

The DfE's draft education and sustainability strategy: for schools

We consider each of the 'action areas' of the draft strategy & what it might mean for schools & academies.

07 December 2021

The 5 November 2021 had the theme of "Youth and Public Empowerment" at COP26. It was therefore fitting that the Secretary of State for Education released the draft Sustainability and Climate Change strategy for education and children's services systems. The draft strategy will apparently be built upon over the next six months in collaboration with young people, educators, sustainability experts and environmentalists, with the final version of the strategy being published in April 2022.

We consider each of the 'action areas' of the draft strategy and what it might mean for schools and academies below, but it is worth also touching on the two initiatives which are put forward to drive the strategy:

- The first is the concept of considering the physical education estate as one large entity under the guise of a virtual **National Education Nature Park**. It is not entirely clear from the strategy exactly how the virtual park will work, but the vision seems to be a digital mapping-based tool where work done in the education estate on improving biodiversity, halting nature's decline and driving climate resilience can be shared, with the platform also being used by children to improve their understanding of this area. The draft strategy states that the Park will help connect work already being undertaken in this space by The Woodland Trust, Eco Schools, The Natural History Museum and others.
- The other initiative proposed to drive the strategy is the roll out of a **Climate Leaders Award** (which will be renamed through the next few months consultation phase). Again, without being totally clear on what is involved, the draft strategy talks about credits being earned through activities in existing awards schemes such as the John Muir Award, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, and the Junior Forester Award.

Action Area 1: Climate education

Moving onto the action areas, the first area focuses on enhancing teaching in schools on the causes and impact of climate change. It is stated that all early-career teachers will have access to free high-quality training and support in this area, and that all teachers and school leaders will have free access to a new National Professional Qualification. This section is light on detail and it is to be hoped that the consultation phase will elicit more detail here about what can be expected.

Interestingly, the Government have taken the opportunity within the draft strategy to confirm that teaching about climate change is not a political issue and so schools do not need to present misinformation or unsubstantiated claims for balance. Accordingly schools do not need to give views of climate change deniers. However, where discussions about climate change transition into and touch upon issues such as social and economic reform, this should be handled in line with schools normal duties on political impartiality. Schools are also directed not to encourage pupils to join campaigning groups, or take part in protests. Crucially, schools are not instructed to actively discourage pupils from taking this path.

Action Area 2: Green skills and careers

This area is, naturally, of more relevance to the further and higher education sectors than to schools.

Much of the detail is focussed on qualifications which are skills based and will sit primarily in the further education sector (such as apprenticeships), and adult re-training for people working in areas which will be impacted by changes in climate policy (for example, re-

skilling heating engineers). There is reference to improving take-up of STEM subjects at all levels, and a commitment to grow the number of Institutes of Technology.

There is specific reference to the schools' commercial programmes on net zero including career opportunity guidance to pupils with regard to the technologies being used. Again, this statement lacks detail in terms of what is intended and how it would work.

Action Area 3: The education estate

There are three main aims within this action area, reduce carbon emissions, adapt the estate to cope with climate change and increase biodiversity.

Reducing emissions

This area references the Government commitment that all new school buildings built by the DfE and not already under contract will be net zero in operation (crucially different than net zero including construction). To seek to deal with the carbon cost of construction, the Government indicates it will continue to develop and test the GenZero prototype for the future new build of schools, which are designed to be both ultra-low in construction carbon, and operate at net zero.

For older buildings, the Government will pilot an energy pod solution in place of traditional gas or oil boilers. Energy pods typically include renewable technologies, energy storage and smart controls.

This will not be available to all schools. Most schools will be supported by the Government to conduct a feasibility study to identify the most suitable low carbon heating systems to replace end of life fossil fuel boilers.

The Government also pledges support for schools to make a transition to low carbon technologies such as EV charging points and smart meters; to deliver green initiatives such as Walk To School Outreach, Bikeability and School Streets; and to access the funds they need to reduce their emissions (from, for example, the BEIS Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme).

Adaptation

The focus here is primarily on risks from flooding. The Government commits to supporting schools to work with the Environment Agency, Water Companies and Local Authorities to reduce flood risk at schools to provide locally tailored solutions. It also indicates that all education settings will be required to sign up to available weather and flood warnings and have emergency plans in place.

Biodiversity

The proposal here is that the biodiversity of the education estate be improved through various activities delivered through the National Education Nature Park initiative.

Action Area 4: Operations and supply chain

Most of the content in this area focusses on the DfE's own operations, but the draft strategy does commit to reducing food waste across the education sector working with Defra and the Waste Resources Action Programme (WRAP), and considering the emissions from food consumed in the sector and reducing. Likewise, the draft strategy commits that the DfE will work with schools to embed sustainable buying in their purchasing decisions.

Action Area 5: Data

The main objective set out in the draft strategy in relation to data is to work with all sectors in education and childcare to improve reporting for carbon emissions, whilst emphasising that in a devolved system the DfE cannot control this entirely.

Many academy trusts are already subject to the Streamlined Energy and Carbon Reporting regime, and maintained schools are asked to adhere to a voluntary target and reporting framework for the public sector; and it is this inconsistency that the Government is seeking to deal with.

Closing thoughts

The draft Strategy is light on detail, but does include some positive statements. We would encourage schools to take any opportunities to get provide views in any consultative activity on the draft strategy (at the time of writing, a formal consultation is not underway).

In the meantime though, we think the action areas for provide a useful framework for your own action. We anticipate in common with the rest of the public sector, the education sector will increasingly be subject to regulation in this area and would encourage the sector to take the lead on setting the agenda.

Not only does the sector have an opportunity to make a significant positive contribution to reducing the UK's emissions, it is also the sector serving some of the most demanding consumers – young people. COP26 showed us that if there is any hope at all for the world, it lies in our young people, and so our education institutions must rise to the challenge of supporting them in their aspirations for a greener future.

Contact



Laura Hughes

Partner

laura.hughes@brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)115 976 6582

Related expertise

Services

Governance of schools and
colleges