

Guidance document – governors’ specific roles

Sustainability Governor

For maintained schools and academies

Executive summary: The Department for Education (DfE) released a [strategy](#) in April 2022 to improve the education sector’s response to climate change by 2030. The strategy states: “By 2025, all education settings will have nominated a sustainability lead and put in place a climate action plan”. Guidance published by DfE is currently a non-statutory requirement and not a feature of governing board agendas, however your school may already be working on a response and, as decision makers, governors should support seniors leader in driving activity.

1. Background

The Department for Education (DfE) released a [strategy](#) in April 2022 to improve the education sector’s response to climate change. The DfE’s strategy aims to make the United Kingdom the world-leading education sector in sustainability and climate change by 2030.

The strategy includes four strategic aims:

- **Excellence in education and skills for a changing world:** preparing all young people for a world impacted by climate change through learning and practical experience.
- **Net zero:** reducing direct and indirect emissions from education and care buildings, driving innovation to meet legislative targets and providing opportunities for children and young people to engage practically in the transition to net zero.
- **Resilient to climate change:** adapting our education and care buildings and system to prepare for the effects of climate change.
- **A better environment for future generations:** enhancing biodiversity, improving air quality and increasing access to, and connection with, nature in and around education and care settings.

The strategy includes key action areas such as climate education, green skills and careers, the education estate and digital infrastructure, operations and supply chains and international action. It aims to help the education sector and children’s services systems positively impact, influence, and inspire communities by improving the sustainability of the environment in and around education settings and the knowledge and understanding of children and young people.

The strategy builds on existing work being done across the sector and supports the delivery of the UK government’s 25 Year Environment Plan and Net Zero Strategy. The DfE has developed the strategy in response to recommendations for education from the Committee for Climate Change, Dasgupta Review and Green Jobs Taskforce report.

Action Area 1 of the strategy strives to prepare all young people for a world impacted by climate change through learning and practical experience. To achieve this, the DfE will support schools, settings and organisations so that all young people have access to high-quality education that equips them with the knowledge, skills and values they need to understand and respond to the challenges of climate change.

The strategy will achieve this by providing a science curriculum which includes climate education, and by ensuring that all young people have access to practical experience and opportunities to engage with the natural world. The DfE will work with schools and colleges to develop and deliver a range of

initiatives that support the development of green skills and careers. Oak National Academy is developing new curriculum resources for primary science, and DfE are working with exam boards and subject experts to develop the draft subject content for the natural history GCSE. The Agriculture, Land Management and Production T Level can lead to occupations including forestry worker and countryside officer and the level 3 low carbon heating technician trains people to install technology such as heat pumps and solar heating.

Climate Action Plans

The strategy states: “By 2025, all education settings will have nominated a sustainability lead and put in place a climate action plan”. A climate action plan is a detailed plan to enable your education setting, or trust, to progress or commence sustainability initiatives. Creating a climate action plan will allow your school to take a structured and strategic route toward ensuring your setting or trust is acting toward, and educating about, sustainability. A climate action plan should typically cover the following four areas, to align with [DfE’s sustainability and climate change strategy](#):

- Decarbonisation, for example calculating and taking actions to reduce carbon emissions, such as becoming more energy efficient
- Adaptation and resilience, such as taking actions to reduce the risk of flooding and overheating
- Biodiversity, for example engaging with the National Education Nature Park
- Climate education and green skills, such as ensuring the education you provide gives knowledgeable and comprehensive teaching about climate change, and that your teaching staff and lecturers feel supported to offer this

There are many organisations providing courses, products, and services to support an education setting’s approach to climate change. There are also many examples of excellent practice when it comes to sustainability and climate change in the education sector, and your school or trust may already have a plan in place. Where this is the case DfE are not suggesting that you create a new plan.

National Education Nature Park

The National Education Nature Park, delivered by the Natural History Museum and partners aims to harness the opportunities of school sites across the country. If all settings took part, it could create a space twice the size of Birmingham for wildlife to thrive in. Joining the scheme offers children and young people the opportunity for hands-on action improving biodiversity, learning data science skills, and finding out about nature’s role in climate change on your school site. Find out more at: [National Education Nature Park](#) and accompanying Climate Action Awards.

