

NHS Workforce Insight Study

Understanding staff attitudes to sustainable development

Introduction

The NHS is the country's largest employer. It is keen to support staff to reduce waste and costs, improve environmental impacts and contribute to good health. Health and sustainability are inextricably linked; most clearly demonstrated by the impacts of different forms of pollution on health.

NHS organisations are pivotal anchor organisations¹, with important influence over the local economy through procurement and employment, as well as local environment through pollution and activity. NHS organisations can use this influence positively to improve the health and wellbeing of staff, patients and local residents.

We already know that the public (92 per cent²) believe that it is important for the health service to act in a way that supports the environment, but is this reflected in NHS staff?

Rationale for the survey

To understand NHS staff attitudes to waste reduction, cutting carbon emissions, and delivering cost savings through supporting the environment.

To understand whether staff think it is important for the NHS to support and lead on more environmental and sustainable actions. Do NHS staff value sustainability and show a desire to embed it into action professionally and outside of work?

To learn what sustainable actions and activities staff undertake at work and is that similarly reflected outside of work. Such as energy saving, recycling, waste reduction, healthy travel, volunteering and using technology.

To ascertain the best methods to engage, encourage and support staff to contribute sustainable actions and activities. Such as understanding health and financial benefits, and how it fits into roles.

¹ UK Commission for Employment and Skills review on Anchor Organisations

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/414390/Anchor_institutions_and_small_firms.pdf

² SDU/Ipsos MORI poll in 2015; 92% of the public think it is important for the health system to work in a more sustainable way; <https://www.sduhealth.org.uk/policy-strategy/reporting/ipsos-mori.aspx>

Summary of findings

NHS staff believe strongly in the need for, and value of, environmental sustainability. Some feel supported by their organisations but others feel they could be supported more. There is a perceived values gap; staff feel that they value sustainability more highly than their organisation does. Staff believe they undertake more action outside of work.

There is potentially an opportunity to empower staff to act on their values in work, benefiting the NHS, patients and the environment. Key areas like recycling, energy and waste are widely actioned by staff in their roles. The most effective engagement approach is to link actions to health and wellbeing benefits for staff and patients. Staff want to understand how action can be specific to their role and can also save time and money.

Staff want to see the NHS taking a role in addressing the global and local environmental challenges that concern them.



Key findings

NHS staff very strongly believe the health system should be sustainable. Ninety-eight per cent think it is important for the health and social care system to work in a way that supports the environment.

This gives the system a mandate to act. Staff and the public expect their health system to go beyond operating within environmental constraints and support the local environment. Staff want to see the NHS taking a role in addressing the global and local environmental challenges that concern them and want to be involved.

There is a perceived gap in the value placed on the environment by staff and their employer:

- 43 per cent of staff think they value the environment more than their employer does.
- Only one per cent of staff believe that their employer values sustainability more than they do.

This shows staff want to be sustainable but some perceive their employers do not value it as highly as them. Therefore, we have a national scope to communicate and engage more with staff on sustainability. This may help

staff to feel that their employer's values reflect their own, which in turn may improve overall staff engagement, satisfaction, wellbeing, recruitment and retention. There is significant evidence that the NHS and care sector are making strides in sustainable development. The Department of Health and Social Care, along with arm's-length bodies (ALBs) have reduced water usage by 33 per cent since 2009/10³, provider carbon emissions from energy have reduced by over nine per cent since 2013/14 and 85 per cent of provider waste is avoiding landfill.⁴ Staff need to hear great headlines like these.

Staff feel more supported at work to undertake environmental action than outside of work:

- 71 per cent of staff feel that their employer encourages them to support the environment at work.
- 20 per cent fewer (50 per cent) feel that their employer encourages them to support the environment outside work.

With such a large and positive work force there is a huge opportunity to better enable staff to support better health⁵, improve wellbeing and embed sustainability - both at work and outside. This could be achieved by supporting and encouraging a broader scope of actions, especially those that align with staff roles and values, promote health and benefit the local community as well as tackling health inequalities.

