

Consultation for the Supply and Management of Environmentally Sustainable Walking Aids - Working Towards Circular, Net Zero Carbon Walking Aids



1.0 Introduction

The NHS purchases a large number of walking aids every year - for example crutches, walking sticks, zimmer frames and rollators. The majority (65%) of these are purchased by individual trusts and other healthcare providers via the NHS Supply Chain Aids for Daily Living framework.

This framework ends on 31 October 2023 and will be retendered in the autumn of this year. NHS Supply Chain is taking the end of this framework as an opportunity to review our approach to the supply and management of walking aids in the light of the NHS commitment to achieve a net zero emissions by 2040 and net zero emissions from the supply chain by 2045.

The NHS is committed in its drive to net zero carbon and net zero plus through decarbonisation of its supply chain. Walking aids have been identified as a carbon intensive product where change is needed. NHS England and Improvement (NHSEI) are particularly concerned about the carbon impact of walking aids, and we are seeing an increasing demand and appetite among trusts and stakeholders for a walking aids provision that support NHS carbon targets and ambitions, while ensuring patient safety.

2.0 Carbon Impact of Walking Aids

Why walking aids? Walking aids have been identified as being highly carbon intensive and one of the top 20 contributors to the NHS carbon footprint in the medical devices and equipment category.

For this reason, the NHS needs to progressively reduce the life-cycle carbon footprint of walking aids and enable a transition to a circular model of walking aid provision.

One of the actions taken by NHSEI is to mandate that trusts increase the rate of return and reuse of walking aids and a minimum target of 40% for the return of walking aids to be achieved by 2025 has been introduced. In addition, mandatory requirements for all tenders to have a minimum 10% weighting for social value/net zero came into force on 1 April 2022.

Trusts are being supported to put in place 'return and reuse' schemes and a carbon calculator has been created to enable trusts to measure the carbon savings. Return, reuse, recycle pilot projects underway aim to identify ways of maximising the return of devices to enable their reuse or end of life recycling.



Once returned, the walking aids are checked, maintained, cleaned, and made available for reuse. Clear refurbishment processes set out in Standard Operating Procedures, backed up by manufacturers' instructions, provide Allied Health Professionals with confidence in issuing refurbished devices.

However, despite a number of successful pilot schemes at a trust level, overall return rates remain low. While there are more measures that can be taken within the NHS, such as walking aids being issued to patients on loan with information on how to return, help is needed from suppliers to achieve better levels of return and reuse.

3.0 Market Dialogue

This market dialogue is being launched to inform the supply chain of this changing demand and begin a conversation and exchange on the steps that could be taken on the part of suppliers and the NHS to:

- Reduce the carbon intensity of walking aids across their life cycle
- Facilitate a circular model of supply and reuse.

As part of this two-way dialogue, we would also like to raise for discussion resilience of supply in the light of global market conditions and scope for added value in product supply and life cycle management.

The results of this consultation will be used to inform the specification for walking aids in the new NHS Supply Chain framework.

4.0 How to Respond

We believe that the supply chain has the information, required insights and creativity to address the challenges outlined. We are open to all ideas that contribute to reducing the carbon footprint of walking aids. For example, in design, manufacture, nature of supply, new or alternative products and services, and distribution.

An online market consultation event will be held on 23 June 2022 from 9am-12.30pm (09:00-12:30 BST).

Please register for the event at - <https://www.supplychain.nhs.uk/walking-aids>

We welcome input and participation from existing suppliers and more widely across the supply chain.



5.0 Additional Information

5.1 A net zero NHS

The following targets are NHS policy:

- For the emissions we control directly (the NHS Carbon Footprint), we will reach net zero by 2040, with an ambition to reach an 80% reduction by 2028 to 2032
- For the emissions we can influence (our NHS Carbon Footprint Plus), we will reach net zero by 2045, with an ambition to reach an 80% reduction by 2036 to 2039.

