

# SPACE TO BREATHE

## Valuing green space at NHS sites for staff wellbeing



Research by the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare shows that gardens and greenery at hospital sites have an important role to play in supporting staff wellbeing. This briefing shares findings from our year-long study at three NHS sites. Each has taken steps to encourage their staff to relax and recharge in green space.

Staff stress has long been a critical issue in the NHS, where in 2019 more than four in 10 staff reported feeling unwell as a result of work-related stress in the last 12 months <sup>1</sup>. These problems are likely to be greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, making staff wellbeing a more urgent priority than ever. Our research shows that there is a strong appetite among health staff to take time outdoors – either for breaks or in the course of work – and points to a range of wellbeing benefits.

### The study found:

- At each of the sites a large majority of staff (83-89%) said they would like to spend more time in gardens and green spaces at their site than they currently did. Benefits described included feeling relaxed and calm, refreshed and re-energized and positive effects on mental and physical wellbeing. A sizable proportion of staff (44-52%) said attractive green spaces were important to them in considering where to work – suggesting that this affects recruitment and retention.
- Staff who said they regularly spent time in their sites' green spaces during the working day reported significantly higher levels of wellbeing. The more ways in which staff said they spent time in green space at work, the higher was their reported wellbeing.
- The most common way in which staff spent time in green space at work was taking a walk at the site during a break. This points to strong potential for encouraging informal walking, alone or with others, an initiative that had already proved successful at one of the sites in the study.
- While relatively few staff at each site had engaged in organised recreational activities at work, such as Qigong or gardening, those who had had slightly higher wellbeing scores than those who had not.
- Staff who had face-to-face contact with patients spent less time in green space than those who did not. However, contact with patients was also found to predict wellbeing. This suggests that staff spending time with patients in green space enjoy a dual wellbeing benefit.

Our study was carried out in collaboration with the University of Essex and with support from the Health Foundation, an independent charity committed to bringing about better health and healthcare for people in the UK.

The research, conducted before the pandemic, explored staff experience of time in green space at work, including both benefits and barriers. This briefing summarises our findings and recommendations. The full report can be found on our website: [www.sustainablehealthcare.org.uk](http://www.sustainablehealthcare.org.uk)





## Experience at three NHS sites

The three sites in our study are part of our NHS Forest network, an alliance for health sites that are working to improve the therapeutic use of green space for the benefit of patients, staff and the wider community. Each site is different, allowing us to explore the value of green space for staff in contrasting settings. While each has a generous amount of green space, their experience in making the most of this is transferable to other sites, including more urban ones working with different constraints.

### Broomfield Hospital

Broomfield Hospital in Chelmsford, run by Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust, provides acute and community-based services, and has more than 5,000 staff. The hospital's green spaces include woodlands, a fruit orchard, vegetable beds, a large lawn and a newly restored sunken dell garden.

Within the hospital building there are several green courtyards, attached to wards and the main atrium. In addition, staff have use of an outdoor Wellbeing Terrace, with tables and parasols, sculptures, planters and games.

showing seasonal wildlife. Our site-wide survey shows that the Broomfield Wellbeing Terrace is popular with staff: 22% had sat there to relax or eat.

At Broomfield, 83% of staff say they would like to spend more time in green space at work than they currently do.



**Broomfield Hospital**

For several years the Trust has run a Natural Health Service project: an initiative which invites volunteers, including staff, to help in creating and maintaining the gardens and woodlands, while learning horticultural skills. It has been calculated that in the course of a year these volunteers gave 1,900 hours, worth £18,600 in paid staff time. The Trust runs a programme of events and activities to promote its green spaces, which have included a Big Woodland Walk and a twilight bat tour. It has also produced a walking map of the grounds

### Guild Lodge

Guild Lodge, run by Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust, is a medium secure mental healthcare hospital on the edge of Preston, with 500 staff and 164 service users. Staff say the site is 'wrapped around in greenery' thanks to its rural location.

The hospital's Grow Your Own Project supplies the hospital kitchens with organic produce and helps both service users and staff to learn horticultural skills, with activities that include staff team-building days.



Both staff and service users participate in Guild in Bloom – an annual site-wide competition to foster pride in individual ward gardens.

The Trust's Workspace Walking initiative aims to promote staff wellbeing by creating a positive ethos around informal walking at work. The idea is that, where feasible, staff should feel free to take a short walking break, either alone or with others, during the working day.





Staff have taken ownership of the concept. In our site-wide staff survey, 39% said when taking a break from work they regularly walk outdoors and notice the gardens and green spaces while 26% had taken informal site walks arranged with other staff.

