

# Implementing sustainable greener healthcare in primary care: a focus on respiratory practices



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As healthcare professionals, we face the dual challenge of providing high-quality care while also minimising our environmental footprint. Primary care practices, particularly in respiratory care, have a unique opportunity to implement sustainable practices that not only benefit patients but also reduce the impact on our planet. This article outlines 10 strategies, divided into top wins and other things to consider, which can be used to create a greener healthcare environment.

## Top wins for greener healthcare

### 1 Switch to ethical bank accounts and energy providers



Traditional banks often invest in fossil fuel projects, exacerbating climate change. By switching to ethical banks, practices can ensure their funds support sustainable initiatives. Ethical banks prioritise transparency, sustainability and positive impact investing. Additionally, transitioning to renewable energy providers can significantly reduce carbon emissions.



The Aberfeldy Practice conducted an evaluation of banks using Mothertree. They decided that they should move away from HSBC to Co-op in August 2024. It is estimated that this move should save 94 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e/ year. The practice hopes to make financial gain by investing in ethical savings opportunities in 2025. Moving banks requires careful thought about what the banking requirements are of the practice e.g. compatibility with accounting software and online banking functionality.

### 2 Promote sustainable travel options



Encourage staff to adopt greener travel habits by installing cycle racks, electric vehicle charging stations and offering shower facilities. Limit parking spaces to promote public transport, walking and cycling.



Tarleton Group Practice installed cycle facilities and provided e-bikes for patient home visits, reducing car travel and local air pollution while promoting active travel.

### 3 Leverage data to drive sustainable practices



Use data analytics to inform sustainable changes such as optimising appointment schedules and promoting virtual consultations. Monitor air quality data to advocate for local changes and inform patients of pollution risks.



In Islington, GPs used air quality data to educate peers and patients about pollution, leading to significant behaviour changes – 52% of patients adjusted their habits after receiving advice.

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## Shared decision making for inhaler prescribing

Metered-dose inhalers (MDIs) are a significant source of carbon emissions. Practices are encouraged to prescribe dry powder inhalers (DPIs) where clinically appropriate, while avoiding blanket switching. Supporting pharmaceutical companies committed to sustainability can further reduce the environmental impact.



The SENTINEL Project in Hull reduced over-reliance on short-acting beta-agonist (SABA) inhalers, improving asthma control and cutting carbon emissions by promoting the use of maintenance and reliever therapy (MART).

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## Implement safe disposal schemes

Proper disposal of medical waste, particularly inhalers, is crucial. Educate patients on returning used inhalers to pharmacies for safe disposal and reduce single-use plastics within the practice.



The TakeAIR project in Leicestershire established inhaler recycling programmes, encouraging patients to return used inhalers, thereby reducing environmental waste.

Every GP practice can make a difference by encouraging patients to return their inhalers to the local community pharmacies.

## Long-term aspirations for sustainable practices

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### Embrace social prescribing

Social prescribing offers non-pharmaceutical options like gardening and walking groups for managing conditions such as asthma and COPD, reducing medication reliance and its environmental impact.



### Donate and recycle

Repurpose waste materials like shredded paper for animal bedding and encourage staff to walk or use public transport to reduce the practice's overall carbon footprint.

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### Explore renewable energy solutions

Investing in renewable energy, such as solar panels and energy-efficient lighting, can drastically cut a practice's carbon footprint. Although initially costly, these can lead to significant long-term savings.





## Adopt simple everyday changes

Small actions can make a big difference: use e-bikes for home visits, turn off electronics overnight, reuse supplies where possible, and compost organic waste.

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## Encourage plant-based diets

Promote plant-based diets among staff and patients, emphasising the health benefits and lower environmental footprint. Poor asthma control has been linked to high meat consumption, making diet adjustments a potential strategy for improved patient outcomes.



### RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

- NHS Greener Practice Case Studies
- PCRS Greener Healthcare Campaign
- RCGP Greener Practice Initiative
- RCPCH Air Pollution Companion

This article highlights practical steps and real-life examples of sustainable initiatives in primary care settings. By incorporating these strategies, healthcare providers can contribute to a healthier environment while continuing to deliver high-quality care.

## Conclusion

Transitioning to greener healthcare requires commitment but offers substantial benefits, from improved patient outcomes to reduced environmental impact. By implementing these strategies, primary care practices can lead the way in sustainable healthcare, especially in respiratory care where the potential for positive change is significant.

Let's take these steps today to build a healthier, more sustainable future for our patients and planet.



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