



NHS Forest
Green space for health

Planning your green space for health project with the NHS Forest volunteer matching service



INTRODUCTION

Green spaces are one of our most neglected health resources. A growing body of evidence points to the benefits of access to nature and green space for mental and physical health, including positive outcomes for heart rates and blood pressure, stress levels, mood and self-esteem, obesity, type 2 diabetes, post-operative recovery, birth weight, children's cognitive development and cardiovascular disease. When people have more access to green space where they live, income-related health inequalities are less marked. In England alone, it has been calculated that the NHS could save an estimated £2.1 billion every year in treatment costs if everyone had access to good quality green space.

Developing green spaces on healthcare sites can be very rewarding for patients, staff and members of the local community. The NHS Forest volunteer matching service helps connect healthcare sites with enthusiastic volunteers to support green space projects, particularly tree planting and maintenance. Engaging volunteers is vital for fostering sustainable and impactful nature-based initiatives on your site.

This guide is a quick introduction to setting up and running a volunteer-based green space project on a healthcare site. The NHS Forest largely supports tree planting projects, but this guide could be used for a variety of different green space initiatives.



PLANNING YOUR PROJECT

Healthcare sites can consider a variety of green space projects to bring nature onto their grounds and provide benefits for patients, staff and the community.

Here are some ideas for potential projects:

ORCHARDS

Planting an orchard with fruit trees like apples and pears can offer multiple benefits. Orchards provide fresh fruit, support biodiversity, and create opportunities for engaging patients, staff and community members in activities like harvesting, juicing, and cooking with the fruit.

WOODLAND AREAS

Creating small woodlands or expanding existing ones can improve air quality, provide natural spaces for relaxation and recreation, support wildlife habitats, and mitigate against rising temperatures.

TINY FORESTS

A Tiny Forest is a dense, fast-growing native woodland. It is typically made up of 600 trees planted in a tennis-court-sized plot of 200m². These small, biodiverse spaces are excellent for citizen science projects or creating enclosed spaces for relaxation.

WILDFLOWER MEADOWS

Establishing wildflower meadows can introduce vibrant colours, support pollinator populations and offer tranquil spaces for patients and staff to enjoy nature.

SENSORY GARDENS

Designing gardens with plants that engage multiple senses through their colours, fragrances, textures and sounds can create therapeutic environments for patients, particularly those with dementia or sensory impairments.

THERAPEUTIC GARDENS

Gardens can be designed specifically for horticultural therapy activities, providing opportunities for patients to engage in gardening tasks as part of their treatment or rehabilitation.

COMMUNITY GARDENS

Developing community gardens can encourage staff, patients, and local residents to participate in gardening activities, fostering a sense of community and providing opportunities for social interaction and skill-building.

GREEN ROOFS/ LIVING WALLS

For sites with limited ground space, green roofs or living walls can introduce greenery, improve insulation and create habitats for wildlife.

NATURE TRAILS OR WALKING PATHS

Establishing nature trails or walking paths through green spaces on the site can encourage physical activity and provide opportunities for nature observation and relaxation.

When planning these projects, healthcare sites should consider factors such as available space, accessibility, maintenance requirements, community involvement and potential therapeutic or educational opportunities. Consulting with experts, including landscape architects, horticulturists and occupational therapists, can help ensure successful implementation and maximise the benefits for patients, staff and the environment. It's important to develop a clear planting or landscaping plan including numbers, spacing, and any additional features (e.g., seating areas, pathways). Working with your site's Estates team from the beginning also helps to ensure a successful project.

Before your first volunteer day:

- Identify your green space site and create a planting and landscaping plan. You may wish to recruit volunteers to help with this. Think about any soil preparation that may need to happen before you can start planting.
- Identify resources needed for the project such as tools, equipment, and supplies like shovels, gloves, mulch and think about parking, toilets, water for volunteers on work days.



FUNDRAISING

Fundraising for your green space project will allow you to buy plants and materials.

When looking at fundraising, you might like to consider a few different options:

NHS FOREST

NHS Forest can supply fully funded trees and woodland-related advice for healthcare sites.

YOUR TRUST CHARITY

Many large trusts have charities that support staff with fundraising for key projects

YOUR LOCAL COUNCIL

Councils can often point you towards relevant pots of money

LOCAL GARDEN CENTRES

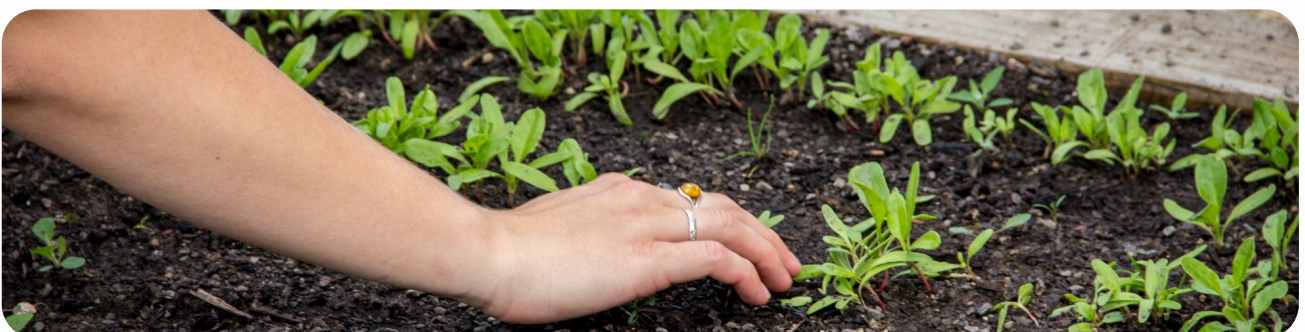
Some garden centres may be happy to donate plants or offer free advice

THE NATIONAL LOTTERY COMMUNITY FUND

You might consider applying for National Lottery Community Fund money.