At Guild Lodge, 89% of staff say they would like to spend more time in green space at work than they currently do.



The Grow Your Own area at Guild Lodge

## Mount Vernon Cancer Centre

Mount Vernon Cancer Centre in Northwood, West London, is a regional specialist centre with 500 staff, run by East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust. Historically a tuberculosis hospital, the centre's main green space is a large lawn, overlooked by the sanatorium terraces where patients once received 'open air treatment'.



The sanatorium building at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre

In our site-wide survey, 56% of staff said they had used this area to relax and eat, emphasising its importance to the site and its identity. The idea of using the site's outdoor areas for health and wellbeing took hold when the Community Engagement Manager attended a talk about green gyms and realised, what their site lacked in indoor space, it more than made up for in outdoor space. A consultation found staff wanted activities that they could complete in half an hour, which were low in cost and would not make them sweat.

In the last three years the hospital has piloted outdoor lunchtime sessions for staff and volunteers that include a walking group and Qigong, a system of movement, breathing and meditation. At the time of our study the centre was also refurbishing a garden area and had plans to create a woodland walking trail.

At Mount Vernon, 86% of staff said they would like to spend more time in green space at work than they currently do.



## Research outline

The research explored staff experience of green space at work using qualitative and quantitative methods, including:

- In-depth interviews with green space leads at each hospital to understand the initiatives that had taken place there
- One-to-one interviews at each hospital with staff who regularly spend time in green space at work, and staff who do not (34 across all sites)
- Consultative workshops at one site
- Site-wide staff surveys at each hospital (981 respondents in total, with response rates of 12.5% at Broomfield, 22.8% at Guild Lodge and 48% at Mount Vernon).

# How do staff spend time in green space at work?

Interviewees described a wide variety of ways in which they engaged with the outdoor environment through the day.

Activities included noticing nature on the journey to work, taking patients out on escorted activities, eating lunch outside in good weather, appreciating the view through a window, taking a short break in the ward garden and having outdoor meetings with colleagues. Some had taken part in organised outdoor activities at work, such as gardening and Qigong.

Both the interviews and our site-wide surveys highlight the importance of walking outdoors during a break as the most consistent way in which staff engage with green space at work. A quarter of survey respondents across all sites said they regularly did this.

## Ward garden at Guild Lodge



At lunch time I do try and go for a walk around the grounds where I have a sort of lap that I do.

Health improvement practitioner

With the service users we'll sit in the garden... and we'll chat, and we just talk about day to day things.

Healthcare support worker

Some of my most effective one-to-ones [with service users] have been held outside of the ward in green space.

Allied health professional

Walking in the course of work was also important: several interviewees described deliberately choosing an outdoor route when moving around the site on errands.

This suggests that encouraging everyday walking offers good potential for supporting staff to spend time in green space at work.







We're here 'til eight o'clock in the evening and so after handover, about five, six o'clock, things calm down a little bit here, so it's nice just to sit outside there for a little bit.

Specialist registrar

## What do staff want from a break?

Asked what they wanted from a break, many interviewees talked about wanting time to themselves in which to collect their thoughts, 'switch off' or do personal tasks such as making phone calls. More people focused on relaxing alone than on social opportunities such as catching up with colleagues.

People also talked about wanting to get away from various kinds of stress – from the ward; from the demands of patients and staff; from a screen or from having to concentrate. Despite this, eating at a desk was a common choice. Asked where they usually went for a break in the warmer months of the year a sizable number of staff at all three sites said they remained at their desks (38% at Broomfield, 30% at Guild Lodge, and 41% at Mount Vernon). Eating in a small staffroom or kitchenette was also common.

If the weather's nice and dry, and even if it's cold but bright out, I will walk outside rather than inside because I think it's just nice to get a bit of fresh air. Nice to see a bit of sunshine. I think it does boost people up.

Play specialist



It just takes one person to email or ring around the office to get a few people to go out for some fresh air. We do try not to talk about work whilst we are walking, as it is a good break from our desks, but it is also a good opportunity to de-stress or vent a little if you have been having a particularly bad day.

Administrator

At all three sites, however, there were interviewees who sometimes ate outside when the weather was warm.



### Green space activities at work described by interviewees



My other job didn't even have a window, so it's absolutely stunning. Get to see all the wildlife and stuff like that... the changing of the seasons.

Allied health professional

When you're outside you're breathing differently, ... your body relaxes.

Finance officer

I feel like everything just melts away and it's, very relaxed, refreshed and even if I have half an hour and I go and sit on the picnic table and come back, take a deep breath and think, right, 'what have we got this afternoon?' ...I've just recharged my batteries really.

