NHS Lothian Charity | Green Health

Impact report

Supporting staff to access nature and green space within Royal Infirmary Hospital

Opened on 22 September 2025, the Staff Wellbeing Courtyard at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh (RIE), located just off the OPD 6 corridor, represents a significant investment from the site and NHS Lothian Charity in staff wellbeing. Transforming an underused and underwhelming outdoor space into a vibrant, restorative environment. Recognising that most staff have only a 30-minute break, the courtyard, which is in a central location, brings the benefits of nature within easy reach and provides a convenient and dedicated green space for staff to step away from the pressures of the working day, rest, recharge and reset. Unlike many other other spaces in the hospital this is for staff only and not shared with patients and families.

NHS Lothian Charity's Green Health Team worked in partnership with Hinterland Studio, landscape architects who are experienced in working in health settings, in consultation with site staff, to create the woodland-inspired courtyard oasis. A RIE Greenspace Short Life Working Group was set up, made up of key staff and site decision makers, supported the project through its 3 year development (providing guidance on technical, legal and clinical challenges) to allow this ground-breaking, green space transformation to take place in a busy acute hospital.

100%

of staff reported they were VERY satisfied with the courtyard transformation.

> This is the only place on the site that gives me a complete break from work."
>
> -Staff member, RIE



Before - formal low level planting with a lack of privacy



After - woodland inspired garden oasis

How staff benefit from taking breaks in green spaces

Research from the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare shows how green spaces at hospitals play an important role in supporting staff wellbeing, by providing "boosts in emotional and physical wellbeing, reduced stress, and a heightened sense of value and connection." Furthermore it reports: "Staff who said they regularly spent time in their sites' green spaces during the working day reported significantly higher levels of wellbeing than staff who did not spend time in workplace green spaces. The more ways in which staff said they spent time in green space at work, the higher was their reported wellbeing." While staff consultation at the RIE indicated a strong desire to access green spaces in their breaks, working in a busy environment creates challenges to achieving this, especially for staff with patient-facing roles e.g. staff find it difficult to take breaks due to demands and staff don't have the time to access nearby nature spots during short time-allocated breaks. As part of NHS Lothian Charity's Green Health Strategy, the programme sets out a plan to create restful outdoor spaces across the NHS Lothian estate for staff wellbeing and the enhancement of this courtyard has addressed barriers experienced by staff by providing an accessible natural environment on site, enabling staff to take restorative breaks and benefit from time spent in nature.

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Impact of the consultation on the design of the courtyard

Shaping the courtyard through staff engagement

A consultation event, led by the Green Health Team and Hinterland Studio, took place in January 2025 ahead of construction works. The event was promoted through site-wide communications, with hot chocolate and biscuits provided to encourage staff participation. Display boards featuring the proposed courtyard design, based on previous consultations with key NHS Lothian stakeholders and staff, were exhibited within the courtyard to gather feedback. Approximately 30 staff members took part, providing overwhelmingly positive responses alongside valuable suggestions that helped refine the final design. The chart opposite summarises key consultation themes, how feedback shaped the final design, and the resulting impact.

100%

of staff involved in the consultation agreed the feedback they provided was listened to and incorporated into the final design.



Staff consultation event

Theme	Consultation comments	Design response	Impact
Improve access to nature for all staff	*"Include flowers/shrubs that attract pollinators please."* *"Would be good to hear birds singing."*	A woodland-inspired courtyard was created with trees, wildlife-friendly planting, seasonal interest and natural materials. As it's open 24/7 all staff regardless of shift pattern can be closer to nature.	**90% of staff agreed the courtyard connects them to nature and the outdoors in the work environment.** *"Its nicely thought out. Nice planting, shade/sun, nice to see bees too. A little oasis."* - Staff member from consultation
More seating and social spaces	*"Plenty of seating area please for single and multiple use."* *"Tables and chairs in social groups?"*	The courtyard includes benches, movable furniture, sheltered pods and communal seating areas to support both social interaction and individual use.	*"I am so pleased you included the outdoor seating with shelter, better than canteen as you can't get a seat."* - Staff member from consultation *"Space feels adaptable. I can easily sit on my own or with colleagues in my break/lunch time."* -Staff member using courtyard
Include quiet spaces to recharge	*"Quiet areas for chance to chill."* *"Peaceful space would be good for breaks."*	Dedicated quiet areas were incorporated alongside planting, natural features and water elements to create a restorative space for relaxation and reflection.	*"Nice spot to sit, get fresh air, I feel calm, I can switch off."* – Staff member using courtyard *"I love the peace, the beautiful wood, the calmness of it."* -Staff member from consultation
Include shelter and all-weather use	*"Maybe more covered seating?"* *"Seating area in shade would be useful."*	Sheltered seating, pergolas and covered areas were incorporated to provide protection from sun and rain and encourage year-round use.	**47% of staff agreed they use the courtyard as much as possible - even if weather is not great.** *"The best part of the design is the shelter from the elements."* – Staff member from consultation.
Improve privacy	*"Great to have privacy, without the guilt of sitting within view of patients."* *"Privacy needed on windows due to patients in department."*	Additional planting, screening for AC units and careful seating placement were incorporated to increase privacy. Opaque nature-themed window vinyls were installed to maintain natural light while providing privacy from the wards.	*"I used to go to the canteen or the main corridor hubs. This space is so much nicer as its for staff only so no patients."* – Staff member using courtyard *"You get some privacy here as it's not inside the hospital, I just love having some fresh air."* – Staff member using courtyard

