SOCIAL CARE SUSTAINABILITY ALLIANCE

The Business Case for Sustainability in Social Care

November 2023

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Summary

However strong the short-term headwinds facing the social care sector, we believe that they must not deflect us from long-term sustainable growth. This paper seeks to show that this is not a choice between economy and ecology, or between sustainability and profitability.

As powerful as the moral case for social care providers to tackle their own carbon impacts, diversity or governance commitments, might be, sustainability must also prove that there is an economic business case for action. This is especially true in our social care sector with ever-reducing margins and ever-increasing complexity.

First and foremost, we in social care have to deliver high-quality care and financially viable businesses. Noble ambitions for sustainability mean nothing if the business does not deliver on its primary obligation and on the bottom line.

This paper argues that addressing the challenges of sustainability can reduce costs, improve care and at the same time accelerate the transition to carbon net zero and a more sustainable future.

About the Social Care Sustainability Alliance

The Social Care Sustainability Alliance (the "Alliance") brings together senior leaders with responsibility for sustainability issues within their organisations from across the Social Care sector to:

- identify key sustainability opportunities and challenges across the sector;
- share best practice within the sector and from other sectors;
- foster collaboration on key issues; and,
- drive awareness and action across the sector, particularly for smaller providers without dedicated resource

The Alliance, founded by Jonathan Freeman MBE (Group Sustainability Director at CareTech) with the support of Steven Fergus (Head of Healthcare at Barclays Bank PLC), Bhavna Keane-Rao (Managing Director at BKR Care Consultancy), and Tom Speirs (Partner at Addleshaw Goddard LLP), launched in April 2023. The Alliance aims to provide support to providers of all sizes in building strategies to reduce their environmental footprint while strengthening social and governance infrastructures. Importantly, whilst the Alliance draws support from across organisations supporting the sector, its core membership comes from the senior leadership of providers and operators.

Details about the Alliance and becoming a member are available at https://www.addleshawgoddard.com/en/sectors/health/social-care-sustainability-alliance/

The Business Case for Sustainability in Social Care

Introduction

At the first meeting of the Alliance, there was widespread recognition amongst members that the moral imperative of sustainability has to be backed up a clear-headed commercial imperative. This was, members commented, particularly important in the social care sector with its significant funding and operational pressures. Members agreed therefore to produce a document that sought to set out the commercial arguments for investing in sustainable growth within social care.

The aim of this paper is to provide those seeking to embark on or to deepen the sustainability journeys within their social care organisations with clear evidence to persuade Executive and Board teams of the financial as well as moral arguments for embracing sustainability at the heart of their organisations.

The sustainability imperative

At the COP27 meeting on climate change, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres bluntly warned delegates that "we are on a highway to climate hell with our foot on the accelerator" and that the world was in the "fight of our lives and we are losing". We in the social care sector are in that same fight.

In July 2023, leading climate change experts set out in the starkest terms their shared concern that action to date to limit global temperature rises to 1.5˚C is falling woefully short of what is required. 2023 has been witness to some of the most serious impacts yet of human-induced climate change, from forest fires sweeping across North America, a record-breaking cyclone in south-eastern Africa, devastating monsoon flooding in India, to powerful ice storms in the southern United States.

Unless decisive, significant action is taken, this is only going to get worse - much worse. Professor Robert Watson of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change recently stated: "If we don't [act], we're going to see more heatwaves, more adverse effects on health, we're going to see agriculture food production threatened, we're going to see problems with water quantity and water quality. We'll see more floods, more sea level rises displacing people on coastal areas, lots of adverse health effects."

What do we mean by sustainability?

Sustainability is about creating the conditions for businesses and organisations to thrive, but doing so within the parameters of what the world's natural resources can support. Sustainability is about taking action today to protect the long-term future of our planet, our communities and our people. Or, as the United Nations Brundtland Commission better defined it: "Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

As important as environmental sustainability undoubtedly is, we take a broad perspective and believe that a sustainable business also focuses on its social impacts and on its governance. This paper therefore addresses broader issues such as supporting local communities, staff and those supported through the social care system.

