

Movement, Recovery and Creative Health in Community Hospitals

By Angela Conlan CMgr FCMl

Community hospital staff have long recognised that recovery is about more than treating a condition. Alongside rehabilitation delivered by multidisciplinary teams, our patients benefit from opportunities to stay active, connect with others and take part in meaningful activities. Whether through movement, creativity, music, time outdoors or simply sharing an experience, these moments can all play an important part in recovery.

This is the thinking behind the Oxford Health Arts Partnership's Creating with Care programme, which brings arts, culture, movement and nature into Oxfordshire's community hospitals. Our experience has shown that these settings offer valuable opportunities to use Creative Health alongside clinical care, helping people stay connected and involved while they recover. This reflects growing recognition that Creative Health should form part of a holistic, person-centred health and care system that supports people to live well for longer.¹

At the Community Hospitals Association Conference 2026, we shared what we had learnt from our 'Move to Health' project. Funded by Sport England, Oxford Health Charity and Oxford City Council, the project uses dance and movement to support physical activity, social connection and participation for both patients and staff.



Why community hospitals are ideal settings for Creative Health

Community hospitals are well placed to offer Creative Health because activity can be shaped around the person and into everyday care. Staff often have time to get to know their patients and understand what matters to them, while families, volunteers and local organisations can also be more involved. Gardens, courtyards and shared spaces also provide welcoming places for activity alongside rehabilitation.

This way of working is also supported by a growing body of research. Professor Daisy Fancourt, a leading researcher in arts and health, describes the arts as a potential 'fifth pillar of health', alongside diet, sleep, exercise and nature. Her work explores how creative experiences can support health through physical activity, social connection and psychological wellbeing.²

Move to Health applied this approach in practice, with sessions held wherever worked best that day, including ward day rooms, shared spaces, patient rooms and outdoor areas. This flexibility made it easier for patients, staff and relatives to join in. No dance experience or particular level of fitness was needed, as artists adapted the activity to

suit the abilities and confidence of those taking part, from gentle seated movement and stretching to more energetic rhythm-based activity.

Move to Health in practice: delivery and impact

During the project, professional dance artists worked alongside physiotherapists, occupational therapists and ward teams to plan sessions that combined movement, music, creativity and time with others.

Feedback immediately after the sessions was positive. Eight out of ten participants said their mood had improved, and no one said they felt worse. Nine out of ten felt calmer, while eight out of ten felt more connected to others. People valued getting out of their rooms, spending time with others and moving in a way that felt enjoyable and supportive.

Staff saw similar benefits. Everyone who completed a survey reported positive responses from patients, improved mood and a better atmosphere on the ward. They particularly noticed people connecting with others, including some who had found it difficult to join other ward activities.



What can other community hospitals learn?

Move to Health offers four practical lessons:

- Creative approaches can make movement and rehabilitation feel more enjoyable and easier to join.
- Community hospitals are well suited to Creative Health because of their close links with local people, organisations and places.
- Partnership working matters. Artists, clinical teams, volunteers, patients, families and community organisations all contributed to Move to Health. Their input also helped shape creative movement discharge packs, with local activity information, Age UK resources and signposting to help people remain active and connected after leaving hospital.
- Creative Health can support recovery and person-centred care. Evidence links arts participation with wellbeing and the management of illness across the life course.³ Longitudinal studies have also found associations between cultural engagement, a reduced risk of depression and longer life in older adults.^{4,5}

Community hospitals have always helped people regain independence and prepare to return home. Move to Health shows that recovery can also include rebuilding confidence to try something new, meeting others and finding enjoyment in movement.

As care moves closer to home, there is a real opportunity to make Creative Health part of everyday practice. This does not require community hospitals to start from scratch. It can begin with local partnerships; a shared space and activities shaped around the people taking part.

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About the author

Angela Conlan joined the Oxford Health Clinical Research Facility as Public and Patient Involvement, Engagement and Participation Lead in February 2025, having spent the previous eight years across Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust, including as Arts Lead for the Oxford Health Arts Partnership, where she won the British Geriatrics Society Special Award in 2024 for her creative work with older people. At the time, she had just completed her Senior Leader Level 7 Apprenticeship and was starting an MBA alongside her CRF role and her position as Interim Development Manager for the Oxford Health Charity.



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