

## Trolleydarity – Immersive experience bringing joy and respite across NHS Lothian

Being in hospital can be hard, patients often experience physical discomfort alongside anxiety and stress about their health and recovery. It can also feel isolating and restrictive, with a loss of independence in an unfamiliar and often overwhelming environment. In response to this NHS Lothian Charity: Tonic Arts in collaboration with the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) and lead artists Shona Reppe and Alan Grieve developed Trolleydarity: a ‘Scratch n Sniff Staycation’ experience, designed to bring a little joy and respite to a patients’ day. Trolleydarity visited wards, departments and rest areas in four NHS Lothian hospitals, with several receiving repeat visits to allow long-term patients, who are particularly vulnerable to boredom and stress, to experience it more than once.

This innovative initiative, was led by two performance artists and their trolley. They approach patients, staff, and visitors, offering them a “staycation” experience, which almost everyone enthusiastically accepted. Participants can choose a staycation destination from a curated list or take a chance by spinning the trolley’s wheel. The adventure begins right where they are: participants remain in place, close their eyes (if they feel comfortable to do so), and put on a pair of headphones. Through interaction with the artists’ voice and a specially designed scratch-and-sniff postcard that corresponds to their chosen destination, their senses are gently awakened and transported, creating an immersive moment of escape.

### Why Trolleydarity works in a hospital setting

- Brief interactions – Brief (2–3 minutes) experiences suitable for patients and busy staff, with options for shared participation using multiple headphones.
- Individualised, person-centred approach – Participants chose their experience, with artists tailoring interactions to individual needs, interests, and health status.
- Flexible, mobile delivery – Trolley-based design enabled delivery directly in clinical spaces, including by the bedside, fitting easily into varied hospital environments while remaining flexible enough to also engage people in less clinical areas when opportunities arose. This delivery model and the preparation by the Tonic Arts team enabled Trolleydarity to swiftly adapt to unexpected ward closures or unplanned disruptions.



Staff enjoying Trolleydarity

**1,182**  
staycations were participated in by patients, families, staff and visitors over the 19 week tour.



A patient enjoying Trolleydarity

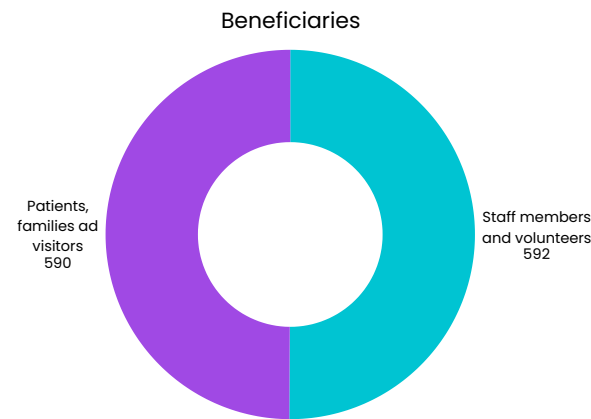
Trolleydarity costs amount to £46,970 which includes development and delivery. Tonic Arts contributed £10,740 and thanks to NTS for their £36,230 financial contribution

**You brought such an air of fun and light heartedness to the ward. It had effects on everyone there.”**

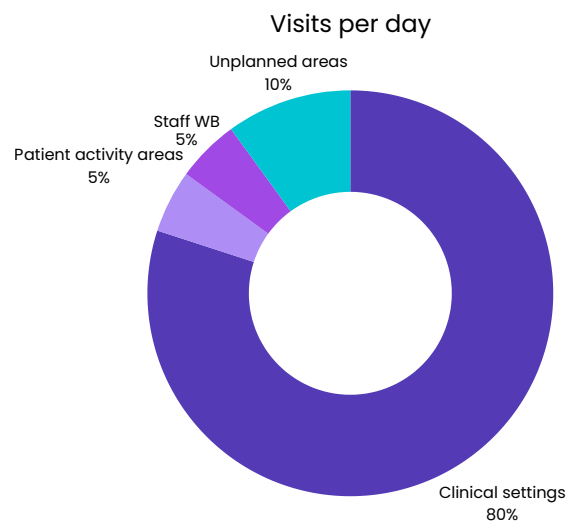
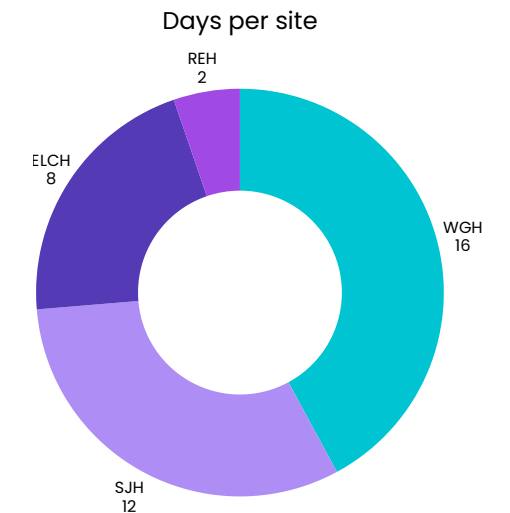
– Dr Ramsay, Consultant, Stroke Ward, SJH