Sustainability in Social Care

The challenges of sustainability apply as much for the social care sector as any other sector, as the following three examples show:

- **Climate change**. The growing pressures driving global warming are increasing the costs to deliver high-quality social care, notably rising energy and fuel costs. The sector is characterised by both ageing property stock and high vehicle dependence. Historic under-investment and old-fashioned regulation have led to a heavily paper-based system with little investment in technological innovation.
- **Population growth**. Global population growth is placing an increasing strain on health and social care demand. In the UK, this is exacerbated by an ageing population which is significantly increasing demand for social care services, (including elderly care but also more particularly specialist care). The growing number of individuals with increasingly complex care needs is heightening the need for greater and more sophisticated provision.
- **Growing inequalities.** Increasing demand for social care is outstripping the public sector's capacity to provide adequate funding through current funding mechanisms. This has led to unmet need and individuals having to self-fund more elements for their care, with a disproportionate impact on the poorest. 'Postcode lottery' inequalities of social care provision and increasingly inappropriate distinctions between the availability of public support for different health conditions are fueling new inequalities. This is compounded by inconsistencies in how social care placements are commissioned across local authorities with different local authorities paying different fees, applying different processes, and having variable expectations and quality monitoring regimes.

The Barclays 2022 report on ESG *(Time to act: Healthcare at a turning point on ESG),* however, commented - diplomatically! - that "the response of health and social care to these imperatives has been muted, at best."

As a sector, we face enormous challenges. The economic situation is further squeezing commissioners' budgets; inflation is driving up core costs; recruitment and retention continue to be a key challenge; regulators' expectations can be inconsistent; the media is quick to jump on actual or perceived shortcomings; and, there are increasing calls to curb private operators' profits and, indeed, to nationalise the sector. Some might be tempted, given these pressures, to pull back on investment in sustainability initiatives. We believe that this would be a huge mistake – both morally and commercially.

Delivering on key sustainability issues can address short-term pressures as much as long-term challenges - but it does require a shift in perspective, considering the longer-term, whole-life full costs and benefits. Effective leaders understand that their role is about striking a balance between short-term needs and long-term vision, ensuring that their decisions contribute to the long-term sustainable success and growth of their organisations. And, recognising, that all of us have a wider set of responsibilities for which we are accountable beyond our own organisations.

Legislative, regulatory and commissioner pressure
It is becoming increasingly clear that the pressure to deliver on sustainability will result in all businesses and organisations having to comply with new requirements.

In order for governments to meet international and/or national targets, many sustainability requirements will become mandatory in due course, not just in respect of an individual operator but in respect of its suppliers too. It is equally evident that those organisations getting ahead of the game and managing these incoming requirements in a managed way are most likely to be able to adapt to this new landscape. In doing so, operators are able to spread the costs and other impacts of moving to compliant assets/models. Alternatively, rather than making sustainability requirements mandatory, governments may force changes by imposing taxes and other penalties (eg removal of procurement of business) on operators where sustainability targets and compliance obligations are not met.

A top-down legislative approach to driving sustainability is unlikely to help the sector with the forecasted growth in demand over coming years. Many providers with the smallest margins and older property assets may simply decide to withdraw from the market, which would not benefit the wider health and social care economy. It is therefore likely to be more efficient for providers to work towards compliance sooner rather than later.

In social care, our regulators are coming under pressure to effect change in respect of sustainability. The new Adult Social Care Single Assessment Framework introduces the new 'Environmental sustainability – sustainable development' criteria to the inspection regime. This puts environmental sustainability at the heart of what it means to provide a social care service that the public can trust. Providers will have to be able to show and evidence that "We understand any negative impact of our activities on the environment and we strive to make a positive contribution in reducing it and support people to do the same."

