

# Environmental sustainability: a whole school approach

A guide for governing boards in schools and trusts

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## Greener Governance campaign

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 oversee this work.

# Introduction

As a society we have become increasingly aware of environmental issues, climate change and the need to create a more sustainable future; young people have helped to raise awareness of these challenges.

It is a core function of boards to determine the values, vision, ethos, and strategic priorities of the trust or school it governs. Governing boards should therefore consider their role in environmental sustainability and ensure that their trusts and schools take action.

This guide is designed to help governing boards:

- understand the role of schools/trusts in improving environmental sustainability
- initiate and develop environmental sustainability discussions
- lead change and monitor progress
- access resources to support the school/trust's environmental sustainability plans

## The global and local context

Key events and legislation have influenced the future of environmental sustainability:

- **Climate Change Act (2008)** – amended in 2019, this act sets a target of 100% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in the UK (also known as net-zero) by 2050.
- **The Paris Climate Agreement (2015)** – Agreed at COP21, this was the first time a legally binding international treaty on climate change was signed by major nations.  
*COP stands for 'Conference of the Parties'. It is an opportunity for governments, businesses and other key players to come together to focus global efforts to tackle the climate crisis.*
- **COP26, Glasgow (2021)** – the first large summit where education and environment ministers met to increase the role of education in tackling climate change

### Department for Education sustainability strategy

Published in April 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) [Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy for Education](#) envisions the UK education sector as world-leading in sustainability and climate change by 2030 and has five action areas:

- climate education
- green skills and careers
- the education estate and digital infrastructure
- supply chain and operations
- international collaboration

The strategy sets out a number of expectations for schools and trusts, beginning with **building sustainability leadership** and **developing climate action plans**.

At a local level, schools have a crucial role in achieving environmental sustainability because they help young people understand the world and develop skills and attitudes to live fulfilled lives as responsible citizens. The education sector could have a significant impact on environmental sustainability, given that:

- schools represent 25% of UK public sector building emissions
- over 24,000 schools in England provide the opportunity to enhance biodiversity, help nature recover, and engage pupils in the natural environment
- one in 70 car miles are associated with the school commute; there’s the potential to change behaviour to create significant long-term impact

# 1. The Six Cs

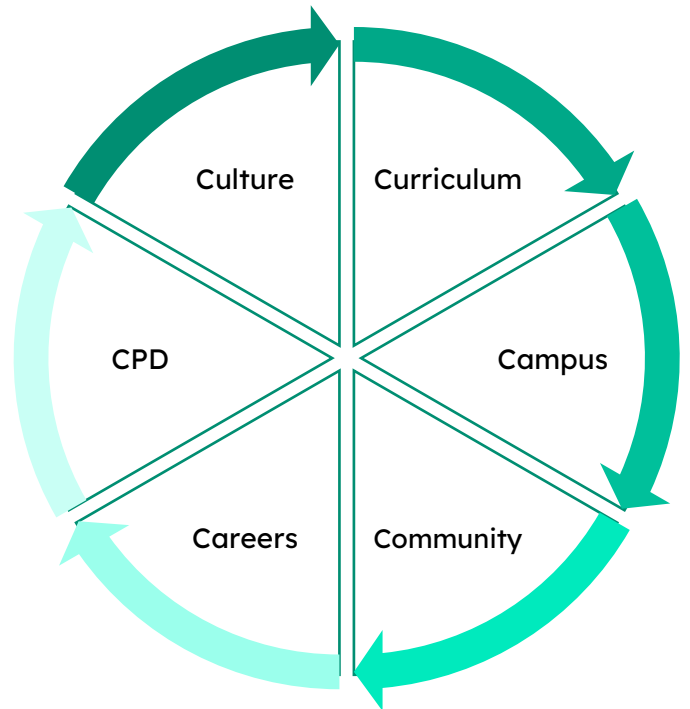
A whole school approach to environmental sustainability should encompass all aspects of school life, learning and management. This can be explained via the Six Cs model:

## Culture: the way things are done

The way things are done at all levels of a school/trust is reflective of your vision and values. If environmental sustainability sits within this, your everyday practices and larger decisions will demonstrate care and respect for the environment.

As a **starting point**, you could ask your school leader at the relevant governing board meeting:

1. How do we listen to our staff/pupil’s views on environmental sustainability? Do we have an eco-council/team for example?
2. What happens at school level on a day-to-day basis that encourages environmental sustainability? For example, food provision, including use of local produce and initiatives such as ‘meat-free Mondays’.
3. How does our school/trust frame environmental sustainability – do we foster a sense of hope and encourage positive behaviours?



