

**THE GREEN EXERCISE PARTNERSHIP** is a joint venture between Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and Health Scotland (the health improvement board of the National Health Service in Scotland). The Partnership aims to build links between the health and environment sectors, following growing evidence that public health can be improved by getting people engaged with the natural environment.

Through its **Greening the NHS Estate** programme, the Partnership aims to establish at least one project in each of the eleven mainland Area Health Boards. The projects aim to show the health benefits that flow from positive investment in and management of the NHS estate – the greenspace around hospitals and healthcare centres.



The new paths offer opportunities for a real work out as well as gentle exercise.

University Hospital Ayr provides the main A&E service for South Ayrshire, with units specialising in Vascular Surgery, Ophthalmology and Audiology. Ailsa Hospital provides residential and out-patient mental health services, with a woodwork shop and garden offering occupational therapy. A nursery next to the main hospital provides day care for children up to the age of five.

The hospitals are based on a large campus, part of which was designed to house the county lunatic asylum in the 1860s. The north of the site is covered in woods, fields and meadows, and there is a growing residential population nearby who use the grounds for informal recreation.

The campus offered great potential for staff, patients, visitors and local residents to explore a varied, beautiful environment, but there was little to encourage pedestrians or cyclists to use the place. The network of routes was limited and unattractive, with no seats to encourage people to spend time and relax. The woodland was neglected and overgrown, with paths that were too steep for many users and often very muddy.

### KEY LEARNING POINTS

- **Active management is a better, and more sustainable, approach to the environment than neglect.**
- **Design paths so they make best use of a site's features.**
- **Help users to find their way by using landmarks and providing good information.**
- **Improve access infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists.**
- **Publicise and promote path networks within hospital buildings using media such as map boards, signs and leaflets.**
- **Be aware that weather and ground conditions can mean you'll need more time and materials than planned.**
- **Greening the NHS Estate is a great way for NHS Boards to improve staff and patient health, and to deliver positive environments for wellbeing.**
- **Establish a long term vision by adopting a landscape master plan approach and developing a woodland management plan for the campus.**

For more information about this project or the Green Exercise Partnership please contact:

Kevin Lafferty  
Access, Health & Recreation Advisor  
Forestry Commission Scotland  
Silvan House  
231 Corstorphine Road  
Edinburgh EH12 7AT  
**Office:** 03000 675 292 (Tues & Thurs)  
**Office:** 01698 368 539 (Mon/Wed & Fri)  
**Mobile:** 07920 595 231  
**E-mail:** kevin.lafferty@forestry.gsi.gov.uk



# GREEN WAYS TO HEALTH

Case study – Ayr and Ailsa Hospitals

## THE PROJECT

The project commissioned a landscape architect to review the site and assess features such as the historic landscaping around the old buildings, as well as the potential for viewpoints and landmarks. Consultations and workshops with health professionals and estates staff looked at what they would like to see in the grounds and how new features could be maintained. The result was a masterplan to create a better environment for people and wildlife, improve existing paths and introduce new ones, provide seating and meeting places, and encourage people to use the grounds more.

A first phase in 2013 improved an existing path leading through woodland to the front of the main hospital, and built a new trail through a small patch of woodland behind Ailsa hospital to create new all-abilities paths. Signing raised awareness of the routes and gave people confidence to use them. Fruit trees were also planted around the site. The woodland has since been used for organised walks and events, and the hospital grounds maintenance team have added chainsaw-carved seating as well as amusing 'secret places' to find.



The path through woodland behind Ailsa hospital, upgraded to all-abilities standard in 2013, is a popular route for staff from the on-site nursery.

Phase two, completed in 2015, has developed an extensive network of new paths that link University Hospital Ayr with the woodland and provide wide, well surfaced routes through the woods. The paths have been designed to make best use of the site's natural features such as wildflower meadows and viewpoints, with seats at regular intervals. A striking circle of wooden pillars can be used as an outdoor meeting place. The woods have been transformed by brushing overgrown trees (cutting off the dead lower branches of conifers to let more light onto the woodland floor), clearing undergrowth, and planting over 3,000 new trees.

