

Consultant Connect Experiences...

with a hospital improvement programme manager

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It's been three years since the initial Consultant Connect pilot was launched at North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust (NMUH).

Andy Finlay, Improvement Programme Manager, Patient First Improvement Team at NMUH, shares insight into the team's experience of the service, including the benefits to clinicians, patients, and more.

1 How did you get buy-in from your teams?

'Consultant Connect was brought in initially as a pilot to support our original covid recovery programme in September 2020. We were facing an overwhelming waiting list size due to the covid shutdown and needed a greater focus on remote-led options whilst uncertainty surrounded what could be done face-to-face.

Consultant Connect was one side of the remote first approach, the other being the switch from traditional face-to-face to non-face-to-face delivery methods for outpatient appointments.

I created an improvement approach by specialty communicated using a presentation deck covering our performance using traditional Advice & Guidance (A&G) and what it could look like using Consultant Connect.

In conjunction with the Clinical Lead and Service Manager for each specialty, we held technical demos with Consultant Connect Account Managers and myself. Each session aimed to create advocates and convert sceptics.

The main concerns or objections were about extra work and the hospital trying to get staff to do more and get less. I addressed these concerns by using existing mechanisms of we already had in place (e.g. consultant of the week). **This enabled a speedy roll out as the infrastructure of obtaining phone numbers was not required, and just releasing the on-call number became the set-up task.** Moreover, concerns from surgical colleagues who were worried they couldn't answer if they were in theatre were allayed instantly through **the USP that Consultant Connect has the back-up of NHS consultants on their National Consultant Network.**

We added acute medicine and geriatric medicine, these were both then expanded for their same-day sub-specialties of SDEC and frailty. **Consultant Connect assists all parts of our services.**

The reporting function within the Consultant Connect platform is an excellent tool to ensure that the outcomes it delivers are communicated widely to the rest of the trust. **Success was and is celebrated through the use of data to show referral returns, volume and time.**

Benefits of using real-time data are huge, we are an organisation which prides itself on using data to improve and having live data at our fingertips is a bonus.'

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2 How is Consultant Connect used in your trust?

'Consultant Connect is used as a conduit for excellent communications with our ICS colleagues, the greater the specialties using the platform, the more we are open and available to all, which means we are open to patients who have yet to come to us.

Consultant Connect is a key tenet of us being able to provide care for patients closer to home. Traditional pre covid pathways ensured that we would only see patients after a GP had referred them, usually 10-16 weeks after the patient went to the GP surgery, this delay meant the conditions and/or patients could largely deteriorate adds more worry too.

Consultant Connect has reduced this time for a specialist referral from months to minutes, in two thirds of cases the GP does not have to send a referral as the condition is managed in the community, thus freeing our capacity for patients who do need to see us.

We have also witnessed in recent months **NMUH colleagues using the platform to contact the specialties on there to talk to them and seek opinions, so an effective consultant to consultant communication** and one case where we have witnessed a request from specialty colleagues which are not part of the platform so gained an opinion from the National Consultant Network.

Colleagues using the platform see it as a valuable tool in their arsenal of communications methods but also from a service point of view, we have a chance of ensuring the referrals that do come to us are those that cannot be cared for in the community. **It has led to a greater and shared understanding between GPs and NMUH colleagues.'**

3 What are the benefits of immediate A&G?

'I always looked for a way of reducing referrals into a service but by not excluding anyone or providing a poor service. Consultant Connect enables us to provide an excellent service at the right time and for all patients.

One of the biggest problems of delays in patients getting their first appointment or GPs not receiving a timely response from traditional A&G, is that the worry is still there, so patients reattend their GP surgery and ask them to ask us how long they need to wait, or to send a new A&G request (just in case the last one got lost) or send a referral to us. When we finally process the original request what is left in the system is either an orphan A&G request which gives us a data quality issue or worse an orphan referral, as we will process the referral and send an appointment to the patient. Their issue could be resolved (through the first A&G request) and so they do not attend their appointment. **This gives us a guaranteed DNA in the system as a direct result of untimely processing of traditional A&G requests. We know that this was a key reason why we embraced immediate A&G as a solution.'**

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4 How does this service fit into your recovery strategy to meet the NHS operational targets?

'Consultant Connect is an integral part of our recovery programme and the benefits described in this piece attest to this. Elective Recovery Fund (ERF) guidance and the additional funding that comes with it will enable us to meet our contractual obligations by ensuring patients are treated in the right place at the right time.'

5 What is your experience of the Consultant Connect Team and more specifically your Account Manager?

'The Consultant Connect team have been and are incredible. They are patient, knowledgeable, and happy to answer the same question 45 times, each time with the same vigour and enthusiasm as the first. I have been with a few account managers, and each one has provided outstanding service to us. **Plus, engagement from the senior team is always very welcome,** I can send messages to Kat with suggestions or questions, and she welcomes them.'

6 What do you value most about the Consultant Connect services you have introduced?

'The highest value is the ability to ensure we have enough capacity to see the patients who need us the most, but also ensure that patients we don't need to see in person still benefit from our specialist knowledge. For the patients today and the patients yet to come.'

7 Do you have any other feedback you would like to share?

'I love Consultant Connect. It's a brilliant tool to enable us to see more patients and communicate better. We do not often get services that do what they say on the tin, but Consultant Connect does!'



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