

Embedding Sustainability Principles in Project Work: Pilot Study

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Background

The climate emergency is a health emergency.(1) Generating 4-5% of global emissions, healthcare is contributing to this problem. (2) In response to this, the NHS has become the world’s first national health system to commit to net-zero carbon emissions by 2040. (3) At Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust, progress has already been made. The Trust’s carbon footprint has been reduced by 42% over the last 10 years. (4) This has been achieved by efforts such as decarbonising estates and fleets, and waste management. According to the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare, 80% of the NHS carbon footprint is determined by clinical decisions. These emissions are more difficult to tackle, and systematic, widespread, transformative change is required. Quality Improvement (QI) and project work presents a unique opportunity to provide clinical teams with tools and support to achieve sustainable service change.

Methods

A staff survey, long-form interviews and observational study was conducted to investigate whether sustainability is considered in project work. Thematic analysis was used to identify gaps in participant’s knowledge and barriers to making sustainable change. These were used to inform the design of an intervention to prompt sustainability thinking during project work.

Results

As shown in figure 1, 75% of participants felt that sustainability was rarely or never considered during project work, with 0 out of 16 projects sampled measuring or assessing sustainability impacts. Over half of all survey respondents felt not so, or not at all confident about making sustainable healthcare decisions, with 89% reporting lack of knowledge of measuring environmental impact was always or often a barrier to thinking about sustainability during project work. The remaining top 5 barriers identified were: other priorities taking precedence, sustainability not usually considered, sustainability not included in governance processes, lack of ideas for sustainable changes in projects. All participants reported that information and support for sustainable service improvements would be useful.

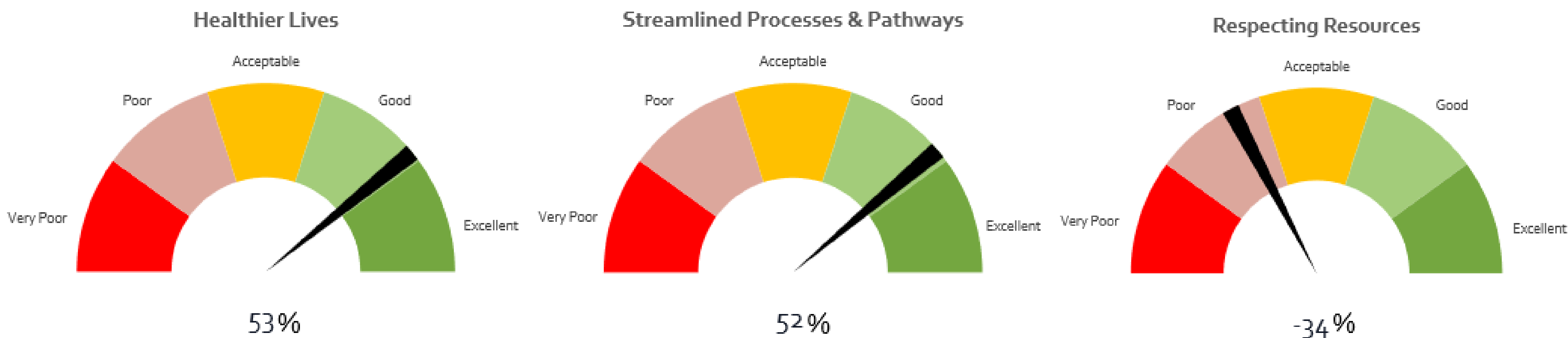


Figure 2. Examples of the results generated by the Green Impact Assessment Tool

Green Impact Assessment Tool

A Green Impact Assessment Tool, grounded in QI principles, was developed to address these barriers and support sustainable change. Users assess their project or service against a panel of sustainability criteria. The tool provides a score against each area of sustainable healthcare (figure 2) and the top 3 environmental risks and benefits of their project. A simple carbon calculator is provided to help measure the impact of changes.

