

Climate change duties - draft statutory guidance for public bodies

Consultation response from RCGP Scotland

1. With respect to the protected characteristics, could the content of the Statutory Guidance be changed or added to, to strengthen any positive impacts or lessen any negative impacts as it is implemented by public bodies?

Yes

No

Don't know

If so, how? Please give us your views.

RCGP Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. As the membership body for general practitioners in Scotland, we exist to promote and maintain the highest standards of patient care.

RCGP Scotland recognises that our world is in the midst of a worsening climate crisis, and all of us as organisations and individuals have a responsibility to play our part in reducing the climate impact and environmental harm of our actions. 90% of patient contact and activity occurs within primary care, accounting for around 1.25% of all carbon emissions in Scotland. Health and wellbeing are inextricably linked to the health of the planet, and high-quality care in general practice should strive to be environmentally sustainable.

We are already seeing the adverse impact of climate change on the health of people and planet. Recent findings from UK Health Security Agency and the Lancet Countdown report clearly illustrate some of the health problems associated with climate change, namely: heat related deaths in the UK have increased by 40% since 2001, 127 million more people are facing heatwave days, air pollution impacting on individuals' respiratory health and resulting in hospital admissions, and longer pollen seasons.

In 2019, [RCGP formally acknowledged the climate crisis](#) and the catastrophic effect on human health of not acting decisively and urgently on climate change. RCGP Scotland, the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and Faculties in Scotland and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society Scotland [published a joint statement on reducing the environmental impact of prescribing](#) in 2022. In March 2025, the College also published its first planetary health report '[Towards greener prescribing in general practice](#)' which highlighted the challenges of sustainable prescribing and outlined calls for the UK Government and other national bodies to reduce primary care emissions while improving patient outcomes and prevention efforts.

RCGP's commitment to tackling the climate crisis can be seen through our [Strategic Plan 2023-2026](#), of which one priority is responding to the climate emergency. RCGP have also developed a [Green Impact for Health Toolkit](#) to help GP practices take practical steps to improve sustainability and record progress in doing so.

2. With respect to inequality caused by socio-economic disadvantage, could the content of the Statutory Guidance be changed or added to, to strengthen any positive impacts or lessen any negative impacts as it is implemented by public bodies?

Yes

No

Don't know

RCGP Scotland recognises that climate change and inequalities are inextricably linked, with those people producing the least emissions most likely to experience the most severe impacts of climate change. We also recognise that in Scotland the impact of worsening climate change will be felt to varying degrees with some areas being more prone to extreme flooding, coastal erosion, or drought. People experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are more likely to be adversely impacted by climate change and therefore action must be taken to ensure improvements to health, environment, housing, education, and employment opportunities counteract this. There is an undisputable link between worsening climate change and health inequalities and RCGP Scotland is supportive of proportionate action to deliver improved health equity.

We welcome the statutory guidance's recognition that inequalities are likely to worsen if action to tackle climate change is not implemented in a thoughtful and strategic manner. RCGP Scotland supports the concept of rural proofing to ensure that well intentioned policies to tackle climate change do not have unintended consequences in remote and rural communities.

The statutory guidance could be strengthened by assessing unmet need as part of impact assessments. For example, we know that across Scotland there are people who need to access healthcare but cannot do so because of various barriers like financial constraints, lack of availability, or geographic distance. Health Boards, who we assume would be responsible for carrying out impact assessments under the statutory guidance, should consider unmet need when implementing policies to tackle climate change.

Taking climate into account in decision making

The climate change duties are laid upon public bodies by [section 44](#) of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. Public bodies must, in exercising their functions, act –

- a. in the way best calculated to contribute to national emissions reduction targets (i.e. mitigation)
- b. in the way best calculated to help deliver the Scottish National Adaptation Programme
- c. in the way that they consider to be most sustainable.

For public bodies to demonstrate compliance with the climate change duties, in particular to show how they have met the requirement to best calculate the impact of their actions in terms of mitigation and adaptation, climate change considerations should be embedded in decision-making processes, with a robust and auditable record.

Section 4.5 of the draft guidance provides information on embedding climate considerations into decision-making processes through the use of appropriate impact assessments and other tools. Chapters 5 and 6 provide specific guidance around implementing duty (a) to contribute to mitigation targets and duty (b) to help deliver the National Adaptation Programme.

You may find it useful to refer to [the consultation paper](#) while responding to these questions.

3. Does the guidance make it clear how public bodies can fulfil the requirement to 'best calculate' the climate impact of their actions?

Yes

Partially

No

Don't know

Please provide comments below.

The [2018 General Medical Services \(GMS\) contract](#) introduced a National Code of Practice for GP premises which set out how the Scottish Government would support a shift to a model in which GPs no longer have to bear the responsibility and liability of providing their own premises.

It is estimated that approximately 380 GP practices occupy NHS Health Board owned centres while the remainder are in roughly 530 properties that are either owned by GPs or leased from private landlords.

