



HOW-TO...

**Develop Guidance for
Sustainability in
Your Specialist Area**



**UK Health Alliance
on Climate Change**

Why?

Members of the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change are professional bodies that both directly regulate and indirectly influence the definition of professional standards that govern clinical practice in a wide range of healthcare specialties.



By developing guidance on sustainability, member organisations can incorporate action to **reduce carbon emissions** into standard practices in specialist areas of work.

Doing this can empower clinical staff working across NHS organisations to take action that:

- reduces greenhouse gas emissions and environmental harms by the health service
- improves health outcomes for individuals and communities; and
- uses NHS funds and resources efficiently



Why?

The NHS accounts for approximately 5% of the UK's total greenhouse gas emissions. In 2020, the NHS committed to reduce its directly controlled emissions to net zero by 2040, and its indirect emissions to net zero by 2045.



Components of the NHS carbon footprint

Direct emissions from NHS Estates (24%)

Indirect emissions from procurement supply chains (62%)

Personal travel (10%), including staff, patient, and visitor travel.

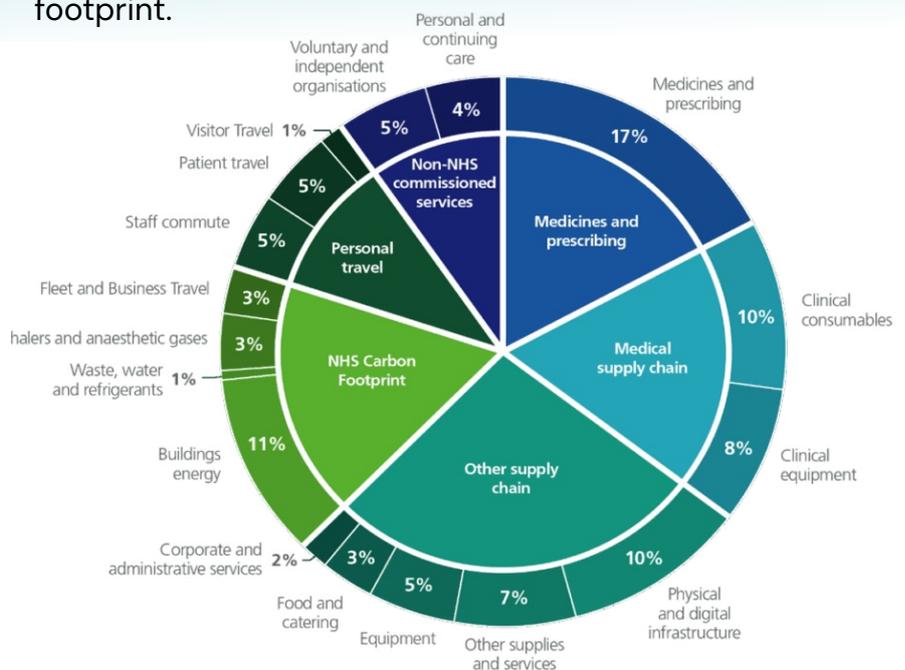
Commissioned health services outside the NHS (4%).

Source: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/five-years-greener-nhs/progress-forward-look>

This includes building energy (10%), water and waste (5%), anaesthetic gases and metered dose inhalers (5%), and the NHS fleet and business travel (4%).

i.e., the entire network of activities involved in getting products or services needed by the NHS from its initial raw materials to the final customer, including sourcing, production, logistics, distribution, and returns.

The procurement of medicines, chemicals, and medical equipment accounts for 30% of the total NHS carbon footprint.



The NHS also contributes significantly to plastic and air pollution:

In catering alone, the NHS bought at least 163 million plastic cups, 16 million pieces of plastic cutlery, 15 million straws and 2 million plastic stirrers in 2018

One in 20 cars on the roads are related to the NHS

Why?



One key pathway to enable the NHS to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is to incorporate measures for environmental sustainability into core professional standards in each clinical specialty. This includes practices such as:

Preventing disease occurrence and progression through health promotion activities.



