



Department
for Education

United Learning's Sustainability Journey

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What is your ambition and approach?

Across the schools that make up the United Learning Multi Academy Trust (94 in summer 2023), we have made a commitment to have a positive impact on our local communities beyond the school, on the national education system and on the wider world. This includes ensuring that our operations are sustainable and seek to avoid negative impact on the environment and climate. United Learning has always been an organisation with a clear social mission; we are educating the next generation for their future lives, and we are all conscious that those lives will be profoundly shaped by decisions this generation makes affecting our climate and environment.

We first set out our ambition to be carbon neutral in 2019 and measured our baseline emissions. We are working to reduce our carbon emissions substantially across our operations. As a community of over 60,000 pupils and just under 10,000 members of staff, if we all make small changes to reduce the impact we have on the environment and climate, we can have a big impact. In particular, we are focusing on:

- Reducing emissions associated with our estate – through the decisions we make about energy use, measures to improve energy efficiency, and reducing our reliance on gas as far as possible;
- Reducing emissions associated with our supply chain – through the decisions we make about what to purchase and the suppliers we use, and influencing our suppliers to change their behaviour and reduce their own carbon emissions;
- Engaging staff and pupils – and parents and communities – across our schools to make more sustainable choices, from the food we eat, to the amount of waste we generate (and how it is treated), the way we get to school and through embedding sustainability in our curriculum.

What was the approach taken to structure Sustainability Leadership?

The approach we have taken to structuring Sustainability Leadership within our schools has been to delegate the day-to-day responsibilities at school level to 'Carbon Neutral Champions'. These Champions are asked to:

- Work with colleagues to develop and deliver an action plan to reduce carbon emissions;
- Review progress against that plan, ensuring that senior leaders know about successes and challenges;
- Galvanise change in schools/clusters and the wider community by communicating, coordinating, and advocating the work schools are already undertaking and their future sustainability plans and ambitions;
- Communicate and share progress and best practice – in school and with the trust central team.

Centrally, this work is driven by a small cross-functional team, with oversight from our Director of Strategy and Performance, a member of the Executive Team. She chairs a steering group made up of representatives from each department as well as from our schools to oversee work towards achieving our Group-wide ambition. Progress is reported regularly to the Executive Board and Group Board.

What was the approach taken to creating, developing, and implementing Climate Action Plans?

Last year, for the first time, we asked schools to develop local action plans. To support this, we provided schools with a planning template, which focuses action on six themes (including community & culture, curriculum, the school site, food, waste and travel of which schools were asked to select at least three) and included useful links to resources, external organisations and support available. Our aim was to give schools easily implementable ideas and inspiration for their local plans, to create a framework for tracking progress and to support Champions to engage school leaders (including governors), teachers, parents, pupils and the wider community. We also shared data on each school's carbon footprint, hosted on an interactive platform (PowerBI), with emissions broken down by scopes 1, 2 & 3.

This year, we are taking a more centrally-directed approach, following feedback from our schools – particularly smaller primaries – that they struggled to identify the capacity to engage and wanted to be told really clearly what action they should be taking locally. We are therefore asking schools to focus on three things in 2023-24:

- implement a clear United Learning energy policy; 'turn it down, turn it off and shut it down',
- one meat free day a week, and
- establish effective means of food waste management.

We have also shared a longer checklist for any schools that are ready to go further. The planning templates remain as optional for those schools who want to continue with it.

Examples of actions undertaken/planned in relation to:

Decarbonising our estate

We have a Group-wide energy contract and in 2020, we switched to 100% renewable electricity. Since then, we have undertaken decarbonisation surveys across all of our

schools, which feed into each school's Building Development Plan. This will inform a Group-wide plan focusing on how we should prioritise our own investment and to inform bids to any available decarbonisation funding schemes. We have committed to year-on-year investment of £2m (just under 25% of our current SCA allocation) in decarbonisation as part of our current five-year strategy and were recently successful in bids to the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme totalling nearly £6m, which we will match-fund.

Engagement of young people

Our carbon neutral ambition includes a strand that focuses on the engagement of our young people which means encouraging them to think actively about how, together, we can prevent climate change. This academic year, we have introduced a Sustainability Curriculum across our primary schools and are currently developing this for secondary, which will be shared with schools in the Autumn. Many schools have eco-groups or a sustainability focus as part of their student council's remit.

In November 2022 we held a COP27 Climate Simulation Negotiation, timed to coincide with COP27 happening in Egypt. 70 students from 14 of the Group's academies and independent schools joined together for the event, hosted with UCL experts and in partnership with the British Council at their UK headquarters in Stratford, London. It was designed to give students the opportunity to strengthen their communication, negotiation and presentation skills, whilst encouraging them to consider potential solutions and deepening their understanding of the decisions, choices and opportunity costs facing policy makers, businesses and organisations across the world in working towards Net Zero. Throughout the day, students engaged in several rounds of negotiations and presented their ideas confidently to their peers. They were also able to see their proposals modelled in a real-life climate simulation using computer software developed by Climate Interactive and MIT. The day was featured on the [BBC London 6pm News](#).

One of the students attending the event, from Surbiton High School, said: *"I really enjoyed how much the event today stretched me and took me out of my comfort zone. For example, I had to play the role of a Fossil Fuel Lobbyist which allowed me to consider different perspectives. I think the event was important because it showed that there is space for all of us in the climate change conversation, and that our voices as young people do really matter."*