Ward support worker



## What are the benefits of time in green space at work?

Much previous research has shown the benefits of being in green space for reducing stress and boosting mood. This is strongly reflected in this study which points to positive effects for staff themselves and for their work with patients.

### Benefits for staff wellbeing

Both interviewees who regularly spent time in green space at work and those who didn't were enthusiastic about the personal benefits of this. When asked how they found the experience, the most common response was 'relaxing' or 'calming'. Those who did regularly spend time, especially, spoke about breathing deeply or freely, fresh air, a sense of space and a clear head. They also talked of enjoying the beauty and variety of nature. Interviewees from both groups said being in green space made them feel happy and positive and helped to reduce stress.

Some interviewees described how outdoor walking and talking with colleagues could facilitate more difficult conversations and help with problem-solving. The vast majority of interviewees said they would like to spend more time in green space than they currently did though some felt this was not realistic.

Our site-wide surveys at the three hospitals also show staff enthusiasm for spending time in green space at work:



Garden at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre

Many interviewees described feeling refreshed, re-charged and re-energized and thought they worked better on returning to work. There were interviewees from both groups who saw time spent in nature at work as time to themselves, and an opportunity for reflection, with some connecting being in nature to spirituality. Green space was widely viewed by interviewees as good for wellbeing, with the stronger emphasis on mental wellbeing than physical wellbeing.

- 83-89% said they would like to spend more time in these areas of the site than they currently did
- 65-78% said being in green space at work made them feel calmer and more relaxed.
- 54-68% said it made them feel refreshed and re-energized
- 48-59% said it would make them more effective when they returned to work
- 74-80% enjoyed the beauty of their site's green spaces and garden areas
- 44-52% said the availability of attractive garden areas and other green spaces at a hospital site was important to them in considering where to work – suggesting that this could be a factor in recruitment and retention.





You see the odd service user that's on their grounds leave and they're always in a good mood when they're on their grounds leave so you get to see them in a different light, and they see you in a different light actually, just walking and taking your time speaking to somebody.

Allied health professional

A lot of the doctors feel that this [ward garden] is a nice area to give news, 'cause it's completely away from the ward, nobody can hear you, so actually it's quite a nice space and it's quite peaceful and you haven't got interruptions.

Ward sister

## Benefits for patient care

Interviewees at all three sites were appreciative of the therapeutic benefits of green space for patients. This was especially so at Guild Lodge, the mental health unit. Here more than 18% of staff said they regularly spent time in green space when working with patients and visitors.

Some interviewees felt that being outdoors together – simply sharing the experience of nature – was helpful in reducing power disparities between staff and service users.

A health assistant described the positive effects of going out into the grounds in calming a troubled patient and reflected that he had also felt safer personally as a result, despite being away from the support of his colleagues.

At other sites, interviewees described the benefits of garden areas as private places for holding sensitive conversations with patients and relatives, for instance, when imparting news or talking through anxieties.

In our site-wide surveys 51-70% of respondents said they found the site's garden areas and green spaces helpful in meeting the needs of patients. However, at two of the sites the proportion of staff who regularly spent time in green space in the course of working with patients and visitors was very low (1.3% at Broomfield and 2.5% at Mount Vernon).



## Benefits experienced by staff from spending time in green space



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.  
Member of theatre staff

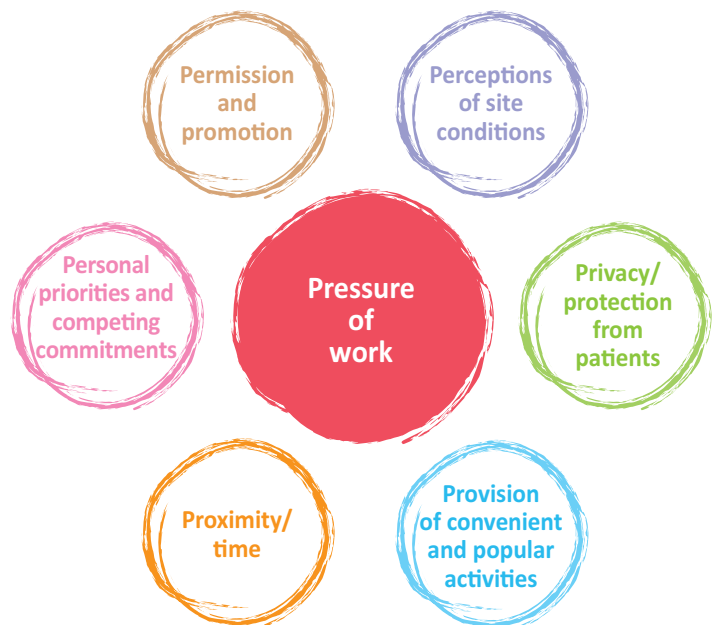
I do see places and I think, oh, I wonder what that's for?... Is that only for patients? Is it only for staff who work in that building or is it open to everybody?  
Medical secretary

