

Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy for education: Progress Update 2023

User Group Assessment

December 2023

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Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) Sustainability and Climate Change Stakeholder User Group is made up of specialists working across the education system. Our role is to:

- provide DfE with sector feedback
- challenge DfE on the delivery of their Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy (the strategy) and whether their policies satisfy the needs of the education sector
- identify potential risks and suggest mitigations to DfE.

The sustainability agenda intersects with other priorities such as attainment, student wellbeing, post-pandemic recovery, staff retention, digitalisation and transformation of the school estate. Education for sustainable development is increasingly recognised globally as a core component of quality education and demand for sustainability in education is increasing.

The user group very much welcomes the publication of the strategy and the various initiatives that have been established since its launch. It's critical work. We particularly welcome the approach DfE have taken – being collaborative and consultative; recognising the breadth of activity already undertaken in this space; and working to navigate where they can best add value and create impact across the education sector that is complementary rather than competitive to what's already there – inspiring and enabling change rather than dictating it.

As part of the DfE's Annual Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy Progress Report, the user group were asked to use the views of the majority to provide reflections and observations on the education system. Specifically, to present a 'snapshot' systems analysis of the current education landscape, reflecting on the extent to which the various influences on the education sector are promoting, embedding and driving sustainability action. Our approach could certainly be refined for future years, but we hope provides a baseline and a framework for further input in future, perhaps on an annual basis.

The strategy was launched in April 2022, and sets out a vision to 2030. Therefore, this snapshot looks purely at the first 18 months since the strategy's inception and recognises there's much more to come – some of which is already planned.

There are limitations to our work – we've used the relatively blunt tool of assessment based upon the opinions, experiences and perceptions of the experts that make up the user group. We all come with certain biases so we've listed those invited to contribute as an appendix to showcase and be transparent about our diverse expertise and interests.

Our biggest conclusion is that we need more information about the engagement and impact resulting from DfE's work. We're keen to support the collection and analysis of

this information in future. What we present here is a 'toe in the water' but over the coming year we commit to a more thorough analysis.

The approach we took

This is no small feat – there are many influences on the education sector ranging from top-down policy interventions to changes enacted by individual learners and staff members. Our first step was mapping these influences. For each part of the education sector (early years, primary, secondary, further and higher education) we listed the agencies, groups and organisations ('bodies') that shape how the education sector operates and grouped these. The map created can be found as an appendix.

Members of the user group were then asked to use their expert judgement and knowledge to assess the extent to which these are promoting, embedding and driving sustainability action through their work. Each of the sector stakeholders identified could be ranked as 'Not yet engaged', 'Emerging', 'Developing', 'Performing', 'Leading' or to assign no specific trend across the group. We also assessed how the DfE Sustainability and Climate Change strategy has affected the sustainability work of each group. For each stakeholder, user group members could say the strategy has had no effect, has enhanced their existing work or has led to them initiating sustainability action. It's important to note that the strategy didn't intend to influence change across all aspects of the education system – yet we wanted to understand the impact it has had. Looking at all of the responses, we made a judgement about the combined assessment for each category.

We recognise the diversity in our sector. There are multiple examples of excellent sustainability practice across all four areas of the strategy: climate education; green skills and careers; education estate and digital infrastructure; and, operations and supply chains. We know our assessment will miss the rich and nuanced stories about what's working well and what lessons have been learned to date. We welcome work undertaken by DfE and others to collect and share these stories to complement this high-level snapshot. Over the next year, the user group should work closely with DfE to think about how to bring these stories to light and to provide a more comprehensive view of the successes and challenges of the strategy for the next annual report. Achieving the vision for the United Kingdom education sector to be world leading in sustainability and climate change by 2030 will only be achieved through partnership and collaboration across society.

