



# Climate emergency declaration

A guide for primary care

# The climate crisis is a health crisis

As a GP, my training has equipped me with the skills needed to diagnose illnesses and prevent ill health. We see the young and the old, care for the dying and help people make lifestyle changes. Our wider role is to promote wellbeing, reduce inequalities and support patients to thrive within their communities.

I therefore understand that to do this successfully, we must fight for our piece of limited - usually financial - resources, and when we get them, we cannot afford to be profligate with them.

The planet also has finite resources, and we cannot afford to be wasteful with these either.

**I believe we should arrange healthcare as if each of us were going to live on this planet forever.**

An important step to taking climate action is to declare a climate emergency. What does this mean?

- 1. Telling the truth – acknowledging this is an emergency.**
- 2. Acting now – taking radical steps in our personal and professional lives to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2040\*.**
- 3. Stronger together – working with others to create new solutions.**

*Dr Matthew Sawyer,  
GP and founder of SEE Sustainability*



\*The NHS has committed to decarbonising by 2040, however, to prevent the worst impacts of the climate crisis, we should be aiming to decarbonise as rapidly as achievable - by 2025 if possible - and not delay starting to take action.



# Who in healthcare is declaring a climate emergency?

It has been a momentous few years for climate change. We've seen an increasing number of practices and healthcare trusts, councils, organisations as well as the NHS and the UK Government take action and declare a climate emergency.

In 2020, the NHS became the first healthcare organisation in the world to commit to achieve net zero carbon emissions.

Cornwall Health Care Partnership led the way with a commitment to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2040:

*"In declaring a 'Climate Change' emergency, the NHS recognises the threat faced to public health as a result of global warming and seizes some of the opportunities to lead and work a more sustainable life that has been presented during the pandemic."*

Cornwall and Isle of Scilly Health Care Partnerships; NHS Kernow Clinical Commissioning Group, the Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust (RCHT) and Cornwall Partnership Foundation NHS Trust (CFT)



*"We enjoyed a close working relationship with our local community and town council, and we were inspired when they were one of the first in the country to declare a climate emergency in 2018."*

*In March 2020, we were delighted to be joined by Portishead Medical Group, Hankham Health, Aberfeldy Practice and Kintbury and Woolton Hill Surgeries to declare an emergency."*

Karen Creffield,  
Frome Practice and Primary Network Care Manager

**Healthcare is beginning to take climate action. All of us must recognise our role and potential impact and contributions on a personal and professional level. These impacts can often be bigger than we think.**

# Why is primary care declaring a climate emergency?

In primary care our staff teams, communities and patients have been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, but the next crisis is just around the corner. In fact, you are already experiencing the impacts of climate breakdown.

Climate breakdown is a health crisis, and primary care is on the frontline as its impacts are already affecting our communities from flooding, heatwaves and air pollution.

## The impact of air pollution in the UK each year



**40,000**  
deaths



**£157 million**  
spent for healthcare



*"As a doctor, I feel a duty to act on climate change. As well as opportunities for carbon and cost saving measures, overall this is about good clinical care; improving asthma care, access to green spaces and reducing health inequalities."*

*This is beneficial for patients and should not be seen as asking people to do more."*

Dr Tamsin Ellis,  
General Practitioner in London



*"Air pollution causes the condition of people with asthma and breathing difficulties to get worse and particularly affects poorer communities. It is also an attributable risk factor for cardiac problems and lung cancer."*

*As doctors, we have a role to prevent these things from happening. Fortunately, the benefits of taking action to prevent climate change also lead to better health."*

Dr Murugesan Raja,  
GP, respiratory specialist and member  
of Manchester's Climate Change Board



**98,000 lives saved**  
through flexitarian diets

**+100,100 lives saved**  
if the UK focused on health gains



**21,500 lives saved**  
through active travel

**+38,400 lives saved**  
if the UK focused on health gains



**3,500 lives saved**  
through improved air quality

**+5,800 lives saved**  
if the UK focused on health gains

Blue: Number of lives saved per year by 2040 if the UK meets its climate targets  
Green: Number of lives saved per year by 2040 if the UK went further and focussed on health gains from climate action

# The benefits of climate action for health

Reducing our carbon emissions isn't only good for the health of our planet and of wildlife; it will significantly benefit our health.

A piece of research\* published in *The Lancet* in February 2021 demonstrates the potential health benefits of climate action. It found that if the UK achieved its 2040 climate targets, each year we could save 98,000 lives through better "flexitarian" diets, 21,500 lives by people taking more exercise and 3,500 lives from reductions in air pollution.

By going further and focusing on the health gains from addressing the climate crisis, every year 100,100 more lives could be saved through dietary changes (with 50% adopting flexitarian diets and 50% going vegan) and 38,400 more lives from more active travel, with 75% of people walking or cycling over the course of a week). Cutting air pollution could save an additional 5,800 lives a year.