## Trolleydarity's reach and beneficiaries

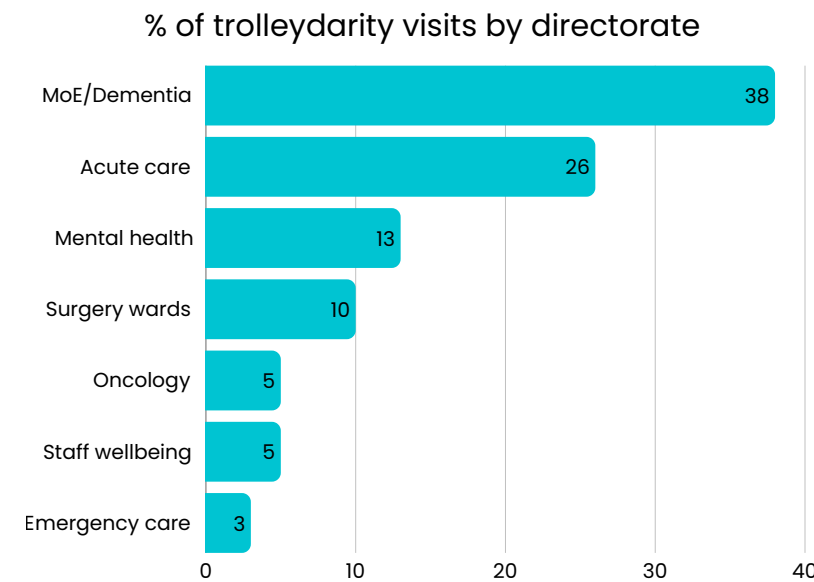
The programme achieved substantial reach through sustained activity across 38 days, working across a wide range of wards, departments, and less clinical areas. Supporting both patients and staff, and focussing on clinical settings, the programme demonstrated adaptability, prioritising those least able to access activity while in hospital and enabling wider participation by those in need of a short break in the moment. Highlighting the potential for inclusive, imaginative interventions to have meaningful impact in health care environments without disrupting clinical care or staffing levels.



- Delivered 100 hours of interactions.
- Visited on 38 days (the number of visits proportionate to the size of the site).
- Covered large areas of hospitals e.g. at WGH 15 wards and areas were visited, 11 at SJH and 5 at REH. At ELCH 7 areas were visited, including all 6 of the hospital in-patient wards



- Planned visits prioritised patients in clinical settings who are often unable to leave the ward or who spend extended periods waiting between appointments/undergoing treatment.
- To complement planned rehabilitation and support activities, 5% took place in patient activity spaces.
- 10% of experiences were unplanned and took place in public areas, cafes and corridors, usually as a result of people asking questions and then offered an experience.
- To prioritise staff in need of support, 5% of activity took place in staff wellbeing spaces (Staff WB).



- Over 50% of sessions delivered supported harder-to-reach and vulnerable groups such as dementia patients, patients in palliative care and individuals with mental health conditions.
- To support this, Tonic Arts arranged training for the NTS team to learn about the range of mental health conditions and how to ensure everyone feels safe and able to engage appropriately. The Tonic Arts Participation Officer also provided on-site support on each day.

## Impact on patients – Improved wellbeing

Patients reported that the experience was relaxing, mood-lifting, and provided a valuable respite from the clinical environment and the negative feelings that can be associated with any length of stay in hospital. The sensory elements made patients feel immersed, reducing stress and anxiety while creating moments of calm and enjoyment which contributed to a better feeling of wellbeing. The project prompted conversations, making patients feel less isolated and more connected to other patients, staff and visiting family members.