Our reflections: description

The level of engagement with sustainability and climate change of the different parts of the education system has been assessed, ranging from those most engaged through to those not engaged. The assessment covers Primary, Secondary, FE and HE. No data was available to the group for Early Years. The assessment is described below, and a supporting visual image follows:

Engagement level: leading

- Primary School Level Community and Civic Society Organisations, Youth and Learner Voice Organisations and Local Community Activists
- Secondary School Level Community and Civic Society Organisations, Youth and Learner Voice Organisations
- HE Providers and Youth and Learner Voice Organisations

Engagement level: Performing

- Primary School Level Local Community Activists
- FE Sector Representative Bodies
- HE Governing Bodies

Engagement level: Developing

- FE Providers, Governing Bodies, Teacher Training and Leadership Training and Leadership Teams
- HE Sector Representative Bodies, Professional Bodies, Teacher Training, Leadership Training, Alliances and Mission Groups, Leadership Teams and Staff

Engagement level: Emerging

- Primary School Level Sector Representative Bodies, Regulators, Curriculum Influencers, Providers, Local Government, Staff
- Secondary School Level Professional Bodies, Curriculum Influencers, Providers and Local Government
- FE Funders, Professional Bodies, Local Government, Youth and Learner Voice Organisations, Staff and Learners and Alumni

Engagement level: Not yet engaged

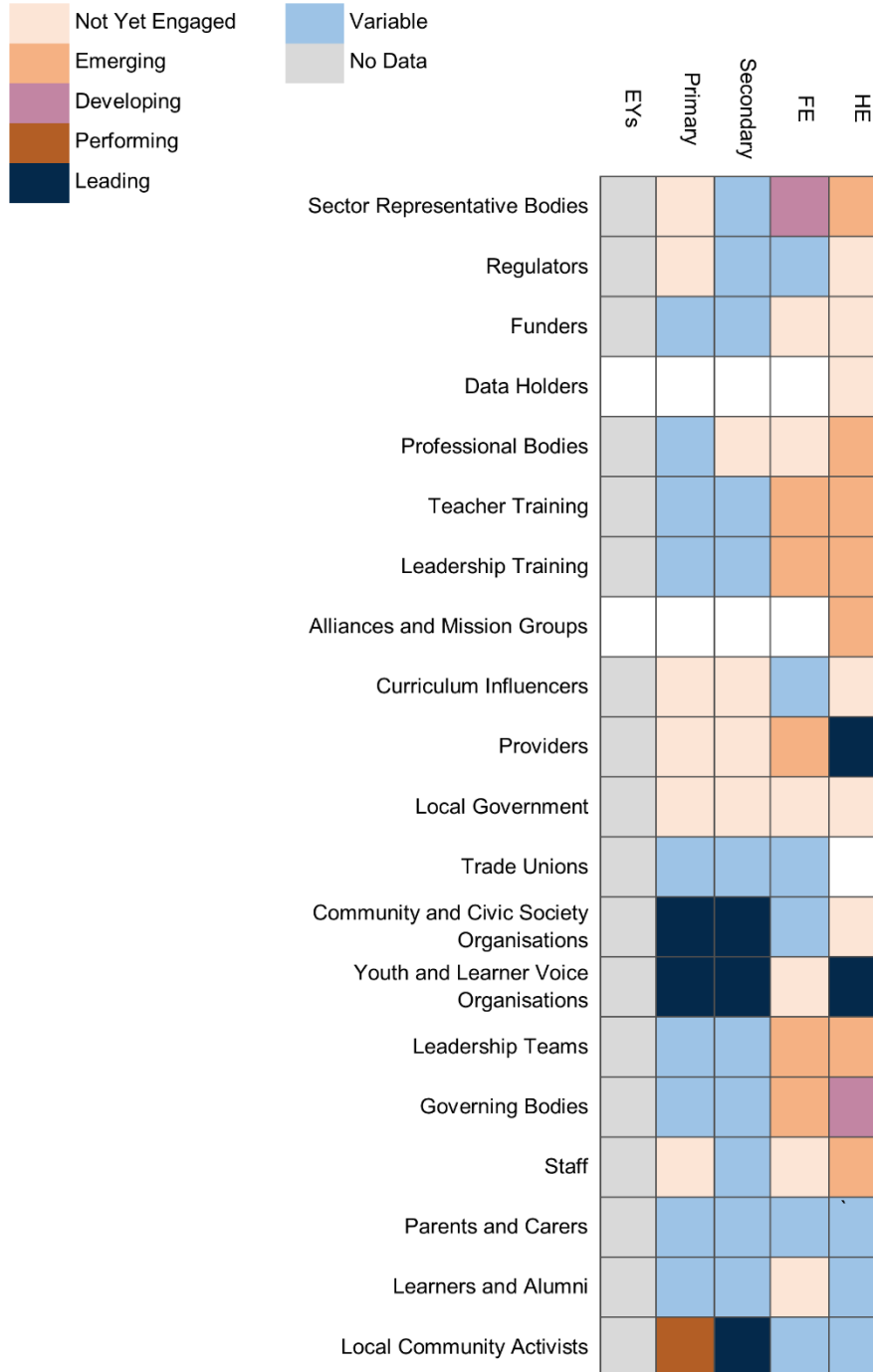
- HE Trade Unions
- Engagement level: Variable
- Primary School Level Funders, Professional Bodies, Teacher Training, Leadership training, Trade Unions, Leadership Teams, Governing Bodies, Parents and Carers, Learners and Alumni