Recently, [Audit Scotland released a report](#) documenting the progress, or rather lack of progress, on implementing the 2018 GMS contract. The report stated, "The Scottish Government has not been transparent about progress with premises commitments and barriers to implementation remain." Problems have occurred owing to the Scottish Government's decision in March 2024 to pause the GP Sustainability Loan fund which would have given practices up to 20 per cent of the value of the property every five years,

with the intention that the NHS board would own the premises by 2043. [A survey](#) conducted by the BMA showed that 30 practices described their position as precarious following the suspension of loans.

The 530 properties that are owned by GPs or private landlords would presumably fall outwith the statutory guidance as currently drafted as these premises are not owned by local Health Boards. RCGP Scotland continues to call on the Scottish Government to re-open the GP Sustainability Loan Fund and to fulfil the 2018 contract's stated ambition of transferring premises to the ownership of local Health Boards. We also call for a framework and ringfenced capital investment to support efforts to decarbonise GP practices to modernise facilities and reduce emissions and waste.

For GP premises that are owned by Health Boards, the requirements to 'best calculate' the climate impact of their actions must fall to the board's estate manager and should be as unintrusive as possible so as not to disrupt GPs as they deliver care to the populations they serve.

In 2024, RCGP Scotland surveyed members and approximately a third (32%) said their practice building was not fit for purpose. Some 53% of respondents agreed that their practice required additional works to improve or upgrade their premises to meet the needs of staff and patients. These findings illustrate the urgent need for the Scottish Government to restart the GP Sustainability Loan Fund and to deliver an injection of capital funding into general practice so that the estate can be modernised to increase physical space, improve energy efficiency and sustainability more generally.

Questions arise as to the status of practices whose ownership is being transferring from private landlords to Health Boards. These practices would not be considered Health Board estate and so would not be compelled by the statutory guidance and as such they may not feature in the Health Board's planning around retrofitting and upgrading the general practice estate until such times as they enter Health Board ownership. RCGP Scotland does not believe that practices that are currently privately owned should be neglected from the planning and investment decisions of Health Boards. Practices, whether currently privately owned and transitioning to Health Board ownership or those that are already under the control of boards provide vital health care and all should be supported when trying to improve sustainability, grow capacity, and improve the estate.

It is RCGP Scotland's view that the cost of investing into the general practice estate is lesser than the costs associated with failing to do so. Many practice buildings are in a state of disrepair, are not energy efficient, and have limited physical space which consequently impacts on capacity for staffing/training.

4. Does the guidance make it clear how public bodies should take future climate scenarios into account when making plans and investment decisions?

Yes

Partially

No

Don't know

Please provide comments below.

RCGP Scotland recognises that future climate scenarios should be considered when making plans and investment decisions. We reiterate that this planning must be carried out centrally by Health Boards with input from general practice. Worsening climate scenarios will likely have the most severe impact on those in deprived areas and geographical areas which are prone to flooding. We call on the Scottish Government to invest capital into the general practice estate to boost the resilience of practices.

We note that the importance of taking future climate scenarios into account was demonstrated most recently during storm Éowyn, a powerful and record-breaking extratropical cyclone which hit Ireland and the UK in January 2025. With worsening climate change storms of similar magnitude will become more frequent, making the case for better planning and improved resilience.

We note that the guidance advises that public bodies should, "undertake the above giving due consideration to their physical assets including buildings, land and fleet; their staff and service users; the services they deliver; and the functions they exercise." We welcome this guidance and note that during storm Éowyn this was not the case as some Health Boards within the red weather zone advised practices to remain closed while others offered no guidance at all. Ahead of future storms similar to Storm Éowyn we urge Health Boards and Scottish Government to work towards having consistent and clear guidance to support practices to ensure the safety of patients and staff alike.

The first duty: reducing emissions (climate change mitigation)

Chapter 5, Implementing the first duty: reducing emissions, lays out the overarching principles and actions that all public bodies would be expected to undertake, in a manner proportionate to their size and nature, to reduce their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, i.e. to develop and implement appropriate emission reductions policies, strategies, route maps, plans and supporting action plans.

The chapter starts with a summary of key actions and outcomes, copied in the drop down section below, before going on to provide detailed guidance around the activities.

Annex A contains a template Carbon Management Plan and associated guidance. This is aimed at smaller and less complex public bodies, who may lack the capacity, skills or resource to develop their own carbon management plan. It is intended as a starting point, with bodies adapting it to suit their own organisation and circumstances.

Annex B contains a template Climate Change Plan for local authorities. It is intended to help local authorities demonstrate their compliance with the three climate change duties, across

their corporate and area wide boundaries. Further information is provided in the drop down sections below.

You may find it useful to refer to [the consultation paper](#) while responding to these questions.

5. Do you have any comments about the guidance provided in this chapter on complying with the first duty?

Please give us your thoughts. For example, are there any gaps or are there ways that you think it could be improved.

See response to question 3.

6. Do you think the Carbon Management Plan template is suitable for its intended purpose as outlined above and in Annex A?

Yes

No

Don't know

Please give us your thoughts.

General practice in Scotland is under unprecedented levels of pressures owing to a workforce and workload crisis. The [number of whole-time equivalent GPs](#) decreased from 3,478.4 in 2023 to 3,453.1 in 2024, a decrease of 0.4%. At the same time the number of patient registrations continued to increase. GPs and their teams are increasingly stretched following years of underinvestment and neglect.

