Back To Basics: Reclaiming Control Of Utilities In UK Schools

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How data, procurement, and smarter systems are helping schools trim costs and boost sustainability

As inflationary pressures ripple through the public sector, schools are being forced to look more closely at every line of expenditure. For many, that spotlight has turned toward a once-overlooked cost centre: utilities.

Heating, electricity, water, and waste services now represent a significant and growing burden for education providers—particularly those operating older estates. But a quiet revolution is under way, led by school trusts that are embracing smarter systems, transparent procurement, and data-led decision making to better manage their utilities—and their budgets.

An Expensive Blind Spot

Utility bills have risen sharply in recent years, driven by market volatility and rising demand. For schools without effective usage tracking or procurement strategies, the result is often overspending and underperformance.

“Without clear data, you’re flying blind,” says Laura Jenkins, head of estates at a multi-academy trust in the North West. “We didn’t realise just how much energy we were wasting until we installed smart meters. Within one term, we cut unnecessary overnight usage by 20%—enough to fund a part-time staff role.”

Smarter Tools, Sharper Insights

At the heart of this shift is the adoption of SMETS2 smart meters, which provide half-hourly consumption data and enable schools to track usage in real time. This data not only improves billing accuracy but also empowers schools to identify inefficiencies, shift usage patterns, and plan maintenance with foresight.

Many trusts are complementing metering with cloud-based dashboards that present energy data visually—tools that support estates teams in meeting environmental targets and reporting progress to governors and regulators.

Procurement, Reimagined

Historically, utilities procurement in schools has been inconsistent—managed locally, and often reactively. New models are emerging. Education-focused aggregators are now working with trusts to consolidate contracts, validate invoices, and streamline supplier relationships.

By centralising procurement across school sites, these providers help reduce administrative burden, ensure regulatory compliance, and unlock economies of scale.

The Hidden Opportunity in Water and Waste

Electricity and gas may get the attention, but water and waste also represent areas of untapped potential. Schools are identifying overcharges and leaks through independent audits, while some are renegotiating waste services to cut landfill costs and boost recycling.

What’s more, these services are increasingly being bundled into wider facilities management frameworks, offering schools integrated solutions under one service agreement.

Culture Change Starts with Students

Utilities reform isn’t just operational—it’s cultural. Some schools are bringing energy usage into the classroom, displaying consumption dashboards in hallways, and involving students in sustainability projects. These initiatives build environmental awareness and embed long-term behavioural change.

Looking Ahead

With government pressure mounting to meet net zero targets, utilities management will likely take on an even more strategic role in school operations. Experts predict increased integration between energy systems, building controls, and curriculum initiatives—alongside a push for broader procurement frameworks and funding access for infrastructure improvements.

Conclusion

UK schools are redefining their relationship with utilities—from passive bill payers to active stewards of energy and efficiency. With the right systems, insights, and partnerships, utilities management can deliver more than cost savings—it can support educational outcomes and sustainability ambitions alike.

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