Streamlining clinical care pathways to reduce carbon emissions and waste.



Opting for low-carbon treatments and technologies where appropriate.



Optimising the use of highly polluting anaesthetic gases like nitrous oxide or desflurane.



Replacing single-use with multi-use, repairable, or recyclable consumables where appropriate.



Using resources efficiently to reduce costs and waste.



Actively travelling to or at work, using public transport where available, and avoiding air travel wherever possible.



Using communication technology when appropriate to reduce staff and patient travel.



What?

Sustainability guidance for your organisation's healthcare specialty may include the following elements:



1 Estimates of/tools to estimate greenhouse gas emissions from activities in your specialist area, including:

The carbon footprint of activities and resources involved in clinical pathways in your specialty; e.g. the carbon footprint of cannulation.



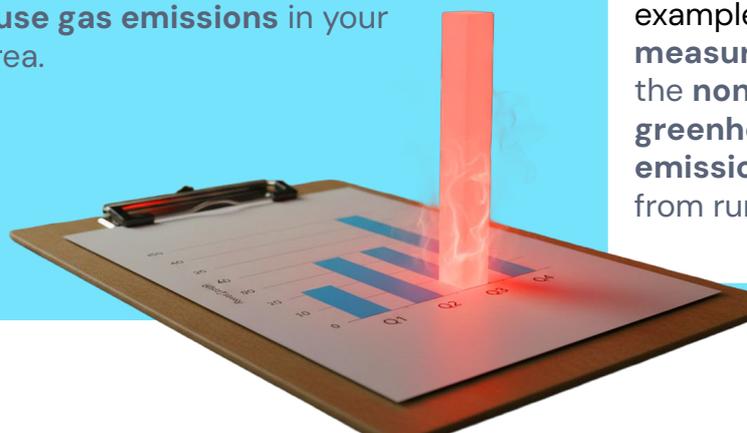
The carbon footprint of the manufacture, supply, usage, and disposal of products used in your specialty.



The carbon footprint of patient and staff transport, and energy used by facilities to provide care in your specialty.



2 Identification of key 'carbon hotspots' in your specialty, i.e., specific processes, areas, or activities that are responsible for a disproportionately large amount of greenhouse gas emissions in your specialist area.



The carbon footprint can be calculated by a combination of **in-house measurement and analysis**, and a review of **existing evidence in academic and grey literature**.

The **Centre for Sustainable Healthcare** provides expertise in **carbon footprint measurement** for organisations and **specialty pathways with robust data to assess impact**.

[You can learn about and access their services here.](#)

[The GP Carbon Calculator](#) is an example of a **tool to measure and identify the non-clinical greenhouse gas emission hotspots** from running practices.

What?

Sustainability guidance



3

Greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets and timelines for activities in your specialty, and for key 'carbon hotspots'. It is important to align these targets and timelines with broader NHS Net Zero policies.

4

Pathways to achieve emissions reductions, such as:

- Streamlined **care pathways**
- Mitigation of '**carbon hotspot**' emissions
- Incorporation of sustainability principles into how products are **sourced, used, repaired, and disposed.**

5

Examples and case studies that demonstrate **cost efficiencies** achieved through more sustainable practice and encouragement to re-allocate resources for sustainability initiatives.

6

Guidance on establishing a leadership and governance structure to develop and deliver sustainable practices within the specialty.

7

A plan to educate members to take action and lead on emissions reduction initiatives in the workplace.

