

A Greener Future

Navigating Sustainability
in Care Homes



Making a real difference



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Introduction

By James Leigh,

General Manager of Care Homes at apetito

Hardly a day passes without reference to rapid climate change, new stats highlighting the damage we are inflicting on the environment, alongside calls for action and change.

Increasingly, sustainability, global warming and net zero are at the forefront of news and our public conversations.

Care homes are no different.



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Every home cares deeply about its residents, and as part of this, will be taking their sustainable obligations seriously. We are all caretakers of our planet and its therefore important for all of us to take responsibility and drive action.

This is why we have launched this new guide on environmental sustainability, 'A Greener Future: Navigating Sustainability in Care Homes', to help care homes make some easy changes and provoke fresh thinking across day-to-day operations. Think of it as a compass – pointing the way to the cornerstone of more sustainable operations and giving helpful guidance for homes seeking to make change towards a greener future.

And by doing so, homes can not only minimise their environmental impact but also stand to reap tangible benefits, from cost savings to enhanced community engagement.

Inside, you will find useful information, guidance, and support across many issues that you face every day. From energy efficiency initiatives to food waste management, and menu cycles that reduce carbon emissions- without impacting on a resident's health or choice.

Sustainability is embedded in the heart of apetito, shown by our ambitious short-term and long-term carbon commitments, independently validated by the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi), with a mission to reach Net Zero by 2040. We are also immensely proud to have been awarded The King's Awards for Enterprise in Sustainable Development 2024 – an honour which follows on from three Queen's Awards for Enterprise in the last two decades.

Working together, we can make a real difference to both human wellbeing and planetary health. We hope that you will find the guide useful in your business, and we are here to help.

The Growing Importance of Sustainability: Understanding the *Why*

In recent years, the impact of human activity on the environment has been spoken about more than ever, and our responsibilities as both individuals and businesses towards limiting these impacts have become more important. Without action, rising temperatures and extreme weather could seriously affect things like food supplies and water availability - and ultimately, our way of life.

In a business context, Streamlined Energy and Carbon Reporting (SECR) has become mandatory in recent years for “large” businesses, or those that meet the criteria. Even businesses that do not meet such criteria are encouraged to provide voluntary reporting to demonstrate their awareness of their carbon impact.

Within the health and social care sector, the Care Quality Commission’s Single Assessment Framework also now places environmental sustainability firmly within its criteria for deeming if a service is “well led”. This includes looking at whether care providers have shown action in areas such as carbon reduction, energy saving measures and waste reduction and recycling.

Despite this quality statement not yet being formally assessed outside of NHS trusts, it’s said to be part of broader regulatory changes for other services expected to be rolled out imminently. For care homes, this presents a valuable opportunity to get ahead, reflecting a genuine commitment to the wellbeing of residents, staff, and the wider community.

This emerging shift in reporting and regulation demonstrates the growing importance for transparency in this space, and for businesses to demonstrate their approach in reducing environmental impacts. Care homes, with their potential for high energy consumption, water usage and waste generation, can have a significant environmental footprint, therefore, making even small changes could create large impact.

Fundamentally, weaving sustainability into business is the right thing to do for the environment and long-term health of the planet. But beyond that, there are plenty of other good reasons why homes should be prioritising sustainable practices.

With sustainability climbing up the priority list, more people are beginning to form an opinion on the subject. Recent data collected on adults in Great Britain found that over half see climate change and the environment as one of the most important issues facing the UK today¹. This additional public perception demands more action from businesses to ensure they are prioritising social responsibility and maintain both reputation and credibility. When it comes to choosing a care home for a loved one, families are likely starting to take sustainability into consideration too. Therefore, having a plan in place with a clear direction may help care homes to attract residents and drive business growth.