More generally, internal and external stakeholders (such as investors and commissioners) are becoming more and more focussed on the activity being taken by providers to achieve net zero carbon and climate resilience. Increasingly, commissioners are asking providers to demonstrate their sustainability credentials in tender exercises, with more demanding asks of providers and with this element becoming far more important in tender evaluations. We only have to look to the NHS to see what is likely to be coming to the social care sector on this issue. The new NHS contractual requirements for healthcare providers now place very clear contractual obligations on providers around carbon reporting. Currently, all large NHS contracts require Carbon Reduction Plans for suppliers' emissions; in 2024, this will apply to all procurements in the NHS. In 2027, all suppliers will be required to publicly report targets, emissions and publish a Carbon Reduction Plan for global emissions aligned to the NHS net zero target, for all their Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions.

A number of social care providers are now setting out clearly their commitment to reducing their carbon impact. Voyage Care, for example, is committed to being carbon positive by 2035 and to make significant reductions in overall carbon emissions by 2025. Voyage Care has been implementing climate and ESG measures proactively since 2020, and the carbon emission reduction achieved by these schemes equate to 4,463 tCO_2e, a 34% reduction against the 2019/20 baseline (market based). Similarly, CareTech Ltd has set out a public target of becoming carbon net zero by 2050 and reports publicly in its annual Impact Report on its carbon emissions and wider sustainability progress.

The bottom line is that every provider needs to be looking now at their approach to environmental sustainability. In the words of the CQC guidance: "Be prepared to demonstrate what you are doing to reduce the impact on your environment and how you are incorporating renewable energy, sustainable transport, and environmentally friendly waste management into your day-to-day working."

Properties

There are some 17,500 care homes in the UK, providing a home to over 400,000 people; 70% of these are residential settings. In the UK, the Government estimates that the average residential property contributes six tonnes of carbon every year. So, that would suggest that care homes are contributing around 105,000 tonnes of carbon every year. But we believe that is a significant under-estimate.

The UK's first carbon-neutral care home – Luxurycare Group's Eagles Mount care home in Poole – calculated that its annual carbon impact amounted to 163 tonnes/year! If this figure were replicated for all care homes, we would be looking at an annual total carbon impact of the UK's residential care homes of more like 2.8 million tonnes.

For those operators that own property (and those external real estate investors who lease property to operators) a key risk is to asset value as the wider economy moves to net zero carbon. Assets that do not perform in line with a science-based carbon reduction trajectory are at risk of becoming stranded which means potential devaluation or becoming financial liabilities (also known as 'asset stranding').

Addressing the carbon impact of our properties presents exciting opportunities for greater energy and cost efficiency: in addition to decarbonisation, there can be cost and CO2 savings from introducing energy and resource efficiencies, especially through the use of building and waste management systems. For example, Oakland Care offsets all carbon produced by their operations across all sites. They have closely monitored utility use and all waste streams since 2021, which has led to meaningful insights and reduction strategies, such as the halving of their clinical waste volume. Any reduction in waste production or utility use will result in a lower cost to the business, and be a positive step towards net zero.

In the UK, the average residential property has an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating – and, thus, environmental impact rating - of D. In private rented accommodation, 60% of properties have an EPC rating of D or lower; staggeringly, this accounts for 77% of all CO2 emissions in homes across England and Wales.

All of this probably means that some 60% of residential care homes – 10,500 properties – will need to improve their energy efficiency by at least one EPC level over the next few years. It is estimated that each EPC grade climbed represents around a 30–40% reduction in CO2 emissions per year. So, the potential reduction in carbon emissions of bringing all residential care homes up to an EPC rating could be truly significant – perhaps as much as a reduction of over 500,000 tonnes of carbon!

The average cost of remedial action to take a residential property from a D rating to a C rating is estimated as £5,500. Even for larger properties, the average is estimated at approximately £12,000. And the payback is becoming increasingly significant. Property experts Knight Frank estimate that energy cost savings from moving from a D to a C rated property could save nearly £400 per year. And the value of a home which moves from a D to a C rating adds an additional 3% to their value over and above local house price growth, equivalent to some £9,000 based on average resale value.

