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The Net Zero contract

How soft-FM decisions shape a trust's decarbonisation trajectory

White paper 3 of 5 . For NHS Chairs, DoFs and Estates Directors

30 August 2026

Executive summary

The NHS Net Zero targets are legislated. Eighty percent reduction in the NHS Carbon Footprint by 2028 to 2032, against a 1990 baseline. Full net zero by 2040. Oil as a primary heating fuel must be removed from the estate by 2028. Fossil-fuel primary heating must be phased out by 2032. The one-billion-pound NHS Decarbonisation of Estates framework opens for bids on 1 May 2026 and its programme starts on 1 October 2026.

Most trust decarbonisation plans focus on the capital programme. Heating, ventilation, solar, insulation. That is right but not sufficient. About one quarter of the NHS operating carbon footprint sits inside the daily soft-FM operating model. Cleaning chemicals. Waste streams. Food procurement. Portering vehicle fuel. Uniform lifecycle. Laundry. Consumables.

This paper argues that the trusts that will hit 2028 and 2032 are the trusts that treat the soft-FM contract as a decarbonisation instrument, not as a cost line. And that a governed soft-FM partner brings a decarbonisation trajectory the trust cannot build in-house at the same speed.

2028-2032	2028	2032	£1bn
80% reduction deadline	Oil primary heating out	Fossil primary heating out	Decarbonisation of Estates framework

About a quarter of NHS operating carbon sits inside the soft-FM operating model. Ignore it and 2028 slips.

1. What the NHS Net Zero commitments actually say

The Delivering a Net Zero NHS strategy sets two carbon footprints. The NHS Carbon Footprint, which covers the services directly delivered by the NHS. And the NHS Carbon Footprint Plus, which extends to the supply chain. Both have binding targets.

Target	Deadline	Baseline
NHS Carbon Footprint. 80% reduction	2028 to 2032	1990
NHS Carbon Footprint. Net zero	2040	1990
NHS Carbon Footprint Plus. 80% reduction	2036 to 2039	1990-92
NHS Carbon Footprint Plus. Net zero	2045	1990-92
Oil as primary heating fuel removed	2028	n/a
Fossil-fuel primary heating phased out	2032	n/a

The Delivering a Net Zero NHS strategy is statutorily embedded in the Health and Care Act 2022. Each trust has a Green Plan. Each ICS reports on carbon. From October 2027 the NHS will only work with suppliers that align with the NHS net zero commitment. That last date is important. Because it means every soft-FM procurement decision made in 2026 has to assume its supplier will meet the 2027 alignment test.

2. Where soft-FM sits in the carbon footprint

The NHS Carbon Footprint breakdown attributes about a quarter of operational emissions to activities that are, in practice, either delivered by soft-FM directly or shaped by soft-FM operating decisions.

Soft-FM operating area	Where the carbon sits	What a governed partner changes
Cleaning chemicals	Manufacture and transport of consumables. Water heating for cleaning cycles.	Concentrate-and-dose systems. Cold-water cleaning where clinically permitted.
Waste streams	Segregation, transport, high-temperature incineration.	Reduce clinical waste stream. Increase recycling. Route to lower-carbon disposal.
Food procurement	Supply chain emissions from menu composition and food miles.	Plant-forward menu development. UK-supplier ratio in the specification.
Portering vehicle fuel	Fleet diesel for internal and site-to-site portering.	EV or hybrid fleet replacement inside the contract lifecycle.
Laundry and uniform lifecycle	Water heating and drying. Textile production.	Cold-wash cycles. Textile take-back and reuse.
Helpdesk and CAFM data	Not carbon itself, but the audit and reporting mechanism.	Every operational KPI reported alongside its carbon impact.

The soft-FM contract, not the boiler, is where a trust wins or loses the 2028 target.

3. What the leading soft-FM operators are already delivering

NHS Property Services published its 2024/25 sustainability data showing a 7.7 percent carbon reduction, 37,000 tonnes of carbon offset annually, and a 12 percent cost reduction on the estate energy programme equivalent to 8.9 million pounds saved over two years. That is what a governed estate operator delivers as business-as-usual.

A national soft-FM operator brings the same discipline to the four workforces that touch the operating carbon. Cleaning. Catering. Portering. Waste. All four run to a specification that already ties operational KPIs to their carbon impact. The trust receives the sustainability report as part of the monthly governance rhythm, not as an annual exercise compiled by the estates team from spreadsheets.