To **delve deeper**:

1. Do we model pro-environmental behaviours transparently in the school's operation?
2. Are initiatives/actions taken by your school or trust fostering an inclusive culture to all pupils in terms of cost and accessibility? For example, [pre-loved uniform](#).
3. Is there any overlap with other strategic priorities that could drive action. For example utilising outdoor space to improve mental health of pupils and staff.
4. If you are part of a multi academy trust - do we foster a sense of collaboration and unity across schools?

## Curriculum: teaching and learning

Treating environmental sustainability as a core value should lead to governing boards taking a keen interest in how this is covered in the curriculum. As climate change affects many aspects of daily life, climate education should extend beyond science and geography.

As a **starting point**, you could ask:

1. What and when do pupils learn about environmental sustainability?
2. Have pupils been consulted on their experience of the curriculum and teaching and learning on environmental sustainability?
3. Do pupils have opportunities to learn outdoors (forest school, local visits or residential trips, for example)?

To **delve deeper**:

1. Could we consult with sustainability education experts to gather insights and recommendations on how to incorporate sustainability education into subject areas?
2. How do pupils develop knowledge and understanding of their local environment and wider global environmental issues?
3. Do we encourage cross-curricular collaboration that involve multiple subject areas?

## Community: working together inside and outside school

Community refers to how the school fosters a united approach to environmental sustainability, both within the local community and the school community itself.

As a **starting point**, you could ask:

1. Do any governors/trustees or staff members have sustainability credentials that could help in this area?
2. How are children travelling to school? How is this actively facilitated by the school/trust?
3. Does the school's work with the local community include any sustainability-focused activities? Could we foster partnerships with community organisations to promote sustainability initiatives and encourage community involvement?

To **delve deeper**:

1. Does the school/trust communicate with parents/local community about what the school is doing (and why) and how they can contribute? This could include update reports, newsletters, social media posts and website content.
2. What is the air pollution in and around school? How can we work with others to reduce this?
3. How could we increase our level of engagement with local, national and international environmental sustainability initiatives?

## Campus: buildings, energy and grounds

This encompasses all aspects of school buildings and grounds. Energy usage will likely already have been considered, but there are other aspects which can positively benefit your school/trust.

[Procurement](#) can offer a route into exploring sustainability by adding it as a necessary criterion for suppliers. The DfE supports this by including sustainability in their procurement frameworks.

As a **starting point**, you could ask:

1. Is our energy and water use monitored and if not, how can we start to do this?
2. How do we use our outdoor space? Could we improve biodiversity or grow our own food?
3. What waste is recycled or composted?
4. Are sustainable procurement choices our first option?

To **delve deeper**:

1. What investment is needed in our buildings to improve their environmental sustainability? For example, LED lighting, insulation, solar panels, ground source heat pumps?
2. Is our energy supplier using renewable technologies and could we generate energy from renewable sources?
3. Is there any financial assistance/grants available that could assist us with improving our campus environmental sustainability?

## Careers: qualifications and work experience

Supporting young people to make informed choices about their future is an important responsibility for schools and their governing boards. With future green careers on the horizon, this is an area both primary and secondary schools should prioritise.

As a **starting point**, you could ask:

1. Do we offer qualifications that include green skills or that can lead onto green careers?
2. Have we gathered feedback and ideas from school communities on sustainability careers and how to better integrate sustainability into career development?
3. Do we offer educational opportunities for pupils to learn about sustainability careers, including workshops, guest lectures, and career fairs?

To **delve deeper**:

1. Have we communicated the importance of green skills and careers through a range of communication materials, for example brochures, posters, social media posts, and website content?
2. Do we have a system that recognises and rewards pupils and alumni that pursue sustainability careers and support sustainability career development initiatives?
3. Could we invite speakers from businesses that champion sustainability and organise on-site visits whenever possible?

## CPD: staff and governing board knowledge

Governing boards, senior leaders and teachers need to be equipped with the skills to deliver on improving environmental sustainability. This includes providing the capacity and budget to do so.

NGA's [CPD guidance](#) provides advice on how boards can establish a culture where staff development is valued and prioritised.