There also may be opportunities for homes to see cost savings through making some sustainable switches. For instance, cutting down on food waste during mealtimes, perhaps by using pre-portioned meal solutions, can be advantageous both environmentally and economically. This approach means less money goes “down the drain” with discarded meals whilst also a possible reduction in waste disposal costs. Paying more attention to use of utilities, and where efficiencies could be made, can also provide dual benefit, with reducing water waste and energy usage helping to support sustainability goals whilst lowering monthly bills for homes.

¹<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/publicopinionsandsocialtrendsgreatbritain/october2025>



Energy Efficiency in Everyday Care

With care homes operating 24 hours a day to provide quality care for their residents, it's no surprise that energy consumption is high. Since care homes typically house elderly residents that feel the cold more than most, there is a larger demand for heating to be used year-round, and the cooking, washing, and cleaning required to run a home further contributes significant energy usage.

And this higher usage comes at significant costs to homes month-on-month, as well as increasing carbon emissions and environmental impacts. With energy prices in recent years continuing to fluctuate unpredictably, finding ways to make operations more energy efficient is essential. Fortunately, there are a range of solutions care homes can explore.

Simple Switches

A great place to start is identifying areas where energy is being wasted unnecessarily in the care home, as even simple checks on the lighting, heating and appliance usage might reveal some quick wins. For example, checking if appliances and equipment are unnecessarily left on standby, carrying out temperature checks on radiators and assessing the timing of your heating. Once this has been done, it's good practice to continue frequent tracking, helping you to identify any issues early-on and measure the impact of any changes made.

In terms of making small, but impactful, changes throughout the care home, switching to LED lighting is a great first step. LED bulbs use up to 90% less energy than traditional bulbs and can also last up to 25 times longer², making them much more cost efficient to run and replace. Implementing controls like timers, that switch lighting off when not in use, and dimmer switches, that lower lighting levels, can also support your energy efficiency efforts.

Here, make sure to also consider the lighting that is used outside, which can often be left on for long periods. Selecting products that have motion sensors and automatic daylight shut-off can help to keep usage, and costs, lower.

Another important area to consider is insulation and how efficiently this may be working to avoid heat escaping unnecessarily. All windows should be double-glazed, and proper insulation should be installed in walls and roofs to reduce the need for heating and cooling systems. With proper insulation measures found to reduce energy consumption by around 10-20%³, it will keep your costs down, as well as lowering carbon emissions.

When you are using heating, other smart changes can be made to allow for better temperature regulation throughout the home. Installing thermostats and heating controls help to reduce unnecessary energy use by only heating the areas that need it and help to keep consistent room temperatures.

“LED bulbs use up to 90% less energy than traditional bulbs and can also last up to 25 times longer”

² <https://www.energy.gov/energysaver/lighting-choices-save-you-money>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/household-energy-efficiency-statistics-detailed-report-2024>

Renewables

If budget allows, exploring renewable energy sources, such as solar panels or heat pumps, is a great way for care homes to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and lower their impact on the environment.

Solar panels absorb sunlight and convert it into power used for electricity, increasing electricity self-sufficiency. Despite perceptions, they continue to generate power even on cloudy days - just at a reduced rate - making them effective all year-round.

Whilst installation involves upfront costs, technological advances and wider adoption has caused the prices of solar panels to drop in recent years. Combining this with ever-increasing energy costs, the payback times are now significantly shorter.

Heat pumps are another option, providing a low carbon way to heat buildings efficiently. These work by drawing in heat energy from the air (air source pump) or the ground (ground source pump), raising the temperature and then pumping it inside. Although powered by electricity, they generate more heat energy than is used in electrical energy, keeping buildings, and your residents, warm all day long while cutting energy use.

While most schemes have eligibility requirements, care homes can explore national or local grants to help with installation costs. For example, the Boiler Upgrade Scheme offers up to £7,500 to replace gas and oil boilers with low-carbon heat pumps, and Great British Energy provides funding for clean energy community projects⁴.

Driving Behaviour Change

Encouraging behavioural changes among staff and residents is an important part of improving energy efficiency. Simple habits like turning off lights and closing doors can all add up to meaningful savings in the long run.

