



Draft position statement on sustainability

March 2025

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Summary

This position statement aims to complement existing thinking and resources in sustainable healthcare by providing principles, suggestions and tools specific to the SLT profession. The intended outcomes include:

- Speech and language therapists (SLTs) knowing where to go to find profession-specific information
- SLTs being aware of the RCSLT's stance on becoming a more sustainable profession
- SLTs adapting their practice to become more sustainable.

While some SLTs have expertise in your personal life and experience in greening their practice, there are many others who will welcome pointers to start their journey toward being a sustainable clinician.

The RCSLT's vision

The RCSLT five-year strategic vision includes the following aspirations:

- In the section on innovation and excellence in research and clinical practice: to be a profession that actively engages in supporting environmental sustainability.
- In the section on organisational excellence: that the RCSLT invests in processes to support sustainability and lower our carbon footprint.

The RCSLT as an organisation has audited its head office with changes to heat and lighting, considered sustainable procurement and reduction in travel and in-person events.

External drivers, strategies and policy

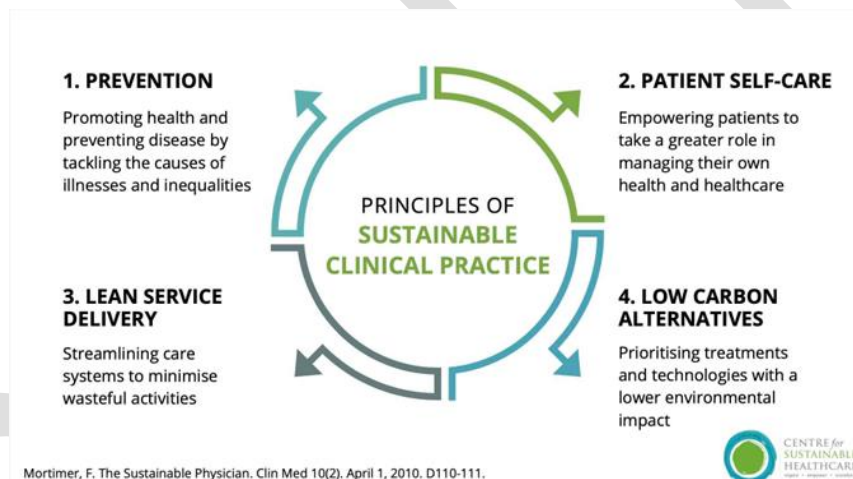
- The RCSLT is supportive of the **NHS England Greener [NHS](#)** programme.
- The RCSLT was involved in the development of the **[NHS England Greener Allied Health Professional Hub](#)**.
- The RCSLT is supportive of the **[Sustainability Action Plan](#)** and **[NHS Wales Decarbonisation Strategic Delivery plan](#)**.
- The RCSLT is associated with the **Council of Deans' [Guidance: Education for Sustainable Healthcare](#)**.
- **[Net zero targets for NHS England](#)**.
- The **[17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#)**.

Definitions and principles

What is sustainable healthcare? One definition is providing high quality care in the present, without sacrificing the health of future generations.

When we talk about the principles of sustainable SLT practice it is not just about recycling, energy, and travel – we can play active roles in prevention, health promotion and patient empowerment/self-care which will create a more sustainable health service and a healthier population.

Environmental sustainability aligns with optimising everyday practice - it's not a huge add on to a profession who are already stretched. By embracing patient empowerment, lean pathways, and sustainable principles, we are reinforcing what SLTs (and AHPs) already do best, supporting patients and families to optimise outcomes, enhance self-management, and deliver high-quality, evidence-based care.



In the context of speech and language therapy this might mean:

- Disease prevention and health promotion. All clinicians should be involved in prevention. Through broader advocacy and in individual patient care, specialties should aim to tackle underlying causes of disease – the social, economic and environmental determinants of health. Where possible, interventions should capture environmental co-benefits of healthy lifestyles, such as the improvements in air quality and carbon emissions from a shift to active travel. An example in speech and language therapy might be preventative work around head and neck cancer.
- Patient education and empowerment. To reduce disease progression and pre-empt complications, many patients could be empowered to take on a greater role in the management of their own health and healthcare. Informed patients are also well placed

to improve the coordination between clinical teams and reduce misunderstandings or duplication. An example in speech and language therapy might be the support we give people in making sustainable lifestyle choices including through accessible information.