As a **starting point**, you could ask:

1. Do we have sustainability leadership in place across all levels of the school/trust and have they got the right skills and training needed to implement the climate action plan/strategy?
2. Have we ensured that the necessary staff have been given the capacity to carry out any CPD required of them?
3. Have we ensured that the budget allows for CPD to be carried out?

To **delve deeper**:

1. Are environmental sustainability credentials reviewed/advertised during recruitment?
2. Have we mapped staff/governor experience and where knowledge gaps exist and what training would be most useful?
3. Have we evaluated how to share knowledge learnt from CPD across the school/trust?

## Case study schools

### South Molton Community Primary School

A school educating over 200 pupils, demonstrating environmental sustainability by:

- **School ethos of “Excellence through outdoor learning”** and values centered on nature (Nurturing, Aspiring, Together, Understanding, Resilience, and Equal).
- **Environmental prize** – an annual award celebrating eco-friendly ideas for the school.
- **Wear it wild for WWF** – pupils and staff dressed as animals to raise money for WWF.
- **Meat-free days on school menu** – new school menu promotes plant based meals and gives them priority on the menu, with two meat/fish free days a week.



### St Christopher’s C.E. High School

A single academy trust with over 1,200 pupils, has implemented:

- **Sustainability leads** – the school appointed a director of sustainability and an eco-governor to maintain communication between the governing board and the school.
- **Homeless sleep-out** – pupils cooked for the local homeless population using home-grown ingredients, focusing on social responsibility and environmental sustainability.
- **Northwest Eco Conference** – the school’s director of sustainability organises a national sustainability networking event for schools and interested parties.



### Eynsham Partnership Academy

A multi academy trust consisting of a large secondary school, an all-through primary/secondary, and six primary schools, has implemented the following:

- **Policy statement** – the trust has created a climate and biodiversity policy statement outlining their net zero vision, including five sustainability issues and actions.
- **Climate Youth Manifesto** – consulting with students at a youth summit, the trust has produced a document outlining how pupils want to tackle climate related issues.
- **Decarbonisation** – working with external partners to carry out carbon reduction surveys (funded by the Community Renewal Fund), resulting in individual school carbon reduction recommendation reports.





## 2. Being strategic

Governing boards can take the decision to make environmental sustainability a key element of their school or trust strategy. In doing so, environmental considerations will then run throughout the organisation's work and decision-making.

### Vision and values

The values that governing boards adopt and reaffirm every year guide the thinking and behaviour in the school or trust, underpinning all its activities. Governing boards should consider whether their existing values support environmental sustainability and consult stakeholders on whether the values need to be updated to ensure care for the environment is more explicitly incorporated. This generates a commitment to develop policies and procedures that ensure the value is lived on a daily basis.

Ensuring clarity of vision is the first core function for every governing board. The vision is reviewed annually and should, in a few sentences, describe what the school or trust will look like in three-to-five years' time, and what their pupils will leave the school knowing, thinking and having done. Making environmental sustainability part of the vision reinforces the commitment to developing and promoting practice throughout the school or trust.

### Strategic priorities

[The board's strategy](#) is a high-level document which sets out how the vision will be achieved and includes a small number of priority goals. Taking the decision to make environmental sustainability one of those strategic priorities will ensure that it is embedded in the fabric of the organisation: a whole school or trust approach. It also means that the topic will become part of the annual strategy review.

If environmental sustainability was not covered in your last annual strategy conversation, it could be added to a full board meeting in the meantime (rather than waiting another year).

## 3. Leading change

### Climate action plans

The DfE expects education settings to put in place Climate Action Plans (CAPs) by 2025, describing them as "detailed plans to enable your education setting, or trust, to progress or commence sustainability initiatives". CAPs typically detail actions across the Six Cs, with the DfE specifying the following elements should be included:

- decarbonisation
- adaptation and resilience
- biodiversity
- climate education and green careers

The implementation of a CAP can vary according to your setting. You may have a CAP that sits within an individual school, across a trust, or both. Most important is that you have a plan that drives action in your setting and supports [governing board monitoring](#). Governors will have responsibility for approving CAPs developed at school level, whereas trustees can expect to have a role in developing them at trust board level.

The DfE has a range of support planned for CAPs, including:

- a digital hub of resources to develop – or build on – climate action plans
- regional coordinators providing local expert support and peer-to-peer learning

Schools and trusts will likely need to identify funding from within their own budgets or other grants to resource their CAPs. Government funding streams currently include the [BEIS public sector decarbonisation scheme](#). See our [resources section](#) for other useful information.

