

## Chairman's annual Foundation Trust Members' update – August 2021

I am writing to you as a Member of the Trust to tell you about some of the latest developments at the Royal Devon & Exeter NHS Foundation Trust and to invite you to our Annual Members' Meeting next month.

It goes without saying that this last year has been a year like no other with the NHS facing a challenge like never before. 2020/21 has seen incredibly difficult times for many people and communities as a result of the pandemic. At the same time the pandemic has brought with it a focus on what really matters and what it means to be human.

I've been in awe of how our NHS staff and volunteers have worked together to respond to the pandemic and of how amazing local people have been in supporting us to be our very best for them. The fundraising, the clapping outside front doors, the comments on social media all have made our staff feel so supported and have demonstrated the strength of our communities. The NHS brand has been hugely reinforced, so much so that there has been a significant increase in people applying for nursing degrees.

This challenging time has shown us more than ever how crucial it is to recognise the incredible work our health and care staff do and to demonstrate that we value them. We've seen what we can do together as communities when we've needed to – this has not been about individual organisations, but about how we work together so that we have a health service that provides for the day-to-day as well as more specialist needs. We can also take huge learning as a Devon health and care system, from how we established the Nightingale Hospital Exeter, which provided care to patients across the county, including North Devon and Torridge, and beyond. The can-do attitude staff showed, in getting things done efficiently and safely, the art of the possible.

Locally, the strong and long-standing relationship between the University and the RD&E meant that our clinicians and scientists have worked well together to support a number of research projects, including the Randomised Evaluation of COVID-19 thERapY (RECOVERY) trial which investigated whether existing medicines are effective against the disease. The learning that we take from this experience has been, and will continue to be, really important.

At the time of writing we face a difficult balancing act. Infection rates remain high and yet many of the restrictions we have been used to for the last 18 months have largely been lifted. My hope is that with the success of the incredible NHS-run vaccination programme, we are entering a phase where we can live with the disease in a more sustainable way. Of course, the shift in the NHS to dealing primarily with the pandemic has had a negative impact on other aspects of healthcare and it is really important that we do what we can to reset and recover our services – and our staff - on a sustainable basis. Our response to the pandemic has meant that inevitably, our waiting lists are not where we want them to be. Many people are waiting longer for their care than we would like and addressing this is of utmost importance to us; it is not about the numbers, it is about every patient and their family behind every number. During the various lockdowns we saw a concerning fall in referrals; the return to normal expected levels and higher is good in that patients who need acute care are coming forward to receive it but is putting further pressure on our services and staff. As always, we continue to work with our partners to ensure we are encouraging people to use their health services in the right way and to get any concerning symptoms checked out. At the same time, demand for urgent care has increased significantly. The drivers of increased demand are multifactorial but the pressure on our staff is the same; their focus on our patients and communities is humbling.

More detail on our performance over the last financial year can be found in our full annual report and accounts for 2020/2021 and previous annual reports are available on our main Trust website [www.rdehospital.nhs.uk](http://www.rdehospital.nhs.uk)

## **RD&E and NDHT integration**

Last December we got the green light from our regulators NHSE/I to take the next steps on a further potential integration between RD&E and NDHT. The final decision will be taken by the two Boards, our Council of Governors and NHSE/I. Following approval to proceed to the next stage from NHSE/I, we are developing an Integration Business Case which describes in more detail how the two organisations become a single integrated organisation working across Northern and Eastern Devon for the benefit of both communities. Both Trusts have worked together for a number of years and our partnership has strengthened since 2018 as a result of the Collaborative Agreement. Formally integrating is the next logical step in the evolution of our partnership and we are continuing to work closely together to develop detailed plans to join together in April 2022. To find out more and to keep updated visit the RD&E and NDHT integration pages on our main Trust website [www.rdehospital.nhs.uk](http://www.rdehospital.nhs.uk) Alternatively If you have any questions email [ndht.rde.integrationcomms@nhs.net](mailto:ndht.rde.integrationcomms@nhs.net)

Although we hope (subject to approvals) to become one organisation by next April, the work will take place over a five-year period to bring our two diverse organisations together. In order to support the next stage of joint working to become one organisation, we have been working to bring together our Board and leadership teams. The composition of the new Board is being progressed to ensure continuity and to retain organisational memory with a combination of existing NEDs from both Trusts, but also to bring in new approaches and ideas through some new appointments.

## **Partnership working**

In March, we announced our strategic alliance with NDHT and Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust (TSDFT). This alliance will see us collaborating more closely to secure sustainable, high-quality patient care for local people over the coming years into the future. Instead of working independently, this approach will enable us to find new ways to connect, communicate and collaborate so that we can better meet the healthcare needs of the communities we, NDHT and TSDFT serve. The development of the Integrated Care System (ICS) and Local Care Partnerships across Devon are hugely exciting too and provide us with the opportunity to work together to transform so we are delivering services sustainably in the context of the demographic challenges we face in Devon. It is great to see that the value individual providers place on their community and the need for collaboration is recognised within the recent Government proposals for legislation.