To increase engagement, the actions must be made as easy and simple as possible for people to follow. This can be achieved through simple visual prompts, such as signs or images, or clear instructions that indicate and reinforce the desired behaviour. One example might be “Switch It Off” signs near light switches and plug sockets, to remind individuals to do so when not in use, or another might be leaving instructions near a thermostat so that everyone is clear on how it works.

Alongside this, providing appropriate training to staff helps to encourage higher engagement, making sure they understand the “why” of the desired behaviour. Using messaging and language that resonates with the audience is also important since it evokes emotion and helps them to feel more involved and have a deeper interest in the action – ultimately making it more likely they will want to play their part in driving down unnecessary energy usage.



Did You Know?

At apetito, we have recently **invested £1.3 million** in our use of renewable energy through significantly increasing the number of solar panels used across our main manufacturing site in Trowbridge, Wiltshire. Now installed, these panels will generate around **15% of all the electricity** used across the whole site, and the payback time of the project is **only four years**.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/great-british-energy-to-cut-energy-bills-for-community-facilities>

Reducing Food Waste

According to the Food Waste Index Report 2024, around one third of food produced globally is either lost or wasted, equating to around 1.3 billion tonnes of food waste per year. This contributes to an estimated 8-10% of greenhouse gas emissions - demonstrating the sheer size of the challenge⁵.

The Waste Resource Action Programme (WRAP) say that the UK is responsible for 10.7 million tonnes of this food waste, which could have been converted into a staggering 15 million meals - enough to feed the entire UK population 3 meals a day for over 3 months.

Food waste also carries financial implications, costing the UK around £22 billion per year⁵. Therefore, reducing the amount of food ending up in the bin should be a critical focus for care homes to both reduce their environmental impacts as well as save money – at a time when every penny truly counts.

And new requirements in this space through the Simpler Recycling legislation means that care homes of a certain size are required to separate out their food waste for collection. This helps to provide a true idea of the current size of the problem, and the cost implications.

“Food waste costs the UK around **£22 billion per year.**”

However, recent research carried out by *apetito*, in partnership with Care England, found that one third of care homes surveyed are still struggling to manage their food waste levels.

When looking to reduce food waste, the best method is focusing on prevention. Start by identifying where the most waste occurs during meal services and continue measuring and monitoring this to spot trends. This insight will help in making informed and effective changes to operations.

Our recent research with Care England also found plate waste to be the leading cause of food waste in care homes, with 51% of those surveyed citing it as the primary contributor.

Focusing on this high rate of plate wastage, it highlights the importance of better portion control management to both ensure residents are served meals that match their appetite and dietary needs and help to reduce food left on the plate. Here, ensuring staff have the correct training on appropriate portion sizing, and clear communication of individual needs, is essential.

A pre-prepared meal system can provide benefits here through offering consistent, set portion sizes whilst also making it easier to accommodate for individual preferences and unforeseen circumstances.

Improving plate presentation can also significantly reduce plate wastage. We all “eat with our eyes”, and so by serving great food that looks just as good as it tastes, residents are much more likely to enjoy their meal and finish everything on their plate.

Finally, gathering resident feedback should be a regular part of your mealtime routine, finding out which dishes they enjoy and which they often leave on the plate. Tracking this feedback will help your team to identify trends and adjust menus accordingly - lowering the amount of waste seen from uneaten meals and improving the overall dining experience.

Did You Know?

apetito are signatories to the **UK Food and Drink Pact**, which is a voluntary agreement that enables collaborative action across the UK food chain to deliver reductions in food waste, greenhouse gas emissions and water stress. *apetito* has also held a nationwide partnership with food redistribution charity, **FareShare** since December 2023, aiming to ensure that no good food goes to waste but instead helps those that need it most.