As you go off on your break you say 'come get me if you need me' so if you went to sit, say, on the lawn somewhere, they wouldn't be able to get you, you know? So we do stay handy.  
Clinical support worker

## What are the barriers to spending time in green space at work?

Our in-depth interviews point to a range of issues that constrain the ability of staff to use green space at work. We have called these the '7Ps'. Of these, pressure of work is most fundamental, and affects clinical staff especially, but other related factors are also important, including:

- **proximity of green space to where staff work** – especially for staff with more limited break time. Being able to open your office or staffroom door onto a green space was particularly valued.
- **permission to take time in green space** – for instance, whether staff feel supported in leaving their work area for a break, rather than feeling they ought to remain close by in case they are needed. The sense of being permitted to use specific green spaces was also mentioned, with some interviewees feeling unsure about whether certain outdoor seating areas were available to them.
- **perceptions of site conditions** – for example, the availability of seating in the places staff prefer to sit, the provision of shade and tables and car-free walking routes.
- **privacy from patients** – concerns that a break outdoors will not be a break from patients, who may not understand that staff are off-duty. A related concern was that staff conversations outdoors might breach patient confidentiality.
- **provision of outdoor activities** that staff can take part in within their break time.
- **personal priorities** such as family commitments may mean some staff choose to work through breaks in order to leave work sooner.



Issues affecting the use of green space at work - 7Ps

Our site-wide surveys confirmed the role of these barriers. Staff proposals to address such issues focused on improving physical opportunities afforded by the site – for instance with more seating, structures offering protection from sun and light rain, and staff-only outdoor areas – while at the same time building a supportive working culture. At each site a sizable minority of staff (14-25%) expressed an interest in outdoor activities with enthusiasm at all three for outdoor mindfulness sessions.





## Green space rich or green space poor?



The grounds of Mount Vernon Cancer Centre

In the course of our research we met some staff whose jobs gave them opportunities to spend time in green space through the day, and who felt this was very important for their wellbeing, and others who were very dissatisfied with their working environment but felt their jobs allowed no possibility of taking an outdoor break.

You want to be somewhere private that you are not going to get interrupted, because [patients] never understand when you are on your break....

If they want something obviously you want to help, you're not going to say 'no sorry, I'm having five minutes'

Staff nurse



Previously, I had no windows in my office. It was just a square box, and I found myself getting quite sad about it. Yeah, it was really affecting me.

Ward sister

### Green space RICH?

An allied health worker described a day that was mostly spent outside, with many opportunities to be aware of nature.

She enjoyed walking around the site in the course of completing her daily rounds for work and noticed the scent from blossoming bushes next to the walkways.

Her supervision meetings were held outdoors, walking and talking. She ate lunch outside with her team in warm weather and would take 'five outside' if there was time to spare while waiting for a delivery.

She emphasised how much she valued the outdoor aspects of working at the hospital.



### Or green space POOR?

In contrast, an interviewee who worked mainly in operating theatres said she loved her job, but her usual working environment, with no natural light, could feel 'a bit like a prison'. Rules against going outside in scrubs prevented her from spending time in green space.

She saw this as partly driven by objections from patients, that staff should not be seen outside in scrubs, and wanted managers to clarify whether this was acceptable if wearing a protective gown.

She described how, on one occasion, during a planning meeting, she and her colleagues could see through a small window that other staff were outdoors playing table tennis, and looked on this with envy.

She argued that a lack of proper breaks and 'thinking time' was a major factor in her team's high levels of sickness.



# Recommendations for good practice

Our research indicates that helping staff to spend time outdoors contributes to wellbeing and suggests ways of tackling the barriers that prevent this. NHS sites wishing to encourage staff to spend time in green space need to focus on both physical and cultural issues.



**Big Woodland Walk at Broomfield Hospital**

## Green space close to work

To maximize opportunities for a green break, it is important to locate green spaces close to where people work – ideally providing all buildings with garden areas. In this research staff especially valued outdoor areas next to staffrooms or offices. In new-build hospitals such access should be designed-in from the outset.

