

Havens: Stories and portraits from NHS Lothian staff

To support staff wellbeing NHS Lothian Charity's Tonic Arts and Green Health Programmes, in partnership with Stills: Centre for Photography, created Havens – a series of stories and portraits documenting NHS Lothian staff members' wellbeing and experience at work. At NHS Lothian mental ill health has been the leading cause of sickness absence for the last 5 years and is rising year on year. The use of workplace Havens improves wellbeing (especially mental wellbeing) by providing staff with a comfortable and private space during their busy workdays.

This project not only supported participants to explore their own health and wellbeing at work, it also facilitated a much wider conversation about staff experience and wellbeing amongst individual staff members, teams, patients and the wider public. A study by Unison in 2022 noted, 53% of NHS staff in the UK reported they were unable to take breaks. By showcasing Havens across NHS Lothian sites, the project inspires other staff to discover or utilise similar spaces to take breaks/micro-breaks to improve their own health and wellbeing.

From July 2022, and over the course of 18 months, photographer Craig Easton and writer Lottie Davies, met with staff from a variety of different roles and services across NHS Lothian. Through interviews and portraits, they captured the essence of their Havens and the impact they have on their wellbeing. Chosen Havens might be green spaces or art-filled areas, courtyards, staff rooms, cafe corners, wherever staff can go for a quiet lunch break or just for a five-minute breather.



Sandi, Senior Charge Nurse

Such powerful work, I'm choked with tears looking at these. So glad these stories are being told.
– NHS Lothian staff member

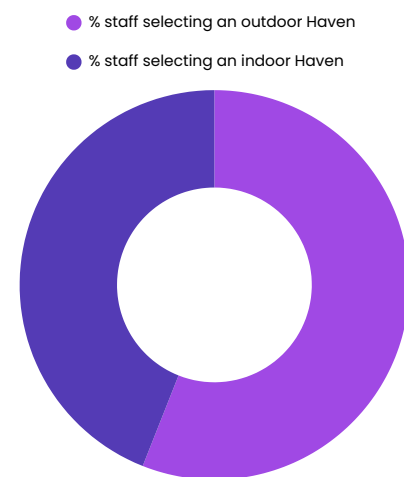
Havens project outputs:

- Learning and development opportunities – Creative Writing and Photography Workshops.
- Photoshoots and interviews.
- Portraits and booklets.
- Website section – where each portrait can be viewed and the staff members stories listened to.
- Exhibitions – Selection of portraits on display in Stills: Centre for Photography and NHS Lothian hospital sites. Each portrait has a QR code that enables the viewer to listen to staff member's story.