> *Case Study: Voyage Care has invested in a retrofit pilot on 14 occupied properties, focusing on fabric first interventions which require no/limited in-use management by either colleagues or people they support with the aim of mitigating increases in energy costs, improving resilience (against both climate change and energy market volatility), reducing carbon emissions and improving environmental health and wellbeing for colleagues and those they support. Site specific interventions include installation of PVs, improved controls on heating,*

lighting and water systems, installation of LEDs and improved insulation levels and fabric upgrades.

Having sustainable buildings may also mean access to green finance, where borrowers can obtain better terms if they meet certain environmental requirements. This is becoming increasingly common as banks are under pressure to demonstrate lending into environmentally-friendly assets. More broadly, being able to demonstrate your sustainability credentials can unlock 'sustainable finance' opportunities as financial institutions seek to promote sustainability through their value chain, and again giving opportunities for improved margins (including possibly on a downwards ratchet basis).

The ability to educate and influence landlords and Registered Providers (pertinent to supported living) on sustainability can prove an effective lever for change. Eden Futures' efforts on this front has resulted in the installation of PV solar panels at their head office.

Another angle to this issue is that of the comfort, care and experience of residents. As the impacts of climate change become more prevalent, care providers will need to consider adaptation of their properties so that residents are cared for in extreme weather, such as ways to cool their buildings (beyond AC!) and grounds, prevent flooding, effective insulation against hot and cold weather.

Case Study: Oakland Care ensures that their new buildings are built to the standards set by BREAAM 'excellent' as a minimum. To ensure resident comfort, they launched a trial in 2023 to closely monitor the environment in each room not only leading to more efficient use of utilities but to ensure that the optimum level of comfort is maintained without waste.

Energy costs

60% of social care providers cite utility bills as a key cost pressure, with some providers reporting in 2023 of 500% increases in energy costs over the last 12 months. Data and science are clear on the climate crisis: aside from being the right thing to do, it is clear that we cannot continue to power our estates using fossil fuel which contribute to global warming and air pollution.

Case Study: Voyage Care has installed smart meter infrastructure across its estate to improve monitoring of energy usage and use 100% renewable electricity on its freehold sites.

The cost-benefit analysis of reducing our energy usage is equally clear, with the recouping of the initial investment for improved energy efficiency and more renewable energy sources such as solar PV panels becoming ever-shorter.

The most common energy efficiency improvements you can make require relatively modest investment. Things like low impact lighting, draught proofing, improved insulation, replacement windows, better heating controls. Or just adding some draught excluders, turning lights out in empty rooms, and other small but important changes. More expensive – but often of much greater impact – improvements like installing solar power and heat pumps are becoming increasingly common. And with energy costs having spiraled, and unlikely to reduce any time soon, the case for these investments has never been greater.

Case Study. Oakland Care has ensured all of their lighting is replaced with the most efficient LEDs, noting the short return on investment for this with today's energy prices. All heating controls are monitored closely and unoccupied room turned to 'very-low'. Local campaigns at each care home focus on day-to-day management of utilities in a more efficient way, and the wider teams at the homes are engaged through group messaging to encourage further momentum. Oakland Care's buildings are all assessed under the BREEAM scheme and future builds will incorporate on-site renewable energy.

Vehicles

Globally, transport accounts for around 25% of carbon emissions and road vehicles account for almost three quarters of this total. In the UK and US, the transport sector is now responsible for emitting more greenhouse gases than any other sector, with the average petrol car in the UK producing 180g of carbon every kilometre. And let's also not forget the serious impact of combustion engine vehicles on air quality.

Figures on vehicle numbers and mileage across the social care sector are hard to come by. The majority of services will have at least one vehicle for transporting those in their care to appointments, visits, etc. So that's probably something like 20,000 vehicles. With an average UK annual car distance of 7,400 miles, that's something like 43,000 metric tonnes of carbon emitted each year. But that is just from vehicles for residential homes. The Home Care Association recently suggested that UK homecare workers travel more than four million miles per day; that equates to a further 423,000 metric tonnes of carbon emitted each year! You would have to plant almost 2.8 million trees every year to offset the impact on the environment of car miles in social care! And that figure doesn't include the impact of the hundreds of thousands of care professionals' commuting to work every day by car...!

