

Climate change - draft Scottish National Adaptation Plan 3: consultation

RCGP Scotland - Draft response

1. What do you think the current effects of climate change are on people in Scotland?

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.

The College recognises that we are in the midst of a climate crisis, and all of us have a responsibility to consider how we as individuals and organisations can play our part in reducing the environmental impact of our actions wherever possible. Our health is inextricably linked to the health of our planet, and good care in general practice should strive to be environmentally sustainable care. RCGP Scotland is a strong believer and proponent of this, and very much see climate and sustainability as more than simply another area of work - it's something which we should consider in relation to all aspects of our professional lives.

Already we are seeing the deleterious impact of climate change on the health of the planet and people. The following examples come from sources including the recent UK Health Security Agency report and Lancet Countdown report: ¹

- Heat related deaths have increased more than 40% in the UK since 2001.
- Globally, 127m more people are facing heatwave days.
- People are experiencing generally more extreme weather.
- Air pollution is impacting on individuals' respiratory health and influencing admissions related to air quality levels.
- Mosquitos spreading and ticks are surviving all year round, increasing Lymes disease.
- We are experiencing longer pollen seasons.
- Crops have been affected by a wet winter, the chances of which are increased by climate change.

The effects of climate change are already occurring, and so a combination of further mitigation and concerted adaptation actions are crucial.

2. What effects, if any, do you expect climate change will have on people in Scotland over the next five years?

In the near future, we are likely to see an exacerbation of most if not of all the above noted impacts of climate change, with additional effects likely, for example *Vibrio* is expected in Scotland's water this century; water supplies are at risk, demonstrated at Lough Neagh, the water supply to 40% of Northern Ireland, which is currently threatened by algal blooms.

While the impacts of climate change are already identifiable, these are likely to become much clearer and unmistakable, with negative consequences for infrastructure, the natural environment, and personal and societal health.

Although Scotland has been said to be shielded from the worst effects of climate change due to its mild climate and geographic location, we will still undoubtedly see the effects of a generally warmer and wetter climate.² Follow on effects to people's health will occur both directly from the weather as well as tangentially through climate change's impact on premises, housing and infrastructure.

Arable and habitable land will shrink due to rising sea levels, floods and droughts. Climate refugees may become a more pronounced feature of global migration and may be especially prominent in the UK due to our relatively benign climate.

In general practice we are likely to treat greater numbers of patients impacted by damp and mouldy housing, patients whose health may directly be affected by wilder, wetter weather such as flooding, as well as a significant disease burden of those suffering from climate change related anxiety and stress. We would also be concerned that a lack of investment now would risk being underprepared for events coming, costing more to respond to in the future. This could result in further strains on public finances, in turn affecting the provision of healthcare and public health funding.

3. What actions, if any, would you be willing and able to take to adapt to climate change?

While mitigation, emissions reduction and other actions continue to be crucial, adaptation to the changed climate is an acute necessity.

In general practice, we must adapt our premises to the climate. Practice premises will require capital investment to adapt for warmer, wetter climates, in terms of flood protections, climate friendly cooling and warming measures, water conservation measures, for example. Infrastructure will be required to ensure GPs and their teams are facilitated to commute, and patients visit, in low carbon ways, particularly to house calls, in order to meet air pollution targets.

GPs themselves will require a thorough understanding of the effects of climate change on individual health to enable us to continue treating patients effectively and holistically. GPs must be provided with the education and training to treat individuals and communities living in a climate which has been irrevocably altered due to climate change, as well as the time to develop knowledge in this area, in protected learning time (PLT). It remains the College preference that PLT arrangements have national support for cover by the national call handling service, NHS24.

While it is essential that we are able to adapt to the realities of the climate in which we live, there is not a binary choice to undertake either mitigation or adaptation. Efforts are necessary in both respects, and policy and funding decisions must reflect this. It is crucial

that mitigation efforts continue with strong resolve; especially as the most detrimental effects of climate change are avoidable if warming is limited.³

4. What factor(s), if any, would prevent you from taking action to adapt to climate change and become more climate-resilient?

General practice is under severe workload and workforce pressures. As such, any changes which must be enacted by GPs and the associated training, necessary learning time and resources to make these changes will likely represent a further burden on an already overstretched workforce.

Protected learning time, appropriate material resources and other support will be crucial for GPs to ensure they are aware of latest guidance related to climate change driven health issues and to ensure GPs are capable of communicating with patients regarding the impact of climate on their health. GPs and nurses are consistently at the top of the most trusted messengers of science and can be a useful resource in communicating the need for action and framing the issues in terms of the health impacts to reduce polarisation.

At present, much of the general practice infrastructure in Scotland is not fit for purpose. This is reflected in the responses to RCGP Scotland's 2022 Infrastructure survey, with nearly 2 in 5 staff member respondents considering their premises not fit for purpose, with the most commonly given reasons for this including a lack of maintenance (45.7%), poor air ventilation (31.6%), mould or mildew (12.3%). It is increasingly crucial that adequate capital investment be made by the Scottish Government to ensure GPs are operating in safe and fit for purpose premises which enable the effective treatment of patients.