## Examples

### Millbrook Primary School

A maintained school with around 250 pupils created their two year [Eco and Environmental Sustainability Policy](#) in November 2021 – a school-level climate action plan that covers:

- **the legal framework** that was consulted e.g. climate change act 2008
- **roles and responsibilities** – who is accountable
- **action areas and goals/outcomes** – what they want to achieve
- **monitoring and review** – how success is evaluated

### Northern Star Academies Trust (NSAT)

Based in the North of England, comprising of 9 schools, this trust made environmental sustainability a key priority and introduced a trust-wide [sustainability and climate change strategy](#) that includes:

- how the trust aims to achieve Net Positive for Education and Children by 2030
- green Pillars (aims) and green non-negotiables (outcomes) for the academic year
- Next Generation Board – a group of pupils representing all trust schools who report to trustees every half term about environmental sustainability projects

### The Education Alliance

Made up of primary and secondary schools, this multi academy trust has 11 schools and has prioritised environmental sustainability as one of four core objectives in their [Trust Development Plan](#). It covers:

- strategic objectives
- priority action areas to focus progress centred on their 5 Cs (curriculum, campus, culture, community, and careers)
- timescales/leadership responsibilities/milestones and investment requirements

## Sustainability leadership

The DfE recommends putting in place sustainability leadership to implement climate action plans; you may choose to take an individual setting approach to building sustainability leadership, set it up across a trust, or both. While it is up to each organisation to decide this structure, it is best delivered by a team with both educational and operational expertise.

The table below summarises how governance and senior leadership roles differ:

### Governing boards:

- initiate discussion on environmental sustainability and ensure it features on the agenda at meetings
- consider appointing a sustainability lead governor/trustee or working group
- incorporate environmental sustainability into school/trust vision and strategy
- develop/agree a school climate action plan
- ensure sustainability leadership has been appointed as school level
- ensure staff have capacity to deliver on the climate action plan and/or trust strategy
- ensure voices of stakeholders are heard

### School/trust leaders:

- create the school climate action plan (if applicable)
- appoint staff members as sustainability leaders
- ensure necessary CPD for relevant school staff
- deliver on the climate action plan
- report progress to the governing board
- listen to the voices of all stakeholders on environmental sustainability

Involving senior leaders in sustainability work is essential as they have the authority, capacity, and support to influence and lead strategic change within the setting. Likewise, estates managers and business professionals can inform plans as they have the knowledge required to enact more sustainable practices. Teachers who have a passion or knowledge on the topic also act as an essential link to school life and stakeholder views.

In a MAT, members of the central team could take responsibility for each of the Six Cs: for example, the CEO might take responsibility for culture and the CFO or operating officer for campus.

## Board practice

The practices that governing boards adopt set an important tone and exemplify the value placed on environmental sustainability to the whole school. ‘Quick wins’ can be achieved by:

- online voting for parent elections
- considering a combination of face-to-face and virtual meetings
- using a digital document storage system for board papers
- opting for E-learning, for example NGA’s [Learning Link](#)

## Engaging stakeholders

Engaging stakeholders and listening to their views is a core function of governing boards. The environment is a topic with which stakeholders are likely to be eager to engage. Involve them from the beginning to find out their concerns and what they would like to see.

Discuss with your leadership team how to harness the knowledge, energy and enthusiasm of:

- **Pupils, classes, year groups and school councils** – young people are increasingly concerned about sustainability and climate change and are looking for opportunities to make change.
- **Staff** – teachers are fundamental to pupil learning about sustainability, and school business staff have an important role in making sustainability a part of resource management.
- **The wider community** – there are many examples of businesses, charities and local authorities willing to collaborate with schools to build a more sustainable infrastructure.
- **Parents and carers** – when schools have the support of parents, they are in a stronger position to achieve their environmental sustainability aims. Some parents may have specific expertise in the topic. NGA has produced [a guide to engaging with parents and carers](#).

## Using pupil voice

Engaging with pupils and using their views and experiences to inform governing board decisions is key to being an effective board. Governing boards should ensure that schools provide opportunities for pupils to express their views.

Schools and trusts that are committed to pupil voice provide time and space for pupil participation, ensure staff have the necessary skills, and value the voices of all.

Refer to our [pupil voice guidance](#) to learn about benefits and methods of engagement.

