

Industry in Focus

Be Transformative: Delivering a decarbonised health service

How Net Zero supports better financial and healthcare outcomes
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Driving Sustainability

2023 marked three years since the NHS became the world's first health service to commit to carbon Net Zero. Last year, we explored how the NHS could integrate decarbonisation with broader strategic transformation objectives and we challenged the belief that NHS Net Zero is solely an emissions target isolated from other NHS objectives.

Breaking out of this mindset is needed to prevent Net Zero from being reduced to a distant pipedream that might only be realised in better times without economic, workforce, and waiting list pressures.

So instead we outline how to be transformative with decarbonisation by intertwining financial, operational and environmental sustainability.

We tethered decarbonisation to transformation objectives that already aim to improve financial sustainability and health outcomes.

This approach will make the journey towards a sustainable future easier, and part of day-to-day health service activity.

In this article, we explore further how this approach is being delivered in practice through 4 clear, tangible and actionable measures:

1

Developing carbon literacy:

Equipping boards, management and clinicians with an understanding of what Net Zero really means for their organisation so they can make decisions impacting health, financial, and environmental outcomes.

2

Building greenhouse gas capabilities:

Accurate, agile analytics of greenhouse gas emissions within organisations to identify and address impactful CO2 emission hotspots.

3

Identifying where Net Zero, financial and health outcomes intersect:

Addressing operational, financial and sustainability challenges as a self funding system instead of individual problems that compete for resources.

4

Reframing Net Zero as an opportunity to deliver improved outcomes:

Aligning the Net Zero journey with core clinical values and workforce priorities while inspiring clarity, mission and purpose.





1. Developing carbon literacy

Delivering change involves collective will and a clear understanding of trade-offs and organisational goals.

The NHS is still very much at the outset of its important Net Zero journey – this is demonstrated by the size and scale of the challenge. Scope 3 emissions alone account for 62% of the ‘NHS carbon footprint’. Tackling scope 3 requires specific skills distinct from Scope 1 & Scope 2 Carbon. Are organisations aligned internally and ready for this? Have Green Plans evolved from strategic visions, to tangible actions underpinning Scope 3 transformation? How will this be funded?

A crucial first step in this journey is upskilling board members and staff fluency in the impact that decisions have on cost and carbon.

Strengthening the understanding of Net Zero science, and integrating it into strategic planning and decision-making, is needed to bring a cost and carbon approach to every board meeting, policy review and project initiation.

In essence, this is about embodying a deep culture of Net Zero into the health service which is visibly enacted from the top and intrinsically linked to how healthcare is delivered.

Digitally empowering fundamental change

A hospital sustainability board, we worked with, fundamentally changed their conversation about finances, carbon and clinical tools when they began using a digital cost and carbon tool. It signposted high value and high priority actions across the organisation. This enabled leadership to secure collective buy-in to implement new higher impact, higher ROI decisions.

2. Building greenhouse gas capabilities

The capability to rapidly baseline and understand organisational carbon footprints is a fundamental part of the carbon challenge.

Many NHS trusts (84%²) lack systems to accurately measure their carbon footprint (let alone identify carbon hotspots). Data is typically spread across disparate systems and there is no standardised approach to translate carbon hotspots into insight and action for frontline teams.

It's already possible to create a world where carbon, the currency of greenhouse gas emissions, is as visible as money. If the unambiguous carbon impact of decisions, or lack of decisions, was visible to NHS organisations they could visualise the real benefits of decarbonisation here and now.

Choosing the right digital tools will enable healthcare organisations to effectively navigate their respective Net Zero journeys, know where the 'quick wins' are and where the highest impact can be achieved with the least effort.

Carbon hotspots and making it real

A health provider used digital tools to rapidly baseline their Scope 3 carbon footprint and identified over 200 carbon hotspots. This made carbon tangible for staff through interactive carbon dashboards. It channeled the expertise of clinical and non-clinical teams into specific carbon reduction plans and boosted the financial benefits of implementation.

2. BMA – Climate Change and Sustainability:
The health service and net zero





3. Intersection between Net Zero, finance and health outcomes

Patient care is unquestionably at the heart of NHS activity. But how does the significant level of carbon in NHS supply chains translate to the chemotherapeutic agent that must be prescribed to a patient, for example? What about the services and supplies that support clinical care? How do you decarbonise clinical treatment pathways or non-clinical services? Where should you even start?

The answer is complex, but lies in understanding high value carbon decisions that clinical teams take and the choices patients make. From medicines that are prescribed at discharge to prosthetics implanted in theatres, these choices range across a wide cost and carbon spectrum. They ultimately shape the carbon and cost footprint of organisations and the system as a whole.

In our experience, it's critical to empower clinicians and care groups with 'real-life' emissions data that brings carbon to life in the world of clinical care and patient outcomes. We also see that carbon decisions yield cost benefits. Typically this data can be used to craft highly specific actions that remove carbon and save money at the same time.

Be Transformative with green plans

A teaching hospital worked with us at the intersection of Net Zero, finance and health to rapidly create deeply thoughtful and impactful clinical decarbonisation actions. Funding pathways were revealed by digital procurement analytics that compliment carbon analytics. The resulting plans were developed collaboratively by clinical, procurement and sustainability teams and embedded onto the trust delivery plan. Double-digit reductions in scope 3 carbon are expected over the next two years.

4. Reframing Net Zero as an opportunity for improved outcomes

Let's remove the perception of Net Zero as a separate and somewhat burdensome task. Reframing Net Zero enables decarbonisation initiatives to seamlessly dovetail work that is already happening within healthcare organisations to deliver financial and operational efficiencies.

It is critical to recognise 'crossover points' where operational and financial efficiencies directly correlate with sustainability outcomes — this will focus workforces and organisations behind a shared and compelling goal.

The critical pathway to delivering Net Zero (and more immediate Green Plans) prioritises these crossovers and highlights the financial benefits.

Seemingly separate objectives will become mutually reinforcing goals: the understanding that environmental, financial and operational outcomes are inextricably linked, and not competing tasks.

For example, preventive care uplifts community health and mitigates the need for resource-intensive and carbon intensive secondary care services.

It's important to identify, the many seemingly small steps or decisions linked to carbon that stack into significant health and financial benefits whilst positively advancing the Net Zero agenda.

Small steps that have a big net impact

An NHS trust working on Scope 3 discovered immediate impact – a 10% scope 3 reduction over the next two years. Implementing the plans would remove over 9,700 tCO₂e per year and over 97,000 tCO₂e by 2045.

In turn, the consequential procurement cost savings would fund decarbonisation and importantly enable reinvestment into sustainability – a mutually reinforcing outcome.



This article has examined the crucial steps the health service should take to support its journey towards Net Zero. It has highlighted the importance of upskilling and engaging staff at all levels from the board to frontline clinicians, alongside enhancing environmental monitoring capabilities and understanding the financial costs and benefits of this. It emphasises the value of reframing Net Zero correctly as an integral part of wider operational improvements and leveraging strategic crossover points where operational and financial efficiencies directly correlate with sustainability outcomes.

Future editions will explore the potential challenges and trade-offs that the NHS will have to confront as it embarks on this journey to Net Zero, as well as articulate example roadmaps that could support the NHS in realising its decarbonisation aims.

To find out more about our cost and carbon out approach in healthcare or experience a demonstration of our respective tools, please contact our team:



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