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How a Fishermen's Clinic in Brixham Offers a Model for Community Health in England

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Tom Parker, a 37-year-old fisherman from Devon, faced a serious health crisis after an accident at sea left him with a broken fibula and badly damaged ankle ligaments. Despite initial hospital treatment, his wound failed to heal properly. It was only after attending a specialised walk-in clinic on the quayside in Brixham that he was prescribed strong antibiotics and advised to undergo a second operation. Without this local service, Tom believes his injury could have developed into sepsis, a potentially fatal infection.

This clinic in Brixham is part of a wider movement in England's National Health Service (NHS) to shift care away from traditional hospital settings towards community-based services that focus on prevention as well as treatment. The NHS's recently published 10-

year plan aims to transform healthcare by expanding local, targeted care, particularly in coastal and rural areas where health outcomes often lag behind national averages.

The Brixham clinic, set up in a repurposed room at the harbour, provides accessible medical services tailored to the fishing community. Staff include general practitioners (GPs), pharmacists, physiotherapists, nurses, and coordinators for health screenings such as prostate cancer tests. Because fishermen often work irregular hours and cannot attend conventional GP appointments, the clinic takes healthcare directly to them, making check-ups and treatments easier to access. This initiative is run by the Seafarers Hospital Society in partnership with the Fishermen's Mission charity and operates not only in Brixham but also in ports across the UK, including Folkestone, Peterhead, and Kirkeel in Northern Ireland.

The clinic has expanded services to include skin cancer checks, mobile dental care, and mental health counselling, addressing multiple health needs in one location. This approach recognises the challenges faced by coastal communities, where older populations and recruitment difficulties in healthcare create higher risks of poor health outcomes. Data analysed by the BBC indicates that NHS trusts serving these areas experience longer wait times for emergency and planned care compared to other parts of England.

To tackle these issues, the NHS plans to open 300 neighbourhood health centres nationwide, prioritising locations with the lowest healthy life expectancy. These centres will offer extended hours and bring together multidisciplinary teams including GPs, nurses, social care workers, pharmacists, and mental health specialists. The goal is to provide personalised, preventative care that reduces the burden on hospitals and improves early diagnosis of chronic illnesses.

While similar ambitions have been stated by past governments, experts caution that rebalancing funding from hospitals to community care requires significant upfront investment and patience, as benefits may take years to fully emerge. Healthcare unions also highlight the need to ensure sufficient staffing without overburdening medical professionals.

Nevertheless, those involved in the Brixham clinic are optimistic about the potential of this model. Dr James Gunning, the local GP overseeing the clinic, notes the identification of new cases of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and high blood pressure, which may prevent more severe conditions later. Fishermen like Rob Caunter, diagnosed with prostate cancer after a clinic blood test, credit the service with saving their lives.

The Brixham fishermen's clinic exemplifies how targeted, community-focused health services can offer practical solutions for improving care in underserved areas. Its success provides a valuable blueprint for the NHS's ongoing transformation towards more localised and preventative healthcare.