

Putting sustainability at the heart of an NHS reset

Delivering on the NHS Net Zero strategy

The NHS Net Zero Strategy marks an important point in the relationship between the health sector and the environment and sets the ambition for the NHS to become the world's first net zero national health service. Delivering this ambition will require commitment from across the health sector, as well as sustained and strong relationships with industry, academia and local government.

This briefing considers how the NHS and its partners can work together to deliver the strategy. Based on a high-level roundtable held as part of the NHS Reset campaign, it explores the issues that have helped and hindered new approaches to providing healthcare in an environmentally sustainable way, as well as ways forward.

Key points

- In October 2020, the NHS adopted a multi-year plan to become the world's first carbon net zero health system. Set out in Delivering a 'Net Zero' National Health Service, the plan covers action on the NHS's carbon footprint and the entire scope of its emissions.
- The NHS Net Zero Strategy goes far beyond the traditional role of the NHS as a self-contained clinical organisation. Forward-thinking NHS leaders recognise that their role extends beyond just their patients' presenting health needs and galvanise others outside of the NHS to take action too. This happens through partnerships with local authorities, local businesses and academia working together to bring about real change.
- Traditional NHS barriers, such as bureaucracy and long lead-in times, are making progress slow in this area. But changes can happen with the right leadership and frontline staff buy in.

- COVID-19 has shown that important changes can be made quickly in a crisis. Climate change is a crisis which needs to be addressed as a priority and with as much speed as the response to the pandemic.
- Working with others, including industry, businesses, local authorities and university partners, is the only way forward. Business partnerships are essential, not something to be cautious of. Climate change cannot be addressed without an effort on all parts.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has sent shockwaves across the globe, presenting one of the greatest public health challenges of recent times. Yet even before the pandemic struck, another threat affecting millions worldwide was looming. Climate change.

The climate emergency is a health emergency¹ and the NHS has a significant role to play in the response to climate change. As the largest public sector contributor to climate change in Europe, the NHS has a duty to set an example in sustainable development and carbon emission reduction. The NHS has made strides in this area and further commitments were made in the NHS Long Term Plan to go further faster.²

Yet while the NHS has made significant advances in improving its carbon footprint and reducing the environmental impact of services, the direction, scale and pace of change needs to accelerate. In October 2020, NHS England and NHS Improvement published [Delivering a 'Net Zero' National Health Service](#), setting out the modelling and analytics underpinning the NHS's carbon footprint and trajectories to net zero. It also details the interventions needed to achieve that ambition. This ambition should be in the context of implementing national clinical guidance.

Moving from a high-level understanding of the climate change challenge to developing a plan for the NHS' role in addressing it remains complex, but is a vital part of resetting health and care in the aftermath of COVID-19. The coronavirus crisis has shown that the NHS can act swiftly in an emergency, working in new and innovative ways and with a wide range of local partners. The environmental crisis is of equal, if not greater, importance. How we tackle it, and who we work with, will be the legacy we leave for future generations.

This briefing is essential reading for anyone working in healthcare or doing business with the NHS, who wants a better understanding of how to turn talk about sustainability into action. It follows a roundtable discussion in September 2020, held in partnership with Boehringer Ingelheim, attended by leaders in the health and environmental fields, on how healthcare can improve its approach to climate issues. It aims to build on NHS England and NHS Improvement's report on delivering a net zero NHS and the strength of NHS organisations, local authorities, local businesses and academia working together to bring about real change.

“ The NHS’s ambition is world-leading, and the first national commitment to deliver a net zero health service. It comes at a time when the UK is preparing to host the UN climate change summit next year, and demonstrates that every part of our societies need to play their part in reducing pollution and responding to climate change.

Dr Nick Watts, NHS Chief Sustainability Officer³

Fact file: The NHS and climate change

The NHS is the largest public sector contributor to climate change in Europe. Each year it emits 21 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent or CO₂e.

The health and care system in England is responsible for an estimated 4-5 per cent of the country’s carbon footprint.

It is also a major buyer of goods and services from local, national and international economies. And it is often the biggest single employer in a region.

The NHS uses more plastic than any other industry: 22.7 per cent of total NHS waste is plastic. Plastics that are only used once are another big issue.

Barriers to developing a green NHS

The NHS is a key player in the sustainability agenda,⁴ but change is not yet happening as fast as might be hoped. Progress is encumbered, in part, by the size and often bureaucratic nature of the health service. At our roundtable, participants discussed two main barriers and how to overcome them.

