

# The School Estate's Most Powerful Decarbonisation Tool

7 June 2026

**Solar-Powered Schools: Driving UK Decarbonisation in 2026**

good eco group | Making Sustainability Simple.

Cut energy bills & carbon | Invest in efficient, future-ready schools | Create greener learning environments

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Reduce energy costs | Cut carbon emissions | Inspire future generations | Build a sustainable legacy

Expert Co-Feature

## Solar-Powered Schools: Driving UK Decarbonisation in 2026

An Expert Co-Feature with Good Eco Group

UK schools face a defining moment in their sustainability journey. With mandatory Climate Action Plans (CAPs) and sustainability leads now in place across England, the Department for Education (DfE) is accelerating the shift toward net zero. Rising energy costs, climate resilience needs, and national targets are pushing estates teams to act decisively.

The good news? Proven, scalable solutions exist today - starting with rooftop Solar PV, smartly paired with LED lighting upgrades, battery storage, and future-ready heat pumps. Schools with large daytime energy loads are ideally positioned to generate clean power on-site, slash bills, cut carbon, and create living

classrooms for sustainability education.

In this in-depth editorial for The School Network, we explore the latest 2026 landscape, highest-discussed opportunities and challenges, DfE priorities around carbon reduction, the Condition Improvement Fund (CIF), and complementary building improvements. Leading the conversation is Good Eco Group, a trusted partner with 20+ years' experience, over 9,500 UK efficiency projects, and specialist delivery across 120+ schools in the last three years alone. Their hands-on work - including major multi-site programmes for the Diocese of Chelmsford Vine Schools Trust and the national Drax Foundation - demonstrates exactly how schools can turn ambition into measurable results.

**20+**Years' experience

**9,500+**UK efficiency projects

**120+**Schools in three years

**2026**Year of delivery

## **DfE's 2026 Push: Policy, Targets, and the Education Estates Strategy**

The DfE's refreshed Education Estates Strategy (published February 2026) sets a "decade of national renewal." Key highlights for school leaders:

- **Mandatory Climate Action Plans** — Every setting must now maintain a CAP covering decarbonisation, biodiversity, green skills, and adaptation, overseen by a designated sustainability lead.
- **Net Zero Trajectory** — Aligns with UK carbon budgets: 50% reduction by end of Carbon Budget 5 (2032) and 75% by Carbon Budget 6 (2037) for the education estate.
- **Renewal and Retrofit Programme** — £710 million committed to 2029-30, launching April 2026. Initial pilots (50 projects in East Midlands, Yorkshire & Humber, South-East) will replace poor-condition temporary buildings and install energy generation/efficiency measures to make sites "net zero ready." National rollout follows.
- **Manage Your Education Estate** — New digital portal launching February 2026 to centralise guidance, funding, data, and tools.
- **School Estate Management Standards** — First annual returns required

from autumn 2026.

The estate's 55 million square metres of roof space offers huge potential: an estimated 0.8-1.9 GW of additional solar capacity. A typical school could save up to £25,000 annually with solar panels plus complementary technologies such as batteries. The Net Zero Accelerator and Great British Energy Solar Programme are already funding installations, LED, EV charging, and efficiency measures across 250 schools and colleges in 2025-26 with £100 million investment - delivering immediate emissions cuts and cost relief.

CIF 2026-27 remains a vital route for condition-led projects. While the primary focus is urgent building safety and maintenance (asbestos, boilers, structural issues), the guidance explicitly encourages energy-efficient and low-carbon options where they address high-need condition problems. Low-carbon boiler replacements are prioritised; pure efficiency projects (e.g., standalone lighting) score lower unless tied to urgent condition needs. Successful bids increasingly demonstrate carbon reduction benefits, with solar PV and integrated renewables viewed favourably when part of holistic upgrades. Outcomes for the 2026-27 round are expected in spring 2026.

## **Solar PV for Schools: Benefits, Real-World Performance, and 2026 Trends**

Highest-discussed points among school business managers and estates leads in 2026 centre on payback, self-consumption, and integration.

- **Daytime alignment** — Schools use ~80% of electricity during daylight hours in term time, delivering excellent self-consumption rates and strong ROI.
- **Typical payback** — 5-7 years (faster with good export tariffs and batteries). Once repaid, 25-year warranties deliver decades of near-free power.
- **Savings & carbon impact** — Average annual bill reductions of £5,000-£25,000 per site; national potential runs into hundreds of millions over 30 years.
- **Educational value** — Real-time monitoring dashboards turn roofs into living science labs.

Early 2025-26 Great British Energy projects already show strong results: 11 pioneer schools collectively saving £175,000 annually, with multi-site trusts like HEART Academies reporting 20% grid reduction and £1.5 million+ net savings over 25 years from a 249 kWp system.

## Challenges commonly raised:

- Upfront capital constraints (solved by pay-as-you-save finance).
- Summer generation “wasted” (countered by excellent export rates and battery storage shifting excess to evenings/weekends).
- Grid connection and planning (expert partners handle DNO applications and approvals).

DfE lifted its 2025 temporary pause on Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) in January 2026, reopening zero-capex routes - but schools are advised to compare carefully: many traditional PPAs leave schools with higher effective rates than their own supplier. Capex or finance models (school ownership) almost always deliver superior long-term value.