Case Study: Eden Futures has initiated an employee survey to ascertain current commuting to and from work; this information will be used to inform their strategy to address and reduce their carbon footprint and enable measured and meaningful targets for reductions.

In December 2022, a third of all new cars sold in the UK were electric vehicles (EVs) - a staggering increase from just three years earlier when the equivalent figure was less than 2%. The reasons for this are pretty obvious: the unprecedented fuel price increases triggered by the tragic conflict in Ukraine have tipped the cost-benefit analysis decisively in favour of low carbon vehicles.

The up-front costs of [Vs are still significantly higher than combustion engine equivalents. When you look at the whole-life costs, however, the latest research shows that [Vs are now slightly cheaper to run than their petrol equivalents. That is certainly what specialist care provider CareTech found; when they factored in lower maintenance, fuel, road tax, congestion charges, etc, they found that transitioning their fleet to [Vs will save money over a relatively short timeframe.

Many people still suffer from '[V range anxiety', but nearly 99% of all driven journeys are under 100 miles and every [V on the market is capable of handling this distance on a limited charge. Today's [Vs have an average battery range of 257 miles compared with 74 miles in 2011, with predictions that 400 miles will soon be the norm.

Taking advantage of new [V salary sacrifice schemes can play a really useful part of your benefits package. At no cost to the organisation – indeed, most will actually save money – providers can offer their staff access to [V leased cars that, thanks to their tax efficiency, can instantly make [V ownership a reality for many staff. Most of us either lease or have a PCP for our cars these days so why not provide your staff with this option to get an [V car, reducing their fuel bills significantly as well as their carbon impact?

> *Case Study: CareTech Ltd only offers EV (or, by exception, PHEV) vehicles for company car users. A salary sacrifice scheme for EV vehicles is available for staff eligible for a Car Allowance and the scheme is now being rolled out more widely to other staff to provide more affordable access to EV schemes.*

There are some great examples of social care providers already seizing the initiative, such as Northern Ireland's domiciliary care provider Connected Health that has introduced a fleet of electric cars - and electric bicycles! - as part of its Carbon Neutral Care initiative.

> *Case Study: Voyage Care's fleet strategy is based on only offering hybrid/EV vehicles for company car users and the company is developing a charging infrastructure for use by colleagues across its estate to encourage EV use. Significant reductions in business travel have been achieved through investment in new ways of working and digital tools as well as promoting sustainable travel options.*

Pay rates

The *Sector Pulse Check* report published in 2023 highlighted that 92% of respondents consider workforce pay as the sector's most significant cost pressure. The King's Fund has reported that an estimated 30% of care workers are paid at or within nine pence of the minimum salary level. A shift in perspective suggest that this short-term approach doesn't stack up commercially in the longer-run.

Skills for Care reports an average 29% employee turnover rate in the sector (more than double that of the NHS), with 75% attributing this to low pay rates in the sector. But, to replace a salaried employee can cost, on average, between 6-9 months' salary when you factor in recruitment costs and training expenses. To cover staff gap, the sector engages a growing army of agency staff – but agency staff cost 80% more than permanent employees. And research is also clear that longer-serving staff are more skilled, deliver greater productivity and higher quality. When you look at all of the costs, the commercial case for bearing down on salary costs looks increasingly short-sighted.

Increasingly, the case for switching to the Real Living Wage is being recognised as being the right thing to do for employees and for employers. Independent research shows that 86% of employers report that Living Wage accreditation had enhanced their reputation as an employer and 64% that it had differentiated them from others in the same industry or activity. Crucially, over half of employers report that the Living Wage has improved both recruitment and retention, with 45% saying that accreditation had also improved the quality of applicants and 29% that it had raised skills amongst Living Wage employees. One social care provider CEO recently spoke passionately about how switching to the Real Living Wage has reduced staff turnover from over 50% to below 40% in less than a year.