Discussion

Clinical services will need to adopt sustainable healthcare principles for a net-zero NHS to be realised. From this pilot study, it is clear that environmental impact is rarely considered during project work at present. Equipping staff with the knowledge and tools to make sustainable service changes is suggested by staff to have the greatest possible impact. The Green Impact Assessment tool has been designed to address identified barriers to sustainable thinking, by providing a clear methodology to measure and assess environmental impact, as well as prompting ideas and considerations for sustainable change. The tool has been in pilot at Sussex Community and partner trusts in Sussex ICS. The author intends to present their findings and analysis of the tool’s usage in due course. The next steps are to embed the assessment tool in project governance and service evaluation processes.

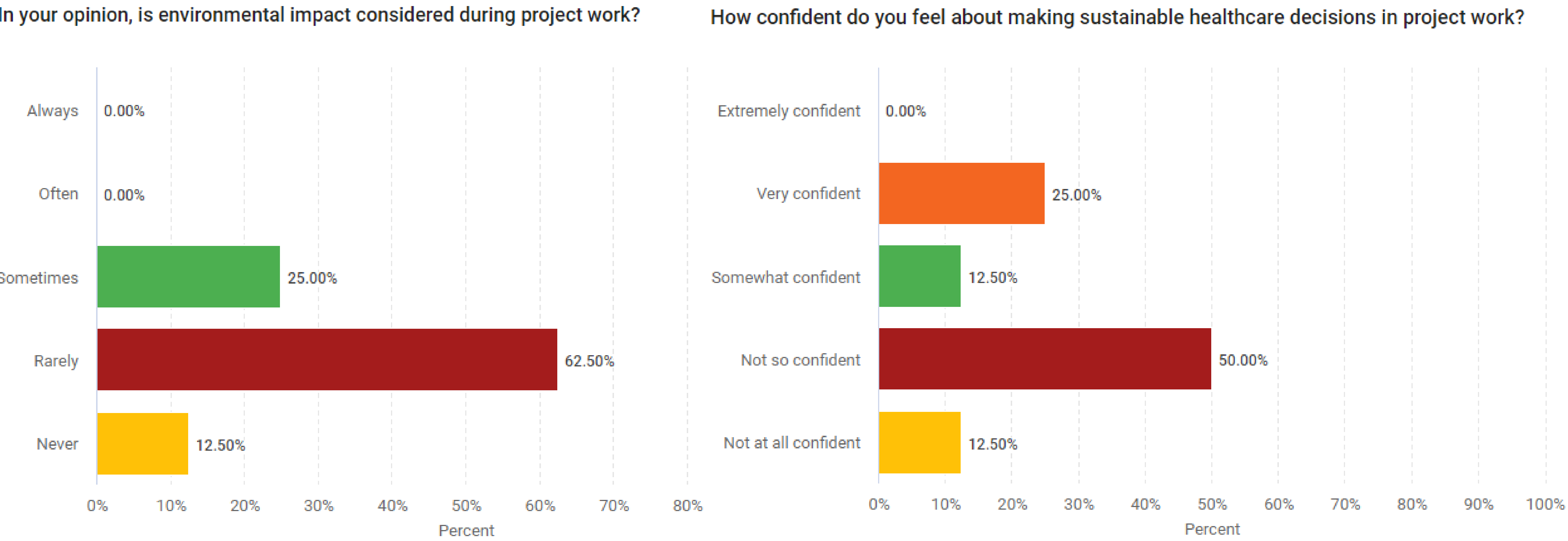


Figure 1. Graph showing inclusion of sustainability in project work and self-reported confidence on making sustainable healthcare decisions

1. Romanello et al. The 2021 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: code red for a healthy future. Lancet. 2021. 2. Tennison et al. Health care’s response to climate change: a carbon footprint assessment of the NHS in England. Lancet Planet Health. 2021. 3. UK health services make landmark pledge to achieve net zero. GOV.UK. Department of Health and Social Care. 2021. 4. Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust Green Plan 2021