2. The role of the Governing Board

Climate change presents opportunities for schools to:

- Respond to the concerns children and young people have about climate change and how it will affect them by providing the knowledge, skills and pastoral care to support them with the challenges and opportunities of the future. This could include careers information about green jobs/employers.
- Lead by example and implement climate adaptation and decarbonisation measures in school buildings. Seeing sustainability brought to life in the buildings around them will allow children and young people to gain experiences which will enhance and contextualise their learning.

Although there are currently **no statutory** requirements to report on sustainability, it would be beneficial, if you haven’t already, to start thinking about how a school Climate Action Plan/Sustainability strategy might impact the curriculum, school premises and budget. Whether plans at your school are well advanced or work is yet to begin, as decision makers, governors should support senior leaders in driving activity. They should:

- Support a drive to embed culture change
- Ensure climate change and sustainability feature on the agenda at key meetings (there are no statutory requirements so you can agree with your clerk how to do this)
- Be responsible for succession planning, so there is a continuing commitment to sustainability.

The board may wish to appoint a specific governor to monitor progress, or it can remain something all governors contribute to. In the next section are a series of questions you may wish to ask.

3. Suggested questions for a report to governors

The items below can be considered, ideally in meetings with a nominated governor and designated Sustainability lead in school, after which a report should be shared in a full governing board meeting. If there is not a nominated governor, the whole board should request an update in a meeting suggesting which areas/questions they would like to be a feature of the information presented and use others to inform the support and additional questions they ask.

- As a first step, find out what is known about how sustainable your schools' practice is currently.
 - How energy-efficient is the infrastructure, and what steps are being taken to further reduce the carbon footprint?
 - What are the total carbon emissions of our school/setting operations?
 - How efficient are our buildings?
 - How could we retrofit our estate to improve energy efficiency?
- How is waste reduction, recycling and composting managed on the site? (preventing food/water/energy waste/no single use plastic/use of rainwater harvest/waste audits/recycle bins/efficient fixtures?)
 - Could we reduce our waste and encourage reuse and recycling?
 - Do we adopt sustainable procurement practices?
 - Do we have food bins or compost our food waste on site?
- Are there any initiatives in place to promote biodiversity and green spaces?
 - Have we mapped and recorded biodiversity on our site/campus?
 - Could our site/campus be managed differently, to provide habitats that serve to enhance local biodiversity?
 - Do the Estates team/Superintendent need CPD and/or help to provide habitats to enhance local biodiversity?
 - What water-saving measures are in place?
 - Does school promote sustainable options for travelling to and from school? Walking bus/charging points/bike and scooter racks?
 - Do we have a travel plan which encourages staff/pupils to take zero and lower emission forms of travel to and from school/setting?
- Vision and values – do these currently reflect the sustainability agenda and/or could it be reflected to do so?
 - How can we reduce our emissions and support pupils to be part of the transition to net zero?
 - How can we adapt our buildings and systems to prepare for the effects of climate change?
 - How can we enhance biodiversity, improve air quality and increase access to, and connection with, nature?
 - How can we prepare pupils for a world impacted by climate change through education & practice?
- Looking at ways to save money on energy use and possibly becoming more self-sufficient will have benefits for climate change and school budgets which are under strain.
 - Look at how: energy efficient the building is - companies like [Energy Sparks](#) offer free virtual energy audits for all state-funded schools. If you do not have the budget to employ professional auditors, there are free DIY energy audits (e.g. [SchooliP tool](#)) that your leaders can carry out.
 - Review the water usage/improve biodiversity of the school site
 - Establish a focus and include consultation and communication in your plans – talk with stakeholders, and importantly get School Council/pupils involved.

Curriculum

- How does school/Trust teach children how to become carbon-literate citizens who have the knowledge to tackle the declared climate emergency?
- How do pupils engage with climate change and sustainability? How is it woven through the curriculum?
- Where in the curriculum do pupils learn about nature, climate change and the importance of sustainability? Could this be broadened and developed? How could it be integrated across all subjects and educational stages?
- What learning opportunities related to sustainability are available for pupils?
- What hands-on learning opportunities related to sustainability are available for pupils, such as trips/science experiments/external visitors?
- Are there extracurricular activities focused on sustainability topics?
- Do pupils have opportunities for learning in the natural environment? How is this part of curricula or extra-curricular programmes?
- Are there any ongoing professional development opportunities related to sustainability for staff?
- How confident are teaching staff in delivering climate change and sustainability material? Do they need CPD? Do they have access to high quality resources?

