



Implementing creative health approaches to support staff wellbeing

Creative health approaches are proven to offer cost-effective non-clinical interventions that support wellbeing. They can therefore play an important role in supporting wellbeing in NHS staff, helping to restore engagement levels and ensuring they are equipped to play their vital role in building a health service fit for the future.

This case study looks at how Dr Jane Stevens, Associate Medical Director for Wellbeing and Workforce at Dartford and Gravesham NHS Trust (DGT), started and embedded a creative health programme to support staff wellbeing within the trust.

Seeking a new approach to staff wellbeing

Dr Stevens joined DGT with a remit to support wellbeing within the workforce. She wanted to incorporate creative health approaches into the work because they would support a holistic way of working that would equip staff to thrive within their profession.

A retreat for health and care workers

While investigating creative health possibilities, Dr Stevens became connected with the Caversham Group Practice, a GP practice in north London that has created the Listening Space, a community garden which aims to help foster community wellbeing.¹ It was through this practice that Dr Stevens met the director of The Quadrangle,² an educational space and retreat centre in the Darent Valley. The centre was in the process of setting up a one-day Out in the Field nature-connections retreat to help NHS and social care workers prioritise their wellbeing.

Dr Stevens attended one of the first retreats in order to confirm the potential. Having experienced first-hand the benefits it could bring, she took the idea to the DGT's executive team for approval. The team was in full support, enabling Dr Stevens to start to roll out the programme.

Securing funding for the work

The cost of a retreat for up to 20 people is £2,400. Dr Stevens secured initial funding for the programme through COVID and staff charities. In 2023, The Quadrangle secured 50% grant funding from Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), predicated on 50% being paid by DGT. In 2024, the trust was unable to match the funding, which meant fewer teams were able to attend the retreat. However, this meant the remaining DEFRA grant could be donated to other NHS trusts, enabling them to send their staff and expanding awareness of the benefits of creative health and nature-connections interventions. In 2025, the intention is to bid for funding from NHS Charities Together.

¹ <https://www.thelisteningspace.uk>

² <https://thequadrangle.co>



Enabling staff to attend the retreat

One of the biggest challenges Dr Stevens faced was creating space to allow staff to attend the retreat day. To free up the necessary time, shift managers rostered staff over a period of weeks to give them each a study day that allowed them to attend.

The shape of the retreat

The retreat³, has evolved to involve:

- forest bathing, an immersive experience designed to calm and soothe
- sophrology, a wellbeing method involving gentle movement, breath work and visualisations⁴
- a nutritious meal followed by a talk by the chef, who is a qualified nutritionist
- a storytelling session for staff to share with colleagues something of their own life
- time to relax in The Quadrangle.

Seeing the difference

Since 2022, about 2,000 DGT staff have attended the retreat. Of the 590 staff who attended in 2022 and 2023, 100% said they would recommend the experience to a friend or colleague. Ninety-five percent said they felt clearer about how to support their wellbeing.

Embedding the change

Alongside the retreat, Dr Stevens has implemented several other creative health approaches within the trust to support day-to-day staff wellbeing.

There is a weekly sophrology session in the Trust's boardroom. There are also monthly drop-in sophrology sessions, which invites individuals and teams to experience the practice of sophrology.

A woodland garden has been cultivated to allow staff to spend time in nature during their working day.

Looking ahead, Jane is keen to bring in an artist-in-residence to support staff.

More widely, her ambition is that every NHS trust is linked with a retreat centre that can bring creative health approaches that will help to boost the wellbeing of every member of NHS staff.

³ <https://outinthefield.org>

⁴ <https://www.sophroacademy.co.uk>



Where next?

The NCCH has worked in partnership with NHS England to develop a [Creative Health Toolkit >>](#)

NCCH supports health and care sector professionals in organisations and systems to achieve the benefits of creative health approaches for patients and service users.

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