

Busy Governance Guide to Environmental Sustainability

What is Environmental Sustainability? Defined by the UN as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This definition emphasises ecological balance and conservation of natural resources to ensure the well-being of current and future generations.

Net Zero? The UK government set legally binding carbon budgets to meet net zero emissions by 2050, the first country to do so. This places a restriction on the total amount of greenhouse gases the UK can emit, with a target of reducing emissions by 78% by 2035 compared to 1990 levels. Key policies to reach net zero: [Net Zero Strategy](#) (2021) [Powering Up Britain: The Net Zero Growth Plan](#) (2023).

Why is it important to schools? Schools and universities represent approximately one-third of public sector building emissions in England and Wales, a key player in tackling the effects of climate change. Through a proactive and structured approach to sustainability, schools can help mitigate and adapt to the impact that climate change is, and will increasingly cause while bringing significant environmental and financial benefits, at the same time equipping children with the knowledge and skills for the future. 2025 brings new sustainability expectations for schools and trusts in the DfE's [Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy](#) for Education. This includes all schools having a nominated **sustainability lead by September 2025** and developing a **climate action plan (CAP) by December 2025**.

The DfE plans to make the UK the world-leading education sector in sustainability and climate change by 2030. In England, this will be achieved by:

- Preparing all learners for a world impacted by climate change
- Reducing direct and indirect emissions from education buildings and providing opportunities for learners to engage practically in the transition to net zero
- Adapting the education estate to prepare for the effects of climate change
- Enhancing biodiversity, improving air quality and increasing access to and connection with, nature in and around education and care settings.

What do boards need to do? Boards can actively support this vital work, contribute positively to climate goals and prepare young people for the future. By encouraging a culture of climate awareness, boards can champion sustainability at governance level, encourage the development of Climate Action Plans and sustainability leads in line with DfE expectations while creating a more sustainable future.

What is a Climate Action Plan (CAP)? This is a detailed plan to enable a school or trust, to progress or commence sustainability initiatives. Creating a climate action plan allows schools to take a structured and strategic route ensuring they are acting toward and educating about, sustainability. It is possible to have a climate action plan for an individual setting, across a trust, or both. A holistic climate action plan should cover four main areas, **Decarbonisation, Adaptation and Resilience, Improving the environment** and **Climate education and green careers**.

Many schools publish their Climate Action Plan or strategy on their website. Having a Climate Action Plan visible is helpful in engaging parents, the local community and external stakeholders on the journey towards sustainability.

What is sustainability leadership: This can be a group of people or an individual responsible for the development and implementation of a Climate Action Plan. Each school or trust decides the structure of their sustainability leadership team, noting that change is delivered most effectively by a diverse team of passionate individuals. It is important that both educational (teaching staff) and operational (estates management) expertise is brought to this team. The presence of senior leaders is critical for planning and implementation to be successful as they provide the authority, knowledge and commitment to the plan forward. It is important that the plan is holistic, with the whole school, or trust, engaged to ensure planning becomes action. Schools or trusts may already have a plan in place, if so the DfE are not suggesting that a new plan is created.

Sustainability leadership and a Climate Action Plan, will help schools to:

- Increase the confidence and expertise of the leadership team, staff and learners to understand climate change and achieve positive change
- Create a culture that prioritises sustainability embedding it across the school without overburdening staff or learners
- Share effective practice with other education settings and develop peer-to-peer learning networks
- Use data to identify and prioritise action
- Improve energy and water efficiency
- Calculate carbon emissions and identify ways to reduce them
- Reduce operating costs
- Increase resilience and start adapting to the impacts of climate change
- Enhance biodiversity
- Help learners develop skills and knowledge which help them to contribute to sustainability and climate change in their lives and future jobs.

Who should be doing what?

Senior leadership team (SLT), governors, trustees, executive leaders and managers should support and drive sustainable activity. They should:

- Provide the authority and support to drive and embed culture change
- Allow staff to be trained and develop their knowledge to effectively implement sustainable action in teaching and personal practice
- Ensure climate change and sustainability feature on regular meeting agendas at committee/local governance, board and trust level
- Plan for succession, so sustainability endures in the setting.

Estates management. The [sustainability of your estate](#) section of the good estate management for schools guidance explains the role of estates management in encouraging sustainability and managing energy and water use. [The Estate Management Standards \(April 2025\)](#) require that all schools have an estate vision and Climate Action Plan in place. See the [Estate management competency framework](#) for more on the board's role in sustainability.