72 Havens stories and portraits were produced



Terry, Painter, Estates



Gillian, Podiatrist

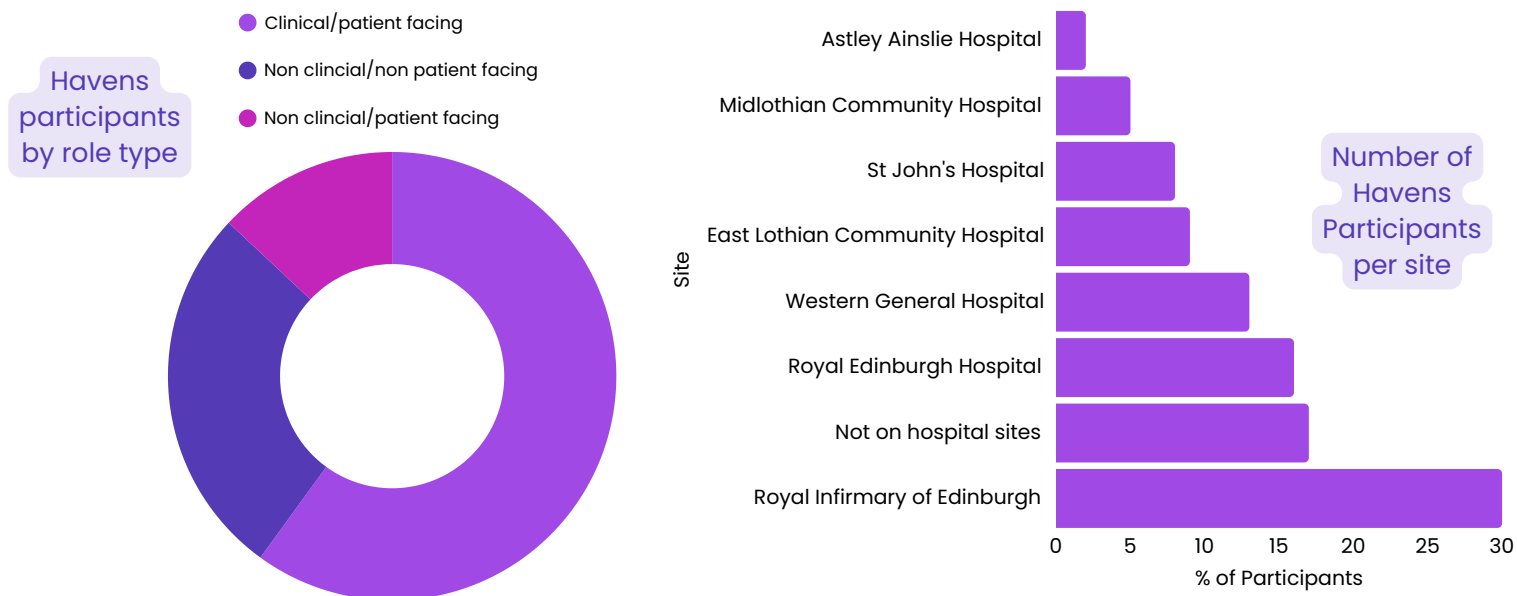


Chris, Hospital Director

Havens participants – impact

How staff got involved

The project was open to all staff, regardless of department or position, with the aim to reflect the diverse community that makes up NHS Lothian and capture staff experience from all perspectives. Staff who wished to be involved in telling their story and having their photo taken were encouraged to register their interest by contacting the Havens project team via email; they received approx. 80 enquiries. Following this, each individual was contacted directly by a member of the team to discuss their Haven and to provide further information about the scope and expectations of the project.



94%

reported feeling **more valued** (12 months later, half responded that they continue to feel valued)



I feel more positive about my work and my value to the organisation."

–Havens participant



I feel more appreciated and my contributions are recognised and valued."

–Havens participant

76%

reported they felt **more listened to** (12 months later, half responded that they continue to feel more listened to)



I feel listened to and that fact it was recorded too has great value for the future."

–Havens participant



My office was under threat due to lack of space but as I was able to show this portrait to my managers and I don't think they will take it away now."

–Havens participant

70%

reported an **improvement in their health and wellbeing** (12 months later, half responded that they continue to feel an improvement in their health and wellbeing)



I am taking more time to myself, to breathe and collate my thoughts and continue to looking after my health and wellbeing."

–Havens participant



I need to constantly challenge myself to prioritise me, this has helped me. I am learning not to take everything on my shoulders."

–Havens participant

Havens Creative Writing and Photography Workshops – impact

To widen the impact of the Havens project beyond the staff who had their portraits taken, creative writing and photography workshops were offered to staff in 2023, taking place across 3 different sites. 70% of the 62 staff that attended had a clinical/patient facing role so the workshops were designed to fit around busy schedules, lasting 90 minutes and held at times when shifts generally end.

The workshops offered staff a different way to participate in the Havens project, looking at how creativity could be a Haven, providing a welcome distraction from their demanding work to help improve their wellbeing. Almost all staff who attended shared they had an interest in photography or writing and would like to learn more. One participant shared: “I have always had an interest in writing and was curious where I could go with it.” During the workshops, staff also explored the idea of a physical Haven to support their wellbeing when at work, leading them to pinpoint specific spaces they either already use or identify spaces they could use.

The workshops

For the photography workshops, participants were shown how they could use their mobile phones to discover their artistic side, learning tips about composition and the use of natural light, they went off in pairs to take photos of the surrounding nature and architecture and shot portraits of each other. The creative writing workshops led staff through a series of writing prompts, resulting in personal narratives describing places that were special to the staff member. Photos and stories were shared amongst the participants at the end of each of the sessions.