While we endorse action to mitigate for and adapt to a changing climate, we reiterate our previous point that any administrative work in developing a Carbon Management Plan must fall to Health Board's estate managers and such work should be carried out in a manner which minimises disruption to the day-to-day work of general practice.

7. Do you think the Climate Change Plan template for local authorities is suitable for its intended purpose as outlined in the drop down section below and in Annex B?

Yes

No

Don't know

Please provide any additional comments below.

NA.

The second duty: adaptation

Chapter 6, Implementing the second duty: adaptation lays out the overarching principles and actions which all public bodies would be expected to undertake, in a manner proportionate to their size and nature, to adapt and become resilient to the changing climate. Core to this is undertaking appropriate climate risk assessments and developing an adaptation plan or equivalent.

The chapter starts with a summary of key actions and outcomes, copied in the drop down section below, before going on to provide detailed guidance around the activities.

You may find it useful to refer to [the consultation paper](#) while responding to these questions.

8. The guidance lays out an approach whereby public bodies should: review the Scottish National Adaptation Plan (SNAP); identify the objectives relevant to them; contribute towards those objectives; and, where relevant, report annually on progress in their public bodies climate change duties report.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposed approach?

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

Don't know

Please provide any additional comments below.

RCGP Scotland responded to the Scottish Government's consultation on the Scottish National Adaptation Plan (SNAP) and our full response can be found [here](#).

9. Do you have any other comments about the guidance provided in this chapter about complying with the second duty?

Please give us your thoughts. For example, are there any gaps or are there ways that you think it could be improved.

NA.

The third duty: acting in the most sustainable way

Chapter 7, Implementing the third duty: acting in the most sustainable way, lays out the overarching principles and actions which all public bodies would be expected to undertake, in a manner proportionate to their size and nature, to implement the third duty. Key to this is

to mainstream sustainable development into the functioning of Scottish public bodies, i.e. work must be carried out in a way that supports sustainable development.

The guidance notes that, due to the individual nature of each public body and the unique nature of the decisions that they make, it is not possible to take a prescriptive approach to this duty. Public bodies are required to consider their actions carefully and apply an awareness of wider impacts to their approach.

The chapter starts with a summary of key actions and outcomes, copied in the drop down section below, before going on to provide detailed guidance around the approach and recommended actions.

You may find it useful to refer to [the consultation paper](#) while responding to these questions.

10. Having considered the content of the chapter, is it clear how public bodies should implement the third duty, to act in the most sustainable way?

Yes

Partially

No

Don't know

Please give us your thoughts.

NA.

11. Do you have any other comments about the guidance provided in this chapter about complying with the third duty?

Please give us your thoughts. For example, are there any gaps or are there ways that you think it could be improved.

NA.

Reporting of scope 3 emissions

Chapter 8, Reporting, provides an overview of reporting, with a particular focus on the mandatory reporting required under [The Climate Change \(Duties of Public Bodies: Reporting Requirements\) \(Scotland\) Order 2015](#), as [amended](#) (the public bodies climate change duties reporting).

Previous guidance mandated reporting of relevant scope 1 and 2 emissions, while reporting of scope 3 emissions was recommended on a voluntary basis ([Public Sector Leadership on the Global Climate Emergency](#) (2021), chapter 7).

This new guidance proposes a reporting baseline for selected scope 3 emissions, which all public bodies would be expected to include in their inventory (see section 8.3.5.1), specifically the emissions associated with:

- consumption of mains water
- waste and waste water treatment
- business travel
- staff commuting and homeworking
- student travel (for colleges and universities)
- fuel and energy-related activities not included in scopes 1 and 2

You may find it useful to refer to [the consultation paper](#) while responding to these questions.

12. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed baseline reporting of the scope 3 emission categories outlined in section 8.3.5.1 of the guidance and in the drop down section below?

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

Don't know

Please provide any additional comments below.

NA.

13. Do you think that any other categories of scope 3 emissions should be included in the recommended baseline for reporting, where these are relevant and applicable? Please tick all that apply.

Purchased goods, works and services

Capital assets (e.g. construction)

Upstream transportation and distribution

Upstream leased assets

Downstream transportation and distribution

Processing of sold products

Use of sold products

End-of-life treatment of sold products

Downstream leased assets

Franchises Investments

If you ticked any of the categories of scope 3 emissions above, please provide an explanation. This field can also be used for any other comments related to this chapter.

NA.

Overall reflections

The purpose of the Statutory Guidance is to support public bodies in meeting their climate change duties. It aims to help public bodies to minimise their operational emissions, adapt and become resilient to the current and future impacts of the changing climate, live within environmental limits, and ensure a strong, healthy and just society.

You may find it useful to refer to [the consultation paper](#) while responding to these questions.

14. Do you think that the guidance fulfils its stated purpose of providing support to public bodies in putting the climate change duties into practice?

Yes

No

Don't know

Please provide further comments below.

NA.

15. Do you have any further comments about the guidance?

Please give us your thoughts. For example, are there any gaps or are there ways that you think it could be improved.

NA.