Community

- How do parents/carers and families engage in the school's/Trust's sustainability efforts?
- Does the school or Trust work with local partners to promote sustainability – opportunities for work with the wider community?
- Are pupils made aware of the likely future career opportunities which exist in the green economy? Do staff have good training about these opportunities?
- What are the skills that pupils will need to develop to be able to access these careers? How can these skills be embedded across the educational offer?
- How is the importance of sustainability communicated to staff, pupils and other stakeholders?
- How are the sustainability values embedded in the school's/Trust's ethos?
- How are staff and pupils encouraged to participate in sustainability initiatives, such as the National Education Nature Park and Climate Action Awards?
- What is in place to recognise and celebrate sustainability achievements, such as awards or recognition in assemblies, celebrating pupils' efforts towards sustainability.

Measuring the impact

- How will you measure progress and positive impact?
- Have there been any negative or unintended consequences of the strategy?
- How do you know that the actions being taken are environmentally sustainable?
- Do staff have enough time, training and resources to make progress towards these goals? How do you know?
- Has there been stakeholder feedback on initiatives so far – what can be learned from this?
- How do you know that the approach is delivering the best value for money?

4. Contacts and more information

The Health and Wellbeing Services can be contacted on: Schoolwellbeing@leeds.gov.uk

Here you can find a useful [Climate Action Route Map \(CARM\)](#) made available to all Leeds schools by the Council's Health and Wellbeing Service. The Route map supports school senior leaders to provide high quality climate education through 10 steps based on established good practice.

From the DfE:

- [Sustainability leadership and climate action plans in education - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainability-leadership-and-climate-action-plans-in-education)

- Launched in 2024 the website [Sustainability Support for Education](#) is an initiative, which aims to help educational settings become more sustainable. Commissioned by the DfE, it will provide resources and guidance tailored to different stages of sustainability in schools and settings. The platform will offer support services and toolkits to help teachers develop climate education and green skills, engage learners in biodiversity initiatives, and create sustainability plans. The initiative is a response to the challenges faced by schools and settings in addressing sustainability due to time, resources, and expertise. It seeks to support schools and settings in preparing learners for a sustainable future by promoting existing resources and guidance.
- DfE has also developed a range of resources to support teaching and learning about climate change, including in partnership with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). The Climate Change Teacher Resource Pack provides teachers with a range of activities and resources to help teach about climate change in an engaging and interactive way. The pack includes a range of activities, including lesson plans, presentations, and videos, that are designed to help teachers deliver high-quality climate education to their learners: [Climate change resources for schools | WWF](#)

Climate Ambassadors: local expert support and peer to peer learning opportunities

The performance management and sustainability section of the good estate management for schools guidance explains the role of estates management in encouraging sustainability and managing energy and water use.

Be inspired by others. The following resources, organised by sector, demonstrate how some education settings have started their journeys. They highlight some of the tools already available and suggested practice:

- All settings - register with the [National Education Nature Park and Climate Action Awards scheme](#)
- Early years settings
 - Read Dr Diane Boyd's [sustainability matters in early childhood resource](#), developed and written in partnership with NCFE
 - Read the [London Early Years Foundation sustainability strategy](#)
- Schools
 - Read about Shinfield St Mary's CE Junior School's work around [sustainability and ecology](#)
 - Read about St Vincent's School, a specialist school for sensory impairment and other needs, and [their sustainability projects](#). These include activities such as:
 - Consult the [National Governance Association's greener governance campaign](#)
- Multi-academy trusts
 - Read about [United Learning Trust's sustainability journey](#) (PDF, 165 KB, 3 pages)

NGA's **Greener Governance campaign** aims to ensure all schools and trusts have a strategy for their contribution to environmental sustainability and to equip governing boards to play their role in overseeing this work. For more information access the website below.
[Greener Governance campaign](#)