Staff recruitment and retention
Evidence shows clearly that employees want to work for organisations with strong sustainability credentials, are more loyal and more productive. A vital component of our collective approach to tackling the sector's recruitment and retention crisis must be to support our employees to contribute to their communities and playing their part in our sustainability agenda.

Some key statistics about employees' increasingly sustainability-minded workforce, reported in BUPA's Wellbeing Index 2023 report, include:

- Nearly half of those who are employed (45%) say their motivation at work would increase if they had the opportunity to contribute their sustainable and eco- friendly initiatives to leadership. A similar proportion (44%) say the same about having the chance to recommend sustainable and eco-friendly companies to partner with.
- 48% of Gen Z workers surveyed agree that they would be willing to consider leaving their jobs if their employer doesn't demonstrate action on social and environmental issues.
- One in five UK workers surveyed (21%) believe that it's not enough for senior leaders to implement sustainability initiatives without wider input and buy-in from the organisation and staff.

Local and service/site-led initiatives within communities, however small are vitally important.

Case study: Eden Futures has formed an ESG Committee, in which accessibility and inclusion is a key driver, and their influencer programme has enabled active discussions and actions regarding ESG across their organisation. The organisation sees its role as being to engage everyone in sustainability conversations and believes that starting small, such as the launch of a focused recycling project, has led to all of their staff and those they support embracing their wider sustainability efforts.

Case study: CareTech Ltd has introduced their CARE4 One Planet Living programme to provide a framework for each of their services to formulate an action plan and targets by which staff and those for whom they care can work in their individual service to deliver positive improvements across the sustainability agenda. The programme is based on Bioregional's One Planet Living sustainability framework, comprising ten simple principles and detailed goals and guidance. Importantly, programme targets are included in the company's corporate reporting framework, demonstrating that sustainability is a key element of the core business of the company.

We can also boost the life chances of those at the margins of society providing them with meaningful jobs. We need to work with organisations with access to such communities to create exciting new employment pathways, opening up whole new pools of untapped talent, recognising that values not qualifications are more important for care roles. Promoting a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion within your organisation and broadening recruitment programmes to enable refugees, care-experienced young people, those with disabilities, and young people from disadvantaged communities to gain employment in the sector can be beneficial both for the organisation and under-represented communities.

With even the best of intentions and determination, it is clear that the ongoing and chronic inadequate funding of social care is not going to be resolved quickly. Social care services operate on a values-based model and therefore providing our workforce with initiatives that go beyond hourly pay is essential. Over the last 12 months, Eden Futures has produced a monthly newsletter for all staff, their families, commissioners, and those they support. Every month, they cover a range of topics, including wellbeing support, action for happiness, random acts of kindness, emotional health, financial wellbeing, physical health, mindfulness, awareness days, healthy recipes, and more. All of this, they believe, supports their recruitment and retention targets effectively.

Supporting our communities
Most talk about ESG and sustainability, very understandably, focuses on the environmental elements – the 'E'. As a highly-regulated sector, most care providers are also very good at the 'G' – Governance - of ESG. The 'S' in ESG, however, is often overlooked but is critical to the social care sector. Social care delivers a huge benefit to society but just being a social care provider doesn't mean that you automatically tick the 'S' box.

It is clear that a well thought-out Social strategy can address at least three of the key challenges being faced by the sector, namely:

- The workforce recruitment crisis
- The workforce retention issue
- The poor public perception of social care

The key elements of the Social element of ESG are how organisations look after their people and how they support the local communities of which they are a part. Research makes it very clear that companies that support and empower their people and are active parts of their local communities do better. Staff are more loyal, more productive and deliver higher quality.

Organisations that are visibly connecting with and supporting their local communities will attract more local talent, are less likely to trigger concerns about having a care service in the community and will promote a more positive view of the social care sector.

And there is no doubt that commissioners and regulators are increasingly looking to providers to demonstrate their social value credentials and their commitment to supporting the communities in which they operate.

