

A School Leader's Guide to DfE Sustainability & Climate Plans

17 September 2025



As we approach the end of 2025, the Department for Education's (DfE) ambitious target is fast approaching: every education setting in England—nurseries, schools, multi-academy trusts (MATs), and colleges—must nominate a sustainability lead and implement a climate action plan (CAP). With only months until the deadline, this initiative offers a transformative opportunity to embed sustainability into your school's operations and ethos. At The School Network, we're here to empower you with resources, connections to expert partners, and a supportive community to ensure you meet this goal confidently and effectively.

Understanding the Initiative: A Blueprint for Change

The DfE's Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy mandates that by 2025, all education settings appoint a sustainability lead—either an individual or team—and develop or enhance a CAP. This flexible, non-statutory initiative encourages schools to build on existing efforts rather than starting anew. A robust CAP should address four key pillars:

- **Decarbonisation:** Reducing carbon emissions through energy efficiency, such as upgrading insulation or optimizing heating.

- **Adaptation and Resilience:** Preparing for climate risks like flooding or overheating with measures like improved drainage.
- **Environment and Biodiversity:** Enhancing green spaces, for example, through the National Education Nature Park.
- **Climate Education and Green Careers:** Embedding sustainability in the curriculum to equip students with knowledge and skills for a low-carbon future.

This holistic approach ensures sustainability becomes a core part of your school's identity, driven by committed leaders with educational and operational expertise.

Essential Guidance: Where to Start or Scale Up

Success hinges on a whole-setting approach, engaging students, staff, governors, and estates teams. For those starting out, nominate a diverse sustainability leadership team, including senior leaders for authority. If you're further along, refine your CAP using data-driven priorities, such as emissions calculations with standardized tools.

Key guidance includes:

- **Involve Learners:** Engage students to spark enthusiasm, reduce climate anxiety, and foster pride in their school.
- **Senior Buy-In:** Ensure SLTs and trustees prioritize sustainability in meetings and plan for long-term commitment.
- **Estates Focus:** Use the Good Estate Management for Schools guidance to optimize energy and water use. For further education, the EAUC's carbon emissions framework offers a standardized approach.

Your CAP can be stored internally or published online to engage parents and the community. Share your progress via case studies with DfE's Sustainability and Climate Change Unit (dfesustainability@education.gov.uk) to inspire others and build networks.

Support Available: DfE Resources and Expert Partnerships

The DfE provides free, tailored support to accelerate your journey:

- **Sustainability Support for Education:** A hub with tools and services to assess your position and build CAPs.
- **Climate Ambassador Programme:** Volunteer experts and Let's Go Zero advisors offer hands-on guidance.
- **National Education Nature Park:** Curriculum-linked activities to boost biodiversity and education.

At The School Network, we enhance this support by connecting you with peers and trusted third-party experts who specialize in school sustainability. These professionals work day in and day out to deliver solutions aligned with DfE goals, ensuring they understand your school's unique context—whether a small primary or a multi-site MAT. We address common concerns to make this process seamless:

- **Time and Resource Constraints:** With the 2025 deadline nearing (it's September 2025!), workload pressures are real. Third-party experts, such as energy auditors or retrofit specialists, streamline complex tasks like emissions calculations or building assessments, saving your staff time. The School Network connects you to providers who prioritize quick, impactful solutions tailored to your capacity, so you can focus on teaching and leadership.
- **Choosing the Right Partners:** Selecting reliable experts can feel daunting. The School Network curates partnerships with vetted providers who understand school budgets, pupil demographics, and DfE priorities. These specialists offer affordable, scalable services—from simple energy audits to comprehensive renewable installations—ensuring alignment with your CAP's goals and your school's operational needs.
- **Technical Expertise Gaps:** Tasks like carbon footprint analysis or energy optimization can be complex. Our network links you with experts who simplify these processes, providing clear reports and actionable recommendations. They handle technical details, so your estates team can focus on implementation, not learning new skills from scratch.

By working with these professionals, you tap into their daily expertise, ensuring your CAP is both compliant and ambitious without overwhelming your team. The School Network acts as your trusted partner, facilitating introductions to specialists who deliver results while respecting your school's context and constraints.

Beneficial Outcomes: Why This Matters for Your School

A CAP delivers far-reaching benefits, as highlighted by DfE engagement:

- **Financial Savings:** Energy and water efficiency cuts operating costs, freeing budgets for core priorities.
- **Cultural Shift:** A sustainability-focused ethos boosts morale, with students gaining skills for green careers and less climate anxiety.
- **Enhanced Resilience:** Adaptation measures ensure safer, more comfortable environments amid climate challenges.
- **Educational Excellence:** Sustainability in the curriculum can improve Ofsted ratings and community impact.
- **Community Engagement:** Published CAPs foster pride among parents and locals, while peer networks amplify your influence.

Your school becomes a leader in climate action, preparing students for a sustainable future while optimizing operations.

Actionable Steps: Leveraging Third-Party Expertise

To turn your CAP into reality, partnering with third-party experts can fast-track progress. Here's how to proceed:

1. **Assess Your Needs:** Use DfE tools to review energy use, emissions, and building efficiency. Identify priorities like outdated heating or biodiversity gaps.
2. **Nominate Your Lead:** Appoint a sustainability team with clear roles, ensuring senior leadership involvement.
3. **Develop Your CAP:** Outline actions across the four pillars, setting measurable goals and timelines.
4. **Engage Trusted Experts:** Through The School Network, connect with vetted specialists who align with DfE goals and understand school contexts. Request consultations to discuss your needs—e.g., energy audits, renewable feasibility studies, or curriculum integration. These experts provide cost-benefit analyses and prioritize affordable solutions,

ensuring value for money.

5. **Implement and Monitor:** Roll out initiatives with expert support, tracking progress with simple metrics (e.g., kWh saved or CO2e reduced). Experts can provide dashboards or reports to simplify monitoring.
6. **Evaluate and Share:** Refine your CAP based on outcomes, sharing successes via DfE or The School Network to inspire others.

Partnering with experts ensures technical tasks are handled efficiently, allowing your team to focus on leadership and engagement. The School Network's curated connections mean you work with professionals who are experienced, reliable, and committed to your school's success.

Empowering Your Journey with The School Network

As a school leader, you're driving a vital shift toward sustainability, and The School Network is your partner in making it happen. We connect you to DfE resources, peer networks, and trusted third-party experts who simplify complex tasks and deliver measurable results. With our support, you can overcome time, expertise, and partner selection concerns, ensuring your CAP is both impactful and manageable. Take the first step today—assess your needs, connect with us for expert introductions, or share your story to join a growing community of sustainable schools. Together, let's make 2025 a milestone for greener education.