

RCP view on healthcare sustainability and climate change

Climate change is the biggest threat to human health. The [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) projects an excess of 250,000 deaths per year by 2050 attributable to climate change due to heat, undernutrition, malaria and diarrheal disease, with more than half of this excess mortality projected for Africa. The record temperatures the UK experienced in the summer of 2022 are a reminder that while the impacts of climate change are not felt equally, they are happening now around the world.

As a founding member of the [UK Health Alliance on Climate Change](#), the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) has been vocal about the health impacts of climate change. Last year, following consultation with its members, the RCP formally adopted sustainability and climate change as one of its four policy and campaigns priorities for the first time. This position paper sets out a range of policy calls from what the government must do to reduce the health impacts of climate change to how we can ensure environmental sustainability is effectively prioritised in the NHS, as well as considering the population health benefits of action to reduce climate change. These recommendations will form the basis for the RCP's campaigning work for at least the next 4 years, working in partnership with individuals and organisations across the health sector, including the UKHACC. A new RCP advisory group on sustainability and climate change will look at what more can be done in the health service – and by medicine in particular – to improve healthcare sustainability.

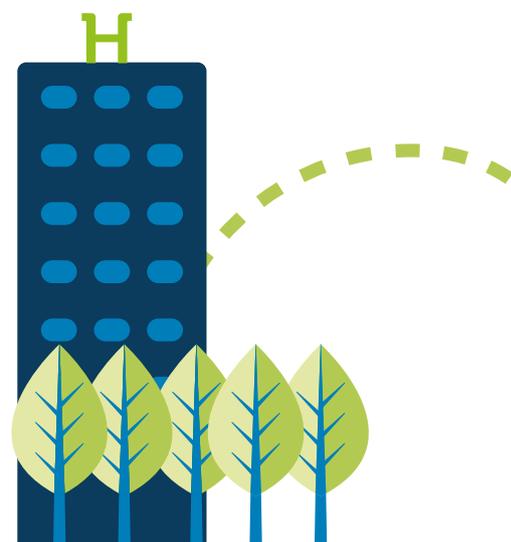
We have a duty to tackle climate change. The action needed to limit its worst impacts are not insignificant, and most will require major changes to the way we live our lives. But the consequences of doing nothing will be far worse for the health of the planet and the country. Indeed, many of the things we need to do to tackle climate change will bring major benefits for improving population health. Tackling air pollution, promoting walking and cycling (known as 'active

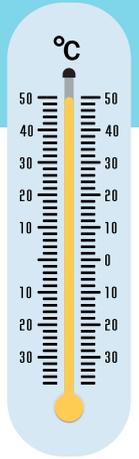
travel'), and improving the number and quality of green spaces can all have dual benefits for the climate and health.

Climate change represents the most significant challenge that society faces today, not just in the UK but globally. Meeting that challenge will require us all to make changes to the way we live and behave but determined action – particularly by governments, industry and public services such as the NHS who have the power to make the biggest concentrated impact – can make a meaningful difference. While it is far beyond the scope of this paper to provide definitive and comprehensive solutions, it aims to identify areas where we can make further progress.

The role of government

National governments have the power to make the greatest impact on climate change and play a fundamental and leading role in setting the direction and ambition of the policy response. In 2019 the UK government legislated for a legally binding commitment to reduce the UK's net carbon emissions by 100% relative to 1990 levels by 2050. This is often referred to as reaching 'net zero'. This commitment made the UK the first major economy to set such a target in law. While this was a welcome step forward, and the subsequent publication of the government's Net Zero Strategy an important milestone, there is a high risk of under-delivery in a number of areas against the goals that have been set.





The Net Zero Strategy sets out a series of policies for meeting emission reduction targets up to 2037. Analysis of the strategy by the UK Climate Change Committee found that there were ‘significant risks’ attached to 33 % of the required emissions reductions and that plans were either missing or inadequate for a further 5 %, as well as highlighting a lack of contingency planning. In July 2022, Friends of the Earth, represented by Leigh Day, brought a successful legal challenge arguing that the Net Zero Strategy failed to meet its legal obligations under the Climate Change Act 2008 to enable parliament to clearly evaluate how the government intends to achieve its carbon emissions reduction targets. The significant economic opportunities presented by the transition to net zero were emphasised in a separate independent review of the Net Zero Strategy led by former energy minister Chris Skidmore MP, which said that realising these opportunities requires ‘clarity, certainty, consistency, and continuity from government’, including a long-term, stable investment plan. It is vital that the UK has a clear and credible plan for reducing its emissions.