Dealing with NHS bureaucracy

The historic difficulties of dealing with a large bureaucratic organisation, or even with its smaller components, are well documented and not isolated to sustainability issues.

But a perceived lack of urgency on addressing sustainability in the NHS can be particularly frustrating for those who recognise the threat to the planet and are trying to offer novel and innovative solutions. Given that the contracting process can often take more than a year, an innovation – particularly a digital one – may be out of date by the time it is introduced.

Businesses can spend a considerable amount of time establishing who it is best to speak to within the NHS machine, wasting precious weeks and months before they connect with the appropriate person. So what can be done?

Example: Directorate for businesses

Aware of the difficulties, Newcastle Upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust set up a directorate for businesses that want to approach the trust – a model that the local authority and university have also helped to advise on.

Tip

Work with existing organisations who can broker business partnerships.

The industrial legacy of an area

When addressing sustainability, the industrial heritage of an area cannot be overlooked. A trust working in an area where coalmining kept the local population in work for generations, for example, will have to think carefully about its messaging if it is to win hearts and minds.

Tip

Where industries that damage the environment are still active, NHS organisations should think carefully about how they work with them to bring about change. Be sensitive to the balance between the environment and keeping people in jobs.

A view from industry

Industry has a significant role to play in the delivery of a greener healthcare system. Boehringer Ingelheim UK (BI) has set out five guiding principles demonstrating how partners can support the NHS in achieving its net zero targets:

- 1. Take responsibility:** Getting your own house in order is the first step. BI has commissioned a net zero roadmap focusing on the reduction of emissions across its own UK operations and supply chain. It is also a member of the Business for Clean Air Taskforce, convened to address the health problem of poor air quality in the UK.
- 2. Innovate:** Smarter thinking is required in the way medicines are made, used and disposed of. BI's reusable inhaler is designed to contribute to the reduction of avoidable plastic waste. Innovative thinking can also be applied in the evolution of care pathways, which BI delivers through joint-working initiatives.
- 3. Invest in digital:** Technology presents huge scope for improving system efficiency and reducing emissions. But it is not a silver bullet. BI has published a report detailing barriers and opportunities for innovators hoping to deliver solutions to the NHS. It also sponsors digital pioneers and is a member of a coalition to ensure no patient gets left behind in the digital transition.
- 4. Look up, look out:** It is important to look beyond standard practice in the quest to create a greener system and society. BI works with entrepreneurs in progressive areas, such as social prescribing, to address healthcare inequalities and find new ways of treating patients that alleviate burden on the system.
- 5. Champion change:** Organisations can use their resources to ensure the issue of climate change remains high on the agenda. BI championed the sustainability content of the NHS Reset campaign and supported the delivery of the roundtable and this report.

Sustainability is the greatest challenge of our generation. Collaboration and sharing best practice will help us prevail.

The impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis has shown that the NHS can take crucial decisions in an emergency so that necessary changes can happen quickly. Such immediacy should not just apply in a pandemic: the same approach could and should be applied to the climate crisis.

One positive effect of the pandemic has been to 'unstick' relationships that had not functioned as well as they might. The NHS should capitalise on forging and reinforcing these new relationships, as well as developing and embracing new relationships, to tackle environmental issues.

In light of experiences from the COVID-19 crisis, it is clear the goals need to be shared between both corporate and clinical staff. And, as with the pandemic response, the NHS response to the environmental crisis needs to be part of a wider public health agenda. The NHS cannot work in isolation but has to see itself as part of the wider community.

Other environmental factors, such as adequate home insulation, must be part of the picture as they too can impact on health and often disproportionately affect those on lower incomes, in poor quality housing or facing issues with fuel poverty. Another inequality is air travel, which has one of the biggest impacts on the environment yet is undertaken by a low proportion of the overall population.

COVID-19 has shown that the NHS can take speedy action when necessary. There's a need to 'look up and look out' to face new challenges. NHS staff need to buy into an approach to environmental change that makes sense to them; to understand and sign up to the environmental issues facing the service. Additionally, there needs to be a shared understanding of the direction of travel, strong leadership to push through that agenda and individual members of staff at all levels who are passionate for change.

The pandemic has also shown that people have appreciated some of the changes experienced during lockdown, such as quieter streets and the sound of bird song. There is a desire to build back better to make communities a more environmentally friendly place. It is important to capture and work with that vision and to remember that it is not just about the NHS, but society as a whole.