- Lean service delivery. Improving clinical decision-making in the selection and targeting of interventions will reduce lower value activities and their associated environmental impacts. Specialties can support this by describing the relevant patient pathways and providing clear, evidence-based guidance. Even where clinical input is of high value, a greater use of online records, email and telephone can reduce travel emissions by moving information in place of patients and staff. Further efficiencies can follow from better integration of specialist services which have a common patient base. An example in speech and language therapy might be the service in Wales which has brought together speech and language therapy, dietetics and pharmacy in a single assessment pathway.
- Preferential use of treatment options and technologies with lower environmental impact. Inclusion of sustainability measures in the evaluation of technologies will allow service planners, clinicians and patients to choose clinically effective treatments with the best environmental profile and will encourage their further development. Examples in speech and language therapy might include dysphagia and imaging, and the choice of materials in paediatrics.

Case studies from speech and language therapists are welcome and will illustrate this statement moving forward.

Scope of this position statement

This statement is intended for all speech and language therapists, SLT students and should be of interest to the support workforce and to other professional bodies. It aims to:

- a. Set out RCSLT's position on becoming a sustainable profession
- b. To encourage members to look at what they are doing in their clinical practice and provide key principles and best practice recommendations on what individual SLTs and speech and language therapy services can do to make speech and language therapy practice more sustainable

The scope is UK-wide and all settings, NHS and non-NHS.

Speech and language therapy is a broad profession working in many different areas. This statement gives an overview which SLTs can use to consider their own context – to give just a few examples, this might be Greener Practice Primary Care, an ICB Green Plan, education settings, or the AHP Green Guide.

There is a large amount of thinking and material available that addresses sustainability in healthcare in general terms. There will be signposting to existing information and resources on an RCSLT webpage which will be updated as new information becomes available.

1. Areas of speech and language therapy to consider

This model comes from the Kings Fund: [My role in tackling health inequalities: a framework for allied health professionals](#)



Awareness
Quality improvement – Embed sustainability into Quality improvement (QI): QI is a process for making systematic changes. QI methodology and tools support you to identify the most meaningful changes you can make, to plan and test changes, and importantly measure the impact of those changes. SusQI can provide helpful resources for considering and measuring environmental and social sustainability alongside clinical and financial outcomes. SusQI can be used alongside any existing QI methodology and processes used by an organisation. It aligns with Making every contact count (MECC) and ensuring services are not only high quality, but high value based on the existing evidence base.
Measuring your environmental impact: Environmental impact can be measured through changes in resource use (for example a reduction in appointments) and carbon footprinting. For support to carbon footprint, we recommend you speak to your organisation's sustainability team (which may also be an aspect of advocacy).
Green Pledge - Encouraging everyone to make a Green Pledge for the year, as an individual or as a team.
Action
Sustainable transport – there are issues of safety and moving equipment, but SLTs and SLT services should consider means to reduce and minimise car use in the daily provision of speech and language therapy. This will be linked to when and how the use of telehealth is evidenced and appropriate. Exploring more sustainable travel options including access to cycle to work schemes, support for public transport usage, and planning of visits.
Telehealth and use of digital platforms - consideration of digital solutions when evidenced and appropriate. Consider the use of online meetings for MDT discussions and for CPD training.
Energy use – the energy required for scans and other technical equipment, and for sending images and other large files by email. Not leaving laptops on standby. Follow evidence-based practice. Consideration of shared drives, storing of resources on shared drives. Storage of VFS and FEES files.
Reduce, recycle and reuse - of AAC and dementia tools. Reducing inhaler use by patients through SLT input and advice. Reduction of waste. AAC repair systems. Avenues to use equipment elsewhere when not being used. Consideration of trials for AAC to match to user to minimise chances of equipment being provided and subsequently not being used. Learn from our physiotherapist colleagues' work on walking aid re-use and consider some consensus or guidelines on re-use of AAC devices.
Supporting sustainable lifestyle choices - the role of SLTs in working with people with cognitive or communication challenge to understand and make sustainable lifestyle choices. Understanding the additional risks that might apply to certain populations. Coordinating and liaising with education and staff, support staff.
AI use and sustainability - the use of AI requires careful consideration in view of its environmental impact. We need to be sure that use of AI is sufficiently beneficial to outweigh its impact.

Plastic use - use of plastic resources (particularly in paediatrics) and identifying an alternative to laminated resources, glitter, bubbles and the like. Some examples of good practice for reusing include bubble tubes with refillable bubbles, organising systems for materials so not needing to print each time, seeking second hand resources (hygiene standards considered) and sourcing recycled paper.

Referral pathways – streamlining so that multiple journeys and separate assessments by different professions are minimised. Understand social and green prescribing referral pathways.

Head and neck cancer - SLT have a significant role in pre-treatment counselling and rehabilitation post-treatment for head and neck cancer, such as assisting patients in returning to oral intake which allows them to reduce reliance upon enteral feeds or oral nutritional supplements, both of which have an impact upon sustainability. SLT also have a role in prevention of further health complications with an associated carbon burden, such as helping to prevent late-onset dysphagia through the provision of prophylactic exercises to maintain swallow function, and also in the role of advising patients on treatment adherence such as avoiding smoking during radiotherapy to maximise chances of treatment efficacy.

