

Case study: The NHS Forest at St Catherine's Hospital in Doncaster

The NHS Forest has been working at this busy mental healthcare site for over five years, and started out by planting trees in the grounds. The Centre for Sustainable Healthcare was able to secure a Big Lottery grant to increase the scope of the project so that a green space specialist has been able to work with a regular group of volunteers, made up of members of the local community and patients from the hospital. They have learnt about horticulture, pathway construction and teamwork by carrying out activities such as constructing new pathways, clearing overgrown vegetation and establishing attractive new areas – for example, setting some tree stumps in a circle in a gladed area to form an outdoor 'classroom'. Several of the project participants, including some former patients, have been able to move into employment having gained skills through the project.



Before (left): the site was largely inaccessible with few members of the community and patients using the grounds.

After (right): the site now features well-made, accessible paths through the woodlands built by volunteers. The paths have helped local people to 'reclaim'



this space, and one parent voiced a typical comment: *"I took my young children along the new footpaths in the woodland area and they really enjoyed it. The kids put their wellies on and had their bags for collecting leaves. I think we had about an hour walking through the woodlands and the hospital grounds. We will be going again."*

The project has also developed activities to encourage the hospital staff to use the site with their patients, such as art therapy sessions for patients with Early Onset Dementia. These activities help the service users to voice their own opinions and participants at these sessions have summed up their involvement, with comments such as: *"That was good," "This morning has been good hasn't it, it's been different,"* and *"I liked that, when are you coming back?"*



By bringing diverse people together, the project has helped to unify the community and to challenge the stigma of ill health. Improvements to the site have attracted many local people to take part in woodland walks, as well as seasonal fun events. Members of the community group have expressed their support for the project, with comments, such as: *"The project provides a useful path to enable people to see the changes in the seasons. As a volunteer, I get exercise and a chance to learn new skills".*

As the project has evolved, local people have taken greater ownership of the site, naming the green space 'Woodfield Park' and setting up a flourishing 'Friends of Woodfield Park' group to oversee regular community activities and celebratory fun days at the site. CSH has recently secured fresh funding for the project's community activities, introducing a new element involving local schoolchildren. They are taking part in environmental arts to inspire them with a love of nature and to engage them and their families with the benefits of being outdoors for their long-term health and wellbeing.