A view from academia

The members of Yorkshire Universities (YU) have renowned research and innovation strengths in health and climate science. However, the challenges facing our society as a whole cannot be solved by one country, industry, institution, organisation or academic discipline alone. Collaborations and partnerships are needed to underpin the response to climate change. Health and wellbeing or climate resilience can no longer be spoken of without talking about social stability, inequality, food security, biodiversity, economic development and inclusivity.

Achieving net-zero carbon targets will require cross-sectoral change. It will require new thinking and fresh understanding of how to navigate trade-offs, as well as ideas on how to change complex systems in ways that create net positive outcomes. It will require practical and effective collaboration among all stakeholders: schools and academia, national and local governments, industry, and civil society.

As civic institutions rooted in their local communities, universities are able to convene, investigate, collaborate and help navigate this uncertain and uncharted landscape. YU's mission is based on bringing together the collective strength of 12 diverse universities, ranging from the research and teaching intensive, as well as small and specialist institutions. Each YU member has a role to play individually and collectively as a higher education sector, and with partners, to ensure that the places and communities in which they are embedded deliver their contributions towards the net zero targets.

“ As with the pandemic, a hospital trust alone cannot successfully act on climate. Local authorities, suppliers and all other healthcare organisations must play their collective role and the best time to start, no matter how small, is now.

Catherine Hope-MacLellan, Director of People and Lead Executive for Sustainability, Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, and Yulia Omer, PhD researcher in Sustainable Working Practices at the University of Surrey⁵

Turning talk into action

Our roundtable of health and environmental leaders explored how the NHS, working in partnership with local partners, can make greater strides towards tackling climate change.

Don't apologise – be a champion

It often takes clinicians and businesses that look and think strategically about climate issues to drive change – people who are willing to 'look up and look out'. Early wins are key to bringing people on board. There is always a danger of lots of talk but not much delivery. On a personal level, managers should be asking themselves, 'What can I actually do tomorrow?' to improve the situation.

Where things go well – such as the recent introduction of virtual clinics in Manchester, implemented by Health Innovation Manchester in conjunction with healthcare professionals to optimise respiratory care in primary care and reduce hospital admissions – the NHS should be willing to 'celebrate and accelerate'. Don't be backward in coming forward.

The pharmaceutical company, Boehringer Ingelheim, which sponsored the roundtable debate, is committed to sustainability within its own business. It has been working to understand the needs of the NHS and patients. It changed the design of its inhalers so that, rather than being discarded every month, the inhaler could be refilled. It now lasts six months.

The organisation believes that digital solutions could deliver environmental benefits across the healthcare landscape. While digital health technology has been critical to ensuring patients continue to receive the support they need during the pandemic, it has also highlighted that technology is not a panacea and could potentially exacerbate health inequalities. BI is working with key organisations to ensure this issue is sensitively considered as we move to a more digitised system.

BI has also supported Oxford Clinical Commissioning Group to [develop pathway solutions](#) that have reduced emergency admissions.

Don't attempt to work in splendid isolation

While it is good to be motivated to change the approach of the NHS to sustainability, environmental change is not something the NHS can achieve on its own.

A new, green hospital building is not enough when, for example, Victorian houses in the nearby town are poorly insulated, have associated health risks and high fuel bills – as well as posing environmental problems. Public health officials play a key role and – despite all the organisational changes they have gone through recently – remain a vital ally not to be ignored.

Health professionals need to look beyond just the sustainability of their own health services but to consider housing, transport and even to the way communities are designed to make it safe to walk, exercise and play outside.

Partnership working has been the hallmark of the COVID-19 response. Partnering with business to attain sustainable solutions, whether that is building a new hospital or providing environmentally sound clinical equipment, should no longer be considered taboo. The NHS should be willing to work with industry or with local universities to seek their advice on the best solutions for their environment.

In areas of England where there has been devolution, such as in Greater Manchester, there may be even more straightforward routes into joint discussions about sustainability, by taking a city-wide approach that integrates health, housing and transport. Devolution is likely to speed up local net zero approaches and make discussions easier. In Greater Manchester, leaders are having discussions on a 'place' net zero agenda, with ambitions to be carbon neutral by 2038 – 12 years ahead of the government's own target.⁶

Keep a watchful eye on inequalities

It will be crucial to have inequalities at the heart of local work. Energy use in many homes, for example, is often disproportionately high in the poorest areas, where there is older, poorly-insulated housing stock. Leaders need to move to 'net zero' in a way that does not exacerbate health inequalities and result in job losses; the transition needs to be done in a considered way. As one roundtable delegate told us:

“ The West Midlands is there because of its cheap fuel. Net zero in the West Midlands or Tees Valley, which is an economy based on chemicals, is a huge issue which I as an NHS leader need to understand if I am to play my part in the conversation...If deindustrialisation leads to the loss of 10,000 jobs, we have another issue on our hands.