\*The public health implications of the Paris Agreement: a modelling study, *The Lancet*, February 2021, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196\(20\)30249-7/fulltext#secce10](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196(20)30249-7/fulltext#secce10)

# 5 benefits of climate action for practices



## 1. Business continuity and resilience

allowing us to continue to provide care to our patients



## 2. Positive physical and mental health impacts

on staff and patients



## 3. Financial savings

by improving efficiency, reducing waste and changing service delivery models



## 4. Minimised reputational risk

by demonstrating that we recognise the impact healthcare has on the planet



## 5. Safer and fairer communities

by recognising and addressing the health impacts of climate change, which exacerbate existing inequalities

*"Healthier populations will prove more resilient to future health threats, thus reducing economic consequences. Finally, whole societies profit when disparities between the most privileged and those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and disease are reduced."*

The Lancet, February 2021

# Why make a declaration if you are already addressing your carbon footprint?

As a respected body in your community, you have agency and the ability **to engage and inspire strong action** from other businesses and organisations. Primary Care trusts have partnered with local councils and others on their declaration and for collective action.

You also have the power to connect the dots between the impacts of climate change on human health, engaging a wider audience who may not feel climate change is affecting them or their families.

Imagine your community more resilient to floods and extreme weather conditions, meaning less mental health issues. Imagine reduced air pollution from community car-free zones and walking initiatives, leading to less asthma and respiratory problems.

 **Greater Manchester was the first “integrated care system” – NHS bodies and council social care working together to declare a climate emergency.**

**They have a bold ambition for the city region to be one of the globe’s healthiest, cleanest and greenest city-regions and to be carbon-neutral by 2038.**



# What to include in your green action plan

If you already have a green action plan in place, this needs revisiting to ensure it reflects the urgency of the climate emergency and these commitments:

- Working towards decarbonise and achieve net-zero by 2040 or sooner if possible.
- Addressing the carbon footprint of all impact areas of the organisation including:
  - Prescriptions
  - Travel (staff and patients)
  - Energy usage
  - Services used
  - Purchases
  - Waste reduction

For more guidance on net-zero and carbon reduction, you can find resources [here](#).

The NHS contributes to 5.4%\* of the UK's carbon emissions.

In 2020, it emitted 25 million tonnes of greenhouse gases - emissions equivalent to that of a small country\*

\*Source: Health Declares, <https://healthdeclares.org/the-science/healthcares-environmental-footprint/>



# Monitoring and measuring your impacts

As with all actions on a green action plan, you will need to build in a monitoring and measuring process to calculate how well your actions are leading towards your goals. This can fit with your annual QoF cycle.

Monitoring your actions is vital to make sure you are on the right trajectory and are on target to reach Net Zero as soon as feasible.

You can use SMART planning to have Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely goals so you know the aims to achieve and by when.

**There are plenty of carbon calculators and tools to use, such as [SEE Sustainability](#), [Compare Your Footprint](#) or [Smart Carbon](#) – who offer a simple and cost-effective way for you to measure the carbon footprint of your practice. There is no need for external consultants or additional specialist knowledge.**



# All you need to declare a climate emergency

Regardless of where they are at on their Green NHS journey, any practice or GP can start the process to declare an emergency now. These are the first steps.

## 1. Know the facts

- Read the latest medical papers on 'Climate crisis is a health crisis'.
- Visit the links in the [Resources section](#).
- Get carbon literate by taking our [Health Carbon Literacy course](#).

## 2. Build a green team

Bring together people from different departments to implement change. You may feel concerned that not everyone is environmentally motivated, but sustainability is about people, planet and profit, so people should care about one of these!

## 3. Develop a green action plan

Creating a plan may seem overwhelming, but you don't have to find the solutions at once. To get started, identify your priority areas and the easy wins. We have templates and guidance to support you [here](#).



## 4. Set carbon reduction targets

Targets are important because they will give you a clear direction, they'll motivate your teams and will allow you to measure progress. Read the NHS' targets [here](#).

## 5. Monitor and measure

This will allow you to identify if you have made improvements, gather baseline data and annually check for reductions.

## 6. Involve senior staff

Senior staff, partners and practice managers are instrumental to success as they are often aware of the anticipated health impacts of the climate crisis on staff, patients and the successful delivery of healthcare. Involvement from the early stages can help set the aims and goals for the whole team while inspiring and enthusing everyone to take part.

"For the emissions we control directly (the NHS Carbon Footprint), we will reach net zero by 2040, with an ambition to reach an 80% reduction by 2028 to 2032."

NHS England, Delivering a net zero NHS

# Engaging your team

Declaring a climate emergency and acting on climate change means collaborating with engaged members from each department to identify ways to reduce your footprint and improve your processes.

**You do not have to win over all the hearts and minds** within your organisation to care about the environment. Many of the steps you will take have other benefits, which you can talk about:

- Financial savings
- Improved patient wellbeing
- PR and community engagement opportunities

Get to know what your team cares about and look at where sustainability comes into it. It could be small things like a recycling bin or tea bags to big things like procurement and medication. Convening regular meetings with your ‘green team’ to work on key areas and support each other will keep the momentum going.