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Impact for staff participating in launch week activities in the courtyard

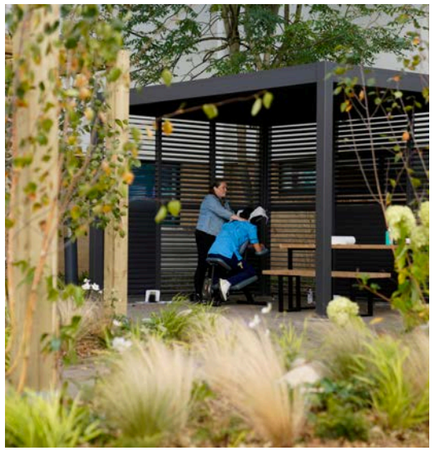
Launching a space for staff wellbeing

The courtyard was officially launched in September 2025, with over 100 staff participating in the week-long programme of activities. Delivered in partnership between NHS Lothian Charity Green Health staff, NHS Lothian Work Well staff and external providers, activities included nature-based experiences, wellbeing workshops, relaxation sessions, yoga, Qi Gong, massage appointments and informal coffee drop-ins. During launch week, staff were introduced to the completed courtyard design, featuring three distinct zones: social, transitional, and calm and rest, demonstrating how the courtyard offers a flexible environment that supports a variety of uses, preferences, and wellbeing needs.

100%

of staff agreed they would be very likely to use the courtyard for breaks or attend outdoor activities in the future.

(100% of line managers who participated in launch activities agreed they were very likely to encourage their staff to use the courtyard for their breaks).



Staff massage in courtyard during launch week

87%

of staff agreed the activity **improved their wellbeing.**

- I am on a phased return from burnout/workplace stress. This was such a beneficial way to end my working week/day. I felt so much calmer and less emotionally reactive after."
- It has helped me feel quite relaxed and switch off. I look forward to using what I made to relax in the bath."
- The Qi Gong has really helped with my physical and mental health."

70%

of staff agreed the activity **provided a restoring break from work.**

- Helped me with a tough morning - this break has made me feel recharged now."
- Made me feel better than sitting at my desk all day and to get outside for a proper break."
- Massage was great and I managed to relax completely in the short time."

65%

of staff agreed the activity **helped them feel less stressed going back to work.**

- Helped me to feel relaxed at work. Reduces stress to go back and nice to do some team building with colleagues."



Staff nature workshop in courtyard during launch week

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Impact on wellbeing on staff using the courtyard for breaks

Evidence-based benefits of the courtyard

A 2021 systemic review concluded that exposure to nature is associated with cognitive and physiological wellbeing. Findings from the review found that even spending a short time (20-30 mins) in green spaces can help activate the body's relaxation response, reducing the stress hormone cortisol, slowing heart rate and allowing blood vessels to relax. These changes support cardiovascular health and contribute to an overall sense of calm and wellbeing. Exposure to nature has been associated with improved attention and mental restoration, helping staff recover from the demands of busy clinical environments.

By supporting staff wellbeing, recovery and resilience, the courtyard helps create the conditions for staff to provide safe, effective and compassionate care, supporting positive outcomes for both staff, patients and their families.

71%

of staff agree the courtyard **improves the care they provide/productivity at work.**

- Being outside in nature is good for productivity. I feel ready to go back to work."

91%

of staff agree the courtyard **reduces stress levels which helps return to work after a break.**

- Being outside in nature is good for productivity, I feel ready to go back to work."
- It's important for me to get fresh air on my breaks. I feel more relaxed and my stress level is lower going back to work after my break."
- Being in the green space gives me more energy for going back to work."

93%

of staff agree the courtyard **improves their wellbeing at work.**

- I genuinely feel that the courtyard has been a significant factor in improving my enjoyment of my work and thus my wellbeing."
- It's an important space for wellbeing and nice environment. Its a great space to socialise."
- I feel restored when I go back inside. It's good for my mood if I am having a stressy day."