- Secondary School Level Sector Representative Bodies, Regulators, Funders, Teacher Training, Leadership Training, Trade Unions, Leadership Teams, Governing Bodies, Staff, Parents and Carers, Learners and Alumni
- FE Regulators, Curriculum Influencers, Trade Unions, Community and Civic Organisations, Parents and Carers, Local Community Activists

Engagement level: Variable

- Primary School level Funders, Professional Bodies, Teacher Training, Leadership Training, Trade Unions, Leadership Teams, Governing Bodies, Parents and Carers, Learners and Alumni
- Secondary School level Sector Representative Bodies, Regulators, Funders, Teacher Training, Leadership Training, Trade Unions, Leadership Teams, Governing Bodies, Staff, Parents and Carers, Learners and Alumni
- FE Regulators, Curriculum Influencers, Trade Unions, Community and Civic Society Organisations, Parents and Carers, Local Community Activists
- HE Parents and Carers, Learners and Alumni, Local Community Activists

Figure 1. Engagement with sustainability and climate change



Our complementary assessment of the impact of the DfE Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy on the work of sector stakeholders to date (recognising the infancy of

the strategy and the initiatives that have begun or are being planned to deliver it) is described below. The assessment sets out the impact as no effect, enhanced, initiated, variable and also highlights where no data is available. The assessment again covers Primary, Secondary, FE and HE. No data was available to the group for Early Years. A visual image to support this description follows the text.

Impact: No effect

- Primary School Level Regulators, Funders, Leadership Training, Providers, Community and Civic Organisations, Youth and Learner Voice Organisations, Leadership Teams, Parents and Carers
- Secondary School Level Regulators, Parents and Carers, Learners and Alumni
- FE Regulators, Local Government, Trade Unions, Community and Civic Society Organisations
- HE Regulators, Funders, Professional Bodies, Teacher Training, Local Government, Trade Unions, Community and Civic Society Organisations, Parents and Carers, Learners and Alumni, Local Community Activists

Impact: Enhanced

- Primary School Level Sector Representative Bodies, Professional Bodies, Teacher Training, Local Government, Trade Unions, Governing Bodies, Staff, Learners and Alumni, Local Community Activists
- Secondary School Level Professional Bodies, Teacher Training, Providers, Trade Unions, Youth and Learner Voice Organisations, Staff, Local Community Activists
- FE Sector Representative Bodies, Professional Bodies, Providers
- HE Sector Representative Bodies, Youth and Learner Voice Organisations, Leadership Teams, Governing Bodies

