

Royal College of Psychiatrists Briefing: Sustainability and Mental Health – Debate in the House of Lords – 30th July 2022 – Draft Environmental Principles Policy Statement – Led by Baroness Parminter

About the Royal College of Psychiatrists:

We are the professional medical body responsible for supporting psychiatrists throughout their careers from training through to retirement, and in setting and raising standards of psychiatry in the United Kingdom. We work to secure the best outcomes for people with mental illness, learning difficulties and developmental disorders by promoting excellent mental health services, training outstanding psychiatrists, promoting quality and research, setting standards and being the voice of psychiatry.

We are committed to improving the understanding of psychiatry and mental health. We want there to be a greater understanding of the interaction between mental and physical health and the social and cultural context in which people live. The College is at the forefront in setting and achieving the highest standards through education, training and research. We lead the way in developing excellence and promoting best practice in mental health services. We promote research and publish the results in our world-class psychiatric journals.

Climate Change and Mental Health:

Climate change is having a destructive impact on human and planetary health. This crisis is exacerbating inequalities as those who are already disadvantaged, including people with a mental illness or disability, are often most affected.

There is clear evidence that healthy environments and contact with nature are important for our mental health. For those with a mild and moderate mental illness, time in nature can support recovery and help prevent relapse when provided alongside more traditional care.

Developing a sustainable health service is a key part of any climate change mitigation strategy. A sustainable health services will need a strong focus on preventative health measures. It must understand and integrate preventative principles and interventions into its ethos.

This briefing looks at the College's sustainability pledges and recommended actions for the government and the health service to promote sustainability and tackle the climate crisis. It also specifically looks at how to make mental health services more sustainable. It will also look at the effects that climate change is having on mental health.

[You can find out more information in our full position statement on health and sustainability](#)

Key messages:

- Climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss have created a health crisis, with particular implications for mental health and disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups, including people with pre-existing mental illness and children.
- The Government must prioritise a unified approach with sufficient resources to tackle the climate and ecological crises, prioritising a green recovery to the pandemic and supporting NHS health organisations in developing and implementing ambitious Green Plans.
- The College has committed to an ambitious plan for sustainability, including a pledge to achieve Carbon Net Zero by 2040 for those emissions it directly controls.
- Social prescribing and nature-based care can play an important role in improving patient outcomes, reducing the burden on primary care and community mental health services.
- The College attended COP26 in November 2021 to emphasise the interplay between mental health and the climate

Our Sustainability Pledges:

We are committed to becoming an organisation that is actively working to tackle the climate and ecological emergency, whilst promoting the sustainability of mental health services. The College has made a number of pledges to do this, including:

- Committing the College to an ambitious plan for sustainability, including a pledge that by 2040, we will achieve Carbon Net Zero for those emissions it directly controls.
- Promoting prevention in psychiatry, showing how detecting and treating illnesses early to halt or slow their progress is an essential part of making healthcare more sustainable.
- Integrating this work throughout the College to develop a wider sustainable network and promote learning.
- Supporting the creation of an alliance across mental health organisations to better represent the mental health impacts of, and potential solutions to, the climate and ecological emergencies.
- Empowering patients to make informed choices in their care and engage them in the development of mental health services that are collaborative and sustainable.
- Continuing to supporting the integration of social prescribing and nature-based care into mental health services.

Our Government Recommendations for Sustainability:

The government must play a critical role to bolster actions to mitigate climate and ecological degradation, whilst simultaneously promoting good mental health. A key action the government needs to take is leading on preventative physical and

mental health measures. For a population to be healthy they need adequate housing, robust health and education services, nature rich green and blue spaces and readily accessible nutrient rich foods.

There needs to be greater emphasis on the importance of social determinants of mental health. Any public mental health perspective must recognise the influence of factors such as poverty and childhood trauma, as well as climate change and biodiversity loss.

We recommend they:

- Prioritise a unified approach with sufficient resources to tackling the climate and ecological crisis across all aspects of government.
- Establish an authority that can lead on public mental health and preventative healthcare, tackling social determinants of mental health early.
- Follow the [UKHACC Principles](#) for a healthy and green recovery to place environmental and health factors at the heart of any economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Base decisions on changes to land and water usage on tools which include assessment of prospective impacts to mental and physical health.

Our Health Service Recommendations for Sustainability:

The NHS in England produces 27.1m tonnes of carbon annually and is the single largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the UK public sector. The work of the Sustainable Development Unit and The Greener NHS Campaign is helping the NHS move to reach net-zero carbon emissions, but more work is urgently needed.

We need a greater understanding, adoption and integration of preventative principles and interventions. This preventative ethos must be placed at the heart of healthcare.

We need to bolster primary, secondary and tertiary prevention efforts. Detecting and treating illnesses early to halt or slow their progress can reduce relapses, and prevent patients deteriorating to the point of needing hospitalisation.

- We need to encourage doctors to incorporate the goals of [Choosing Wisely](#) into daily practice.

Improving quality and thoughtfulness of care is an important part of achieving sustainability. We should encourage doctors to provide patients with resources that increase their understanding about potential environmental harms of biomedical/ pharmaceutical interventions. By having discussions that are informed by the doctor, but take into account what's important to the patient, both sides can be supported to make better decisions about care. Often, this will help to avoid tests, treatments or procedures that are unlikely to be of benefit.

