

White Paper: Going mobile

How NHS Rotherham is challenging traditional ways of working

This is the story of an NHS trust and a communications company. But it's not your traditional supplier/client relationship. By inviting O₂ into a genuine partnership, NHS Rotherham has changed the way community health workers do their jobs. And, by doing that, they've made patient records easier to manage.

But it hasn't been easy. Along the way both NHS Rotherham and O₂ have learnt important lessons: that change takes time. That one size doesn't fit all. And that often, the most obvious answer isn't the best one.



This is what happened

In February 2006, NHS Rotherham adopted one of the new NPfIT Clinical IT systems. For the first time, clinical data for community services was to be stored on one central system, replacing the traditional paper-based way of working. In line with the national NHS drive, it seemed that an entirely paperless system was in sight.

But travelling back to base to fill out digital patient records just wasn't practical for community health workers. They needed to be able to upload patient information on the spot, from their patients' homes.

There was no national solution to this problem. So NHS Rotherham had to think on their feet. Their answer? Give community health workers a laptop to take with them, with SystmOne, the central IT system, built in.

Breaking new ground

With no official guidance for how to introduce mobile working, NHS Rotherham decided to run a pilot scheme with 11 community services across the borough.

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In March 2007, they gave out 20 laptops with 3G built in so that community health workers would be able to access the internet and SystmOne on the go.

In theory, the new laptops should have improved the quality of patient records and made life easier. But many community health workers found the computers difficult to use. The logon process was complicated. Network coverage wasn't consistent. And the fact that some staff couldn't access the digital record instantly meant they were spending time trying to find out details from patients that were already on the system.

The result was that lots of people were still using paper records to save time. And others, preferring the desktop computers in the clinics, were still travelling back to base to save patient information at the end of every shift.

Although everyone could see the benefits of the new system, the feedback from the pilot scheme was mixed. So NHS Rotherham decided to look into what was going wrong.

Digging deeper

In November 2008, the NHS Rotherham SystmOne team commissioned a report into mobile working and how the project was



going so far. The results confirmed their suspicions: lots of people weren't confident using the equipment, and many said they needed more focussed training.

By that point, the SystmOne team had given out over 100 laptops. And although some people were really enthusiastic and making good progress, other staff weren't finding the laptops as useful as the team had hoped.

An outside opinion

Introducing mobile working was clearly going to be a much bigger challenge than the SystmOne team had thought. If they were to challenge traditional ways of working, they'd need to think carefully about what people wanted and needed, and then take time to prepare them for the change.

On a practical level, they needed to improve the coverage on the laptops. But on a more strategic level, they needed independent, impartial advice. Someone to look at the new system and at all the work the SystmOne team had put in, and then

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make suggestions about how to get mobile working to stick.

The team knew that O₂ had lots of experience helping other businesses switch to mobile working. So they asked them to get involved.

Getting started

Solving the technology issues was the easy bit. As NHS Rotherham's second network provider, O₂ installed an APN link which quickly improved the 3G network across the district.

But to make the biggest difference, O₂ needed to understand more about how NHS Rotherham worked – the problems people were facing, and what was stopping them from making the most of the new technology.

To help them do this, O₂ introduced a business consultant from their professional management service. His first task? To talk to people: stakeholders, clinicians and the people using the technology. Anyone who could help O₂ get to the bottom of what was happening.

A chance to speak up

The Rotherham SystmOne team gave O₂ three groups for a trial: district nursing,



school nursing and intermediate care. They invited people from each group to a workshop where they could share their experiences and thoughts.

The project team were pleased to see how many people volunteered to come along and get involved. Not only was it a good chance to hear first-hand what had been happening, but it was also a vital step in getting clinicians interested in the process and interested in mobile working in general.

A day in the life

The project team didn't want to make any recommendations without seeing for themselves what community health workers did on a day-to-day basis. And the best way to do this was to shadow clinicians from the three trial groups as they travelled to visit patients.

The team started with district nurses. They watched how the nurses talked to their patients, all the time thinking about how technology could make the process easier.

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And at the end of the shift, the team followed the nurses back to base. There, they noticed the nurses spent hours uploading patient records, picking up work for the next day, and contacting other nurses. All things they could have been doing on the spot – if they had the right technology and training.

The team also saw that the nurses hadn't got to grips with the IT systems they were already using. Because they'd only had specific training on SystemOne, they weren't sure what else they could use the computers for. Yes, they could upload patient information. But they could also schedule work. Email each other. And use other programmes like Microsoft Word that might have made life easier.

People weren't making the most of the new technology, which meant time was being wasted. And from a security point of view, the confusion had led to patient files being a mix of electronic forms and paper – making them much more difficult to manage and keep safe.

O₂ now understood how the nurses worked and where they needed more help with the technology. So they used their findings to make recommendations to NHS Rotherham.



Getting district nurses up and running

NHS Rotherham and O₂ quickly set about addressing each of the problems they'd seen. The project team ran training sessions to make sure the district nurses were up to speed with all the different systems. And, importantly, they reassured people that it was okay to use the computers with programmes other than SystmOne if they needed to.

