

A SUSTAINABILITY CLINICAL FELLOW'S JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD OF LABORATORY MEDICINE

What is the CSO Clinical Fellowship Scheme?

The Chief Sustainability Officers (CSO) Clinical Fellowship is a twelve-month programme designed to identify and support clinicians who want to develop as clinical leaders and as sustainability champions of the future. Clinical fellows lead on key projects to help embed net zero carbon principles across the healthcare system and take part in a comprehensive educational programme. The scheme is multi-professional. With reference to laboratory medicine, it welcomes applications from doctors in training and healthcare scientists. You can register your interest for the 2026/27 scheme on the FMLM website.¹



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What have I been doing on the Fellowship?

When I started the CSO clinical fellowship, I had completed two thirds of General Practice training. I was offered a post funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), with the aim of driving decarbonisation of NHS diagnostic laboratories. Whilst I was passionate about environmental sustainability, I had not yet undertaken any formal training in sustainable healthcare. Moreover, I had never worked in a laboratory. As you can imagine, it was a very steep learning curve. Luckily, I received enthusiastic support from a variety of expert teams, including Greener NHS, NHSE Pathology Transformation, my host organisation Peninsula Pathology Network and professional body sustainability champions.

We named the project 'Greener Clinical Labs'. Our overarching aim was to develop a resource that specifically supports clinical labs that provide NHS services to improve their environmental sustainability. We also wanted to publicly recognise the progress that labs make through offering certification.

Phase one – the recommendations

The first phase of the project involved developing recommended actions that laboratories could take to improve their environmental sustainability. We felt it was important for these actions to align as closely as possible with existing best practice guidance and accreditation requirements for clinical labs. We also worked to align them with sustainable

healthcare guidance issued by NHSE. We created actions that we thought were likely to achieve co-benefits for labs, such as financial savings, improved quality of patient care and/or experience, plus staff satisfaction.

We did not want recommended actions to be too prescriptive, so that labs have the autonomy to undertake them in a way that is adapted to their local circumstances and fits with their organisation's wider priorities. Labs should have the space to be innovative and creative in their solutions. We also felt the resource needed to support the integration of environmental sustainability into business as usual, rather than it being a separate and additional thing to do. We wanted the resource to encourage lab staff to reach out and collaborate with other parts of the healthcare system and to feel empowered to influence others, even when an outcome is outside of their direct control.

The recommended actions were informed by a review of academic evidence, policy and guidance documents, case studies and by interviews we conducted with Pathology Network sustainability groups. It became apparent that we currently lack literature that thoroughly describes the environmental impact of clinical laboratories. This makes it difficult for us to advise which actions labs should prioritise in order to have the greatest impact. There is also a lack of literature investigating the effectiveness of different actions to improve the environmental sustainability of clinical labs. When designing the resource, we therefore had to apply sustainability principles from other healthcare and science settings to clinical labs. For this reason, we felt it was particularly essential to test our recommendations with the pathology community. We also wanted the resource to be a mechanism for sharing actions already taken by clinical labs in the UK, to minimise duplication of effort. We achieved this by referencing relevant case studies within the resource.

Phase two – The pilot

The second phase of the project involved

running a pilot of the recommended actions with clinical labs. Twenty-five labs signed up to participate: they agreed to work on as many of the actions as possible in the short six-week pilot and to provide feedback on their experience. They represented a broad range of disciplines and geographies across England and Wales. During the pilot we ran group meetings for pilot leads to share successes and challenges, which participants reported they found motivating.

We are now analysing the feedback from the pilot and will use this to improve the Greener Clinical Labs resource. The content will then be published on a UKRI online platform called Spark Hub. We want the resource to remain open access, so we will design the certification process and the mechanism for updating the resource to be robust, but lean.

Hopes for the future

We hope that the Greener Clinical Labs resource will help to organise and co-ordinate efforts by clinical labs across the UK to decarbonise and unlock the associated benefits beyond just environmental sustainability. We also hope that it will support the emergence of an evidence base that is specific to sustainability in clinical laboratories.

Laboratory Medicine, as a community, has shown such interest and enthusiasm towards this project, as exemplified by the number of labs willing to take part in the pilot. Considering tests are involved in nearly every clinical pathway in the NHS, you have the power to influence the wider system, which is really exciting for the future of sustainable healthcare in the UK. I am extremely grateful to those who have supported this project; their generosity with their time is all more remarkable given the pressures that services are under.

Reference

- 1 <https://www.fmlm.ac.uk/services-programmes/clinical-fellow-schemes/current-schemes/chief-sustainability-officers-clinical#:~:text=Sponsored%20by%20NHS%20England%27s%20Chief,sustainability%20champions%20of%20the%20future>