

### Written evidence submitted by the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare (PHS0095)

A preventative approach to health is the bedrock of any sustainable healthcare system. Investing in prevention can secure the financial sustainability of the NHS for future generations by reducing avoidable healthcare expenditure. Similarly, prevention can also significantly improve environmental sustainability by reducing the environmental damage associated with unnecessary health system utilisation. We would urge the Committee to support joined-up policy-making across government by using this inquiry to promote forms of prevention that will deliver benefits for people, planet and public finances.

The actions taken by governments, businesses and individuals this decade will be critical in determining whether global warming stays within the 1.5-degree threshold set as part of the Paris Agreement. The Committee can support these urgent efforts by integrating environmental sustainability within its work on prevention, placing particular emphasis and value throughout the inquiry on preventative interventions that will cut carbon at the same time as improving public health.

The NHS is responsible for around 4% of the total carbon footprint of the UK. Any preventative interventions which help people to stay healthy could in principle reduce these carbon emissions by reducing the need for future treatment and care. In addition, some forms of prevention go beyond this by having direct environmental benefits. For example:

- Active travel (walking or cycling) as an alternative to car use improves cardiovascular health and reduces obesity, as well as reducing carbon emissions
- Physical activity in green spaces has proven benefits for both physical and mental health, and the creation and maintenance of high-quality green spaces acts as a carbon sink, reducing global warming and promoting biodiversity
- Reducing consumption of meat in favour of a healthier plant-based diet can play a part in preventing obesity while also dramatically reducing carbon emissions associated with food production
- Air pollution is responsible for around 30,000 deaths in the UK each year and exerts a particularly high toll on more deprived communities. Action to improve air quality could prevent deaths, reduce inequalities and also help to cut the UK's carbon footprint.

Conversely, there are preventative actions which could improve individuals' health but at the expense of additional environmental costs. For example, if a local authority gives planning permission for a gym in a location with poor public transport connections, the net effect could be to encourage more driving and hence more carbon emissions. Similarly, some healthy foods have a sizeable environmental impact depending on where and how they are grown, transported and stored. The job of government is to put selective emphasis on preventative interventions which also deliver environmental benefits and to avoid promoting those that could backfire environmentally.

The NHS is taking action to reduce its own carbon footprint through the Greener NHS programme in England and similar efforts in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – indeed, the NHS is recognised internationally for its work on this. However, what is missing currently is a concerted focus on prevention, and without stronger action on this any efforts by the NHS to reduce the carbon intensity of treatment could be counteracted by rising demand.

While the NHS can and should give greater emphasis to prevention, there also needs to be broader action. A cross-departmental strategy to improve population health and reduce health inequalities is needed, and this strategy should be deliberately interwoven with the UK's efforts to combat climate change. By explicitly linking these two agendas there are significant opportunities for mutually supportive action on prevention and climate. The Committee can make a major contribution to this by taking a sustainability lens throughout its inquiry. It can do so by taking two specific steps:

- **Firstly, by placing selective emphasis on preventative interventions that deliver health and environmental benefits together**
- **Secondly, by advocating for environmental impacts to be incorporated in research so that there is better evidence to inform the design of climate-friendly preventative interventions**

### **About the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare**

The Centre for Sustainable Healthcare is a registered charity that develops knowledge and resources to support the NHS and other health systems to reach net zero carbon and wider sustainability. We support the adoption of sustainable approaches based on the four principles of sustainable clinical practice:

1. Prevention – promoting health and tackling the causes of illnesses and inequalities
2. Patient empowerment – supporting people to take a more active role in managing their own health
3. Lean care pathways – streamlining care systems to minimise wasteful or low value activities
4. Low carbon alternatives – prioritising treatments and technologies with a lower environmental impact

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