The team are now encouraging nurses to schedule more of their work electronically, rather than going back to base to send faxes. And they're making sure no one is given a laptop unless they're comfortable using it.

What the team haven't recommended is going entirely paper-free. They saw how important it was that nurses left paper records behind in patients' homes. So instead of getting rid of paper altogether, they want to give people guidance on how to create patient records, so they know when to use electronic

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records, and when paper is necessary.

Part of this is going to be introducing digital pens. These will let nurses make digital and paper records at the same time, so the information will be on the central system, as well as in patients' homes. Having experienced how digital pens have improved efficiency in other trusts, the team are confident that people will be able to start using them without changing their day-to-day routines.

Helping school nurses use the system

Next, the team shadowed school nurses. The problems here were similar to those in district nursing. As school nurses have to work quickly, they don't have time to upload information electronically after seeing each patient. And when they're travelling from school to school, it's unrealistic to expect nurses to lug around equipment they might not even use.

The project team spent time with the school nurses, finding out what wasn't working and how they could help.

Then, as with the district nurses, they made sure people were given proper training on how the IT systems worked. Not just SystmOne – but other programmes that might make their jobs easier.



A head start for intermediate care

Finally, the project team looked at how they could help the intermediate care professionals. No one in this team had tried mobile working before, so it was a good chance to see whether thorough training would help them get used to the new system.

After shadowing the clinicians, the team took the laptop training programmes they'd run in the past, and adapted the sessions to make them as relevant and useful as possible. Before, they'd used one-on-one training, but they now realised it would be more cost-effective – and helpful for the clinicians – if everyone learnt about the system in groups.

The newly designed sessions included lots of practical information about the IT systems, but they also gave people the background to the scheme. That way, people understood why they were being given laptops, and how mobile working could make things easier in the future.

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After the training sessions, the team made sure they stayed in touch with the community health workers. They asked for feedback once people had started using the technology. And they helped out with any questions or problems that came up.

The result of this thorough roll-out? Clinicians in intermediate care are now spending 33% more time with patients than they were before.

Instead of travelling back to base to upload information, they understand the systems well enough to create patient records on the spot. They can also contact each other remotely. And divide work up without having to be in the same room.

It's a huge achievement, and one that proves the real value of mobile working.

Making changes across the trust

The partnership with O₂ has given NHS Rotherham the confidence and time to explore other opportunities. O₂ were trusted to lead on the roll-out to District Nursing, School Nursing and Intermediate Care. This freed up time for the NHS Rotherham team to explore other ways technology could help community teams work more effectively and efficiently. And identify working processes which could be



automated to free up more time for carers to care.

Physiotherapists and Speech and Language Therapists are now using digital pens to support the way they work by allowing them to capture profession specific information where ever they treat patients . Patient information is captured at the point of care and records are transferred quickly and seamlessly to SystmOne. Work is already underway looking at how the children's red book can be digitised to ensure the Children's Services team only have to record information once - drawing on O₂'s expertise to link up these records with other systems, securely.

Other plans for NHS Rotherham and O₂ include:

- changing the IT system to make it more intuitive
- setting up an extended email network so people don't need to send faxes
- making it easier for clinicians to get hold of each other and share information

Common elements of the patient file could be made widely available in a digital format with the opportunity for a trust to add fields unique to them.

- and, of course, carrying on talking to people to make sure they're happy with the new technology.

Making changes further afield

In the longer term, O₂ are looking into ways to make it easier for NHS trusts across the country to realise the benefits of mobile working. NHS Rotherham and O₂ have invaluable knowledge as a result of this journey together, which other trusts can benefit from.

One of the main challenges will be creating common elements to the patient file for key clinical groups. At the moment, the same clinical teams region to region collect different pieces of information in different formats during patient visits.

Common elements of the patient file could be made widely available in a digital format with the opportunity for a trust to add fields unique to them. Such an approach will reduce duplication of effort across the NHS and remove another barrier to more flexible working.

It's a big project, but one that O₂ now have the knowledge and experience to tackle.



A long-term partnership

Although NHS Rotherham and O₂ have made some big changes, this is a partnership that is going to last long into the future.

But both sides know nothing can happen overnight. The successes with intermediate care have shown that change has to happen gradually, and that it has to be managed very carefully. The team have seen that it's not enough just to get new technology and expect everyone to use it. To introduce something successfully, whether it's digital pens, a laptop or a new piece of equipment in the future, it has to support the clinical need and everyone has to be behind it first.

Having a fresh pair of eyes helped the SystmOne team see where they needed to change things. And NHS Rotherham's willingness to invite O₂ into the team – and into the heart of the community health department – has been crucial in making sure the new systems are right for the people using them. NHS Rotherham and O₂ have become a proper team, making decisions together, and working towards one common goal.

Where systems were already in place, O₂ have helped make those systems work more efficiently, paving the way for future changes. Most importantly, though, they've managed to get the community health professionals in Rotherham behind mobile working.

Want to know more?

To find out more about how NHS Rotherham and O₂ are working together, get in touch with the Rotherham SystmOne team on 01709 302714. Or with O₂'s NHS team on 0800 955 5590.

