

Environmental sustainability in the NHS: strengthening accountability

What's the issue?

Climate change is a major risk to the health of the UK population and also creates significant operational risks for the NHS. The NHS is the largest public sector contributor to climate change and has a programme of work to address this, but NHS organisations often struggle to prioritise environmental sustainability in the context of other pressures.

Strengthening accountability is key to accelerating progress.

As NHS England merges with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), it is imperative that national leadership for sustainability in the NHS does not become diluted or lost. Policy-makers have an opportunity to embed sustainability across the system and to deliver multiple benefits by doing so.

Why is it important to strengthen accountability for sustainability?

Holding NHS organisations to account for operating in an environmentally sustainable way can help to achieve multiple policy objectives, including:

- supporting better health by reducing the health impacts of climate change
- improving value for money by reducing waste, streamlining care pathways and using resources more efficiently

- aligning with the 10 Year Health Plan by supporting prevention and reducing demand for resource-intensive hospital services
- strengthening system resilience by helping the NHS prepare for climate-related risks, such as extreme heat, flooding and supply chain disruption.

Key research findings

NHS England's Greener NHS programme has established strong foundations for holding NHS organisations to account for delivering environmentally sustainable services. But despite clear national requirements, accountability arrangements need strengthening to drive faster progress.

- Sustainability is often assessed in isolation rather than embedded in mainstream performance, financial or oversight frameworks.
- NHS organisations are required to have a board-level lead for sustainability but the strength of commitment to sustainability at this level varies widely.
- Responsibility is often delegated to small teams without sufficient authority or resources to drive organisation-wide change.

These and other issues create significant variation in progress across the NHS.

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How can policy-makers strengthen accountability for sustainability?

Our report sets out 10 recommendations for strengthening accountability. Here, we focus on four key points that are particularly relevant for national policy-makers:

1. Reinforce national leadership including through a statutory duty for the Secretary of State

As NHS England's functions move into the DHSC, progress made by the Greener NHS programme must be protected by:

- introducing a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to report annually to Parliament on progress on sustainability in the NHS
- maintaining a dedicated, well-resourced Greener NHS function within DHSC
- providing visible leadership and ensuring sustainability remains a national priority.

2. Embed sustainability within regional performance management processes

Sustainability should form part of the performance conversations between regional teams and local NHS bodies in relation to operational, financial and quality priorities. Actions to achieve this include:

- requiring regional teams to incorporate sustainability into routine performance discussions with trusts and ICBs
- developing lines of enquiry for regional finance and performance teams focused on reducing waste, improving efficiency, and supporting sustainable models of care

- training regional leaders to support consistent implementation.

3. Align national oversight mechanisms with sustainability objectives

National frameworks, such as the NHS Oversight Framework (NOF), should drive behaviours that are aligned with environmental sustainability by:

- strengthening the focus in NOF on prevention, population health and demand reduction – all of which also support sustainability goals
- developing a sustainability metric for future iterations of NOF
- integrating environmental considerations into other national accountability and oversight mechanisms.

4. Make sustainability part of the national vision for a high-quality NHS

Sustainability is still seen as separate from quality and efficiency rather than essential to delivering them. Effective leadership and communication are essential to help make these links clearer. This can be addressed by:

- having a strong narrative from ministers and DHSC leaders that positions sustainability as core to quality, efficiency and future service resilience
- communicating the benefits for staff and patients, such as more efficient resource use, improved care environments and better health outcomes
- signalling the importance of sustainability and climate resilience through inclusion in major NHS planning and policy documents.

Further reading

Naylor C, Wills E, Hillson R (2026). *Environmental sustainability in the NHS: a new approach to national leadership and accountability*. The King's Fund website. Available at: www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/reports/environmental-sustainability-nhs

Callan C, Cameron G (2024). *Policy levers for a net zero NHS: four priorities for the future*. Health Foundation website. Available at: www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/briefings/policy-levers-for-a-net-zero-nhs-four-priorities-for-the-future

Naylor C (2026). 'What does climate change mean for the future of public services?' The King's Fund website. Available at: www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/blogs/climate-change-future-public-services