Creative writing workshop

Impact – provided a creative break

100%

of staff who took part in a workshop agreed it **provided a creative break** from the usual work routine



I learned so much information, very thought-provoking.”

–Havens Workshop participant

Impact – improved use of Havens for wellbeing



I have gone to my Haven more and have also found new Havens while out taking photographs.”

–Havens Workshop participant



It’s made me appreciate the hospital gardens more and will use now.”

–Havens Workshop participant



I appreciate my Haven more and plan to use it again soon.”

–Havens Workshop participant



I will mention the project and Havens to other colleagues now.”

–Havens Workshop participant

Impact – improved wellbeing

Staff were asked how they felt (1 = tired/stressed and 5 = inspired/energised)

On AVERAGE they rated:

Before

2

After

5



Staff sharing their work

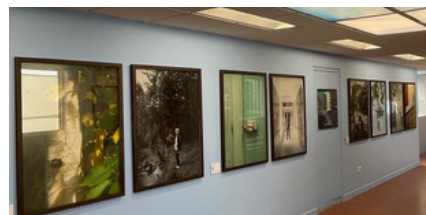


Photography workshop

Havens Exhibitions

The Power of Shared Stories

Sharing the authentic experiences of NHS Lothian staff, conveyed through photography and showcased in exhibitions reaches a wide range of audiences. It highlights the need for Havens, to not only those using the hospital spaces but to the wider public by highlighting those dedicated spaces where staff can find crucial moments of peace and replenishment during their busy and challenging workdays. To date, the Havens portraits have been displayed in an outdoor exhibition at the Astley Ainslie Hospital, Stills: Centre for Photography, a city centre gallery, and within the hospital environment at the Tonic Arts Galleries in The Western General, The Royal Edinburgh Hospital and Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh.



Exhibition at REH



Outdoor exhibition at AAH



Installation at WGH

Public Exhibition – Stills: Centre for Photography

The project showcased a selection of larger portraits at [Stills: Centre for Photography](#), 23 Cockburn St, Edinburgh. The exhibition opened with a preview event on 27 June 2024, where 130 NHS Lothian staff members, Havens participants and their families, and third sector partners attended.

Running from 28 June – 13 July 2024, the exhibition was open to the general public. The Tonic Arts team selected this gallery as it's a busy city centre gallery with a large footfall welcoming Edinburgh locals and tourists from far and wide. The exhibition, viewed by approx 1,200, people, tested public perception of NHS staff and how that changes through the shared stories – encouraging greater empathy and improving how the public interacts with staff by understanding the challenges staff face.



Discussing the portrait (Photo- Craig Easton)



Exhibition at Stills (Photo – Crag Easton)



My mum has worked in the NHS for years down south. I wish she could be here to see this amazing show that validates NHS workers."

–Visitor ,Stills Gallery



We all need to find – and take – those moments at work (and beyond) more often, to regain our balance."

–Visitor, Stills Gallery



Jamie, Senior Charge Nurse, with his portrait (Photo – Craig Easton)



Thanks to Stills: Centre for Photography for their support. The in-kind contribution for the project was approx. £4,600



Impact on patients, carers and their families



I really enjoyed this exhibition – it calmed me down after a stressful visit."

– Patient ,
Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh Gallery



Got thinking about art and its healing effects both spiritually and physically."

– Patient ,
Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh Gallery



Very insightful and a good contrast to being in hospital."

– Patient ,
Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh Gallery



Such a beautiful bit of breathing space with a calming selection of pictures."

–Family member,
Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh Gallery

Havens Exhibitions – wider impact

100%

of people viewing the exhibition agreed they **now understand the need** for staff to have Haven at work

The photographs portray such a calmness and the need for a Haven really shows."

– Patient, Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh Gallery

Their work is busy, demanding and relentless in so many ways. The concept of a Haven, wherever it is, in or outside the working environment is so important and valuable."

– Third sector partner at the Stills Gallery

A wonderful window into the life of an NHS worker. I will definitely revisit the idea of a Haven going forward."

