



Location

Lochgilphead, Argyll

Summary

Woodland around Argyll and Bute Hospital is now used on a daily basis by hospital staff, patients and local residents of all ages and abilities as a result of woodland restoration, path creation, signage and interpretation with both direct and indirect health benefits.

Health benefits

- Physical and mental health benefits for those involved in practical woodland path management work
- Physical resource / refuge / place of safety and tranquillity for those visiting the hospital
- Reduced suicidal and self-harm tendencies amongst mental health service users as a result of involvement in the project
- Reduced cigarette smoking by those working in the woods

Keys to success and learning points

- Access to attractive and well managed woodland or other natural environments was traditionally an intrinsic part of mental health care and is no less relevant today.
- Restoring and developing woodland and other habitats with opportunities for public access adjacent to hospitals, as well as where people live and work, can provide opportunities for local residents, staff and visitors to enjoy walking and other physical exercise.
- Developing an accessible path network is fundamental to encouraging and enabling people to enjoy walking, and to stimulating informal outdoor physical activity.
- Involving as wide a range of people as possible can add to the physical labour resource and get more people active, with physical and mental health benefits.
- Opportunity for mental health service users to work, mix and laugh with the “interesting” characters brought in as contractors and trainers is an important key to success.

More about the project

Argyll and Bute Hospital is typical of many such institutions set up in the Victorian era. The woods around the hospital were created as an integral part of the "asylum", providing a refuge or place of safety and tranquillity, and along with farm and gardens, forming part of the outdoor resource for work and recreation. As the hospital and attitudes to health care changed over the years, the woods became inaccessible. In 2002 a project was set up to restore and enhance this woodland for environmental, community and health benefits, led by Reforesting Scotland, in partnership with Argyll Green Woodworkers Association, NHS Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) and Lochgilphead Community Council.

Extensive research, consultation and appraisal was followed by detailed planning and fundraising. Work began on the ground in August 2005, restoring and enhancing the two main strips of woodland, Low and High Wood, reclaiming the old garden as a tree nursery, establishing a well signed path network, a viewing platform, boardwalk, ramps, seating and nature observation hut. On-site interpretation reveals more about the wood's wildlife, history and other aspects of interest. For those who struggle to see or read, this information is available on CD.

Alongside local volunteers, hospital staff and patients have been closely involved throughout both directly on site in physical work and indirectly. Users of mental health services come into the project in a number of ways, including referral by Occupational Therapy, the Advocacy Team, the Voluntary Services Co-ordinator, Service Development Worker and Mental Health Employment Worker. Some 30 hospital in-patients, 6 users of external mental health services, 12 clients of Lochgilphead Resource Centre (which provides for people with mixed physical and learning disabilities) and 8 clients of Argyll Supported Employment Team have helped with practical work such as tree planting, making and signing paths. Inspired by the wildlife found in the wood, Occupational Therapy patients have made a variety of woodland creatures out of clay and other media. On two or three days almost every week, a group from the Garden Project run by SAMH at the hospital will be working in the wood.

Blarbuie Woodland was officially opened in 2007 as a public park, providing an invaluable resource for both the new and old hospitals, for visitors and local residents. People of all ages are now able to walk in the woods all day, every day. By early 2008, on average 110 people were visiting the wood each week, including hospital staff, patients and local residents. Funding is now being sought to continue and further extend the many benefits of the project in the long-term.



"This past few months have been fantastic and it's all down to the Blarbuie Project. The work gives me a sense of value and worth which builds self-esteem and there is definitely a sense of job satisfaction when a day's work has been completed. All in all the woodland project gives me that bit bitter quality of life."

Iain Forbes, Furnace, who suffers from agoraphobia

"Cutting down old trees, designing the paths, the activities made me feel great and needed. It had a great effect on my sense of well-being. I experienced peace and loved learning new things about animals and insects, wildlife and trees. I really loved being in this environment and would recommend it for others."

Robert Smillie, former in-patient at Blarbuie Hospital who was in charge of a large group twice a week

"I'm so glad to be part of the woodland project. It's great to meet others, and I'm starting to feel strong again. I've not been fit for some time. It's great to be outside in the day and I really like digging and things."

Angus McLean, patient

"If I'm sitting at home the depression comes back"

"I'm all fired up now, and want to use the wood to make all kinds of benches."

Further information

www.reforestingscotland.org

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