



Hospital Discharge Navigators - The difference between relapse and recovery

If you've never heard of a Mental Health Hospital Discharge Navigator before, their role is simple in theory but powerful in impact: remove the barriers that prevent someone from leaving hospital safely and with dignity. From arranging benefits to securing suitable accommodation, Discharge Navigators provide the practical, emotional, and holistic support that often makes the difference between relapse and recovery.

We recently sat down with Debbie, who has worked as a Discharge Navigator for over 3.5 years on inpatient wards with Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust. With warmth and deep empathy, she shares what her role entails and why it matters so much.



“Seeing the change in someone is what I love the most.”

I work across three hospital wards, two wards at the Zinnia Centre (a male and female ward) and a female ward at Newbridge House. Patients come in at their most vulnerable, and often with little trust in anyone. Supporting them to rebuild that trust and seeing their transformation and recovery, is what I love the most.



Barriers to Discharge

For most patients, the biggest barriers to leaving hospital are benefits and accommodation. People may have been in hospital for days, weeks, or even months and during that time, their entitlements may have lapsed or changed, with many who have not been claiming any benefits. Understanding the benefits system is hard enough when you're well, let alone when you're dealing with serious mental health issues.

I work with patients to review their personal entitlements, from Universal Credit which is essential if they require accommodation, to supporting them to apply for PIP and PIP reapplications. Some patients qualify for pension credits, attendance allowances, bus passes and I even support patients in obtaining a mobile phone, something many take for granted, but are crucial for accessing services like the Job Centre. A simple mobile phone and SIM card can be life-changing, it's the little things that make the biggest difference.

Finding the Right Place to Call Home

Another major barrier is finding safe and appropriate housing. Many patients can't return to their previous homes, sometimes due to unsafe conditions, sometimes due to the support they need following their hospital stay. Our goal is to find the right blend of support and accommodation, which isn't always easy.

Some supported housing options in Birmingham are not up to standard, but I have worked hard to build strong relationships with trusted housing providers that offer quality supported accommodation across the city.

Of course, compromises sometimes have to be made, whether in location or amenities, but when we know the patient will have the right support in place, it gives them the best chance to stay well and eventually move to independent living.

I supported an older woman who, after a long-term relationship breakdown and a severe mental health decline, found herself homeless for the first time and having to claim benefits which for her was quite humiliating. She had never lived in supported accommodation before, and it was a huge emotional step. It took time, trust, and a lot of conversations but eventually, we found something that worked for her.



A Team Effort

I couldn't do this job without my amazing colleagues. We're in touch daily, usually by WhatsApp or text and we lean on each other a lot. That peer support is everything.

I spend most of my week on hospital wards, and support on average 8 to 10 patients at any time, I join the MDT (multi-disciplinary team) meetings and participate in ward rounds with doctors and clinical staff, but this job goes far beyond paperwork and meetings.

Making a Difference

I advocate for patients who might not have the strength to speak for themselves, whether it's about their medication, their care, or their next steps. I'm a trained counsellor, so I know the value of active listening. Just giving someone time to talk, to be heard, can be transformational.

What drives me is knowing that I'm making a difference. Some people just need a little help, for others, it's everything. Being there at that critical moment, when someone is preparing to leave hospital and trying to rebuild their life, it's a privilege.



Birmingham Mind has seven Discharge Navigators, working across multiple hospital wards in Birmingham and beyond who are funded by Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust.

Discharge Navigators are a valued member of Hospital Discharge teams, without them these barriers prevent patients from leaving hospital on time, this can lead to beds being blocked to new patients and clinical staff taking on the role of securing benefits and sourcing accommodation. It's an integral role in the recovery of the individuals we support, and although our care doesn't continue once supported accommodation is in place, our patients stay with us in our hearts for a long time. Debbie recalls one patient's words that stayed with her:

“I've had numerous hospital stays in my lifetime, but you've done more for me in the short time I've known you than anyone else ever has.”