## Green space for restaurants and rest areas

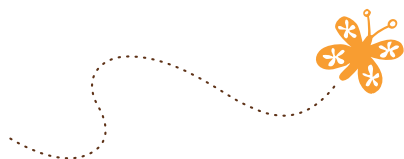
Hospital canteen facilities and rest areas should have access to outdoor space with chairs, tables and adequate shade (e.g. parasols or awnings) so that staff can spend time in green space in the warmer months and look out on green views all year. None of the restaurant areas in the study had such direct access.

## Privacy for staff outdoors

In locating green outdoor seating areas close to work areas, it is important to consider staff privacy and to avoid locations that are readily overlooked or where staff feel that their conversations cannot be private. Sites should explore the scope for designated outdoor staff areas that provide a degree of screening as well as weather protection in sun and shade – for example gazebos or other types of outdoor shelter, or seating with tables and umbrellas or awnings in areas effectively screened by greenery.

## Green walking routes

To encourage staff to take walks in the hospital grounds – either during a break or more incidentally in the course of their work – sites should develop attractive, well-signed and well-delineated green walking circuits, enabling those moving about the hospital to experience a pleasant green route, that is not dominated by parked cars or moving vehicles.







I would like, in an ideal world, for there to be a small area that we could... sit uninterrupted ... and enjoy sights, smells, sounds, water always sounds good. Just even for five or ten minutes. Just be.

Chemotherapy nurse

## Supportive working culture

Encouraging staff to make use of outdoor amenities also requires a supportive working culture, in which staff feel permitted to take time out in green space, either alone or together, as opportunities arise, for instance, to reduce stress or to talk through an issue with a colleague. To achieve this it is recommended that senior staff explicitly endorse such activity and promote the benefits of workspace walking, including by their own example.



Conscious Walking leaders at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre

## Outdoor activities

Offering organised recreational activities – such as a led walking group, gardening or games – not only creates an opportunity for staff to engage in green space but helps to communicate organisational support for this. Surveys at the three sites in our study highlight enthusiasm for outdoor mindfulness sessions.

## Green space for patient care

Staff should be encouraged to find more opportunities to help patients enjoy the therapeutic benefits of their site's green spaces, an activity that could also enhance their own wellbeing.

## Guidance on clinical clothing outdoors

Managers should clarify whether there are conditions in which it is permissible for staff to sit in scrubs in outdoor space, providing they also wear a protective plastic gown.

If infection control requires that staff moving from their immediate surroundings for their lunch break must change out of clinical clothing, then this change should be accommodated within their work time.





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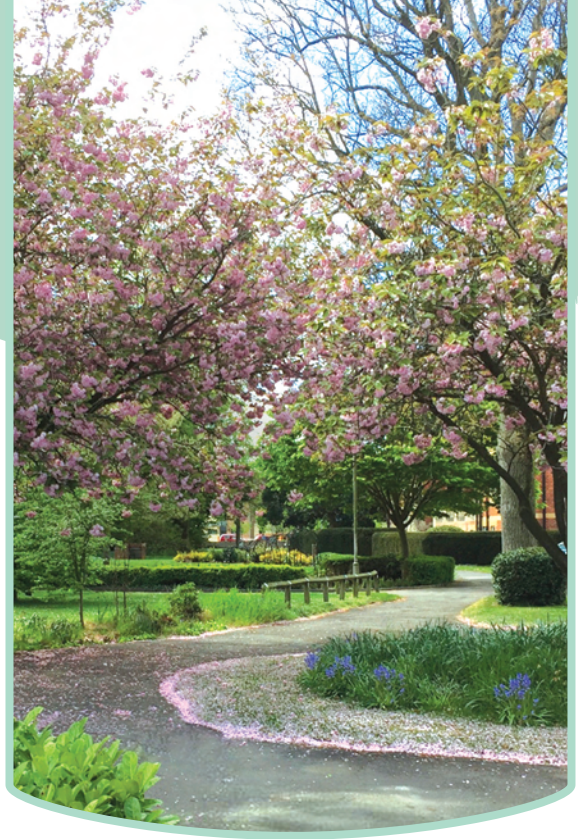
This briefing shares the results of research by the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare. The full report is available on our website.

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The Centre for Sustainable Healthcare (CSH) inspires and empowers people to transform healthcare for a sustainable future. Our [Green Space for Health Programme](#) supports NHS sites in developing their green space for the benefit of patients, staff and the wider community. This can mean creating therapeutic gardens, vegetable gardens, orchards, walkways and outdoor trails, offering outdoor wellbeing activities, and planting trees at NHS sites.



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