THE NHS FOREST

"Imagine a hospital with a view of trees outside every window. Imagine walking to your appointment along a winding path bordered by blossoming cherry trees. Imagine patients spending time with their visitors in the shade of a small woodland. Imagine staff being invited to join lunchtime wellbeing sessions beneath the green canopy."

Vicki Brown

Imagine a hospital where healthcare happens right across the estate – not just inside the building.

This is the vision of the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare, who founded the NHS Forest [1] in 2009. Starting life as a tree planting initiative, the NHS Forest has evolved over the years as the evidence [2] for and understanding of the links between green space and health have become more widespread.

We know, for example, that patients who have a view of trees from their window will recover more quickly from surgery, and request fewer painkillers, than those who have a view of a wall. We know that access to nature can reduce incidences of cardiovascular disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes, as well as lowering rates of stress, anxiety and depression.

In England alone, it has been calculated that the NHS could save an estimated £2.1 billion in treatment costs *every year* if everyone had access to good quality green space. Green space contributes to a sustainable healthcare service, not simply by storing carbon and supporting wildlife, but by reducing dependence on the NHS and cutting costs across the system.

CSH believes the NHS can be an active driver for creating and protecting green space, as well as enjoying the many benefits it brings.

Creating accessible green spaces for all

The NHS estate is hugely varied. The hundreds of hospitals, GP surgeries and ambulance stations contain compact courtyards, therapeutic gardens, productive orchards and ancient woodlands. Trees can provide cleaner air, offer shade and privacy, lower noise pollution, reduce erosion and flood risk, and reduce temperatures – both outdoors, and inside neighbouring buildings. They capture and store carbon, and provide habitats for native species. In healthcare settings, they can provide calming views, and be actively used as part of care.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Access to nature is incredibly unequal: the poorest communities and ethnic minorities are twice as likely to live in a neighbourhood without nature-rich spaces [3]. Healthcare sites located within these areas can act as 'anchor institutions' – providing accessible, safe and welcoming green spaces. This can combat wider social disparities: studies show that when people have more access to green space where they live, income-related health inequalities are less marked. The more biodiverse the space, the greater the health benefits can be; trees and woodlands near hospitals can offer accessible landscapes that change throughout the seasons, to listen to birdsong or kick fallen leaves.

There can be many barriers to visiting local parks – in terms of distance, obstacles for people with wheelchairs, pushchairs or mobility aids, a fear of stigma against those with mental or physical health issues, women feeling unsafe to enter alone, and some communities feeling they do not "belong" in these spaces. Healthcare sites are well placed to address these barriers, as they are visited by all, regardless of disability, race, sex or age.

Supporting staff wellbeing

> "We can't go outside in scrubs and our breaks are quite short, so by the time we've got changed and been able to leave it's time to come back again... during winter months we don't see the sunlight for maybe four days at a time."

Long, irregular shifts, stressful work and short (or no) breaks can make it virtually impossible for healthcare staff to have regular contact with nature. Planting and conserving trees close to wards and offices – with accessible walkways, signage, seating and features that provide privacy – can significantly increase the opportunities for staff to spend time outside.

> "What I'm doing is not gardening. This is wellbeing. This is to help [clinical staff] have somewhere to go." – NHS staff member and hospital garden volunteer

At a time when NHS staff are reporting high levels of stress and there are more than 130,000 vacancies, we believe the presence of trees near their workspaces is more important than ever, in attracting staff, retaining them, and supporting their health and wellbeing. So, too, is creating a cultural setting which permits and encourages them to use these spaces as part of their workday.

Greening the grey

Ideally, provision for trees and woodlands would be embedded into the design of healthcare sites at the very inception of the planning process – hospitals could be excellent candidates for biophilic design, given the number and variety of people this could benefit. The government's New Hospital Programme, which aims to deliver 48 hospitals by 2030, has created an opportunity to rethink the design of these buildings. Multiple design submissions have been forward-thinking in their architectural concepts [4], which include creative and ambitious plans for incorporating nature into the healthcare landscape.

Southmead Hospital – Photo Credit: Vicki Brown CSH 2021

In reality, most hospitals will have to find solutions for protecting, managing and expanding the tree cover they already have. Strategically situated trees, visible from ward beds or offices, will have benefits that extend beyond biodiversity and carbon. Mature trees offer multiple benefits; actively protecting and managing these should be a priority. Some sites may need to look beyond the estate; Aintree Hospital [5] in Liverpool, for example, and Grantown-on-Spey Medical Practice [6] in the Cairngorms both manage woodlands that border their sites, and are exploring ways to use them to support their patients and wider public health.

> "I'd found 'me' in this garden.
> I laughed, I didn't cry, I was singing
> [...] My family noticed the difference,
> the relationships with my family had
> improved, and I'd got my confidence
> back." – NHS staff member, during
> the Covid-19 pandemic

A solution to the health and climate crises

The world is experiencing twin climate and biodiversity crises, with grave implications for human health. At the same time, the UK healthcare system is also in crisis. Protecting and expanding our trees and woodlands is not just a nice thing to do; it is essential for a resilient health service, resilient ecosystems and a resilient population. In order to realise the full range of benefits from these trees and woodlands, they must be protected and actively managed. The NHS green estate is a healthcare asset – one that should be invested in, capitalised on, and celebrated.

https://nhsforest.org
https://sustainablehealthcare.org.uk

The Centre for Sustainable Healthcare is a registered charity. It offers strategic input and consultancy. Our green space projects, including the NHS Forest, assist healthcare sites to improve their natural environment and reconnect their staff, patients and the wider community with their local green space to benefit their health.

The NHS Forest is funded by the Trees Call to Action Fund. The fund was developed by Defra in partnership with the Forestry Commission and is being delivered by the Heritage Fund.

1. https://nhsforest.org/
2. https://nhsforest.org/evidence/
3. https://www.cpre.org.uk/about-us/cpre-media/new-campaign-calls-for-legal-right-to-nature-in-levelling-up-reforms/
4. https://nhsforest.org/blog/new-hospital-programme-new-generation-of-garden-hospitals/
5. https://nhsforest.org/locations/aintree-university-hospital/
6. https://nhsforest.org/locations/grantown-on-spey-medical-practice/