Learners: Involving learners is important in climate action planning, it will:

- Inspire their enthusiasm to help drive positive change
- Increase their practical knowledge of sustainability and climate change
- Provide a sense of agency where anxiety stems from climate concerns
- Create a sense of pride in their education setting
- Enable them to share their knowledge and enthusiasm to engage their parents, local and wider communities.

What does action look like? The NGA annual governance survey 2024 found that 61% of those that responded had taken action on environmental sustainability in their school or trust, the most common actions included:

- Embedding environmental sustainability into the curriculum/learning
- Providing opportunities for outdoor learning, e.g. forest school, visits or trips
- Energy saving measures and solar panels
- Reducing waste e.g. recycling and composting.

Where do we start? Have a plan, broken down into stages, starting with where your school is now, then where it wants to be by when and how you will get there, then monitor progress and hold leadership to account. As with any new initiative, it helps to start with the willing, so action leads to more action. Consider appointing an EcoLead within the school, or a small working party to start the process. It is a good idea to appoint a sustainability link governor/trustee to lead on strategy and to monitor progress and outcomes and have sustainability as a regular governance agenda item.

Where is your school now? Ask questions to make a start and remember, 90% of schools in the South West are also just making a start. What is your school already doing across the four key areas:

- **Decarbonisation** – What measures do you already have in place to become more energy efficient and therefore reduce carbon emissions?
- **Resilience** – what policies and procedures do you currently have that deal with weather and climate risks and waste management or food policy? Do you have sustainable procurement practices?
- **Environment and Biodiversity** – what is happening in your school grounds to support biodiversity, such as ponds and wild garden areas?
- **Climate Education** – how does your curriculum provide teaching about climate change, what do pupils learn and when? How are your staff supported to do this, how are they trained? How are the voices of stakeholders and the community heard? Do you provide information about green careers?

Where do we want to be and by when? What does your school vision say about environmental sustainability, is it a core value in your school? Does your vision have aims that link to and support your timetable to achieve environmental sustainability?

How will you get there? By having a plan and reaching out to organisations that specifically help schools. There are many organisations providing courses, products and services to support schools, many at no cost to the school, along with many examples of excellent practice. Action will be required, but start with easy actions that pull in expertise, build confidence and promote further action. Some ideas to consider for each of the four key areas:

- **Decarbonisation** – Quantifying carbon emissions is now much simpler, schools can register with organisations, such as [Eco-Schools](#) for their ‘Count your Carbon’ free resource, it provides a benchmark to build on and helps schools to understand the key areas of their operations that produce carbon emissions, before providing a report with carbon-reducing recommendations and actions that can then be dropped into a Climate Action Plan
- **Resilience** – Consider flooding, building resilience, heat loss, overheating, waste management and consider requesting an annual resilience statement that is shared with the full board
- **Environment and Biodiversity** – Register your school with the [National Education Nature Park](#) for help to create new or improved green spaces for nature to thrive; contribute to real scientific research; boost biodiversity locally and across the country and promote caring for nature across generations
- **Climate Education** - [National Education Nature Park](#) provide free programmes for all educators with resources, support and guidance to embed climate and nature into learning.

Which organisations offer free help?

- [Sustainability Support for Education](#): Resources, services and tools to identify appropriate action to develop, or build on, Climate Action Plans, grants available.
- [National Education Nature Park](#), bringing all school grounds into one virtual national nature park. See their funding page for opportunities
- [Climate Ambassadors](#) based at the MET office in Exeter, offer support to school leaders and teachers in the development and implementation of Climate Action Plans through support, talks, workshops and activities at schools. Also see [Climate Action Planning Template](#)
- [Let's Go Zero](#) A national campaign uniting teachers, pupils, parents and schools to set zero carbon targets and develop delivery roadmaps
- [Energy Sparks](#) help schools become more energy efficient and fight climate change via a specific energy management tool and education programme
- [The Exeter Diocese Board of Education](#) (EDBE) have resources and advice for church schools and all maintained schools and academies in Devon
- Local Authorities and local Governance Associations including DAG, recognise this is an additional workload for schools and offer a range of support, guidance and signposting. See the [DAG website](#) for resources including recordings of recent environmental seminars. See DCC website page ‘[Grants for schools](#)’
- The [National Governance Association's greener governance campaign](#)
- The [London Early Years Foundation sustainability strategy](#) for early years.
- The Royal Society [Tomorrow's Climate Scientists](#) provide grants for schools
- [The Zero Carbon fund](#) provides money for school projects
- [Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme](#) aims to spend more than £12 billion on energy efficiency by 2028. This scheme from DESNZ has tended to favour larger organisations that can fund the considerable time and resources needed to put together a successful bid.