Effective engagement relies on our commitment to listen and communicate openly and honestly with stakeholders. NHS Services are of particular importance and interest to most people – whether provided in the community or in hospital. By working with our stakeholders, our goal is to achieve improved mutual understanding and trust. We want to listen to the ideas of local people and understand them better to help us make improvements to the way we provide services. We aim to create a culture of partnership with patients, staff and the community; for patients to be involved in their care, for ongoing listening and learning and for everyone to work together in the design and delivery of services for the continuous improvement of the healthcare services. Nevertheless, there is a need for a balance between providing clinically effective and safe service that are acceptable to stakeholders, and making the best use of scarce resources.

## **Our people**

Our extraordinary staff have shown such commitment, compassion and flexibility over the last year. They have continued to provide high quality safe care in the face of the most severe crisis the NHS has faced in its history. We know that our staff are the beating heart of our organisation and the last 18 months has demonstrated – in spades- how fundamental they are to delivering the care we aspire to. I am sure you would want to join with me, the RD&E Board of Directors and the communities we serve, to highlight our collective appreciation of their endeavours over the last year. It will not be a surprise to you to know that the pandemic has taken its toll on our people and, as we begin to emerge, the pressures on our staff remain unrelenting and that is why the Board and the Executive team have prioritised staff wellbeing and support as a top priority. The pressure on our staff will continue as the demand for urgent care and referrals for elective procedures continue at a high level and we seek to stabilise and then reduce our waiting lists.

Inclusion is one of our core values - it is central to what we stand for and what we do, and the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced why this is the case. The second Public Health England review on health inequalities (June 2020) recognised that the unequal impact of COVID-19 on BAME communities may be explained by several factors, including racism and discrimination, demonstrating in very tangible, health-related terms why inclusion is so fundamental.

We know that just holding inclusion as one of our values is not enough and that we must embody these values in all that we do, and so I am pleased to share that over the last year, we have made progress with our inclusion strategy. This involves launching our BAME and LGBTQ+ Networks, and working with a small group of staff to develop a Disability Network, supporting staff from these groups to advocate for their peers and influence organisational decision making. We have also secured funding to commence a reverse mentoring scheme, which will see members of the RD&E Executive team work with and learn from staff from underrepresented groups. I am acutely aware that there is much more to be done to make the RD&E more inclusive, but the progress we have made this year further cements our commitment to create a workplace that enables both diversity and inclusion to flourish. I am very grateful to our CEO, Suzanne Tracey, for personally leading this effort.

## **RD&E Charity**

The RD&E Charity fundraises over and above what the NHS is able to provide to make a real difference to our patients, their families and our amazing staff that treat them. Over the last year, the charity has been actively fundraising for the Starfish Appeal, which has so far raised approximately £187,000. The money raised will help us to enhance our children's services and outpatient waiting areas by creating a warm, bright and engaging space. As well as this, the charity have funded a number of wellbeing initiatives, including two new staff rest areas, following the success of the #HelpUsHelpYou appeal. This appeal which was launched last year to support RD&E staff during the pandemic and has raised approximately £116,000. For more information, to see how you could support the RD&E Charity or to make a donation, please visit [www.rdecharity.com](http://www.rdecharity.com)

## **Final reflections**

A year of such challenge has really shown us what we are made of in Devon. The NHS has a mountain to climb to get back to where it was, but we have hugely dedicated staff and a great leadership team across our organisations, with everybody absolutely committed to doing the best they can. We have significant opportunities in the coming years, including funding for our estates and technology and working together to transform as part of the Devon ICS. The proposed integration of the RD&E and NDHT is a huge part of this – with shared challenges, we have recognised that we will be stronger together, and over this coming year, we look forward to the work we need to do towards becoming a single organisation, so that together we can provide the very best care for all our patients. After all, that is what we are here for. I'd like to take the opportunity to thank our staff, my Board colleagues, the Council of Governors and Members who play an invaluable role in how we operate as an organisation. I also want to highlight the overwhelming support we have received from our Devon partners and local communities.

Finally, after nine years at the helm as the Chairman of the Trust, this will be my last update to members as I step down next year having reached the end of my third extended term. I have enjoyed every single moment of my time in the NHS and it has been an honour and a genuine privilege to carry out the role I have had during this time. I remain humbled by the energy, commitment and passion of the people who come in to work every day to make a difference to the lives of people who rely on the NHS to be there when required. This focus on making a difference to the moments that matter for people in need is something that will stay with me as I move on.

In the meantime, I look forward to our Annual Members' Meeting on Wednesday, 29<sup>th</sup> September where I hope to meet some of you, via videoconferencing.

Yours sincerely



**James Brent**

**Chairman**

### **DON'T FORGET: Think 111 first and get the right treatment**

If you contact NHS 111 by phone or online, at any time of day or night, you will get quicker clinical advice and care before visiting an Emergency Department. So, if you are feeling ill or injured but it's not life-threatening then call **111 first** or visit [111.nhs.uk](http://111.nhs.uk).