8

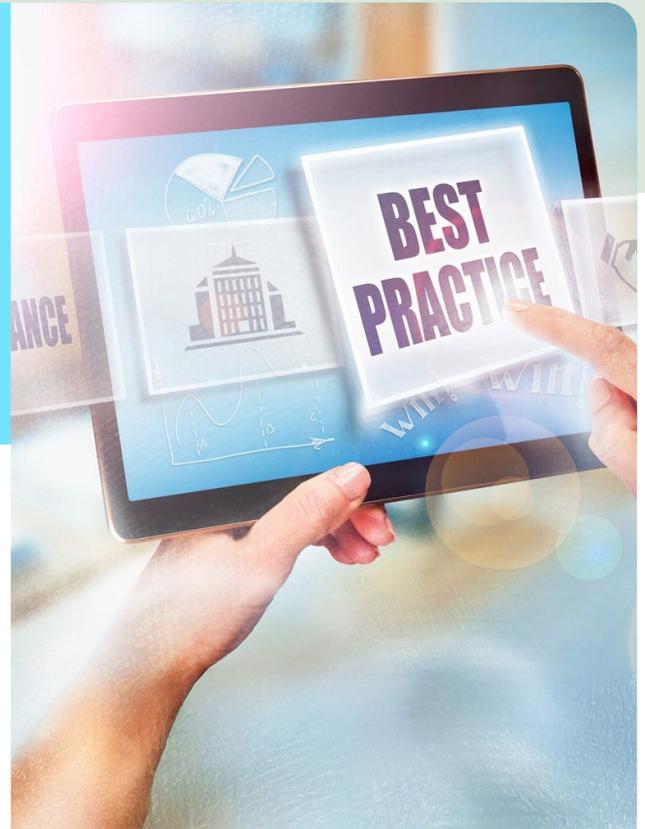
A system for monitoring, reporting, and accrediting emissions reduction objectives in your specialty.

How?

1 Initiate Process

At present, there is no policy mandate that requires professional bodies in the healthcare sector to develop sustainability guidance for their specialties.

The government and the NHS strongly recommend that organisations take such action, but ultimately these efforts are voluntary. In such a situation, the process of developing sustainability guidance can be initiated either by action of organisations' leaders, or by the advocacy of organisations' members.



2 Create a Steering Group

Once the process has been initiated, it is important that organisations create a steering group to develop the details of the sustainability guidance that you will develop for your specialty.

When constituting the group, it is advisable to include a mix of **internal and external stakeholders** including, **organisation leaders, lay members, academic experts, NHS administrators, NHS estates representatives, patient representatives**, and if possible, **industry representatives**.



How?

3 Strategies to develop a Sustainability Guidance

Your organisation's steering group can adopt a combination of the following strategies to develop sustainability guidance for your specialty.

(i) Study and draw inspiration from the existing sustainability plans or guidance documents of professional bodies in your own or allied specialties.

(ii) Draw on the expertise that exists within your organisation.

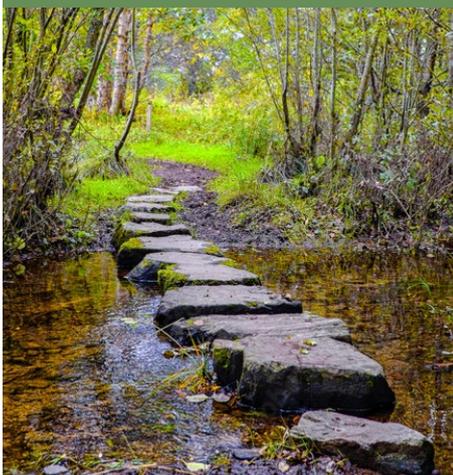
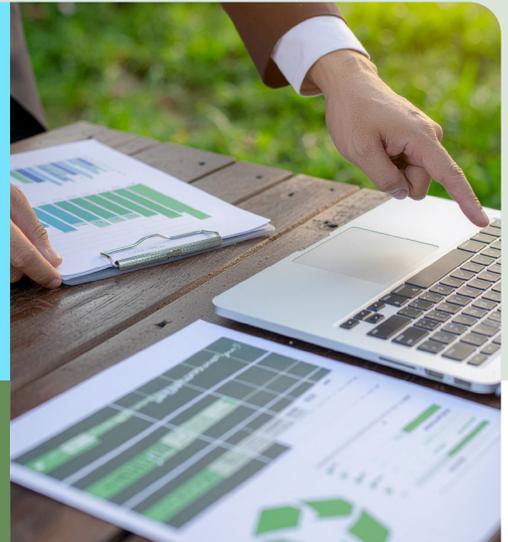
It is highly likely that there will be members of your organisation who hold **significant knowledge** about topics in sustainable healthcare, or who have **already implemented sustainability projects in the workplace**. Involve them in the process of developing the sustainability guidance, and use the resources that they have used to acquire knowledge and shape projects.