*“We’re very good at taking a team approach. We have a group of people that really care and are all working on different areas, and that’s starting to gather momentum. I think that’s been one of the key things.”*

Karen Creffield,  
Frome Practice and Primary Network Care Manager



# Engaging your patients

While the pandemic was the centre of conversations in 2020-2021, the climate emergency remains a vital issue that more and more people want to act on.

You don't need to turn everyone 'green'. You can **communicate the family, community and individual benefits of low-carbon lifestyles** to your patients and work with local stakeholders to transform the infrastructure to make those choices easier for people.

**48%**

of people are more concerned about the planet's health as a consequence of the pandemic\*

**80%**

are willing to make lifestyle changes to stop climate change as big as those they've made for coronavirus\*\*

## What steps can people take?



Eat more plant-based food



Cycle or walk short journeys



Switch to renewable energy



Plant trees

# How to write your climate emergency declaration

Two main messages:

- Your acknowledgement of the climate crisis and of the role your sector can play in providing solutions;
- Your pledge to take action.

To make it easy for you to get started, there are already approved templates, you can find one [here](#).



## Example declaration

1. We recognise that the climate and ecological emergency is a health emergency.
2. We recognise that the health impacts of climate change are unfairly distributed and exacerbate existing health inequalities.
3. We will act in both a professional and personal capacity to reduce the severe risks to public and global health.
4. We will communicate the importance of these threats to health to our colleagues, decision-makers and the public.
5. We will call on our organisations and government to tell the truth, respond fairly, and act in keeping with the urgency of the threat.

Further examples can be found on the [Health Declares](#) website.

# Sharing or publicising your climate emergency



The NHS contributes to 5.4% of the UK's carbon emissions.\*



Doctors have a duty to benefit the health of the wider community. Raising awareness about climate change and sharing your own manageable, positive actions is a great way to encourage change.

To maximise impact with your climate emergency declaration, you can share it with:

- Local journalists
- All your suppliers and stakeholders
- On all your social media channels
- Other local health organisations

Here are some tips for powerful communications:

- Aim to personalise the story for your local community, highlighting how you are already seeing the impacts of climate change on your patient's health in your region, which is motivating you to take action.
- Call on other local institutions and health organisations to declare, sharing your learnings and resources.
- Spread the word to influence national health organisations such as Royal Colleges, trade unions or defence organisations.
- Join local groups to support change.

# Further support

You are not alone in your journey! There are many others taking these steps and a lot of guidance is available on these issues.

- SEE Sustainability, Resources for primary healthcare:  
[seesustainability.co.uk/blog/f/useful-sustainability-resources-for-primary-healthcare](http://seesustainability.co.uk/blog/f/useful-sustainability-resources-for-primary-healthcare)
- Carbon Literacy Project: [carbonliteracy.com](http://carbonliteracy.com)
- Centre for Sustainable Healthcare: [sustainablehealthcare.org.uk/courses](http://sustainablehealthcare.org.uk/courses)
- Doctors for Extinction Rebellion: [doctorsforxr.com](http://doctorsforxr.com)
- Green action plans: [sap.sustainablehealthcare.org.uk](http://sap.sustainablehealthcare.org.uk)
- Greener NHS: [england.nhs.uk/greenernhs/a-net-zero-nhs](http://england.nhs.uk/greenernhs/a-net-zero-nhs)
- Greener Practice: [greenerpractice.co.uk](http://greenerpractice.co.uk)
- Health Cares Without Harm, Global road map for health care decarbonization:  
[healthcareclimateaction.org/roadmap](http://healthcareclimateaction.org/roadmap)
- Health Declares: [healthdeclares.org](http://healthdeclares.org)
- The Lancet, The public health implications of the Paris Agreement: a modelling study:  
[thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(20\)30249-7/fulltext](http://thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(20)30249-7/fulltext)
- UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, Carbon Literacy guide:  
[ukhealthalliance.org/carbon-literacy-guide](http://ukhealthalliance.org/carbon-literacy-guide)
- Green Impact for Health: [www.greenimpact.org.uk/GIforHealth](http://www.greenimpact.org.uk/GIforHealth)



# Who is SEE Sustainability?



**“My vision: for all GP practices to become carbon literate, have a green action plan in place and declare a climate emergency.”**

I'm Dr Matt Sawyer, a GP in the Northeast of England and the founder of SEE Sustainability, an environmental consultancy focusing on the decarbonisation of small and medium sized businesses with specific expertise in the health service and primary care.

I split my time between general practice and sustainability consultancy, working with primary care trusts and surgeries to develop their 'green plans', or Net-Zero roadmaps, identifying financial savings along the way.

I also deliver regular climate literacy training and have a host of on-demand training courses online.

## Contact



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