What good operator reporting looks like

- Monthly. Chemicals consumption, water use, waste tonnage by stream, portering fuel, catering food-miles ratio, uniform lifecycle status.
- Quarterly. Carbon reduction trajectory against the trust Green Plan. Named remediation actions.
- Annual. Full Scope 1, 2 and 3 report aligned to the NHS Carbon Footprint Plus reporting framework.

4. Why in-house cannot deliver the 2028 trajectory alone

A trust running an in-house soft-FM operation would need to build three capabilities that a national operator already has. Building them in-house inside twenty-four months is extremely difficult.

Capability one. Sustainability specialism

The specialist role that translates operational KPIs into carbon reporting is scarce and expensive. A trust that recruits one in 2026 has a single point of dependency. A national operator has that specialism embedded in the account management team already.

Capability two. Sustainable procurement pipeline

Cleaning chemicals, catering supply chains, uniform manufacturers, waste contractors. Each of these has to align with the NHS net zero commitment by October 2027. A trust would need to renegotiate every one of them, individually. A national operator has already done it across their portfolio.

Capability three. Investment in fleet and equipment

The capital cost of moving a soft-FM operation to EV portering vehicles, low-carbon cleaning equipment, and cold-wash laundry sits inside the operator's balance sheet if the contract is long enough. Inside a trust's own operation, it sits inside the trust capital programme, competing with clinical priorities.

5. Reading the market. Sodexo's Zero Fund and Public Sector Sustainability Framework as external evidence

Sodexo is a useful external benchmark here because it publishes its Public Sector Sustainability Framework as a standing document. Two components are relevant to a trust's 2028 trajectory.

The Zero Fund is a self-funded programme, capitalised inside the operator's cost base, that invests in low-carbon operational change on a client site. In practice, this is where cold-wash laundry, EV portering, chemical-dosing systems, and low-carbon catering improvements are financed inside the contract lifecycle, without a trust capital ask.

The Public Sector Sustainability Framework provides the monthly and quarterly reporting structure and the annual carbon-footprint report aligned to the NHS Carbon Footprint Plus framework. It is the same instrument the operator uses across its NHS and public-sector portfolio, which means the trust benefits from cross-account learning rather than starting from a blank sheet.

6. What a Chair needs to answer before the £1bn framework closes on 1 May 2026

- What percentage of our NHS Carbon Footprint Plus sits inside soft-FM, and who is our named responsible executive for it?
- Are our soft-FM suppliers on track to align with the NHS net zero commitment by October 2027?
- Do we have a monthly carbon report from our current soft-FM model, or an annual reconciliation from estates?
- If we are bidding into the £1bn Decarbonisation of Estates framework, does our soft-FM operating model demonstrably support the trajectory in the bid?
- Are we prepared to require, in our next soft-FM procurement, a Public Sector Sustainability Framework clause and a Zero Fund equivalent commitment?

The Chair who cannot answer any one of these five questions in April 2026 is out of time for the 2028 target.

Sources and notes

All figures verified 30 August 2026. Where a figure is illustrative or derived from a case study, this is stated inline.

• NHS England, Delivering a Net Zero NHS strategy. https://www.england.nhs.uk/greenernhs/a-net-zero-nhs/

• NHS England, Green Plan guidance and Net Zero Building Standard. https://www.england.nhs.uk/greenernhs/

• NHS Property Services, Getting NHS property to net zero. https://www.property.nhs.uk/news-insights/insights/getting-nhs-property-to-net-zero/

• MMCTS, Net Zero NHS. Why decarbonisation is a compliance and competence challenge. https://mmcts.co.uk/net-zero-nhs-why-decarbonisation-is-a-compliance-and-competence-challenge/

• Sodexo UK, Public Sector Sustainability Framework (published, referenced as external evidence). https://uk.sodexo.com/insights

• Sodexo Global, Zero Fund programme description (published, referenced as external evidence). https://www.sodexo.com/sustainability

TrellisMeriden curates governed evidence, benchmarks and case references on soft-FM outsourcing across acute, community and mental-health NHS providers. This paper is part of the Governed First-Outsourcing knowledge bank.

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