Trust Chief Executive

Build back greener

There are increasing calls for the government to ensure that the country's economic recovery is 'green-led', so that sustainability does not suffer in the race to recover lost economic growth. Green approaches to recovery will be vital to 'building back better', with focus needed on a green new deal and local green approaches to personal protective equipment development. As noted by experts at the University of Oxford, COVID-19 recovery packages can boost economic growth and stop climate change.⁷ A forensic look at procurement should be part of this effort, adopting new ways to use sustainable, green local suppliers.

Local NHS leaders can be at the forefront of this change and can galvanise others across the system to take up the mantle. They, alongside NHS leaders, have to ask themselves if they are serious about change and whether they are going to do what they say they will. A key factor in meeting the net zero target will be having built-in checks and balances along the way, to ensure that plans meet with pre-determined targets, as currently happens on equality.

“ The NHS is a key local anchor institutions with the capacity to help create healthy places and to be major corporate citizens in the enormous recovery challenge facing communities, towns and cities across the country. We can play a leading role to not only build back better, but also to grow back greener, healthier and fairer.

Gideon Ben-Tovim OBE, Chair of the Innovation Agency and Chair of the Liverpool City Region Climate Partnership⁸

Spotlight: Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Hampshire Hospitals NHS Trust will be the first trust in the UK to have commissioned a net zero emissions strategy, with a deadline of 2030. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the trust continued to take action on climate change.

In April, for example, the trust procured extra electric bikes to provide safe travel options for staff. Remote working was introduced within two to three weeks in March for over 1,000 staff, reducing traffic into the hospital. It also published analysis of environmental and other benefits of telemedicine, contributing to the NHS Long Term Plan target of 30 per cent reduction in outpatient appointments.

Recommendations: what you can do

Sustainability in the NHS requires both visible leadership and staff buy-in. Frontline staff are often closest to the answers, but leaders need to drive through change, sometimes against the odds, and to monitor outcomes.

So, what can you do? Participants at our September 2020 roundtable suggested these five actions:

Recommendations for healthcare leaders

- It is not enough to just accept that people are too busy doing their day job to do anything about sustainability. Sustainability is the day job. **Ask yourself and your colleagues a generational question: 'Are we going to do what we say we will?'**
- It is important to move on from just 'talking the talk'. **Work with staff and clinicians to find solutions, but don't have too many targets.** Be clear of your purpose and build the policies and procedures to support that. And just focus on a small number of priorities.

Recommendations for providers and commissioners

- If you are to build sustainability into everything you do, you need to make sure it is actually happening. **It needs to be monitored constantly as a factor in your trust or clinical commissioning group reports – just as equality would already be.** Sustainability needs to be a language that is understood by all those making or influencing decisions. That will take a programme of education and won't happen overnight. But you don't want to cut sustainability out just because someone who doesn't understand the agenda argues that it's too expensive.
- Local communities are passionate about being involved in climate-related issues and how they can get involved in the decisions behind these changes. **Design public services with local communities, with sustainability at the heart locked in for generations.**
- There may also be factors not currently measured, such as the number of patient journeys saved by online consultations, which could become part of your performance targets.

Against this backdrop, it is time for the NHS to set aside the old school 'them and us' approach. Instead, in the face of the climate crisis, reach out to other public or private sector bodies. Think about how the local business might be able to help you – and ask them for support.

The new investment in infrastructure that the NHS and wider economy will see will be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to boost capital spending. It remains to be seen whether the government, famed for its commitment to 'build back better', will take the opportunity.

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About NHS Reset

COVID-19 has changed the NHS and social care, precipitating rapid transformation at a time of immense challenge. One message from leaders and clinicians across the UK has been clear: we must build on the progress made to chart a new course.

NHS Reset is an NHS Confederation campaign to help shape what the health and care system should look like in the aftermath of the pandemic. Recognising the sacrifices and achievements of the COVID-19 period, it brings together NHS Confederation members and partners to look at how we rebuild local systems and reset the way we plan, commission, and deliver health and care.

Join the conversation **# NHS RESET**

Find out more at www.nhsconfed.org/NHSReset