



Given the shortage of personal protective equipment in the UK, people from around the country have started sewing face masks for healthcare workers on the frontline

Masks for maternity

Despite self-isolation, social distancing and NHS work during the COVID-19 pandemic, Sandra Denicke-Polcher and Anna Lawin-O'Brien found a way to make a joyous difference, connecting the community with healthcare providers on shop floor.

Reports about significant shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) for midwives, nurses, doctors and health care support staff, working for the NHS and worldwide during the COVID-19 crisis dominate the news. While the government and Public Health England (PHE) denied a shortage of PPE for weeks – the situation at the front line remains critical. Health care providers in many trusts face frightening shortages of visors, masks and long sleeve gowns. With a substantive number of deaths from COVID-19 among NHS staff, the government's approach to PPE provision causes health concerns among care providers at every shift.

In early March, Carolyn Paul, an Obstetric Consultant from the Whittington Hospital witnessed the fear of staff working without protective equipment while caring for general patients and started to sew homemade masks to lift their mood. The masks were beautiful and Carolyn together with her colleague Consultant Anna Lawin-O'Brien started the morale boosting project 'masks_for_maternity.'

Anna then reached out to her friend Sandra Denicke-Polcher, Deputy Head of Architecture at London Metropolitan University, to draw her attention to the low morale among maternity staff at times of PPE shortage: 'Do you have a sewing machine and can make face masks for maternity?'

This triggered Sandra and what began for her as a Sunday evening task became a demonstration of creativity in crisis - cutting up old shirts and bits of colourful, patterned fabric, carefully sewing and ironing masks - was paired with the rewarding feeling of doing something useful amidst the pandemic. Sandra made 20 masks that evening, and the next morning she sent out a call for help to

her colleagues at The Sir John Cass School of Art, London Metropolitan University. The enthusiasm to help from people locked down at home was huge. While working full-time in her day job she quickly faced the need to actively manage the vast contributions from the fast-growing sewing community. Isolating colleagues, friends and family as well as a large number of people personally unknown to her started sewing. Passionate sewers contacted her from Surrey, Suffolk, Norfolk, Bournemouth, Cardiff and as far as Cumbria. She had to googlemap her way to the helpers to pick up their extraordinary contributions. The individuals sewing in isolation during the lockdown quickly connected with each other via social media; a sewing community of people developed who otherwise would never have met. To date, this community has produced nearly 1000 beautiful face masks which were distributed among NHS staff at the Whittington and Hammersmith Hospitals. Masks were given to key workers at GP surgeries, a homeless shelter, the HNCC Crisis Centre and to the Camden New Journal's relief effort. Members of the community show an ongoing supportive response and so the project continues with more of the precious masks being produced as a growing number of people ask for sewing instructions to start their own initiatives. And since Carol Dean, who organises the creative community's support of North London Crisis Centres, has started managing the masks_for_maternity instagram account the numbers of followers has increased tremendously.

Questions were asked by sewers and mask receivers about the level of infection protection from homemade masks. The only two PubMed listed papers investigating the efficacy of homemade masks are available on the Instagram account. There is evidence for homemade cotton masks providing more protection than no mask. Many countries made face masks compulsory for the public during the pandemic. The German Robert-Koch-Institute recommended on 02/04/20 to wear a mouth-and-nose covering mask in public to reduce viral spread, explaining that 'masks made at home' can have a protective effect. On 21/04/20 The Guardian stated that 'Scientists join calls for UK public to wear homemade face masks outdoors', and that 'Britain should consider adopting the US advice for people to wear "cloth face coverings" in public'.

To state the obvious, our masks_for_maternity masks are not PPE. Our masks were never meant to replace approved PPE masks such as surgical masks, FFP2, or FFP3 mask and they are not to be worn while working on NHS wards. Our masks are a token of appreciation and an exquisite present for NHS care workers from our community. The masks are intended to be worn during a key worker's commute, while shopping or walking in the park on a day off.

Despite the COVID-19 crisis and shortage of PPE for NHS workers, we would like to highlight the many noteworthy positive effects of the mask making project. It has created a vast number of cheerful homemade masks at a time of scarcity and fear. A strong community spirit developed and a UK-wide network of engaged home sewers was created, expressing: 'I wish to do something to support the NHS' and '...only 13 made today as I went a bit wobbly in the emotions department, this isolation is growing really testing...'. Though many helpers experience true isolation they feel uplifted and connected through the making of the masks. 'I took pride in making them well ... I love the sewing.' It appears that the paramount message of our initiative is the substantive positive effect for both - givers and receivers of masks. Wearing a homemade mask provides some protection, supports awareness of physical distancing, reduces touching of one's face and most importantly makes the wearer feel special and appreciated. Making masks empowers the sewer to support their NHS and indirectly their own health protection. Making masks reduces the negative impacts of self-isolation like loneliness, helplessness and low moods. Anna and her colleague Carolyn also felt the joyful magnificence of everyone coming together through this project: 'To everyone in the sewing community, a huge thank you for your efforts. Your handmade cotton face masks are beautiful statements of your appreciation for our maternity team. Thanks to you, there will be smiles under our masks and our hearts will be a little lighter!'



A colourful display of the homemade face masks

Follow [masks_for_maternity](#) on Instagram for updates on the project.

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