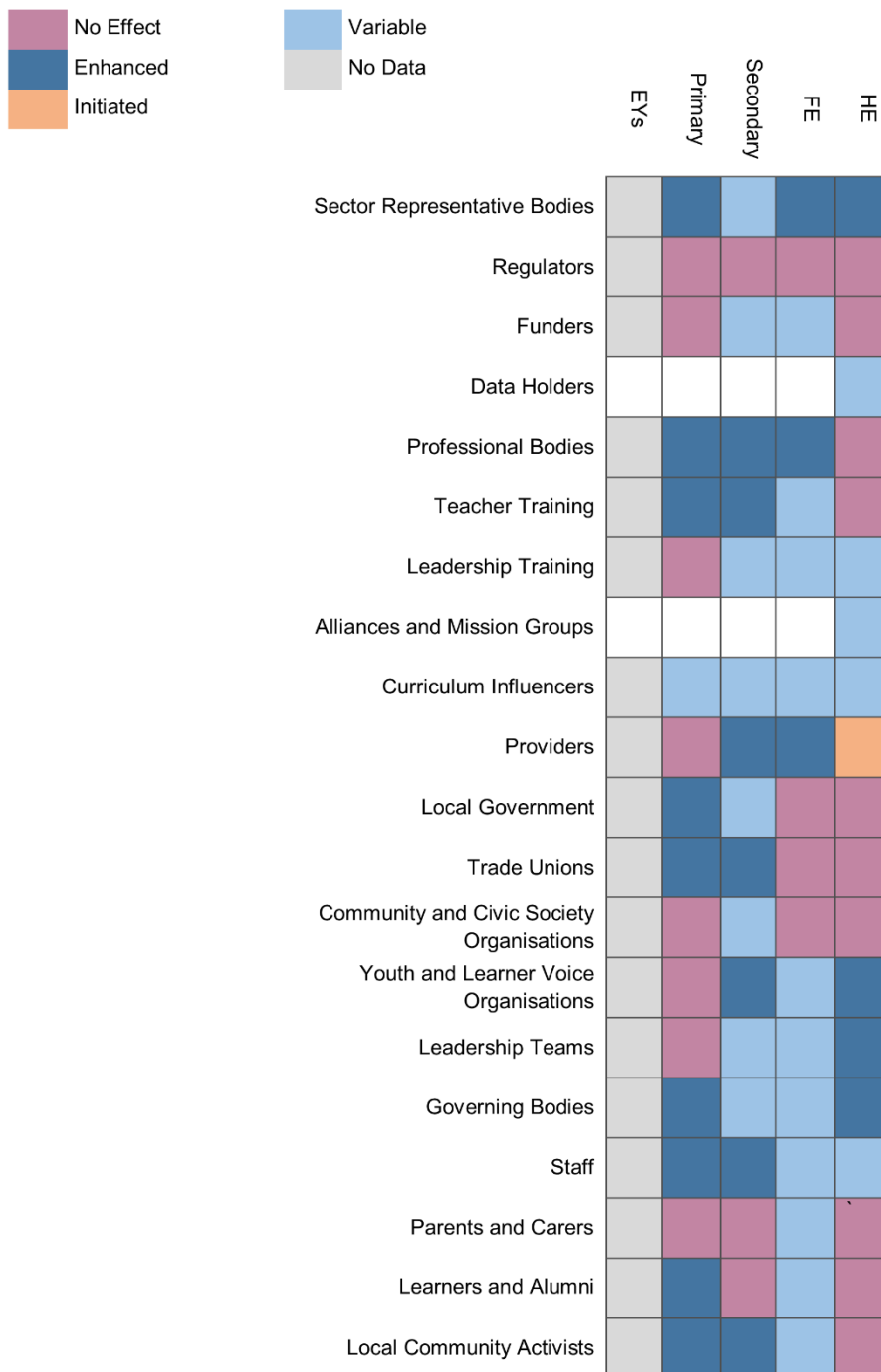
Impact: Initiated

- HE Providers

Impact: Variable

- Primary School Level Curriculum Influencers
- Secondary School Level Sector Representative Bodies, Funders, Leadership Training, Curriculum Influencers, Local Government, Community and Civic Society Organisations, Leadership Teams, Governing Bodies
- FE Funders, Teacher Training, Leadership Training, Curriculum Influencers, Youth and Learner Voice Organisations, Leadership Teams, Governing Bodies, Staff, Parents and Carers, Learners and Alumni, Local Community Activists
- HE Data Holders, Leadership Training, Alliances and Mission Groups, Curriculum Influencers, Staff

Figure 2: Impact of the Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy



Based on the assessment of the user group for this exercise, a number of key points can be seen:

- Considering the infancy of the strategy, it's already having wide reaching impacts across the sector.
- The ability of the group to assess the engagement of the Early Years sector is limited. There needs to be more work to enable deeper assessment of this sector.
- In general, the tertiary (further and higher) sector were seen as having greater levels of engagement than the other sectors. The support of sector representative bodies AOC, UUK and Guild HE were cited. This is not to discredit the work undertaken across the early years and schools sectors, nor the vibrant diversity of NGOs that support sustainability action in these sectors, but to recognise that sustainability action across tertiary education was more widespread and established.
- Community and civic society organisations and youth and learner organisations were assessed to play particularly important leadership roles across the education sector. EAUC, Ecoschools, Lets Go Zero, NEU, NGA, SEEd and UKSSN were all cited by user group members as having supported change in the sector. In addition, for the primary and secondary phases, local community activists and thought leaders also play important leadership roles.
- HE providers were also assessed to play leading roles.
- There are many primary and secondary stakeholders that were assessed to have highly variable engagement. Future work should target addressing this variability and engaging the widest possible set of stakeholders in these sectors.
- The engagement of regulators, funders and local government is generally low across the sector.
- The strategy was judged to have enhanced the work of very many stakeholders across the education sector. The breadth of this enhancement across stakeholders and parts of the sector should be celebrated as a key positive outcome of the strategy.
- There is particularly strong enhancement of activity in the primary school sector. The strategy was deemed to have enhanced sustainability action in half of the stakeholder groups.
- There is more variability of impact in the tertiary sector, with the strategy judged to have had no effect in half of the stakeholder groups for the higher education sector and significant variability in assessed impact in the further education sector. Interestingly these sectors were also judged to have greater engagement as a whole, so perhaps it is unsurprising that where sustainability action was already established, the strategy has had least impact.
- Issues around the capacity for climate leadership and education were cited, with concerns raised about the workload implications on an already stretched workforce – particularly in early years, primary, secondary and further education.

