



## **UNISON – Nursing and Midwifery Committee**

### **Statement in Support of reaching Net-Zero Carbon Emissions in healthcare**

Climate change is the greatest single threat to human health in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The COVID-19 pandemic has tragically demonstrated that the consequences of globalisation can be catastrophic for our health when our governments and health systems are not resilient and prepared for emerging threats. Further pandemics and negative health consequences are inevitable if the man-made climate emergency is not brought under control.

As nurses and midwives representing our sisters and brothers around the United Kingdom we back strong, urgent action for the NHS to lead the race to net-zero carbon emissions. We care for our patients and our communities and we recognise the importance of climate action to protect the health of the public. Many of the measures we must take will also improve public health.

As trade-unionists we believe in equality and justice. We recognise that the effects of man-made climate change are being borne by vulnerable populations whilst the benefits of industrialisation have been reaped by the world's richest. It is only right that the UK, as one of the world's first industrialised nations, aims to reach net-zero as early as possible.

Earlier, deeper action will save lives and protect health and so we urge the NHS to lead this race.

We wish to draw attention to areas of our practice and work as nurses and midwives where we can support the NHS race to net-zero. These are areas which could be immediately explored but action clearly should not be limited to these alone.

#### **Education and training of nurses and midwives**

It is vital the nurses and midwives of the future have a sophisticated understanding of the climate emergency. This should include; its causes, the need for adaptation and mitigation, the likely impacts upon the patients and communities we care for, and the need for our practice to become more sustainable.

We call for modernisations of the curricula and education standards for nurse and midwife training so that sustainability is built in as a principle core of training and education for new nurses and midwives.

The climate emergency, however, is upon us now. Investment must be made in the existing nursing and midwifery workforce to empower them to understand its consequences and to lead reductions in carbon emissions in their areas of practice.

### **Leadership**

Nurses and midwives make up the largest portion of the health workforce in the United Kingdom. No programme to get the NHS to net-zero and make the health service truly sustainable can be successful without drawing on the knowledge and expertise of nurses and midwives. Neither will programmes to reduce emissions succeed without the buy-in and active engagement of our professions.

Nurses and midwives must take up leadership positions in the race to a net-zero NHS. Policy makers must listen to and engage with our professions and ensure programmes to reduce carbon emissions are congruent with nursing and midwifery codes and practices.

### **Co-benefits**

We recognise that many of the drivers of global climate change also have consequences for human health. In our everyday practice we spend our time and expertise treating the effects of these in our communities, from the respiratory effects of harmful air pollution to those injured because of a lack of safe infrastructure for walking or cycling.

The actions we need to take to reach net-zero carbon emissions will make our communities healthier and safer. Too much of the public attention on action on climate change has instead focussed on the costs. We believe prevention and maintenance of public health is important and call for wider recognition of the co-benefits that we will enjoy as we reduce carbon emissions, these must be factored into planning. Economic analyses of interventions to reduce carbon emissions, as well as on the activity of the health service and wider economy, should take better account of the co-benefits to health.

### **Travel for nursing practice – Community Practice**

Many nurses and midwives work in our communities, delivering care to people in, or close to, their homes. Community practice will only grow as health is integrated with social care and practice increasingly moves to minimise the need for inpatient treatments.

It is vital that our community practice is considered in this context and measures taken to reduce the level of carbon emissions in practice. Vehicles used should be electric and run on renewable energy. Alternative treatments and pathways that minimise emissions should be available and accessible. Modern software and technology must be implemented to manage working patterns and the need for short journeys to maximise efficiency and reduce waste.

### **Travelling to work**

A large proportion of nurses and midwives continue to work according to shift patterns. The need for early starts, irregular patterns, night and twilight shifts, makes it often prohibitively challenging for nurses and midwives to use active and public transport.

Far too often our choices in this regard are severely limited by employers who do little to encourage these modes of transport and by local options that are extremely limited and expensive.

More must be done by Government, employers and communities to ensure all nurses and midwives have the option of affordable, accessible and high-quality public transport for their travel to work.

The same must be done to ensure active transport such as walking or cycling is an option for more nurses and midwives. Safe, protected routes should be available and comfortable facilities provided in workplaces for those who need to shower and change clothes.

By making active and public transport more accessible we will reduce carbon emissions and improve the health of those in our communities and our professions.

### **Hospital Food**

Shift patterns, long hours and challenging work make it difficult for nurses and midwives to prepare healthy food and take adequate rest breaks. Too often in our hospitals and places of work there are few or no options for healthy, quality food at the times we need it. We also know avoiding food waste is important for sustainability.

We call for urgent action to improve the food and drink available in our workplaces. There should be locally sourced, freshly prepared, high-quality food and drink available at the times we need. There should be no single use plastics and unnecessary packaging and rational, local planning to reduce any food waste.

## **Uniforms**

A large number of nurses and midwives work in uniforms required by their clinical areas. The cost of laundering these uniforms at a high-enough standard to ensure safe infection control has been passed on to individuals and their families. Washing and drying these at home as regularly as nurses and midwives need to do is inefficient and expensive.

Consideration should be given to the introduction of staff laundries where uniforms could be laundered in the most carbon-efficient and safe way. This could also result in reduced costs for individual nurses and midwives and create secure, public jobs in our NHS.