– NHS Lothian Staff member at the Stills Gallery

100%

of people viewing the exhibition agreed the exhibition **highlights the challenges staff face in the work they do**

It is the best thing I have ever seen here. It's so important to highlight the challenges that staff are facing. I feel overwhelmed at work, this shows the importance of getting a break."

– Staff member,
Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh Gallery

A beautiful, important project. Some of the observations make me smile, others broke my heart."

– NHS Lothian Staff member at the Stills Gallery

Love it!! It's real and displays the real side of the NHS – personal and gritty."

– Patient, Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh Gallery

100%

of people viewing the exhibition will now **change how they interact with NHS Lothian staff in the future**

It makes the world of difference to see NHS workers in their glory and expressing how they like to unwind in the scenic spots of the hospitals."

– Patient,
Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh Gallery

The photos themselves are beautiful and they give such a sense of the staff's dedication and commitment to the NHS."

– Family member,
Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh Gallery



Over 10,000 people have viewed the Havens exhibitions on NHS sites

Capturing the stories of a variety of NHS Lothian staff

An important element of the project was to represent the experiences of all NHS Lothian staff including those who do not/may not usually have a voice. By doing this, the project recognises it takes everyone in every role to deliver good quality, compassionate health care. Feedback from people viewing the exhibition shows how this aim was met and that everyone's wellbeing is important;

"Introduces you to individuals working in the NHS and get to see them in an intimate way. I like how it's captured all manner of jobs, from doctors to domestics. The workforce is so diverse, it's a community of people and this exhibition brings everyone together." – NHS Lothian Staff member at the Stills Gallery Exhibition

"I am close to tears to see this photo makes me emotional, I know this lady, she is one of the unsung heroes that has worked for the NHS for 35 years. The exhibition shows that we as a community value them, whatever role they do. It highlights the people in the NHS who don't get time or recognition." – NHS Lothian Staff member at the Stills Gallery Exhibition

"I love the way that it's not just doctors who are portrayed. There are so many staff that the public are unaware of. They need highlighted too. The exhibition felt real and lifelike." – Patient, Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh Gallery

Legacy and next steps



How Havens participants have used their Haven for wellbeing since taking part in the project



I have been ensuring that I go for a walk at lunchtime in my Haven, this means I can regroup myself and provides certainty that I have stepped away from work for a short period of time during the day."

–Havens participant



I found a similar less busy space close to my office now so easier to decompress."

–Havens participant



I appreciated my Haven lots before and after the photo. I have definitely spoken about it more with folk though which hopefully has promoted the space."

–Havens participant



I have visited my Haven more often. Its nice to think others may discover it due to the project."

–Havens participant



How Havens Workshop participants have used creativity as their Haven since taking part in the workshop

100%

of Havens Workshop participants agreed that since attending the workshop **they continued with their interest in photography or writing skills**



I am making an effort to take more and share my photographs. I am also encouraging others to do the same – there are some keen amateur photographers in my department and it is lovely to see them sharing their work."

–Havens Workshop participant

Havens from here?

Exhibitions of Havens portraits will continue to be rotated around NHS Lothian Charity's Tonic Galleries, details can be found here: [NHS Lothian Charity Tonic Arts website](#). NHS Lothian Charity's Tonic Arts Team is also exploring how the exhibition can be used as an educational resource for those interested in art and/or a career in the NHS.

Moving forward the Havens exhibitions, website, and booklet will continue to support staff wellbeing by;

- Raising awareness of the importance of staff wellbeing
- Empowering staff to address personal wellbeing issues like break taking
- Improving awareness of challenges staff face (with colleagues, patients and the public)
- Shifting of public perception of staff to ensure staff are treated with dignity and respect
- Raising awareness of the diversity of NHS Lothian staff and staff roles

Thank you

Thank you to the Haven's participants for sharing their experiences by providing feedback, and to Craig Easton and Lottie Davies for supporting the evaluation of this project. Thanks also to the NHS Lothian Charity Impact Support Volunteers who supported with collecting data.

Go to the [NHS Lothian Charity Havens website pages](#) to see the Havens portraits and to find out more about this project.



Margaret, Play Services Co-ordinator

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