## 4. Monitoring and reviewing progress

Governing boards and school leaders regularly monitor progress against their strategic priorities and goals linked to them. As laid out in [Being Strategic](#) guidance, they should agree arrangements for monitoring the strategy, along with the data and information used to evaluate progress and assess impact. This should be recorded in the strategy document. Therefore, if environmental sustainability has been adopted as a strategic priority, its monitoring and review will become part of the board's regular business.

If your board has not yet adopted environmental sustainability formally as a strategic priority, there will need to be a separate governing board discussion on the expectations and how the approach to environmental sustainability will be monitored. CAPs provide a key point of reference and tool to support the board's monitoring and review of progress.

Governing boards will need to work closely with their leadership team to agree:

- Which aspects of the Six Cs plan will be reported to relevant committees, such as premises?
- What is important to know about how the school/trust is progressing towards its strategic goals for environmental sustainability?
- What data and information will tell the board what it needs to know?
- Is this best discussed in a full governing board meeting or as a working group to monitor the whole school/trust approach?

**Appointing an eco-governor or working party** can be a useful approach, particularly during the early stages of planning and monitoring. Governing boards are free to determine their own monitoring programme that takes account of governor/trustee and school leader workload.

The resulting monitoring routine should use all or a combination of the following:

- feedback from themed governor/trustee visits
- engagement with pupil and parent forums
- survey data (this could apply to a range of audiences and topics, such as a travel survey)
- resource data (such as recycling rates or energy usage) and procurement outcomes
- oral presentations to the board from individuals, including leads for each of the Six Cs

### Review

Governing boards can ask and adapt the following questions when discussing the impact of the whole school approach:

- Can we point to examples of how our approach and policies have led to sustainable practices and changes to habits throughout the school/trust and among stakeholders?
- Can we point to the benefits of our whole school approach? Have there been other unexpected impacts, such as financial efficiencies or to pupil learning?

- Have there been any negative consequences of our whole school approach to environmental sustainability – what are they?
- Based on what we have learned, what should we be doing more of or doing differently?
- How are we supporting our staff (such as through CPD) to stay up to date with the issues and help embed our whole school approach?
- How is this work balanced against staff’s other workload demands?
- How do staff work with pupils to develop all Six Cs?
- What do our stakeholders, especially our pupils, think of our whole school/trust approach? How do we know?
- Which local, regional and national organisations and networks is the school/trust engaged with to enhance learning, action and impact in relation to environmental sustainability?

## 5. Resources

The following resources can support the implementation environmental sustainability strategies:

### National Education Nature Park

[National Education Nature Park](#) is a DfE initiative that gives children and young people the opportunity to lead the way in mapping, monitoring and enhancing their spaces for nature.

### SchooliP audit tool

SchooliP, NAEF and NGA together provide [a free online tool](#) to help governing boards adopt environmental sustainability as a strategic priority and for leaders to develop climate action plans.

### Choice Voting

[Choice Voting](#) is a process to set up and launch your online elections. Online voting improves the environmental impact that your school or trust has by eliminating paper and ink waste.

### Energy Sparks

[Energy Sparks](#) provides a free online energy analysis tool and energy education to help schools reduce their carbon footprint and teach pupils energy saving and sustainability life skills.

### Living Streets

[Living Streets](#) is a UK charity that encourages everyday walking, including children walking or wheeling to school.

### UN CC: Learn

The One UN Climate Change Learning Partnership (UN CC: Learn) has developed [free e-courses on climate change](#). The interactive courses are based on official UN content.

### Let’s Go Zero

[Let’s Go Zero](#) is the national campaign uniting teachers, pupils, parents and their schools with support on setting zero carbon targets and developing roadmaps for delivery.

## School grants

A & S Landscapes have collated a brochure of [grants available to schools](#), some of which relate to environmental sustainability.

## UK Schools Sustainability Network (UKSSN)

[UKSSN](#) brings together regional networks of school staff and students from all over the UK. They share in common a focus on youth social action and sustainability education.

## Climate Ambassadors

[The Climate Ambassadors scheme](#) is a scheme led collaboratively by the University of Reading and STEM Learning which aims to improve the climate education of young people and help guide schools and colleges on their path to Net Zero.

## Explore Urban Nature

[The Explore: Urban Nature programme](#) from the Natural History Museum encourages students to track and monitor the nature closest to home, become the local experts, observe and collect new data, and take action.

NGA would like to thank the National Association for Environmental Education (NAEE) for their work promoting environmental education – [NAEE resources](#) have helped to shape this guidance.

[naee.org.uk](http://naee.org.uk)

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