- Encourage social prescribing and nature-based

Social prescribing is the term used for introducing individuals to activity-based groups in their local area, examples include groups for gardening or walking in nature and activity groups such as football, drama and knitting. These groups are

community based and often run by the charitable or voluntary sector. The 'prescription' element of social prescribing is the tailored signposting to groups that may benefit a person's physical or mental health.

Social prescribing can be beneficial in the prevention of mental illness, recovery and in maintaining remission. Social prescribing is not a substitute for other treatments for mental illness such as talking therapies or medications, but can be used in combination. It can play a substantial part in reframing psychiatric treatment to make it more preventative, holistic and sustainable.¹

[You can find out more information in our how health services can be sustainable in our full position statement on health and sustainability](#)

Mental Health and Climate Change Concerns:

Concerns about climate change are having a severe effect on mental health, especially on children and young people's mental health. Research from the College from May 2021 found that:²

- Three in five (60%) people say concerns about climate and ecological emergencies are affecting their mental health
- Over half (55%) of people agree that climate change poses a threat to the mental health of future generations
- Almost three in five (59%) 18-34-year-olds agree that failure to act on climate change will become a growing mental health problem.

We conducted discussion groups with young people during this process and found high levels of anger, hurt and fear for what the future holds.³

Cost of Living Crisis

The current cost-of-living crisis poses a threat of pandemic proportions to the nation's mental health as concerns around personal finances can have a significant effect on mental health. Food insecurity, fuel poverty, debt, are already affect millions in the UK. The effects of Climate Change have the ability to exacerbate this by causing long-term and significant food shortages and rising energy costs.

Food insecurity, with effects on nutrition and livelihoods, has also been shown to be independently associated with higher levels of psychological distress, psychiatric illnesses and impaired childhood development.

¹ [The Importance of Social Prescribing \(rcpsych.ac.uk\)](https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk)

² [RCPsych declares a climate and ecological emergency](#)

³ [The College's position on Sustainability | Royal College of Psychiatrists \(rcpsych.ac.uk\)](#)

Air Pollution:

There are emerging links between air pollution and mental health impacts across the life course. Long term air pollution has been linked with depression and anxiety. Research has also found possible links between air pollution and dementia and air pollution and higher rates of suicide.⁴ ⁵Additionally, people with mental illness are more likely to live in polluted urban areas and the impacts of improved air quality on their physical health would be highly beneficial.

Mental Health and Extreme Weather Events:

Flooding has been shown to have a major impact on mental health, with flood victims experiencing PTSD, depression and anxiety. Flooding is the most common extreme weather event in the UK and globally, and is becoming more frequent and damaging than ever due to climate change.

- A UK study of flooded households showing that 20% of participants who had been flooded had probable depression, 28.3% had probable anxiety and 36% had probable PTSD at one year.⁶

Higher temperatures and heatwaves have a strong association with suicide and higher levels of mental illness. Droughts have been shown to cause mental health problems with women, young people, the elderly and the poor particularly at risk.⁷

Mental Health and the Environment:

There is clear evidence that healthy environments and contact with nature are important for our mental health. It has been recommended that a central part of the UK's 25-year environmental plan should include the integration of green spaces into mental health care.

The college has been championing social prescribing and there are many examples of social prescribing that involve access to green space.⁸ For those with a mild and moderate mental illness, time in nature can support recovery and help prevent relapse when provided alongside more traditional care. People with SMI

⁴ Chen H, Kwong JC, Copes R, Hystad P, van Donkelaar A, Tu K, et al (2017) Exposure to ambient air pollution and the incidence of dementia: A population-based cohort study. *Environ Int.* 108:271-277. doi: 10.1016/j.envint.2017.08.020. Epub 2017 Sep 13. PMID: 28917207

⁵ Braithwaite I, Zhang S, Kirkbride JB, Osborn DPJ, Hayes JF (2019) Air Pollution (Particulate Matter) Exposure and Associations with Depression, Anxiety, Bipolar, Psychosis and Suicide Risk: A Systematic Review and Met Analysis, *Environmental Health Perspectives* 127(12):126002 DOI:10.1289/EHP4595

⁶ Waite TD, Chaintarli K, Beck C, Bone A, Amlôt R, Kovats et al (2017) The English national cohort study of flooding and health: cross-sectional analysis of mental health outcomes at year one. *BMC Public Health*, 129: doi: 10.1186/s12889-016-4000-2

⁷ Page, L, Hajat S, Kovats S, Howard L (2012) Temperature-related deaths in people with psychosis, dementia and substance misuse. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 200:485–90

⁸ [Green spaces and mental health - what's the connection? \(rcpsych.ac.uk\)](https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/green-spaces-and-mental-health-what-s-the-connection/)

potentially have some of the most wellbeing and physical health gains of any group, but the most barriers to accessing green space.

The College has published a number of documents on our website [on nature based interventions for Mental Health Care](#).

More Information:

For more information on this briefing contact gregory.kay@rcpsych.ac.uk

Further resources:

1. [The College's position on Sustainability | Royal College of Psychiatrists \(rcpsych.ac.uk\)](#)
2. [RCPsych declares a climate and ecological emergency](#)
3. [The Importance of Social Prescribing \(rcpsych.ac.uk\)](#)
4. [position-statement-ps01-21---social-prescribing---2021.pdf \(rcpsych.ac.uk\)](#)