Staff understand the value of accessing green space for their own and patients' wellbeing:

- 95 per cent of staff understand that accessing green space has health and wellbeing benefits, for both patients and staff at NHS sites and outside of the NHS estate.

Staff need to be supported to utilise existing green space and there is an opportunity to improve and create more green space developments on or near NHS sites. Continuing to encourage greater use of green space in staff and patient lives is also important. The Government's 25 Year Environment Plan⁶ also recognises the issue and is committing to; "Improve health and wellbeing by using green spaces including through mental health services".

Staff feel they already undertake lots of sustainable actions in certain areas, but there is room for improvement.

³ Greening Government Commitments report 2017; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/679636/ggc-annual-report-2016-17.pdf

⁴ SDU Healthcheck 2018; <https://www.sduhealth.org.uk/policy-strategy/reporting/sustainable-development-in-health-and-care-report-2018.aspx>

⁵ NHS England 2017; NEXT STEPS ON THE NHS FIVE YEAR FORWARD VIEW; <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NEXT-STEPS-ON-THE-NHS-FIVE-YEAR-FORWARD-VIEW.pdf>

⁶ DEFRA, 2018, 25 Year Environment Plan; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

Many staff report that they use water efficiently (95 per cent always or occasionally), reduce paper (93 per cent always or occasionally) and turn off lights (88 per cent always or occasionally) which has already led to significant cost savings. Typically, these actions were more frequent outside of work than in work.

However, fewer report that they volunteer (only 15 per cent), avoid business travel where possible (28 per cent) and reduce packaging (55 per cent).

This knowledge can be used to target areas and tailor messaging: Explaining to staff that we want to take the social norms from outside of work and embed them in our working culture. There is also less value in communicating actions and activities (such as water efficiency) that staff feel is already being done, unless there is local evidence to the contrary.

**Staff are aware of the need to save money.
They are likely to engage with sustainable
action if the financial savings are explained.**



Possible actions could include focused campaigns (a week or month) on spreading information about one theme of action, encouraging staff to adopt new habits and celebrate their achievements.

The top three engagement tactics that staff believe are effective are:

- Demonstrating how the action or process benefits staff, the public's and/or patient health and wellbeing (80 per cent of those who think this already happens say it is effective; 75 per cent of those who think it doesn't already happen locally believe it would be effective).
 - For example, active travel provides health benefits to the individual with co-benefit of avoiding air pollution and carbon emissions impacts on health from combustion vehicles.
- Making the action or process fit into the staff member's role – especially when there are associated time savings (78 per cent of those who think this already happens say it is effective, and 75 per cent of those who think it doesn't already happen locally believe it would be effective).
- Staff also reported that they can be motivated by financial savings (78 per cent of those who think this already happens say it is effective, and 76 per cent believe it would be effective).

When engaging staff to uptake actions, the best motivators would appear to be explaining what the patient or staff health and wellbeing benefits are. Staff also want the action to be relevant and specific to their role so messages should be targeted. Actions are especially engaging when they show how they can save time. Staff are aware of the need to save money in the NHS so if the financial savings are explained staff are likely to be engaged.

Opportunity

Increasing understanding, supporting action and celebrating the achievements are all crucial in driving forward the sustainability agenda. The NHS is the country's largest employer, and has a workforce that wants to be engaged in creating a sustainable health system. Their help and action is essential in achieving this goal, both as staff and as members of the community. Typically one in ten employees in any one community are likely to work in health and social care, providing the opportunity to engage them as agents for health, getting serious on prevention and creating better communities. It is estimated that the personal carbon emissions of all health and social care staff is the same as the whole health and social care system; a total of 54MtCO_{2e}⁷ - around seven per cent of England's entire footprint.

This research was developed by the Sustainable Development Unit (SDU), in partnership with the Sustainable Health and Care Campaign. The survey received 6,214 responses covering a range of organisations types, job roles, age groups and geographies.

⁷ Using SDU's Health and Social Care 2018 natural resources footprint and using Government's 2014 carbon emissions calculations of 827MtCO_{2e} [here](#) and apportioning per capita (double counting has been avoided).