

Standards for Better Health Health Care Standards for Services under the NHS

Response by Sustrans

General comments

Sustrans greatly welcomes this consultation by the Department of Health. Our comments below relate to our area of expertise - transport - and in particular the promotion of sustainable, physically active travel.

We believe that the promotion of healthy behaviour, as a way of improving the health of the nation, is likely to be more effective, and more cost-effective, than providing medical attention to treat the results of an inactive, unhealthy lifestyle.

Many commentators have proposed a shift in resources within the NHS from treating disease to promoting health – turning the national sickness service into a true National Health Service¹. We entirely support the principle and would go further; we would like to see other major government spending programmes, such as those for transport, focused on the promotion of healthy behaviour. In our view, this would very often produce additional benefits in areas such as progress towards sustainability, social inclusion and equity.

We should like to see greater resource allocation within the NHS to the promotion of healthy lifestyles, and to raise levels of competence on physical activity promotion among frontline healthcare staff.

Star ratings for trusts should, we feel, include a significant component related to success in promoting and achieving increased levels of physical activity – and indeed for other public health and health promotion measures. NHS delivery bodies, especially foundation PCTs, should be set demanding health promotion targets, including those for the promotion of lifestyle physical activity. These targets, for all trusts, should include elements relating to the Trust's own trip generation: staff travel and patient transport. The NHS should play a leading role in the promotion of lifestyle physical activity to help achieve

the target set by the Chief Medical Officer of 70% of the population undertaking enough physical activity to promote their health by 2020.

Access to the NHS

The Social Exclusion Unit report on transport highlights, among other issues, the need for accessibility to be factored into Department of Health decisions about new healthcare facilities². Accessibility planning is now being piloted by the Department for Transport. Accessibility planning in the NHS context is largely focused on patients and visitors but dovetails with existing requirements that all NHS facilities should develop travel plans, which address staff travel to, from and at work. This requirement is stated in the National Service Framework on Coronary Heart Disease, the NHS Environmental Strategy and the Controls Assurance Standard.

NHS priorities

Working as we do, as an external partner to NHS organisations, Sustrans may not be qualified to comment on the most effective way to performance manage them. What we can say is that in the areas of physical activity promotion, accessibility of healthcare services, and travel planning, the lack of effective performance management in the past had held the NHS back. The NHS needs to have clear, known targets (as standard) for:

- the promotion of physical activity as part of daily life, including through transport, across the population
- expertise in the promotion of this activity among front line staff
- encouragement of active travel among staff, removal of barriers to this (such as working practices, lack or changing rooms etc)
- removal of financial and other incentives to car use
- enhancing accessibility of healthcare services – not least in improving access for the poorest sections of the population who are known to have more difficulties in accessing NHS facilities.

NHS bodies need to be managed on their performance in these areas; the weakest helped to improve and the best rewarded.

We should like to see greater resource allocation within the NHS to the promotion of healthy lifestyles, through advice to patients and staff as well as environmental changes. We are concerned in particular that many front-line health professionals may not be adequately trained in the promotion of physical activity and would like to see specific training programmes and budgets established to address this.

The NHS is a major motor traffic generator but does not currently know how much transport it is generating, how it is managing it or what the environmental or health consequences are. This should be addressed with research into the current state of affairs and a strategy to reduce the negative

impacts of NHS travel alongside measures to maximise the potential for promoting healthy, active ways of travelling – by staff, patients, visitors and service providers.

The implementation of travel plans at NHS sites, despite a raft of policy instruments which demand them, is lagging behind other sectors. In particular, PCTs have largely failed to implement travel plans, and those working on it do not commit adequate staff resources. Good practice, such as it is, generally depends on committed individuals volunteering and carving out some time among their other responsibilities. This situation needs attention. In 2003 Sustrans co-organised a Travel Plan Learning set with five PCTs and the Government Office for the South West.³ Key recommendations for the NHS were:

- Board and senior management support is crucial to a successful travel plan, and it is therefore most important that board members understand the issues. The set members were surprised to hear a negative reaction from a director at one of our member PCTs which in other respects had shown itself to be something of a leader. This suggests that more work needs to be done centrally, by the Department, NHS Estates and others, to challenge assumptions, by staff at all levels, of a right to subsidised car parking.
- The Department should consider how to ensure that travel plan work is seen as a real issue for the NHS, not an optional add-on.
- The Department should provide a bursary for full-time travel plan co-ordinators working across a patch of between 4-7 PCTs.
- The Department should consider funding the set up and maintenance of a website specific to PCT travel plans that would provide a single point of access to obtain information and examples.

The existing IT capability in trusts should be used to address travel planning – for staff, patients, visitors, services and deliveries. Our own work with the NHS suggests that the necessary skills may be in place, but that there is no standard approach to travel planning and managers may not even be aware that the GIS software used for other estates management tasks is suitable for this purpose.

NHS finance directors should be tested on their management of both the capital and reserve investment in – generally heavily subsidised – car parking. The NHS should not be subsidising car park spaces for non-essential users (or, if it is judged appropriate to do so, it should provide benefits of equivalent value to non-driving staff). However, our experience suggests that very few trust Financial Directors even know what they are spending in this area, although in many cases the cost may run to hundreds of thousands of pounds per annum.

Background: Sustrans' work programme

Sustrans works through practical projects to change the physical environment so that sustainable, physically active ways of travelling are more accessible. We have over 25 years' experience in creating environments for physical activity, such as the UK National Cycle Network programme, and changing the transport culture to make it possible, as with our national Safe Routes to Schools programme and the successful UK pilots of TravelSmart individualised travel marketing. We also have a national programme, Active Travel, working with the UK health sector to encourage physically active travel as a healthier alternative to motor transport.

References

¹ Hunter, D. 1995: The case for closer cooperation between local authorities and the NHS, BMJ, 310, pp. 1587-1589

² Social Exclusion Unit, 2003: Making the connections: Final report on transport and social exclusion

³ Horne, J et al, 2004 Moving forward with the South West PCT Travel Plan Learning Set, Bristol: GOSW