Impact of climate change on other health conditions because of pollution, for example respiratory from air pollution and climate anxiety affecting mental health.

Flexible nasendoscopy – the RCSLT endorses the statement coordinated by ENT UK regarding sustainability in flexible nasendoscopy.

Advocacy

Procurement and investment – sustainability considerations in the supply chain for equipment and for modified diet products. Ethical investment in sustainable funds.

Dysphagia assessments - can create a lot of waste; it is hard to find smaller portions. SLT can be the advocate in speaking to catering providers. Risk assess the use of PPE, particularly gloves.

Community role - being an anchor organisation in your area; supporting local activities. Encouraging local shops to sell healthy or low carbon food; this makes it hard for families even if greener and healthier diet advice is given.

Social and Green social prescribing – forming closer professional ties with local link workers in primary care networks and deliverers of social and nature-based activities.

Collaboration with others - collaborating with other services to share universal messages; upskilling others such as working more closely with health visiting colleagues, early years practitioners and staff delivering groups to families in libraries. Collaborate with upskilling nursing home staff to streamline and reduce pressure on services and thus carbon outcomes. collaborating with/supporting education and support staff to provide accessible information to relevant populations, regarding sustainable choices.

Nutrition and hydration - In dysphagia practice, following EBP, providing individualised care that prevents complications and promotes long-term health is sustainable care. This involves working collaboratively in an MDT including with dietitians and occupational therapists to optimise nutrition, positioning and equipment needs. Lean pathway and low carbon principles can be considered such as optimising appointment schedules, avoiding low value videofluoroscopy, and switching to reusable equipment such as feed bottles.

The curriculum and SLT education – periodic reviews of the RCSLT’s curriculum and placements guidance will consider the latest evidence and practice in what it means to be a clinician practicing sustainable healthcare. Sustainability is a core component of the RCSLT Professional Development Framework.

Equity, Diversity and Belonging (EDB) considerations

Sustainability means taking account of the EDB considerations that are allied to environmental and social concerns. In general terms these include:

- The social determinants of good and poor health
- Differential impacts of climate change on disadvantaged groups
- The impact of housing and of the cost of living
- Differential access to telehealth and digital inclusion / exclusion

More specifically for speech and language therapy EDB considerations include:

- The disproportionate impact of air pollution and its impact on respiratory disorders on disadvantaged groups
- Cultural awareness in respect of eating and swallowing
- The needs of people with speech, language and communication difference, disability and barriers such as expensive AAC or support with understanding and making sustainable lifestyle choices
- The needs of people with eating, drinking and swallowing needs, for example the use of drinking straws.

These considerations remind us of the need for equality impact assessments of green and sustainability initiatives, and of the importance of co-production of this work with people with lived experience.

This is allied to the work of the RCSLT and the UK speech and language therapy profession internationally, emphasising cultural appropriateness and decoloniality.

In launching this draft statement, we make a call to action to the speech and language therapy profession. In a context of rising climate anxiety, small things make a difference and we can all play our part.

Glossary

Climate change / climate emergency	A long-term change in the average weather patterns that have come to define Earth's local, regional and global climates / a situation requiring urgent action to mitigate the effects of climate change, a long-term shift in weather patterns caused by human activities and avoid potentially irreversible environmental damage.
Climate and ecological emergency and define that as being beyond just carbon	Serious and urgent problems that are being caused or likely to be caused by changes in the world's weather, in particular the world getting warmer as a result of human activity increasing the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere / biodiversity loss and the decline or disappearance of the variety in living things
Intersectional healthcare	The need for understanding diverse patient backgrounds, encompassing race, gender, socioeconomic status, and more, to deliver effective care.
Lean pathways	The application of Lean principles to optimise patient care processes by streamlining workflows, eliminating waste, and improving efficiency, ultimately enhancing patient outcomes and resource utilisation.
Low carbon	Causes only small amounts of carbon dioxide to be added to the atmosphere.
Net zero: carbon emissions	The balance between the amount of greenhouse gas (GHG) that's produced and the amount that's removed from the atmosphere. Primarily from burning fossil fuels and industrial processes, are the main drivers of climate change, trapping heat in the atmosphere and causing global warming.
Planetary health	The idea that the health of the planet and human health are linked, and that the health of the planet affects human health in the long term.
Sustainability in quality improvement (Sus QI)	A framework that integrates sustainability principles into healthcare quality improvement efforts, focusing on the triple bottom line (environmental, social, and economic impacts) to achieve sustainable value.

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists in the UK. As well as providing leadership and setting professional standards, the RCSLT facilitates and promotes research into the field of speech and language therapy, promotes better education and training of speech and language therapists, and provides its members and the public with information about speech and language therapy.

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