- The affordability of decarbonising the education estate was also cited as a significant barrier.
- Leadership mindset and capacity was also raised as a barrier, particularly in primary and secondary. Environmental sustainability is seen as a luxury and very few schools/trusts currently have an appointed sustainability lead. Future DfE action will look to address this and a key metric of success will be in the development of the sustainability lead cohort.
- Whilst the user group recognised the work undertaken by some initial teacher training/education providers, the FE sector was cited as leading from a teacher training perspective with education for sustainable development now embedded in the different routes new educators can take to gain qualification or professional status.
- DfE's strategy has had less impact on adult education and independent training providers - these are audiences that have reported they don't 'see themselves' in the framing or content of DfE's work.

Recommendations

With the 2024 launch of DfE's package of support for sustainability leadership and climate action plans, the user group anticipates further engagement with the strategy and its aims across the education system. We really welcome DfE's leadership in this area and the collaborative and open approaches taken. Therefore our greatest recommendation is to please continue!

A clear message from our assessment is that more robust evaluation and evidence is needed to understand both the impacts of the DfE's work and what works best in sustainability and climate change education. Some work in this direction is already underway, including the climate literacy survey of school leavers, but more work is needed to understand the variability revealed in our assessment – why are some engaged and others not.

We feel the following recommendations would further strengthen the sector's uptake of sustainability action:

- The **funding** available to DfE and thus to the sector to deliver the strategy should be increased – particularly with regards to decarbonisation of the estate and capacity within the education workforce (particularly leaders and educators) to engage with the strategy's aims. Procurement exercises and funding streams should promote collaboration, with meaningful amounts of time to apply for and use funding and have strategic alignment with other public funding programmes.
- Evidence based sustainability and climate education should be embedded throughout the whole **curriculum** developing relevant skills and behaviours and sustainability literacies as well as knowledge. Clear messages about political impartiality are important so that high quality and impactful sustainability and education is not constrained. A clear signal that existing and new qualifications should align with the DfE's strategy through Ofqual would be an effective driver of change in the further education sector.
- Without the engagement of key changemakers, the strategy and systemic change is highly unlikely to succeed. It's not just the work of education settings that shape the system but also regulators, funders, sector agencies and local government. Neither Ofsted nor the Office for Students currently hold education settings accountable for their sustainability and climate work. Inclusion of sustainability action and education in the relevant **regulatory frameworks** e.g. the Education Act, and mandates and remits of the full range of **sector bodies** (see appendix 2) would be a significant driver of change.
- Widespread and accessible impactful **continued professional development and training** is needed for educators, staff, leaders, and governing bodies. Scale, pace and quality are what's needed in terms of roll out and lessons could be learned from the training undertaken upon introduction of the Prevent agenda.

- Mandatory **centralised reporting** for carbon management and other elements of sustainability education would be welcome so that data was available for benchmarking, to inform prioritisation and decision making, and to enhance accountability across the sector. However, this would need to be managed well to ensure organisations have the capacity and capability to facilitate this.
- Inclusion of sustainability and climate in the Gatsby benchmarks would initiate a change in **careers advice and guidance** relating to sustainability. Greater links between the excellent work that DfE is doing on green skills and the wider government green skills delivery group would be welcome and efficient.
- **Professional bodies** that set standards for education organisations and those that work within them should also be encouraged to include sustainability and climate in those standards.
- The **user group's membership** expands to include further expertise in the early years sector. Further invitees could include the National Day Nurseries Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, National Child Care Association, Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years and Early Education.

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