HUBBUB

Hubbub is an environmental charity that gives out grant funding



WHY WORK WITH VOLUNTEERS?

Developing volunteer-based green space projects is an excellent way to build community support and show the health benefits of green space projects firsthand. It is also cost effective.

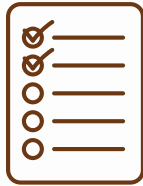
Volunteer-based green space projects can:

- Enhance the appearance and functionality of your site
- Cultivate a sense of community ownership and environmental stewardship
- Provide opportunities for staff, patients, and the wider community to connect with nature



RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS

01



Plan your project, consider suitable planting sites, species selection and community engagement.

02



Seek advice from specialists or community groups if needed.

03



Register with the NHS Forest volunteer matching service by visiting nhsforest.org/xxxxx to find volunteers who can specifically support with green space and nature projects. Once you have registered, volunteers will then contact you directly to make arrangements. NHS Forest can support with advice and best practice, but you remain in charge of the process.

04



If planting trees, visit the NHS Forest website to apply for fully funded trees.

VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

Recruitment

- Estimate number of volunteers needed based on the scale of your project.
- Advertise volunteer opportunities through the NHS Forest volunteer matching service.
- Provide volunteering guidelines and requirements upfront regarding paperwork, clothing, schedule etc.
- Designate a site coordinator to manage volunteers and oversee planting events.
- Conduct safety briefings and demonstrations of proper techniques.
- Arrange for refreshments, first-aid supplies, and sufficient volunteer break periods.
- Engage volunteers in a mix of tasks and roles during the planting.

Volunteer safety

- Conduct a risk assessment and ensure appropriate insurance coverage.
- Volunteers may need a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check if they could come into contact with children or vulnerable adults.
- Demonstrate how to use relevant tools and lead by example throughout the task. Keep a keen eye on volunteers to ensure they are following instructions and safety protocols effectively.



Celebrating your volunteers

Tree planting and gardening is hard work. Remember to thank your volunteers and treat them to a cup of tea and some biscuits on the days they are working. You might also consider some bigger events like a volunteer picnic as a way to show your appreciation.

Community Engagement in your project

Involve the community, including staff, patients, schools and local organisations, from the early stages of planning. Involving volunteers in planting, maintenance and community events helps to foster a sense of ownership of the project. Green spaces have the most impact when people know about them. Promote your green space and encourage people to use and enjoy the area through signage, events and activities.

Aftercare and Maintenance

It's vital to develop a plan to maintain your green space after your project comes to an end.

- Implement a maintenance plan, including watering, mulching, and weed control – this is especially important if you are planting young trees
- Engage volunteers for ongoing maintenance and community events in the green space
- Think about who will be able to carry on the work if you move on from your site and consider a training programme

Reporting and Promotion

- Share your project progress with the NHS Forest team. We're especially keen to hear how many volunteers you've been able to work with through our service
- Share details of your project with your trust communications team so as many people as possible find out about your work



GUIDELINES FOR VOLUNTEERS

Sign up for volunteer opportunity alerts through the NHS Forest website. Once you spot an opportunity you think might suit you, contact the site using the contact details on the website. By following these guidelines, healthcare sites and volunteers can work together to create and maintain vibrant green spaces that benefit patients, staff, and the wider community while supporting biodiversity and the environment.

01

Before the Event

- Confirm your attendance and review the site's listing to understand the expectations.
- Complete any required volunteer forms, including emergency contact information and health condition disclosures.

02

During the Event

- Follow all site safety instructions, including tool usage guidelines.
- Wear appropriate clothing and footwear for outdoor work.
- Be prepared for weather conditions and bring enough food and water.
- Listen to the project leader's instructions and demonstrations.
- Work methodically and in small groups or teams.
- Rotate tasks throughout the day to maintain interest and engage different muscle groups.

03

After the Event

- Assist with cleaning up and returning tools and equipment.
- Share your experience and photos on social media, tagging @The_NHS_Forest on Instagram or @NHSForest on Twitter/X.

04

General Guidelines

- Your participation and enthusiasm contribute to the success of these green space initiatives.
- Follow the site's instructions and ask questions if you need clarification.
- Prioritise safety and report any concerns or incidents immediately.
- Enjoy the opportunity to contribute to the improvement of healthcare environments and connect with nature.

NEXT STEPS

You can find lots of inspiration on the nhsforest.org website as well as on the Green Space for Health Susnet, which is an online network platform designed to bring together people working in green space for health. You might also want to look at some of our other guides and templates:

- Pocket guide
- Volunteer guide
- Tree Planting guide
- Bee Healthy Project Guide
- Sample risk assessment



NHS

Forest



Green space for health

A project run by



CENTRE *for*
SUSTAINABLE
HEALTHCARE
inspire • empower • transform

**To find out more, visit
www.nhsforest.org**

**or contact us by email
info@nhsforest.org**

The NHS Forest is run by the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare.

www.sustainablehealthcare.org.uk

The Centre for Sustainable Healthcare is registered in England & Wales as a company limited by guarantee, No. 7450026 and as a charity No. 1143189.

Registered address: 8 King Edward Street, Oxford, OX1 4HL.

Postal address: Suite 310, 266 Banbury Road, Summertown, Oxford, OX2 7DL