthcare Lead at P+HS Architects, based in Yorkshire in the North of England and leads multiple healthcare schemes nationally.

Like many things in life, the key to success is optimising communication.

Life has changed recently in how we are communicating, affecting the increased frequency of meetings, speed of decision making and innovation. There is increased accessibility and staff availability to attend more meetings mainly due to less travel affording us the luxury of time.

It's clear in our offices that P+HS culture has changed. With new smart screens in board rooms and increased mobile working our three offices are even better connected digitally, further improving our ability to share resources and communicate across offices. However, one thing that we know will never change and is more valued, are the collaborative sketching sessions, office stationery supplies, the sharing of exciting books and private beverage bay chats. We still feel the need to meet face to face to keep motivated, to stay inspired, to nurture the next generation of designers and to water (and talk to) the plants!

Humans need real contact for wellbeing and that, in my opinion, will not change (except for the current social distancing). Perhaps the context, environment, format and formality of how we meet might be changing.

This pandemic has been a catalyst to shake up communication and the culture of how we operate, rapidly opening the door to a better work/life balance

and improved staff wellbeing through flexible working for those that want or need to. One thing for certain is that every employee throughout this shift has had different needs and, through improved communication and flexible working, we have been able to work with these through consultation and surveys.

In relation to healthcare, it's impossible to fully gauge how this pandemic will influence the future of healthcare design and innovation. As designers, our position is to learn from this event and to pursue the potential opportunities that these present for our clients' unique requirements. We know from experience that some departments within hospitals are very detached from one another and siloed in communication which is not good for a collaborative culture overall. How each department is affected by the pandemic will be unique and there probably is not a one size fits all approach to dealing with this. What we are seeing is an acceleration of a new balance of bespoke digital communications which can only be beneficial.

There is no design guidance for departmental or interdepartmental 'Culture' - the intangible, subtle, unique social behaviour and operational aspects of a space.



Staff recruitment and retention in healthcare has long been an issue, affecting sustainability and quality of healthcare delivery, at times due to; embedded negative culture, poor management, over working, poor communication, security issues, an inadequate built working environment causing inability to get the job done. It can be a combination of common and unique factors, only some of which are preventable through good design. Now there is an new anxiety surrounding COVID 19 and keeping staff safe at work. In mental health facilities we are learning rapidly that this is extremely challenging and unique due to social distancing.

P+HS's collective experience from surveying numerous existing healthcare departments and interviewing staff, across several Trusts, has highlighted one key recurring theme. That, in the majority of departments there is a historic lack of staff facilities. These include changing areas, staff kitchen, absence of space for private one to one conversations or space to take a breather away from others, especially when it's not possible to leave a ward facility during a shift.

HBN 00-01 covers some positive elements on evidence based design, promoting appropriate transient spaces between departments for human interaction with views to nature, access to natural light, incorporating Art and creating spaces to pause and communicate. We know that creating the right backdrop will enable staff to flourish, but what is highlighted now is that we could potentially work more flexibly with less desk space, becoming leaner in areas, creating value in softer areas improving health and wellbeing.

When working in the early RIBA stages from a health planning perspective, the design team need to ensure that the volume of communication space is of an adequate percentage to allow for these positive interactions including transitional space between departments, which can be perceived as an unnecessary luxury destined to be value engineered at a later date.

Should additional staff facilities be added to design guidance to enable better support for staff?

There is also a sea of research on the topic of staff wellbeing including publications by The King's Fund, putting staff at centre stage, an extract as follows;

'Wider action on the workforce crisis must be underpinned by better support for staff wellbeing to support good patient care and improve staff retention. This should not be seen as a short-term response to the pressures of working through Covid-19, but a sustained commitment to tackle long-term drivers of poor staff experience, health and wellbeing and address chronic excessive workloads.' 'The road to renewal: five priorities for health and care.' By Ana Charles and Leo Ewbank

Architecture in isolation cannot solve the problem, but should be combined with the increasing evidence for 'transformational change' focussing on what is important for patients and staff as the backbone of the briefing process. Improving digital support that is flexible and future-proof is part of this and essential in the evolution of healthcare, supporting the creation of flexible spaces that enable continuous improvement in culture.

Case studies across Europe and America demonstrate very strongly how important communication is through every aspect of healthcare design. Healthcare providers even create new positions internally solely to oversee projects and communicate effectively with all parties strengthening staff satisfaction throughout the design process and towards their new building.

By incorporating appropriate digital technology and medical equipment for staff, combined with designing universal single patient medical/surgical rooms, clear beneficial improvements have been measured in; staff mobility, efficiency in care pathways, reduction in medical errors, all resulting in improved staff satisfaction levels.

Optimising staff productivity and enabling the right environment for staff to provide the best in patient care is what every healthcare facility should be planning for and integral to every NHS business case. Creating opportunities for improvement in departmental, interdepartmental communication and culture is integral to this.

The Dutch concept of

Niksen – time to do nothing.

How can we encourage true 'down time' during breaks to help recharge?

Front-line NHS employees face intense daily demands, preventing burn out and taking time to acknowledge mental health of colleagues is all part of creating a sustainable care environment. Emptying the mind allows head space for reflection, for relaxation, a change in perspective, innovation and clarity.

Designing in, designated thoughtful areas internally as well as garden areas for impromptu private reflection and counselling could be a big move in cultural change.

Research has evidenced improvement on wellbeing with garden breaks for medical staff. Supporting staff with adequate counselling spaces and private space away from the public eye, whether formal or informal could make a difference to an individual's outlook.

Further reading and references

<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications/covid-19-road-renewal-health-and-care>

<https://aacnjournals.org/ajconline/article-abstract/27/6/508/4111/Impact-of-Nurses-Taking-Daily-Work-Breaks-in-a?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

<https://www.nhsemployers.org/-/media/Employers/Documents/Retention-guide.pdf>

Health professional mobility in a changing Europe, Chapter 15, Creating good workplaces: retention strategies in healthcare organizations
Elisabeth Jelfs, Moritz Knapp, Paul Giepmans and Peter Wijga

<https://www.healthcaredesignmagazine.com/architecture/designing-staff-and-patients/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/shortcuts/2019/jul/22/people-just-do-nothing-is-the-dutch-concept-of-niksen-the-best-way-to-relax>

Photo Credit - Burleigh Medical Centre, P+HS Architects. 'Forest music' is played throughout this primary care centre which is already seeing benefits on staff wellbeing.