Interpretation panels in the hospital and at strategic points in the grounds provide a map of the paths and encourage people to explore. They also introduce some of the site's rich wildlife and explain how areas of grassland will be managed for wildflowers instead of being kept as close-mown grass. An accompanying leaflet guide has been produced.



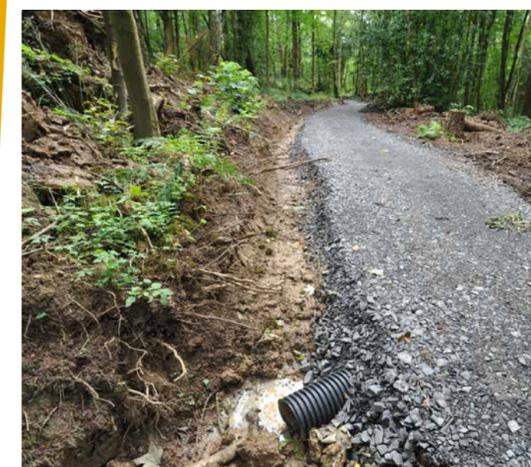
Interpretation panels use a colourful layout style and a specially-drawn map to encourage people to explore the site.

An exciting extension to the project will improve an old track through the site, linking it to the local network of cycle routes. This will give people the chance to cycle or walk to the hospital from Maybole and Ayr for the first time.

## CHALLENGES

Perhaps the major challenge for this substantial project was to break down cultural barriers within the NHS. It brought together departments and organisations with very different perspectives, and led to a shift in attitudes to see the outdoor estate as a positive asset. Maintenance plans had to be re-directed so they are suitable for a diverse, wildlife-friendly environment.

There were practical challenges too. Much of the path construction took place during the very wet summer of 2015, which made for slow progress. Much more material was needed to make a firm foundation for the path than expected: it's essential to build some flexibility into the budget to allow for contingencies like this.



Good drainage is essential for all paths. A deep gully on the uphill side of the path catches water and leads it to cross drains that take it under the path.

## THE RESULT

This Greening the NHS Estate project has transformed the hospital campus. It has created a network of routes that offer practical, attractive ways to get from one part of the site to another or peaceful places to take a break. Varied environments of woodland, meadow and grassland create interest in all seasons and are valuable wildlife habitats. Since local residents can use the site for walks and picnics, the campus is better integrated into the local community and the new routes offer active, healthy travel choices.

Staff say they now use the grounds for walking and relaxation, and report mental health benefits from taking time away from busy wards and clinics. Some also use the paths as calm places for "walk and talk" meetings. Patients say the paths are "peaceful and therapeutic". Links are being made with respiratory, stroke and cardiac patients and clinicians to explore how outdoor sessions could be integrated into rehabilitation programmes.

The project is very much in line with the Scottish Government's vision for a "health promoting health service", and is being used as a catalyst for strategic greening projects at other sites in NHS Ayrshire and Arran, including North Ayrshire Community Hospital and Crosshouse Hospital. The result is a shift in attitudes from the outdoor estate being viewed at best as a burden and at worst a liability, to an emerging view that the NHS estate is an asset that can be managed for health promotion and used for preventative, therapeutic and restorative benefits.

The project has brought neglected woodland back into sustainable management and given the extensive area of woodland, meadow and grassland a clear purpose. It is now recognised as a valuable part of the campus, and thus protected from being seen simply as vacant land that could be sold or built upon.



Reaction to the project was very positive, even while construction was still taking place. This local dog walker's comment, "Thank you for the lovely paths!" was typical.

"When Ailsa Hospital opened in 1869, spending time in the outdoors and being in the fresh air were seen as central elements of recovery and care. However, the post war period saw a move away from nature as part of rehabilitation and recovery towards a greater reliance on technology and therefore buildings and indoor environments. Investing in NHS Greenspace is a cost effective way of increasing opportunities for therapeutic outdoor activities for patients, improving staff health, and strengthening the symbiotic relationship between health and the natural environment"

Dr Carol Davidson,  
Director of Public Health, NHS Ayrshire and Arran