

Alliance for Better Care : Engaging with Patients, Families and Carers to inform the development of 'Virtual Wards' in East Surrey



Background

We were asked by Alliance for Better Care to explore the idea of virtual wards across a number of locations in East Surrey. Virtual wards allow patients to get the care they need at home, rather than being in hospital. We focussed on older people in the community, who were more likely to be future virtual ward patients.

The aim was to have immersive discussions with people to understand about their initial thoughts about the concept of virtual wards. We provided a brief description of the service and showed visual examples of the equipment involved. We also wanted to understand their living situations, whether they had any care needs and whether they had any experience of self-monitoring at home, such as for blood pressure or oxygen levels etc.

Our approach

We held 6 engagement events in total, gathering 64 in-depth experiences. We ensured our engagement reached residents who live in the key neighbourhoods in East Surrey.

Our findings and recommendations

- 1. Overall, people were receptive to virtual wards** – Most people stated that they would prefer to be at home rather than in hospital.
- 2. Support needed to manage equipment/monitoring** – Most people who were happy to be at home still acknowledged that they would need support for managing any equipment needed for monitoring.
- 3. Clear information will be required and consider a name change** – The term virtual wards were confusing to many that we spoke to. The word 'virtual' had for many online/digital connotations which made them nervous and worried about the level of skill needed. Therefore any information provided would need to be available in a number of formats to ensure it is accessible for the individual being cared for and any carers they may have.
- 4. Mental health needs to be considered** – many cited mental health as a deciding factor in whether they liked or disliked the idea of virtual wards. Some residents who lived at home found remote consultations and not seeing health professionals in person rather difficult and said they felt isolated.
- 5. Wider support & Carers** – it is vital that any carers (paid and unpaid) are identified and are involved in any conversations regarding virtual wards.

The findings from the engagement events were collated and the key themes and recommendations were shared with Alliance for Better Care, along with the detailed individual experiences. The findings will help inform the development of the virtual wards in East Surrey.

"There is so much valuable insight in there and going by the richness of the feedback and by the photos, it was gathered in a really positive way that put people at their ease. We'll discuss this with the wider team working on Virtual Wards and can feedback how what we've been told will shape what we're doing both for your own knowledge and to share with participants if you want to / are able to." – Commissioner, Alliance for Better Care