(iii) Consult with external experts.

There is a growing community of academic experts and clinical researchers who are working on sustainable healthcare topics. Many of these experts offer **consultation services** to help **translate research findings into actionable interventions** in healthcare work contexts. The [Centre for Sustainable Healthcare](#) offers professional development services that you can use to develop your sustainability guidance.

(iv) Follow a multi-step process.

You may consider initially developing a **pilot guidance document** that can be created without a significant investment of resources (funds, time, and personnel). This document can emphasize **interventions that can be easily implemented**, and **processes to seek more input and develop further projects** to embed sustainability in your specialty. The initial pilot can be followed by a process of planned iteration where your organisation's sustainability guidance is **regularly reviewed and renewed every 3–5 years**. *For example*, the **Association for Palliative Care** has instituted ['The Greener Palliative Care Award'](#); the organisation ran a pilot scheme in 2025 with plans to expand.



Enabling Conditions

To ensure effective implementation, it is important to include the following elements in your sustainability guidance:



1

Duty of care:

Emphasize that **interventions to reduce the negative environmental impacts** of your specialty are a part of healthcare professionals' duty to **do no harm**.



2

Easy wins:

Identify and list actions that your organisation's members can take in the course of their **existing duties**. This can ensure that action for sustainability is **not seen as an additional burden**. *For example*, reducing the length of the admissions booklets, or switching operating theatre ventilation from a low powered 'set back mode' to off overnight.



3

Emphasize health benefits, cost savings, and social benefits:

Many interventions to reduce negative environmental impacts of your specialty will **provide positive health outcomes**, while **reducing financial costs** and also reduce financial costs and **provide added social benefits**.



Enabling Conditions



4

Commit funding and personnel:

Create and communicate a plan to dedicate funds and personnel to work on sustainability in your specialty over time. This will convey the seriousness of your intent, and has the potential to **spur behavioural and systemic change** needed to ensure sustainability in your specialty.

You can also consider **appointing Fellows** in your organisation to work on this issue in a dedicated manner. This can be done either using existing schemes such as the [NHS Sustainability Fellowship Scheme](#) or the [Specialty Fellowship programme at the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare](#), or by developing and instituting a scheme of your own.



5

UKHACC members who are responsible for professional standards can also consider creating standards suggesting or mandating that **departments/units dedicate a certain number of working hours to sustainability work.** This would be helpful for practitioners to negotiate and develop their work plans.

6

Incentivise change:

Commit to providing **institutional and financial support for ongoing professional development** and creating a network of **sustainability champions** in your specialty. For example, the **Royal College of General Practitioners** provided funding support to help create the **Green Impact for Health Toolkit**.

7

Celebrate success:

Outline a plan for **recognising sustainability projects and achievements in your specialty.** For example, the **Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists** ran a '[Green Maternity Challenge](#)' in 2024–2025, where nine clinical teams were mentored and supported to implement sustainability interventions in work settings. In March 2025, the College organised an event called the '[Green Maternity Showcase](#)' to **recognise and publicise the work done by these teams**, and to **encourage future sustainability initiatives.**

Examples



A number of UKHACC membership organisations have taken action to develop sustainability plans for their specialty areas.

You can access an index listing these initiatives [here](#). Below are **three examples** that demonstrate how your organisation can approach this process in a variety of ways that can all have significant positive impact.

GreenED Framework

In 2019, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, in response to suggestions proposed by concerned members and growing public awareness, divested from fossil fuels, made a formal declaration that there was a climate emergency, co-launched the annual Lancet Countdown Report, and started to reduce the environmental footprint of the college and its activities.