The Trolleydarity wheel



A patient enjoying Trolleydarity

# 100%

of patients agreed the experience improved their mood.



**I've been a wee bit down in spirits lately. I've been sitting here since they left and I keep smelling the card and it's taking me back to the trip."**

- Patient



**Changed the mood and relaxed everyone in the group which is sometimes unachievable in this type of environment."**

- Staff member, Dementia Cafe, ELCH



**I was laughing away which I didn't expect today as I am just out of surgery!"**

- Patient

# 100%

of patients agreed the experience provided a short respite.



**I enjoyed being at the park, doesn't feel as though I am in hospital at all."**

- Patient



**I don't like being in hospital so I appreciated the smell from the cards. Breathe of fresh air, which you don't get in hospital."**

- Patient



**I feel isolated as I am in a single room, it's a long day. I feel as though I really am there, takes me away from the room."**

- Patient

# 100%

of patients agreed the experience made them feel more relaxed.



**Totally relaxing. Lots of stress going on, and that chilled me out."**

- Patient



**Felt very relaxed and something nice to talk about with my visitors. "**

- Patient



**What a difference it makes to my mum. I know she enjoyed it too, she was relaxed and smiling."**

- Family member

## Impact on patients – Increased opportunity for reminiscence


Many patients shared memories with the Trolleydarity team or staff members after their staycation, these were personal memories spurred on by the topic and contents of the staycation and by the smells from the scratch and sniff cards. Sharing memories, often called reminiscence, can be very beneficial for people living with dementia because it taps into the parts of the brain that dementia affects less, while also supporting emotional wellbeing, identity, and connection with others. Benefits include:

- Strengthens remaining memory abilities – Long-term memories, such as those from childhood or early adulthood, are often retained longer in dementia, and revisiting them helps stimulate preserved areas of the brain, reinforce neural connections, and maintain cognitive activity.
- Improves mood and reduces anxiety – Engaging with positive memories can create comfort and familiarity, helping to reduce stress, confusion, and agitation while promoting relaxation and a sense of safety.
- Supports identity and sense of self – Sharing memories helps people stay connected to who they are by recalling important roles, relationships, and achievements, supporting dignity and self-worth.
- Enhances social connection – Memory sharing encourages meaningful conversations, strengthens relationships with others, and helps reduce feelings of isolation or loneliness.
- Improves communication – Familiar topics can make communication easier, encouraging expression, participation, and engagement, including through non-verbal responses such as gestures or facial expressions.
- Reduces challenging behaviours – When people feel understood and engaged, they are less likely to experience frustration or agitation, as memory-based activities can provide a calming and structured focus.

### Case study – Dementia cafe drop in


The team delivered Trolleydarity sessions at the dementia drop-in café at ELCH on four occasions, following staff requests for its return in recognition of its positive impact on people living with dementia and their families. An NHS Lothian staff member running the sessions reflected: “Sensory memories are core memories for our patients, and I observed the experience evoking feelings and recollections of happy childhoods, pets, and family life.”

Because people living with dementia can find it challenging to engage in traditional evaluation methods, Fiona, an NHS Lothian Charity Impact Support Volunteer, attended one of the café sessions to observe how Trolleydarity supported engagement. She noted that the experience helped evoke personal memories in different ways: one person responded positively to the scent of roses, linking it to the Avon brand and memories of the “Avon lady”, while another participant, though largely non-verbal and expressionless, showed signs of engagement through movement and later attempted to communicate by mentioning fish and chips. Fiona also observed a couple who chose a “trip to Skye”, and shared memories together of a ferry journey they had once taken.



**It's been quite a few years since I have been on a beach, reminded me of having fish and chips in Ullapool.”**

- Dementia patient



**The grass reminded me of my childhood. I am going to tell my next visitor that I have been away swimming!”**

- Dementia patient

## Impact on patients – Improved clinical outcomes

Staff shared that participation with Trolleydarity supported improved clinical outcomes as patients were better able to engage with their care, ate better, slept better and were in a better mood. Some staff also noted positive physical changes in their patients such as reduced blood pressure. Staff also observed changes in behaviour including reduced anxiety and stress, these changes are known to support improved clinical outcomes.

