



# Commissioning for Sustainability

What GP Consortia need to know

This document is designed to help GPs and GP Consortia establish commissioning structures and processes that do not simply ensure compliance with sustainability legislation, but deliver business profitability, longevity and resilience in a rapidly changing world.

To strategic and business minded organisations the future challenges in health are clear:

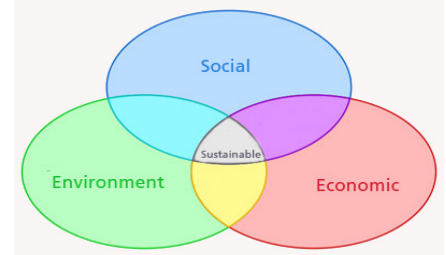
- A perpetually increasing demand on health services fuelled by a growing, less healthy, aging population with numerous co-morbidities
- Increasing expectations around quality of clinical outcomes and experience of using the service
- budgetary constraints in the public sector
- global resource uncertainty due to diminishing resources coupled with increasing demand from the developing world
- A changing climate and the well documented impact this will have on health

To manage these challenges consortia will need to adopt new approaches to commissioning. Approaches that encourage the seamless integration of services - managing demand by providing appropriate services in the community rather than incentivising secondary care activity. Commissioning that uses evidence to underpin decision making and takes into account the wider impact that the delivery of health care has, balancing the operational needs of the present with the strategic needs of the future. To be effective consortia will need to build strong collaborative links with secondary care clinicians and local authorities. Consortia need to face the challenges of the 21st century and break the cycle of costly structural changes by delivering effective lean sustainable commissioning.

## Sustainability – Getting the balance right

Sustainability is about striking a balance:

- Sustainability is about striking the right balance between three key areas: 'Economic Sustainability', 'Social Sustainability' and 'Environmental Sustainability'. This is illustrated by the 'sweet spot' in the middle of the diagram.
- We often talk about carbon reduction and environmental sustainability – but sustainability for health systems is much broader than this – it is about how we deliver care, how we create a healthier, happier population and how we ensure we can afford to continue to deliver care in the future



Barbier, E., 1987. The Concept of Sustainable Economic Development. *Environmental Conservation*, 14(2):101-110

Therefore sustainability in health is simply the recognition that the health of the individual is inextricably linked to their physical and social environment. An acute centred curative model of care will at best stem demand but not proactively manage it. Sustainable healthcare is about seeing the bigger picture and modifying how different factors interact. General Practitioners intuitively see health holistically. They deal not only with whole people but whole families and communities.

Likewise, sustainability of the health system is achieved by striking the balance between a healthy economy, a healthy environment and a healthy society.

As you design the new system it is an opportunity to apply whole systems thinking and build sustainability in upfront. The frequently asked questions overleaf should support you in understanding the evidence base and starting this debate. Please contact the NHS Sustainable Development Unit for further assistance or to discuss any of these commissioning strategies. We look forward to hearing, sharing and developing ideas as we move forward at the beginning of this exciting and challenging journey putting GPs at the heart of healthcare commissioning.

## Key articles and evidence for adopting a sustainable approach

General: [www.sdu.nhs.uk](http://www.sdu.nhs.uk)

- NHS Carbon Reduction Strategy (2009) & Update (2010) - NHS Sustainable Development Unit
- Save Money by Saving Carbon – NHS Sustainable Development Unit (2010)
- Sustainable Finances: Reporting on Sustainability for NHS Finance Managers – NHS Sustainable development Unit (2010)

Key Reports: [www.sdu.nhs.uk/publications-resources/key-reports.aspx](http://www.sdu.nhs.uk/publications-resources/key-reports.aspx)

- Managing the health effects of climate change – The Lancet (2009)
- How Doctors can close the Gap? – RCGP, RCP, RCPsych, FPH, Nat. Heart Forum & NHS SDU (2010)
- Stern review on the economics of Climate Change – HM Treasury

Health Impacts of Climate Change: [www.sdu.nhs.uk/publications-resources/14/Health-Impacts](http://www.sdu.nhs.uk/publications-resources/14/Health-Impacts)

- Health effects of climate change in the UK – Department of Health & Health Protection Agency (2008)
- Claiming the Health Dividend – Kings Fund (2003)

# Frequently Asked Questions: What GP Commissioning Consortia need to know

## Why is sustainability a commissioning issue?

There are three main reasons;

1. Managing system risk – Sustainability is essentially about excellence in business management. Commissioning organisations are able to, and must, take a whole systems approach to both delivery (ensuring integration of provider services) and managing future risks (for example resource uncertainty, a changing climate etc).
2. Managing demand - Activity based commissioning will not incentivise managing demand for health services. We need to start thinking about incentivising and enabling a 'health and well-being service' focussed on an upstream preventative approach as opposed to an 'ill health service' based on activity
3. Contractual Levers – Providers should not dominate commissioners – as commissioners you are responsible for allocating money and therefore have the power to ensure providers adopt sustainable business practices – this is especially true with the shift to an 'any willing provider' model. All contracts and tenders need to include statements on demonstrating real action on sustainable business practices and reducing carbon emissions. Buying services from a provider that damages public health through its environmental practices, or promotes social inequality through its employment practices is at best short sighted and at worst would constitute a breach of the duty of care. Equally the health co-benefits of buying services from providers that take sustainability, staff health and well-being, environmental impact etc seriously will deliver savings and improve health outcomes through linked environmental, social and financial considerations

## Are sustainability principles part of the current thinking around commissioning?

There are small pockets of good practice emerging but this is not systematic and is dependent on the ability of some management teams to grasp the bigger picture. The whole point of putting clinicians in charge of commissioning is to signal a departure from the old way of thinking about health. However, there is a real danger that we do things the same way we have always done and that we end up with the same results. GPs are needed not because of their contracting expertise but because of their understanding that treating symptoms whilst not addressing the wider determinants of health is unsustainable and a joined up approach is needed.

## Why is sustainability a governance issue for GP Commissioning Consortia?

Commissioning organisations are likely to be held to account on three key areas:

**Account for outcomes** = Measurable improvements in health outcomes, not the amount of activity. An important part of commissioning needs to be ensuring that we are continually mindful of the importance of training and education to help to sustain high quality care in the future

**Resource stewardship** = Balancing the use of economic resource, use of finite natural resource, use of human capital (social) resource

**Fulfilment of duties** = Social justice/responsibility, working with partners, responsibility to promote healthy environment, reducing inequalities, meeting environmental legislation (e.g. the Climate Change Act 2008), system resilience, managing foreseeable risks, prevention etc.

All of the above are aspects of sustainability and can be demonstrated by placing sustainability principles at the heart of your corporate governance and accountability structures (e.g. reporting on corporate social responsibility, reporting on measures taken to ensure providers are operating sustainably, having a Sustainable Development Management Plan [SDMP] in place). Guidance on how to incorporate sustainability governance can be found on the NHS Sustainable Development Unit website [www.sdu.nhs.uk](http://www.sdu.nhs.uk)

## In summary: what are the business benefits of including sustainability in a commissioning model?

The five main reasons for sustainable commissioning are:

- It saves money
- It produces health benefits as well as other advantages in both the short and long term
- NHS organisations have huge purchasing power and prominence and should take a lead in their local community
- Natural resources are limited
- There is a legal duty to cut carbon emissions under the 2008 Climate Change Act

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The SDU can offer the benefits of our experiences working in this area and sharing examples of national and international good practice and the current thinking across the private and public sector. The SDU website ([www.sdu.nhs.uk](http://www.sdu.nhs.uk)) also contains guidance, evidence, learning and development tools and case studies.