We support efforts including funding from the Green Public Sector Estate De-Carbonisation Scheme (GPSEDS) to assist practices with energy efficiency, and the installation of more thermally efficient glazing and new insulation to reduce mould and dampness. If general practice is to adapt to the effects of climate change, support is needed to ensure it is able to do so, to the benefit of GPs and patients alike.

5. What action(s) do you think the Scottish Government should prioritise in order to build greater resilience to the impacts of climate change?

We would support the Government adhering to advice given by climate scientists and other subject matter experts, including the Climate Change Committee (CCC).

We would further support actions which would have downstream and less immediate impacts on health. Proactively considering and supporting greater environmental outcomes through efforts to increase biodiversity, support adaptive agriculture methods and other actions could further support healthy environments, which themselves support healthy communities and individuals. It is crucial to recognise that individuals and the environment are not divorced from one another.

A risk management approach would be appropriate in which cost effectiveness of actions are weighed against the general health and climate outcomes of any given decision. However, cost has often been seen as a limiting factor on climate action and this may be due to the difficulty in assessing the cost of inaction.

6. The draft Adaptation Plan sets out actions which will be taken to protect and restore nature. Which of the following actions proposed around protecting and restoring nature should the Scottish Government prioritise for a better adapted Scotland?

Agree to all.

7. When you consider your local natural space e.g. park, canal, woodland or beach, what would you like to see improved in terms of blue and green space in your local area?

8. For Scotland to adapt to the impacts of climate change, lots of different groups, such as individuals, communities, businesses and public bodies, will need to work together and support each other. How could others support you (or your organisation) to adapt to climate change over the next five years?

Cross collaboration between the NHS and other parts of the community or public bodies would be beneficial.

9. In what way(s) could the plan help different groups across Scotland and/or its regions to collaborate on climate adaptation?

10. Advice from the Climate Change Committee (the Scottish Government's independent advisors on Climate) is to adapt to 2°C of warming and assess the risk for 4°C. To what extent do you agree with this advice?

We would support the government adhering to the advice of experts whenever possible.

11. Would further guidance on future climate scenario(s) be useful when making plans and investment decisions?

12. Would an assessment of “cascading” risks from weather-related disruptions to infrastructure help you or your organisation to adapt?

Agree.

13. What, if any, are the barriers to businesses accessing advice and support on climate risks?

14. How should farming, fishing and forestry businesses be supported to adapt to climate change?

15. How do you anticipate disruption to domestic and/or international supply chains caused by climate change will affect Scottish business, industry and consumers?

16. What, if any, should the role of government be in supporting more resilient supply chains?

17. What, if any, do you think are the business and innovation opportunities arising from climate change in Scotland?

18. What, if any, support would be required to encourage businesses in Scotland to take advantage of innovation opportunities arising from climate change?

19. How could the Scottish Government support communities impacted by climate change across the world?

20. Scotland is known for its excellence in climate change research. Are there international adaptation focussed research opportunities which Scottish-based academic work should focus on?

21. What do you see as the main barrier to private investment for adaptation action?

22. How can the Scottish Government support or incentivise more private investment in adaptation action?

23. The proposed approach to monitoring and evaluating progress of the Adaptation Plan is set out below. Do you agree with the proposed approach to monitoring adaptation?

Agree.

24. Do you have suggestions of data or indicators that could be used to track adaptation outcomes in Scotland?

One of the challenges posed by climate change is the difficulty in monitoring its direct and tangential effects. In general practice, there is, at present, no means of recording and therefore monitoring climate change related presentations. For example, a patient presenting with symptoms which may be linked to living in mouldy damp housing, which itself may be impacted on by the changing weather as a result of climate change.

We would support further investigation regarding how we can monitor and track the effects of climate change from practice level coding to the public health level monitoring of population level impacts.

25. What, if any, impacts do you think this Adaptation Plan will have on groups/individuals who share protected characteristics?

26. In respect to protected characteristics, what, if any, measures could be taken to strengthen any positive impacts or lessen any negative impacts of the draft Adaptation Plan?

27. What, if any, impacts do you think the proposed Adaptation Plan will have on inequality caused by socio-economic disadvantage?

28. In respect to inequality caused by socio-economic disadvantage, what, if any, measures could be taken to strengthen any positive impacts or lessen any negative impacts of the draft Adaptation Plan?

Take a health equity in all policies approach.

29. What, if any, impact do you think the Adaptation Plan will have on children's rights and wellbeing?

30. What, if any, measures could be taken to strengthen any positive impacts or lessen any negative impacts of the draft Adaptation Plan on children's rights and wellbeing?

31. What, if any, impacts do you think the Adaptation Plan will have on Island communities?

32. What, if any, measures could be taken to strengthen any positive impacts or lessen any negative impacts of the draft Adaptation Plan on Island communities?

¹ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/659ff6a93308d200131fbe78/HECC-report-2023-overview.pdf>

<https://www.lancetcountdown.org/about-us/interact-with-the-key-findings/>

² <https://www.environment.gov.scot/our-environment/climate/changing-climate/#:~:text=Scotland%20generally%20has%20cool%20summers,summers%20with%20more%20extreme%20events.>

³ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/659ff6a93308d200131fbe78/HECC-report-2023-overview.pdf>