

Festival Fridays – Edinburgh International Festival performers entertain patients, families, staff and volunteers across NHS Lothian hospitals

A range of musicians selected by Edinburgh International Festival performed a series of concerts at five NHS Lothian hospitals, The Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh (RIE), Royal Hospital for Children and Young people (RHCYP), Royal Edinburgh Hospital (REH), Western General Hospital (WGH) and St. John's Hospital (SJH). Dubbed 'Festival Fridays', the musical events, offered through NHS Lothian Charity's Tonic Arts Programme, saw patients, families, staff and visitors enjoy some respite and distraction with 24 performances taking place over 8 Fridays from May to October 2024. A special 'Festive Festival Friday' was also included in the programme of events in December 2024.

This project showed the positive impact culture can have on mental and physical health and wellbeing, while also bringing a taste of the festival to the children and young people who were unable to attend events."

– Jenni Minto, Scottish Government Public Health Minister at a performance at The Royal Hospital for Children and Young People,



Rising Stars of Brass perform at the RHCYP

Best hospital visit ever!"
–Family member, The Royal Hospital for Children and Young People

Music in clinical settings

Events and performances like these are one of the ways NHS Lothian Charity's Tonic Arts Programme uses art and creativity to help alleviate stress, reduce anxiety, and create a positive environment for the NHS Lothian community. Research* shows the benefits of music in clinical settings for patients and their families, staff and for therapeutic interventions of patients with mental health conditions. Music acts as a medium for processing emotions, trauma, and grief—but music can also be utilised as a regulating or calming tool.

*Music Therapy in Mental Health for Illness Management and Recovery by Michael J. Silverman (2022)



1,500 patients, staff, families and volunteers attended the performances



14 hours of music was performed (5 hours in wards and 9 in communal spaces)



On average audience members rated the performances 5/5

The performances

NHS Lothian Charity’s Tonic Arts team assessed priorities and focused on delivering the performances in spaces which would have the most benefit and be easily accessible for patients and staff (targetting wards caring for older patients or those with a mental health condition). A comprehensive communications plan was actioned to maximise awareness and engagement, including displaying posters across the wards and targetted emails to key staff.

Each performances lasted approx. 30 minutes and the team ensured that performances aligned with staff breaks or times when patients were not engaged in ward activities. As a result 100% of audience members (staff and patients) agreed they were fully able to engage in the performance and had no distractions. Each performance was introduced by Lucy, Edinburgh International Festival Presenter, who introduced the musicians and supported the audience to engage with the performance throughout. One audience member shared: “I liked the questions and facts that Lucy gave out during the performance, it was a great way to understand the music more – so it’s accessible to all.”

A variety of musicians took part in performances on different dates in a range of spaces including clinical wards and communal areas such as hospital cafés and dining rooms, and one in the Gardens of the Royal Hospital for Children and Young People. Festival Fridays 2024 welcomed artists from the Philharmonia Orchestra, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Halle Orchestra, Bamberger Symphoniker, Rising Stars of Brass as well as groups such as VRi, Twelfth Day and the Resol Quartet.



Spotlight on...‘Festive Festival Friday’

On the 13th of December, 30 singers from the Edinburgh International Festival Chorus performed festive concerts at 3 NHS Lothian hospitals. Travelling across Edinburgh by bus, they began at the café in the Anne Ferguson Building, Western General Hospital, continued to the Mall at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh and concluded at The Hive, an activity centre and café, at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital. Around 250 patients, families, staff and visitors enjoyed festive classics such as "White Christmas" and "Silent Night".

One of NHS Lothian Charity’s Impact Support Volunteer’s, Ellen, was at the first performance and shared her observations: “The café was bustling with a lovely Christmas atmosphere, everyone was tapping their toes, clapping, and singing along to a mix of traditional and older carols. Edinburgh International Festival presenter, Lucy, took requests and shared information on some of the carols, including a beautiful Ukrainian carol, "Carol of the Bells", which everyone found very interesting. The performance brought smiles to everyone's faces.”



The choir on the bus



Such beautiful voices and choice of carols. I felt like I was floating up and going to heaven. It set me up for the day.”

–Patient,
Western General Hospital



Choir perform at the HIVE, REH

How the performances made a difference

Patients and staff have improved wellbeing

98%

of audience members agreed that the experience had a positive impact on their health and wellbeing



I love classical music and enjoyed the performance – made me feel relaxed and have a good sense of wellbeing.”

–Patient, Royal Edinburgh Hospital



I was feeling very low this morning. I feel much better now. The music was wonderful.”

–Patient, Western General Hospital



It was an absolutely wonderful experience. I even had tears in my eyes, tears of happiness.”

–Staff member, Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh



I work on a cancer ward and it can be very hard going....as soon as I heard the music I relaxed, the tension went out of my body, my shoulders relaxed. It really prepares you for the afternoon ahead.”

–Staff member, St. John’s Hospital

Enhanced experience and care for patients in hospital

100%

of audience members agreed they enjoyed the performance and it improved their experience that day



It's our first hospital visit with our child and and we now have positive associations for when we have to return.”

–Parent, Royal Hospital for Children and Young People



It's really brightened up a dreary day, something different and out of the ordinary. Lots of young children are here for long periods of time so its lovely they can go away and chat about it for the rest of the day.”

–Staff member, Royal Hospital for Children and Young People



That performance was so special, nice to have the patients in a room together to listen to the music, usually they are in single rooms and quite isolated. Patients feel part of something.”

–Staff member, Western General Hospital

Next steps

The feedback from this project illustrates the impact this programme of musical performances had on staff, patients, family members, volunteers and visitors to the hospitals. As a result NHS Lothian Charity's Tonic Arts team and Edinburgh International Festival have planned another series of performances at NHS Lothian Hospitals from April – September 2025.

A main learning from this year's series of performances was that performing solely on Fridays doesn't provide the greatest reach. To further improve accessibility and artist availability, the team are exploring alternative performance models.



Vri perform in a ward in the WGH



Twelfth Night perform in a ward in SJH

I love that lots of people in this dining room would never have heard music like this before – its introduced me to a different type – like the equality of it."

Staff member, St John's Hospital



Philharmonia Orchestra perform in the canteen in SJH

I wasn't expecting to still be in hospital by this stage, I just want to be at home so something like this is such an unexpected treat. The music was wonderful, I was fair tapping my toes!"

Patient, Western General Hospital



Scottish Chamber Orchestra perform in the mall in the RIE

Thank you

A huge thanks to Edinburgh International Festival, the in-kind contribution of these series of performances was £22,698.

Thank you to the NHS Lothian staff who supported NHS Lothian Charity's Tonic Arts team with the organisation of the performances in the hospitals and on the wards and the NHS Lothian Volunteers who helped patients attend the performances. Lastly, thank you to the NHS Lothian Charity Impact Support Volunteers who supported the evaluation.

Report compiled by Rebecca Caulfield, Evaluation Manager, NHS Lothian Charity