95%

of staff agree the courtyard **provides a restoring break from work.**

- Today I just needed a wee bit of space to de-stress and take a moment. Very hot and intense on the ward so this is just what I need right now."
- Takes the stress out of work. I actually take the time to eat my lunch here."
- It's good place to have a break, feel the fresh air and it's a calming space. The wards are very stressful."

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Impact on wellbeing on staff using the courtyard for breaks

74%

of staff agree the courtyard **encourages them to take their break.**

"The courtyard motivates me to take a proper break."

"I work in an office so it's easy to take lunch at my desk but this space encourages you to get outside in your breaks."

"Not wasting time in break by walking to other outdoor spaces, allows me to take a proper break."

78%

of staff agree the courtyard **makes them feel valued.**

"Makes me feel valued as there is a lack of outdoor space on site and I work in a windowless office so this is really a nice bit of respite."

"It makes me feel valued as it was made for staff. It's somewhere to get away, if sitting in public areas you get asked questions."

"At times I don't feel I get recognition, but this feels like the hospital organisation is giving back to staff."

A thriving wellbeing space for staff

- All outdoor spaces need to be maintained to remain useable and impactful, even if this one has been designed as wild/low maintenance. A volunteer staff gardening programme, managed by the NHS Lothian Charity Nature Ranger was created, providing opportunities for connection, shared purpose and continued maintenance of the courtyard.
- Flexible seating and sheltered areas support restorative breaks across differing shift patterns. Staff are using the courtyard for reading, mindfulness, quiet reflection, listening to podcasts, and connecting with colleagues over shared breaks and meals.
- Wellbeing activities, including windowsill gardening workshops with the Nature Ranger, creative art-making activities led by NHS Lothian Charity: Tonic Arts and yoga sessions offered by Work Well, ensures the courtyard is a vibrant, therapeutic space that actively supports health and wellbeing rather than functioning solely as a passive landscape.
- The courtyard is proving popular, particularly during sunny weather and lunchtime periods. During one (1 hour) observation, 22 staff members were using the space simultaneously, including individuals seeking quiet time, small groups of 2-3, and a group of 8 gathered in the sheltered seating area. This pattern of usage was common throughout other observation periods.



Wellbeing activity taking place in the courtyard


OT Team spending their wellbeing hour in the courtyard

Impact on nature

How nature benefits from the courtyard

Environmental quality is proven to have a direct impact on people's physical and mental wellbeing, therefore tackling the twin threat of climate change and biodiversity loss is a core goal of NHS Lothian Charity's Green Health Programme. The enhancement of the courtyard supports in the delivery of actions in the NHS Lothian Sustainable Development Action Plan and NHS Lothian Biodiversity Action Plan.

The Nature Ranger and staff have spotted a greater volume and variety of wildlife in the courtyard, showing it is providing the resources needed for nature to thrive. Pollinators such as bees and butterflies help support plant reproduction, while insects such as ladybirds (hundreds have been spotted) contribute to natural pest control. Birds (young blackbirds now visit the courtyard) benefit from increased food sources and shelter, and in turn help disperse seeds and support local ecosystem health. A wider range of species also suggests improved habitat quality. Each species plays a different role within the ecosystem, creating a more balanced and resilient environment that is better able to adapt to environmental pressures such as climate change, disease and habitat loss.

Within an urban hospital setting, increasing opportunities for wildlife contributes to wider nature recovery by providing habitat in an area where green space is limited. Although small in scale, the courtyard helps strengthen ecological networks across the site, enabling species to feed, shelter, breed and move between habitats. The return and regular use of the space by birds, pollinators and other insects is therefore an indicator that the courtyard is not only supporting individual species, but also contributing to the health and resilience of the wider local environment.



Staff member transporting ladybirds

30

New plant and tree species introduced, transforming the courtyard into a more diverse and valuable habitat for wildlife.

> We've enjoyed a particularly good year for ladybirds. The abundance of ladybirds suggests the courtyard is developing into a healthy, functioning ecosystem, where natural processes such as pest control and species interactions are helping to support biodiversity and ecological resilience. At one point we had so many, staff from the Emergency Department took some ladybird larvae to their adjacent courtyard to help with their aphid infestation."
>
> -Nature Ranger, RIE

Creating a blueprint for future outdoor wellbeing spaces

Having successfully delivered this challenging and pioneering project at RIE, the Charity has established a blueprint for transforming hospital courtyards across the NHS Lothian estate. With many of the technical, legal and clinical challenges already addressed, future projects can be delivered more efficiently, accelerating the development of other green health spaces for staff, patients and visitors.

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Impact in pictures















Thank you

Thank you to the NHS Lothian Charity Impact Support Volunteers who collected feedback for this report, speaking to approx. 100 staff members over the summer in 2026.

Keep up to date with Green Health activities taking place at the Royal Infirmary Edinburgh and go the the Green Health Website for more information on the programme.

Compiled by Rebecca Caulfield, Evaluation Manager, NHS Lothian Charity