⁵<https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/45230>

⁶<https://wrap.org.uk/taking-action/food-drink/actions/action-on-food-waste#:~:text=For%20households%20and%20businesses%2C%2070,alone%20total%2018%20million%20tonnes.>





Ask the *Expert*

Lottie Percy, Sustainability Manager at apetito debunks some common misconceptions around making more sustainable switches in care.

“Sustainable catering means eating fully plant-based”

Not at all. In fact, small shifts in reducing red meat consumption or adding a couple more vegetarian options into your diet can make a big impact. It's not about extremes but having a balanced diet!

“Food waste is unavoidable in care homes”

Whilst there will always be a small amount, through better portion control, improved plate presentation and regular resident feedback, care homes can significantly reduce the levels they're seeing.

“Energy-saving measures disrupt daily care and routine”

Making simple changes, such as LED lighting, insulation and thermostatic control, can be implemented easily without impacting on resident comfort or regular routine.

“Residents won't accept the menu changes”

The best approach is making small and gradual changes to menus that do not impact on the choice and variety available. It's also important to have open conversations with residents, that help them to understand the “why” and bring them along on the journey. This way, many will be open to change – and even enthusiastic!

“Sustainable changes are too expensive”

Many sustainable practices, such as reducing food waste or working on more efficient energy consumption, will save you money over time through ordering less ingredients, and stopping using energy unnecessarily.

“Sustainable packaging means everything must be biodegradable”

Reducing unnecessary packaging altogether is the most effective way to start cutting waste, providing the best solution for the environment. If unavoidable, then using reusable and recyclable packaging can be the next most effective option. Make sure to speak with your partnering suppliers – they may be able to support you!

“Sustainability is just a tick-box exercise”

Making sustainable changes provides a chance to improve wellbeing, reduce costs and showcase leadership, as well as protect the environment and our planet for future generations. Increasingly, it is also being woven into regulation for businesses, with SECR being mandatory for some businesses and sustainable impacts being monitored on the CQCs Single Assessment Framework for NHS Trusts. Soon, this is aimed to be rolled out across other areas that the CQC monitors and so now is the time for care homes to get ahead of the game.

Alongside this, families and communities are placing more value on environmental responsibility, making it a factor to be considered when choosing a home for a loved one.

Did You Know?

The **Science Based Target Initiative (SBTi)** is a corporate climate action organisation that helps companies to play their part in combating the climate crisis. SBTi create standards, tools and guidance that allows companies to set GHG emissions reduction targets. Over 4,000 companies and financial institutions have set emissions reduction targets, including apetito, helping to provide guidance on what we need to do to reduce our environmental impact.

Did You Know?

Net Zero carbon emissions mean cutting down emissions as much as possible and then balancing out what's left by removing it from the atmosphere. Reduction should always be done first, with offsetting used only for that final part. This can be done through actions such as planting trees or capturing the carbon using specialist technology. The goal is to make sure that the overall impact is neutral, with total emissions adding up to zero. Having said that, it's important to choose offsetting methods carefully, as whilst some are genuinely effective, others may offer little true benefit or even cause unintended harm.



Helping the Care Sector Towards Net Zero with Project Boomerang

Since 2021, we have been operating the world's first closed-loop recycling scheme for ready meal trays on an industrial scale. This pioneering scheme demonstrates our commitment to sustainable business practice and leading the way towards a more circular economy.

How does it work?

After our Specialist Nutrition meals are served to residents, used trays are collected, not disposed of, and cleaned to remove any food content – either by washing or putting through the dishwasher.

Once clean, the trays are then stacked, labelled and returned to us by handing them to our driver on the next delivery.

The trays are then sent on to our recycling partner where they are broken down and made into brand-new trays to use for our meals – all here in the UK!

Our Specialist Diets meal trays are made from:



Up to
80%
recycled
plastic



And are
100%
recyclable

What can you save?

By returning your Specialist Nutrition meal trays back to us through our closed-loop scheme, you could save an estimated **272kg CO2e per year***!



