

An update on visitors at OUH during COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic evolved, measures to keep people safe in all settings have done so too. In healthcare settings, issues around social distancing and reducing risk by minimising contact emerged early on. At Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (OUH) staff had to work quickly to make sure appropriate measures were in place.

These measures ranged from wearing face masks to setting up virtual clinics. One of the biggest and most sensitive changes was restricting visitors to hospital.

In March 2020, Oxford University Hospitals took immediate action to stop the vast majority of visitors to our hospitals. At the height of the pandemic, the only exceptions to this rule were birth partners, one parent for child patients, visitors to patients at the end of their life, and visitors required to make decisions for patients (for instance for patients with learning disabilities).

In June, [Oxford University Hospitals made the decision to relax visiting restrictions and introduced the 'Rule of One'](#) – one visitor, per inpatient, for one hour, once a day.

This policy continues, including during the current second lockdown, and is kept under constant review.

We have never lost sight of the value of visitors to both our patients and our teams – their support, understanding, patience, and kindness is invaluable.

This has been an incredibly challenging year, not least for people in hospital, and we have followed clinical guidance to allow visiting when it is deemed safe to do so. This has been very well-received and we remain grateful to our visitors.

We appreciate that there are some people who have been unable to have visitors, and understand how difficult and lonely this can be. However, we have worked hard to bridge that gap and hope we have gone some way to offer an alternative – whether that be through technology or a good old-fashioned letter.

Ultimately, we are guided by safety – and where possible, we will do our utmost to support visiting when appropriate.

Patient and staff safety is absolutely paramount and means that some visiting restrictions are still in place – including in outpatient departments, Emergency Departments, and Emergency Assessment Units, where patients are expected to attend on their own unless there are exceptional circumstances.

Maternity and birth partners

Giving birth is one of the most important occasions in a woman's life, and at OUH we have permitted birth partners throughout the pandemic.

When the national guidance around shielding was lifted, we also allowed partners to attend for all scans. We have also made sure that individualised visiting arrangements for bereaved women, women with mental health issues, and other vulnerable maternity patients have been in place for the duration.

One mum who gave birth during the pandemic was Daisie Whitford, who left some lovely feedback following her stay at the John Radcliffe Hospital in April this year.

"The care I have received from every department I saw was second to none and more importantly I felt safe and protected from the virus at every stage / ward.

"The point I mainly want to make is apart from my husband not being there the next day, the care I received throughout was no different to what I experienced two years ago when I gave birth to my first son."

[Daisie's complete experience is available to read in our news story.](#)

Golden tickets for our younger patients

Ward staff at Oxford University Hospitals worked with families to design 'golden tickets' to be used in our Children's Hospital.

The ticket acts as a 'hall pass' which allows a parent to have pre-approved open access to visit their child in hospital.

Launched in July 2020, the tickets have proved incredibly popular with our patients.

Virtual visiting

In April, the Trust distributed dozens of tablet devices across our hospitals as part of our 'virtual visiting' initiative.

Patients are able to use them free of charge, enabling them to keep in touch with their loved ones who may not be able to come by and visit.

Within a week, 246 tablets were delivered to the Trust. The devices are securely preloaded so patients can video call friends and family. They also contain apps and streaming media sites such as iPlayer and Netflix. They even link to hospital radio.

Being in hospital can often be a worrying time. By providing our patients with these tablets, a familiar face was just a few taps away.

'Keep in touch'

In some circumstances, patients being cared for in Oxfordshire's hospitals couldn't receive visitors (for instance if they had COVID-19). Inspired by a scheme introduced by Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust, OUH introduced a letter delivery service to help patients hear from their friends and family during their time in hospital.

The 'keep in touch' scheme involved the creation of a dedicated email address for friends and family to send in their messages, which would then be delivered to patients by OUH staff.

More details, including how to send a message, [are available in a news story](#).

Outpatients and attending the Emergency Department or Emergency Assessment Unit

Outpatients are required to attend appointments alone, unless there are exceptional circumstances, such as a patient requiring a carer or parent, having learning difficulties, experiencing mental health difficulties, or being unable to communicate.

Recently, people attending outpatient clinics have been bringing other people into the hospital, which is not in line with the current guidance.

We know and understand that people will often want people with them at hospital appointments.

However, we have to do everything we can to keep everyone safe during COVID-19, which includes ensuring patients are not accompanied to outpatient appointments unless there are special circumstances.

In some services, people attending outpatient appointments may be asked to wait in their car if the clinic is busy, and will be called on their mobile when they can come in.

Virtual and telephone appointments

We have also been offering virtual and telephone appointments for many of our outpatient clinics, meaning patients can receive support and care remotely from their own homes.

People are reminded to check their appointment letter to see if their appointment is virtual, by telephone, or in person before attending to save an unnecessary journey.

The majority of our virtual appointments are carried out on the phone, with other methods including video calls on mobiles and tablet devices using a programme called Attend Anywhere, which is very straightforward to use.

There have been **over 23,000 video consultations** since 13 March 2020.