> *Case Study: Voyage Care's 'Mission Zero', their behavioural change and engagement campaign, is targeted at colleagues and the people they support to drive engagement and awareness of sustainability initiatives. Captain Planet and his three sustainability sidekicks - Energy Educator, Water Wiz and Waste Warrior - provide a series of fun and engaging activities to support people with guidance on reducing our environmental impact. This includes an interactive energy saving checklist, a Voyage Care cookbook (with ideas on reducing waste, energy efficiency and reducing meat consumption) and an environmental focus in stories and activities shared on our intranet, Zest magazine and Activ8 activity programme.*

Examples of how providers can support local communities, include:

- each service developing its own Community Engagement Plan;
- supporting volunteers from staff teams to serve as Enterprise Advisers in local school;
- sourcing as much as possible from small local businesses; and,
- supporting employee volunteering and charitable fundraising;

Consumer demand
The business case for sustainability often focuses on reducing operating costs. An important aspect that is too often overlooked, however, is the demands of consumers. Consumers increasingly expect businesses to play their part in tackling climate change as much as governments. And consumers increasingly factor in an organisation's values and their commitment to sustainability at the heart of their buying decisions.

Research is increasingly clear on the importance of consumers' expectations of business in respect of environmental sustainability:

- Recent research by *The Economist* highlighted that the demand for sustainable products in the UK has increased eightfold over the past five years.
- Market researcher Garner reported in 2021 that 73% of UK consumers want to behave more sustainably in the year ahead (and beyond!).
- An independent study commissioned by SmartestEnergy revealed that 4 out of 5 people describe themselves as likely to choose a brand with a positive approach to environmental sustainability.
- Research by Vypr for its 2023 *Food for Thought*[iii] report revealed 58% of consumers actively or sometimes choose sustainable products when they can.

Whether individuals are private funders or their care services or their fees are being met by the state, they are consuming a service. They are able to make a choice about what sort of service they want, how they want to receive that service, how much they are willing to pay for that service, and, in the case of residential care, where they want to receive that service.

The Vypr study cited above also highlighted how individuals are changing their daily routines to become more sustainable; this includes recycling more (58%), choosing products with less packaging (36%), choosing local produce (27%) and reducing the amount of meat consumed (26%).

Consumers increasingly demand that the products and services they purchase must be increasingly sustainable, that they want to select organisations that are ethically-driven and, that the services they purchase must support their own increasingly-sustainable daily routines. There is absolutely no reason why this should be any different for people choosing their social care providers. To remain competitive, therefore, social care providers must not only adopt environmentally sustainable practises, but ensure that they communicate this to their potential customers.

The recent launch of Autumna's *Go Green* initiative demonstrates the increasing sustainability demands of social care's consumers. As Autumna's press release states, "*Go Green* will give care providers the ability to showcase all of their sustainability and green projects to increasingly environmentally-conscious care seekers."

Case Study: Oakland Care has implemented a number of initiatives across the group to provide more sustainable care services for their residents, including:

- *a review of all waste streams to maximise recycling and a 'zero-to-landfill' policy;*
- *creating sustainable menus, including a daily selection of low-carbon, plant-based meals;*
- *single-use plastics for water have been drastically reduced or eliminated completely by installing efficient filtered dispensers;*
- *halving of care-related waste by introducing vac-pack systems in all homes; and,*
- *the introduction of wild gardens to enhance biodiversity and to provide a valuable outdoor resource for residents to enjoy and to which they can contribute.*

Conclusion

This paper will always be a 'work in progress' as the sector progresses on its sustainability journey. Even at this relatively early stage in the sector's work to embrace a more sustainable growth model, it is clear that there is a wide range of opportunities available to social care organisations to embrace this agenda that will positively impact on the bottom line. It is also increasingly clear that early adopters will benefit significantly from seizing these opportunities voluntarily and enthusiastically rather than waiting for regulatory and legal compulsion. Despite the very many issues that social care operators undoubtedly face, this paper highlights the innovation, enthusiasm and creativity of the sector to rise to the sustainability challenge.