It also set up the **Environmental Special Interest Group (ESIG)**, which was tasked with researching and developing ways to **assess and improve the environmental sustainability of everyday clinical practice** as part of a wider advocacy and education remit.

The ESIG developed the **pilot GreenED Framework** in 2021. This tool was aimed at empowering emergency medicine practitioners working across the 130 NHS Emergency Departments in England and Wales to implement sustainability actions in hospital settings. The **GreenED framework** drew on the well-established **Laboratory Efficiency Assessment Framework** (from the domain of laboratory sustainability operations), and contained **immediate, medium-term, and long-term actions** that practitioners could take in the workplace. It also provided professionals with the means for them to **evaluate** the impact of those actions and to feed into wider **sustainability targets** at both Trust and national levels.



This tool is an example of how an individual healthcare professional body can create a sustainability plan that can be enacted by its members in healthcare practice settings in the NHS across the country.

Examples

Green Impact for Health Toolkit

In 2014, a small group of GPs in Bristol created the Green Impact for Health (GIFH) toolkit. They had help from the National Union of Students (NUS), the Severn Faculty of the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), the University of Bristol, and Health Education England Southwest.

They built their **toolkit for GPs** using the **NUS's existing Green Impact toolkit** (a pre-existing tool designed to support environmentally and socially sustainable practices within organisations, in general).

In this toolkit, the authors shared practical information with GP practices regarding:

- What they could do to be more sustainable
- Why they should do it
- How they could do it

The group also introduced an **annual award scheme** to recognise incremental achievements. A **pilot study** showed the toolkit had real potential, but at first it was hard to get support. Either funders didn't see sustainability in general practice as important, or they doubted the effectiveness of the toolkit itself. However, the **NUS** supported the web platform at no cost, and **volunteer GPs** kept it updated.

In 2015, the new **RCGP president made funds available to run the web platform** (about £10,000 a year), while **volunteers** continued to improve the content. This facilitated a roll out of the toolkit nationally and annual improvements. **By 2025, the importance of sustainability and working towards net zero carbon is widely accepted.**

Now, 1800 (22% of UK) GP practices use the toolkit, and it has been recommended in other countries. It is supported by the **RCGP** and **Greener Practice**.



This toolkit is an example of how advocacy by a group of motivated professionals within a specialty can result in the creation and institutionalisation of a sustainability plan within a specialist area.

Examples

Green Surgery Report

In 2021, the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, the Brighton and Sussex Medical School, and the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare initiated the development of the Green Surgery Report.

The aim of the project was to create the first-ever detailed, evidence-based account of how to reduce the environmental impact of surgical care while maintaining high quality patient care and potentially saving the NHS money.

A group comprising members from the **three organisations secured funding from the Health Foundation**, and created a steering committee to develop the report. This steering committee included representatives of **19 professional bodies** involved in different aspects of surgical care, **academic experts** on sustainability in surgery, **NHS estates representatives, industry representatives, and patient advocacy representatives**. Between 2021 and 2023, this group worked together to plan, gather evidence for, compose, review, and **publish this landmark report**.

Since publication, the report has been widely used in the UK and beyond to **educate surgical professionals on incorporating sustainability into their work, and to implement changes in professional practice**.

This report is an example of how effective collaboration by a large number of professional bodies can result in the creation of a comprehensive sustainability plan for specialist healthcare provision.



MAP ACTIONS

AGAINST CLIMATE AND HEALTH SCORE CARD



The Climate and Health Scorecard is a tool used to assess progress towards delivering the UKHACC Commitments.

The Climate and Health Scorecard is a tool used to assess progress towards delivering the UKHACC Commitments. The following questions (and points awarded) are used to assess progress against the commitment to 'Develop a plan for sustainability in your specialist area'.

6

Have you developed a plan for sustainability in your specialist area, working with health systems (NHS/Greener NHS) to implement the plan?



2 points

Find out more about the scorecard including the complete questionnaire and previous reports at [Climate & Health Scorecard](#)