## Funding Routes in 2026: Making It Cost-Neutral or Better

1. **Great British Energy / Net Zero Accelerator grants** — Direct capital support for solar + efficiency bundles.
2. **Salix Finance / Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme (PSDS)** — Interest-free loans or grants for heat decarbonisation and efficiency.
3. **CIF + Renewal and Retrofit Programme** — Condition-linked funding with sustainability uplift.
4. **Pay-as-you-save finance (e.g., Good Eco Group’s Greener Good Fund)** — No upfront cost; repayments matched by energy savings. Schools can be cashflow positive from day one with partial upfront contribution.
5. **Smart Export Guarantee (SEG) + local authority/community funds** — Additional revenue from exported power.

Good Eco Group routinely supports schools with Salix applications, AIA 100% tax allowances, and fully funded models - ensuring projects fit within existing

budgets.

## **Good Eco Group: Proven Delivery Partner for Education Estates**

Good Eco Group stands out as the go-to specialist for live-school environments. With in-house engineering, RIBA architects, and dedicated education teams, they have completed energy upgrades in 120+ schools in the last three years while maintaining zero compromise on safeguarding and minimal disruption.

### **Stand-out project: Diocese of Chelmsford Vine Schools Trust**

Stand-out project: Diocese of Chelmsford Vine Schools Trust (21 primary schools)  
Good Eco delivered a coordinated LED lighting upgrade across all sites - completed within the six-week summer break - with full internal/external replacements including classrooms, halls, kitchens, and outdoors. Scope also included detailed energy assessments and design for roof-mounted Solar PV systems to maximise on-site generation. Several sites required asbestos management and infrastructure coordination.

### **Outcomes**

**68-69 tonnes** Annual carbon reduction CO<sub>2</sub>e

**£105,000+** Annual energy cost savings

**61%** Average energy reduction

**3.11 years** Average payback

New lighting lifespan: 10-13+ years.

Suthan Santhaguru, Director of Finance, Vine Schools Trust:

“With 23 schools in our trust, it’s vital we address our collective carbon footprint... By switching to solar energy and LED lighting, we expect to save £150,000 annually.”

# National scale: Drax Foundation 'Free Lighting for Schools' Programme

Sole delivery partner since 2023 - over 75 schools upgraded with full LED replacements.

**1,684 tonnes** Carbon reduction CO<sub>2</sub>e

**£840,000** Annual savings

**72%** Energy reduction

**2 years** Average payback

## Good Eco's core education offering includes:

- **LED Lighting & SMART Controls** — Up to 80% savings, rapid 1-2-year ROI, wireless monitoring.
- **Solar PV & Battery Storage** — Zero-carbon generation, grid-export revenue, 25-year warranties.
- **Heat Pumps & Full Decarbonisation** — Tailored low-carbon heating with Salix/Greener Good Fund support.
- **Building Design & Construction** — In-house design-build, refurb, modular, safeguarding works, DNO coordination.
- **Greener Good Fund** — Flexible pay-as-you-save finance with immediate or cost-neutral cashflow.

All works are scheduled out-of-term-time with central project coordination, detailed site surveys, and performance monitoring to support ongoing estate management. This structured, education-specific approach ensures consistent quality, safety, and alignment with wider net-zero plans.

## Beyond Solar: Holistic 2026 Decarbonisation Roadmaps

Highest-impact programmes combine measures: LED first (to lower base load and right-size solar), then PV + batteries, followed by heat pumps and fabric upgrades. Good Eco's whole-estate assessments identify the optimal sequence for each site, maximising grant eligibility and ROI.

Broader improvements funded via CIF/Renewal & Retrofit include roof replacements, classroom extensions, ventilation, insulation, and flood resilience - all opportunities to embed low-carbon technologies.

## **Practical Steps for School Leaders - Expert Advice from Good Eco Group**

1. **Review your CAP** — Ensure it includes a decarbonisation pathway with solar/LED as quick wins.
2. **Commission a free site assessment** — Detailed energy modelling and roof surveys (Good Eco provides these at no cost).
3. **Model funding options** — Compare Capex, finance, Salix, CIF, and GB Energy - Good Eco delivers side-by-side analyses including PPA pitfalls.
4. **Plan for summer 2026** — Out-of-term delivery windows fill quickly.
5. **Engage early** — With Manage Your Education Estate launching now and Retrofit Programme pilots opening April 2026, proactive trusts are already securing places.

James Heath, Marketing Manager at Good Eco Group: “Schools don’t need to navigate this alone. Our education-specialist teams deliver end-to-end - from funding applications to commissioning and monitoring - so estates teams can focus on education while we deliver measurable carbon and cost reductions.”

## **Time to Act: Positive Steps for a Net-Zero Estate**

2026 is the year schools move from planning to delivery. With record capital investment, unlocked private finance routes, and proven partners like Good Eco Group already delivering at scale, the pathway is clearer than ever.

Whether upgrading 5 sites or 50, the combination of solar PV, LED, smart controls, and flexible funding delivers immediate savings, long-term resilience, and powerful sustainability messaging for pupils, parents, and inspectors.

# Ready to power your school's net-zero journey?

Contact Good Eco Group today for a no-obligation education-specific assessment and funding roadmap. With their track record on projects exactly like yours - including the Vine Schools Trust transformation - you'll be in expert hands from day one.

Let's make 2026 the year your estate becomes part of the solution.

**Co-featured in partnership with Good Eco Group** - leading providers of energy efficiency and decarbonisation solutions for the UK education sector. Visit [goodecogroup.com](http://goodecogroup.com) or email [education@goodecogroup.com](mailto:education@goodecogroup.com).

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All figures and outcomes drawn from Good Eco Group project data and DfE publications as of February 2026. Individual results vary by site; full feasibility assessments recommended.