Reducing and ultimately eliminating our use of fossil fuels must also be a priority for government. Continued fossil fuel use will undermine our ability to mitigate climate change and leave everyone – from consumers to organisations like the RCP – vulnerable to energy price shocks which have significant impacts on health. The transition away from fossil fuels must be managed in a way which does not exacerbate health inequality – a range of complementary policy interventions at both national and local level, for example around skills and training as well as support for everyone to reduce their energy consumption through home insulation initiatives, are needed to achieve a just transition.

The role of the NHS

The NHS is responsible for around 40 % of the UK’s public sector emissions and 4 % of total emissions. It aims to become the world’s first net zero national health service and has set targets for achieving this, which include reaching net zero in the emissions it controls directly by 2040. A focus on improving the environmental sustainability of healthcare delivery needs to be embedded across the NHS at national, regional and local levels. It can be challenging to prioritise sustainability at a time when there is very high demand for clinical care, but it can ultimately deliver wider benefits for population health and in doing so reduce pressure on the NHS.

New, more environmentally sustainable ways to deliver healthcare will make a significant contribution to our efforts to mitigate climate change. Clinicians and other healthcare professionals in the NHS can play a vital part in improving the sustainability of healthcare by making changes to how they practice and the way that care is delivered. All such changes, whether large or small, make an important contribution to reducing the impact that the health service has on the environment and climate change. There are also wider potential benefits that can be realised through the development of new methods of treatment that consume fewer resources and generate less waste. There are many successful initiatives currently taking place across the NHS which have the potential to be scaled up more widely. This paper includes several case studies demonstrating how a more sustainable approach to healthcare delivery can be achieved and the impact this can have.





Population health

Many of the interventions we need to take to address climate change also have major benefits for population health in their own right and can ultimately help to reduce pressure on the NHS. Research published in *The Lancet Planetary Health* in early 2023 assessed the health impact of policies recommended by the UK Climate Change Committee – the independent body which advises government on emissions reduction – for achieving net zero by 2050. The analysis suggests that these would result in at least 2 million additional years being lived cumulatively across the population of England and Wales between 2021 and 2050.

Recommendations

Recommendations for government

- Prioritise a just transition from fossil fuels, redirecting all funding and subsidies to renewable energy sources and technologies and implementing complementary policy initiatives to ensure this process does not exacerbate health inequalities.
- Strengthen the Net Zero Strategy to ensure there is a robust and credible pathway for reaching the UK's emission reduction targets by 2050 at the very latest.
- Build on the UK's presidency of COP26 and continue to push for ambitious international action to limit climate change.
- Go further in its efforts to reverse environmental decline – existing targets and commitments should be regarded as a floor not a ceiling, and policy interventions should actively seek to go beyond them.
- Put prevention at the heart of health and wider government policy, recognising that reducing avoidable ill health

and demand for healthcare will require cross-government action, and has environmental, health and economic benefits.

- Fully implement recommendations from the chief medical officer's 2022 annual report on air pollution, taking robust action across a range of different sectors to improve both outdoor and indoor air quality.
- Ensure that the infrastructure needed to enable active travel (walking and cycling) is in place across the country to realise the aim set out in the 2023 Environmental Improvement Plan that half of all journeys in towns and cities should be walked or cycled by 2030. This should be supplemented by efforts to improve the provision of public transport across the country to reduce emissions from car travel.
- Provide everyone with access to a green space within 10 minutes of their home, building on the 15-minute pledge in the Environmental Improvement Plan and setting out a clear timescale and funding commitment to deliver this.

Recommendations to ensure the NHS and health and care systems can effectively prioritise environmental sustainability

- The NHS constitution should be updated to include the net zero targets.
- The link between climate change mitigation and improved health outcomes should be recognised and leveraged by NHS bodies and systems in national, regional and local health inequalities work.
- Initiatives to reduce the environmental impact of healthcare delivery within the NHS must be appropriately funded, including capital investment where necessary.