produces 3.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide per year (Royal College of Nursing, 2007).

As the largest employer in the UK, the health service has a duty to engage with the agendas outlined in the Climate Change Act and to contribute to proposed government targets. Sustainability is, therefore, a huge political issue.

While debates about the nature of climate change and the impact of global warming on the environment focus largely on the use of resources, the topic is much wider. The UK government argues there are two main strands in achieving sustainable development (Fig 2):

- Living within environmental limits;
- Ensuring a strong, healthy and just society.

These depend on three strategic developments:

- Achieving a sustainable economy;
- Promoting good governance;
- Using sound science responsibly (HM Government, 2009).

**RCN POSITION STATEMENT**

As the largest professional body representing nurses in the UK, the RCN can make a difference to the way in which healthcare commissioners and providers respond to contemporary professional concerns. It recognises that healthcare providers’ carbon footprints have a major impact on sustainability in the UK. The RCN (2008) suggested that sustainable products or services should be:

- Less toxic;
- Minimally polluting;
- More energy efficient;
- Safer and healthier for patients, workers and the environment;
- Easier to repair;
- Easier to recycle;
- Made with less packaging;
- More durable (have a longer lifetime);
- Locally produced (travel short transport distances).

The RCN has signed up to the Climate and Health Council’s declaration and is working to reduce its own carbon footprint. It is also actively lobbying healthcare providers to review their impact on sustainability, for example, by reducing healthcare waste.

The RCN is also a member of Health Care Without Harm (www.noharm.org), an international coalition of healthcare organisations and professionals. The coalition strives to influence the healthcare sector to develop policies and services that do no harm and that aim to prevent disease and promote the health of people and the environment. It was set up in 1996 by a group of environmentalists and healthcare workers following concerns expressed by scientists in the US. The coalition now has 440 organisations as members, with a regional base in Europe. It has identified the following four aspects of unintentional harm to which the health sector contributes:

- **Waste incineration**: in Europe many healthcare providers use incineration to dispose of medical waste such as dressings. However, this disperses unacceptable amounts of chemical waste such as dioxins, heavy metals and other toxic chemicals into the atmosphere;

- **Using dangerous materials**: mercury, used until recently in pressure and temperature measuring devices in the health service, is a potent neurotoxin, while PVC in medical devices can leach toxic di(2-ethylhexyl)phthalate (DEHP) into patients and releases dioxins if burnt as medical waste;

- **Poor food quality**: good nutrition is