Boiling over
6,804 kettles!



Over **372** toilet rolls!



Driving a petrol
car **992** miles!



As well as significant cost
savings as waste collection
costs are reduced

*based on returning 20 trays per day

What do our customers think?

Carl Jackson, Head of Commercial at *Dovehaven Care Homes* spoke about their experience of adopting this:

“When apetito introduced their closed-loop recycling scheme, we did not hesitate to get involved and soon began returning Specialist Nutrition meal trays across a number of our homes.

“As a group, we are deeply passionate about reducing our environmental impact and recognise the importance of doing our bit for the planet. This initiative allows us to take further meaningful action while also delivering some operational benefit, such as cutting down on waste collection costs.

“The team at apetito has made the process easy to understand and follow, providing clear guidance and helpful visual assets to support our teams.

“In just 6 months, recycling the trays has become part of the daily routines across participating homes, with an ambition to expand the scheme out further. Even with busy kitchens, our staff have embraced the process.

“This is a great example of what's possible when care providers and suppliers work hand-in-hand towards a shared goal. We are proud to be on this journey together and contributing to the care sector's progress towards net zero.”

Taking the Carbon *out of Menus*

From hearty cottage pies to classic roast beef dinners, traditional red meat dishes remain popular favourites among residents and a staple on care home menus. Yet as care homes begin to explore ways of reducing their environmental footprint, modestly reducing red meat consumption is proving to be a meaningful step towards more sustainable dining.

Interestingly, when looking at the carbon footprint of our ingredient mix at *apetito* we found that whilst beef only represents 5% by weight of all the ingredients we use, it accounts for a staggering 37% of our ingredient carbon footprint. A stark difference when compared with chicken, which equally represents 5% by weight, yet only 7% of the footprint.

This difference really emphasised how making even small reductions in the use of red meat in favour of ingredients with a lower carbon footprint, such as poultry, fish, or plant-based options, would be able to make significant changes in carbon footprint.

In practice, through using “nudge theory”, homes could drive significant reductions in their carbon emissions through implementing small, subtle changes to resident menus – even just changing out two meals on a two-week menu cycle could make a real difference.

This approach is one that we have proven in practice at *apetito* in other areas of the health and social care sector, by delivering the first reduced carbon menus into the NHS back in 2022, working with our partners MITIE and St George’s University Hospital in Tooting, London.

Since adoption, the results have been extremely impressive with St. George’s Hospital seeing its menu drop 17% in carbon emissions. After rolling the programme out further afield across partnering hospitals, overall, we have seen close to a 16% carbon reduction across meals that we supply into the Healthcare sector. Importantly, this has all been delivered without incurring any additional cost into the NHS or impacting on patient satisfaction.

With such small changes in choice, meal variety is not impacted, and residents would not even be aware that they are eating from a lower-carbon menu.

Of course, the dietary needs of residents and their access to appropriate nutrition should always be at the forefront and never compromised in pursuit of lower carbon. However, care homes should be considering making some small, smart changes to their menu cycles that help to bring down those carbon emissions and meet sustainability goals.

If you are interested in understanding how we can work with your care home to design a lower-carbon menu, get in touch!

Scan here

to book your
tasting now!





Our Net Zero Commitment

We are committed to achieving Net Zero carbon emissions by 2040, supported by a robust three-stage carbon reduction pathway that is independently validated and approved by the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi). This ensures our targets are credible, science-led, and focused on genuine decarbonisation rather than offsetting.



King's Awards for Enterprise

apetito are honoured to have been awarded with the UK's highest business accolade, The King's Awards for Enterprise in Sustainable Development 2024. This is our fourth Royal Honour and recognises our commitment to conducting business in a way that impacts positively on the environment, society and economy. This also celebrates our ambition to achieve Net Zero by 2040 and our work in taking actions to meet challenging short-term and long-term targets for carbon reduction (validated by the Science Based Targets Initiative).



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