5.2 Increase in 'return and reuse' culture

While walking aids provided to patients remain the property of the NHS, relatively few are returned for reuse and recycling. A 20% return rate is currently considered good practice amongst trusts. NHS trusts are increasingly looking to adopt measures that encourage and facilitate improved return rates, for example through provision of drop-off points, requests, pro-active communication, automated recall, promotion of return schemes, and return amnesties.

Recent trust performance reports indicate that 100 trusts have some form of reuse scheme in place and a further 44 are looking to establish one within the next 1-2 years. The majority of the remaining trusts do not issue walking aids. See NHS to reuse more medical equipment (www.gov.uk).

5.3 Changing perception of barriers to reuse

Previously, reuse schemes have tended to be limited due to lack of awareness or understanding around liabilities, acceptability to stakeholders, the resource requirements to set up a scheme, uncertainty on appropriate refurbishment process and manufacturer instructions, lack of awareness of the carbon benefit, and the perceived low-cost benefit. However, research undertaken, evidence gathered, and legal advice received has helped to change perceptions around reuse schemes and these issues.



5.4 Concerns about liability are no longer an issue

Some trusts expressed concern about the refurbishment and reuse of walking aids, with specific regard to the potential for and liability for defects. The legal guidance given is that the risk for a walking aid reuse scheme is low and should not be a barrier to implementing a reuse scheme when balanced against the significant environmental, health and cost benefits saving.

NHS Resolution, which provides third party insurance for NHS trusts have stated a trust or ICS with appropriate indemnity insurance will be covered for a walking aid reuse scheme. Trusts are encouraged to mitigate risks by buying devices intended for reuse, ensuring patients are provided with information, guidance, and support, having Standard Operating Procedure for maintenance and refurbishment.

5.5 Stakeholder acceptability and appetite for reuse is increasing

NHSEI has been discussing the carbon intensity, operational use and end of life management of walking aids with stakeholders. The key stakeholder groups consulted were clearly in favour of reuse, and as awareness increases so does the demand for reuse. If refurbished walking aids were available, NHSEI expects trusts to provide them to patients and evidence suggests trusts are keen. Consultation with patients is underway to better understand their motivations for returning devices and how to communicate the returns process to them.

5.6 The level of resources needed to check and refurbish is low

Pilot projects have shown that the time taken to check, clean, repair as needed and return to use is low (estimated as 5-10 minutes per device). Introduction of a Standard Operating Procedure, backed up by manufacturers information and availability of spare parts has streamlined the process and enabled the process to be managed by non-clinical support staff such as porters.

5.7 The cost-benefit of reuse schemes makes it worthwhile

Case studies have identified the potential financial savings to NHS trusts through both in-house and third-party supplier reuse schemes.



For example:

- NHS in Barnsley reused 94% of 14,000 walking aids collected.
- Mid-Essex Hospitals trusts achieved a 40% return rate at its pilot site and expanded to a second hospital.
- 3,000 items worth £27,000 are reused each year, plus the trust generates income from scrap metal from damaged items.

5.8 Carbon saving achieved is measurable and recognised

The potential carbon saving has been identified as significant, with some 5.7k tonnes of carbon that could be saved through wider implementation of reuse schemes. A carbon calculator has been developed for NHS trusts to identify both the potential carbon savings of a scheme and to measure the carbon savings of schemes in place.

6.0 About Us

6.1 NHS England and Improvement (NHSEI)

NHSEI have worked together as a single organisation since 1 April 2019, to help improve care for patients and provide leadership and support to the wider NHS.

NHSEI is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department of Health and Social Care.

6.2 Supply Chain Coordination Limited

Supply Chain Coordination Limited is the management function for NHS Supply Chain operating model. It aims to deliver supply chain excellence and best value to NHS customers and patients through innovation, service, and clinical expertise.

6.3 NHS trusts

An NHS trust is an organisational unit within the NHS of England and Wales, generally serving either a geographical area or a specialised function (such as an ambulance service). In any particular location, there may be several trusts involved in the different aspects of providing healthcare.

