



**Press Release**

**For Immediate Release**

**26 September 2022**

Cygnet Health Care is celebrating after its first 'home grown' cohort of nurses have qualified as Registered Mental Health Nurses as a result of its apprenticeship pathway.

Supporting the career development of support workers, the Cygnet Health Care Nursing Pathway Apprentice Programme addresses an industry-wide shortage of nurses, as recruitment and retention of staff remains a key concern for the sector.

Cygnet, a leading provider of services for individuals with mental health needs, learning disabilities and autism, is leading the sector on the employment of nurse associates and the development of nurse apprenticeships to help overcome these challenges.

Staff can take two Apprenticeship pathways, whilst working, to become a nurse associate. Upon completion of the two-year course, the programme participants can take a final tier to continue studying and working for a further 18 months to become registered nurses.

Three members of staff have become the first Registered Mental Health Nurses as a result of this pathway with a further 19 expected to qualify by 2023. To date, Cygnet has offered 125 staff the opportunity to become Nurse Associates or Nurses.

Suzanne Smith, Apprenticeship Manager at Cygnet Health Care, said: *"We wanted to offer a complete Nursing Pathway Apprenticeship route in our organisation to enable a journey from support worker, nursing associate, student nurse to registered mental health nurse. Not only does this help us with recruitment at a time of national shortage, it also helps with retaining high quality staff and gives an amazing opportunity to thrive and progress.*

*"We want our existing staff to feel invested in, and able to recognise that we support career progression, empowering them to forge their own path and take every opportunity to create a clearly defined career pathway.*

*"The passion and drive to succeed exhibited by our apprentices has been awe inspiring. They have flowered and grown and now we have our first Registered Nurses in post as a result of this programme.*

*"I couldn't be prouder seeing them take their place in our services, using their expertise and skills to support our service users."*

Chris Longshaw is one of the three nurses who graduated through the apprenticeship pathway. He started working at Cygnet St Augustine's, a specialist high dependency inpatient rehabilitation for men in Staffordshire, several years ago as a Support Worker.

*"I enjoyed every minute of working there and I fell in love with working in the mental health sector. Being inspired by the fantastic nurses and the team at St Augustine's, I decided to be a nurse and started a Mental Health Nursing course at Staffordshire University," he explained.*

*"Due to unfortunate circumstances, I had to drop out during my first year but took the chance to return to Cygnet as a Support Worker. Although I thoroughly enjoyed my role, it was still my ambition to become a mental health nurse so that I could increase the level of help to those in my care."*

With the support from Cygnet Health Care, Chris began his apprenticeship programme to become a Nurse Associate in April 2018 with the University of Wolverhampton.

*"Throughout the programme, I felt supported every step of the way – through my mentor, my nursing colleagues, and the manager. They always pushed me to be the best that I could be. There is not a thing that I would have changed about my apprenticeship journey. Starting out as a Support Worker, the programme has developed my practical skills and has given me a greater understanding of inpatient care. Having a regular place of work to build my knowledge and skills was invaluable.*

*"For anyone considering an apprenticeship and a career in mental health nursing, my advice is just to go for it. It was a great route for me to follow when I left university during my first year and I'm proud that I took on all the opportunities that came my way."*

The training was free to the apprentices because Cygnet Health Care funded the programme through levy, introduced by the government in 2017.

*"Not placing any financial burden on the individuals demonstrates the commitment us as an organisation dedicate to this programme and to the staff as individuals. We hope to reap the rewards of that through high quality, trained staff but also loyal ones that the organisation can retain for many years to come," added Suzanne. "Offering clear pathways that enable people to enter the profession, pursue their career goals and in turn retain their talent is the ultimate goal for us.*

*"We want to use Apprenticeships to reduce the need for adhoc courses which could be costly and add little value. By using Apprenticeships instead, we have been able to guide staff onto a career pathway with improved knowledge and practical skill set where they also value the training they are given and can use it to enhance and improve workplace practice and quality. In turn, this positively impacts patient outcomes and satisfaction."*

According to NHS digital data, the number of mental health nurses in England has slumped by more than a tenth over the past decade.

Cygnet Health Care has offered 21 different pathways since it started its apprenticeship programme and are looking to increase its portfolio to include more. It has also offered more than 850 opportunities to complete an apprenticeship and has seen many of apprentices earn promotions and progress within the organisation.

*"Despite the pandemic we have continued to support apprentices through the most challenging of times," explained Suzanne.*

*“The national shortage of nurses, in particular mental health nurses, is well documented, which is why Cygnet is so proud to offer an apprenticeship programme for staff who want to pursue a nursing career. Our Nursing Pathway is our most coveted apprenticeship programme and seeing the hard work result in our first cohort of qualified nurses is incredible for all involved.*

*“It’s not just about addressing shortage however. It’s about consistency of care. Our apprentices are already embedded in our services, they know our values and how we operate.*

*“Mental health as a sector has not always had a good physical health knowledge base and by introducing the role of Nurse Associate we are now able to monitor, care and support physical health for our patients where we may have had to hand this over to an outside professional. We have staff who are now skilled in venepuncture, clinical observations and who can lead and drive good care practices across the business.*

*“Seeing qualified Registered Nurses come through the pathway is only going to increase the importance of this programme for us as an organisation.”*

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#### **Notes to Editors**

For interviews, please contact Gemma Attew, External Communications Manager, at [gemmaattew@cygnethealth.co.uk](mailto:gemmaattew@cygnethealth.co.uk)

#### **About Cygnet Health Care**

Cygnet Health Care has been providing a national network of high-quality, specialised mental health services for the NHS and local authorities for the past 30 years.

Cygnet Health Care’s pioneering services support people with complex and acute mental health needs across the UK.

As one of the best quality providers in mental health services in the country, Cygnet Health Care’s focus is always on the best outcomes for those who use or commission its services. 85% of Cygnet’s facilities are rated as good or outstanding, which is above the national average. [www.cygnethealth.co.uk](http://www.cygnethealth.co.uk)