**In 100% of patients who had a staycation we saw blood pressure go down, breathing rate go down, less sweating, and better pain management. We saw heart rates drop, for example one patient was 140 and went to 90 after it. Every patient that night slept better as they were de-stressed, got cortisol out of body to calm down enough to sleep."**

- Staff member

**Patients, staff and relatives commented on how calm the ward was after the sessions. Patients ate better at lunch and staff felt calmer."**

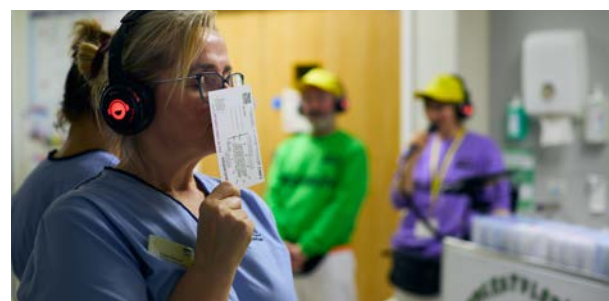
- Staff member

**The night staff commented patients slept better and the scratch and sniff cards were still going strong and night staff could smell them entering the rooms."**

- Staff member



The Trolleydarity team at WGH



Staff member experiencing Trolleydarity

### Case study – From distress to recovery

Fiona, Senior Charge Nurse, Enhanced Care Unit at St. John's Hospital shared one patient's experience: "A young man in his 20s was admitted with a new diagnosis of diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA), a serious and potentially life-threatening condition. At the time of the visit, he was experiencing significant psychological distress. He was not sleeping, was disengaged from staff, and found it difficult to communicate with his parents. His family, who remained constantly at his bedside, were also highly anxious and emotionally overwhelmed.

During the time on the ward, the Trolleydarity team first engaged his parents and grandparents, bringing them together to take part in the experience. The lights were dimmed and blinds drawn to create a calming environment, and the family chose to embark as a group on the "Trip to Skye". The effect was immediate and striking: their visible stress eased, and they became relaxed and uplifted, sharing moments of laughter. This provided an important opportunity for emotional relief and connection at a time of considerable strain.

The patient chose an experience aligned with his interest, a car journey through a forest. As soon as he began, his engagement shifted noticeably; he became fully immersed, describing clear enjoyment and requesting a second experience. He subsequently joined his family on the Skye journey. This moment of escapism was particularly significant, offering him a temporary release from the anxiety his recent diagnosis and admission to hospital.

Following the experience, the patient was able to fall into a deep and much-needed sleep, remaining asleep for the rest of the afternoon. This marked a turning point in his overall wellbeing. On waking, he demonstrated a more positive outlook, engaging more openly with clinical staff, participating in his treatment, and reconnecting with his family."

## Impact on staff – Improved wellbeing

Staff feedback highlights that the project provided a valuable opportunity for relaxation, enjoyment, and emotional reset within a busy clinical environment. Many reported improved mood, reduced stress, and a sense of calm, with even short interactions offering a meaningful break from demanding shifts. The experience was frequently described as fun, uplifting, and unexpectedly immersive, helping staff to momentarily “switch off” and return to work feeling refreshed and more positive. It also fostered shared moments of laughter and connection among colleagues, while importantly giving staff new ways to engage with and support patients.

# 100%

of staff agreed the experience improved their mood.

# 100%

of staff agreed the experience provided a short respite.

# 100%

of staff agreed the experience made them feel more relaxed.

**Changes your mood – was a bit down sitting at my desk, am not down now!”**  
– Staff member

**That completely changed my feelings, what an unexpected journey.”**  
– Staff member

**That was great, I will take the feelings and smells with me all day.”**  
– Staff member

**On the day trolley came I felt like I could explode with stress, there was something about putting those earphones on and I was transported straight away.”**  
– Staff member

**Great experience within such a small space of time. Felt transported and relaxed.”**  
– Staff member

**It hit all the senses with sound, smell and saying my name throughout the story hooked me in. I felt so much calmer and able to get on with my day after it.”**  
– Staff member

**Just loved it! What a way to end my shift – I feel totally at ease after a busy shift.**  
– Staff member

Thank you to the staff who supported Trolleydarity to visit their wards and to the staff that took part in this evaluation. Watch this space for further Trolleydarity activity. Go to [NHS Lothian Charity: Tonic Arts](https://www.nhs.uk/lothian-charity/tonic-arts) website for more information.

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



Staff group enjoying Trolleydarity



Staff members enjoying Trolleydarity