



Department  
for Education

# **DfE Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy: Evaluation Framework**

**January 2024**

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## Foreword

Evidence must be at the heart of what we do. We made that commitment in the publication of our Sustainability & Climate Change Strategy because we know that building a strong evidence base for our environmental sustainability policies is crucial to understanding what works and for whom. Only through this will we realise our vision for the United Kingdom to be the world-leading education sector in sustainability and climate change by 2030.

This document sets out our framework to ensure that current and future sustainability evaluation activities are proportionate, comprehensive, and consistent, aligned with the departmental-wide Evaluation Strategy.

By publishing this document, we are committing to undertaking robust monitoring and evaluation, and to promoting the use of best evidence to underpin decision-making.

We will work closely with our partners across and beyond government to establish a strong evidence base in sustainability in the education sector, to ensure that DfE remains at the forefront of research and evaluation.

To build our evidence we are also looking for new and novel sources of data. We are committed to demonstrating the impact of our innovative and forward-thinking sustainability policies, whilst understanding what we do well and what we can do better and incorporating this within current delivery and future strategy development. The publication of this document is a statement of intent to take an active role in reinforcing our culture of robust evaluation.

We are therefore pleased to introduce this framework which sets our direction to build on the good practice we have already put in place, and outlines where we aspire to be in the future.



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## Summary

The UK requires the education sector to play its role in positively responding to climate change and inspiring action on an international stage. Moreover, our vision is for a department which is able to access a strong evidence base to support policy making and able to demonstrate the changes our policies are achieving.

The Department for Education's (DfE) [Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy](#) (S&CC Strategy) was published in April 2022, setting out the short, medium and longer-term actions that will enable the department to make progress towards achieving our four strategic aims and overarching vision.

This report provides an introduction and overview to the Evaluation Framework for the S&CC Strategy. The Framework is built around key evaluation principles, further highlighted in [DfE's Evaluation Strategy](#) document, and includes the strategy background, a summary table of initiatives and their evaluation approach, portfolio benefits management approach, and governance arrangements. It also covers our Areas of Research Interest for sustainability in education.

## Introduction

This document sets out the Department for Education’s (DfE) approach to the monitoring and evaluation of the [Sustainability and climate change strategy: a strategy for the education and children’s services systems](#)<sup>1</sup> (S&CC Strategy).

The S&CC Strategy commits that *“Evidence will be at the heart of our activity. By 2023 we will develop and publish a framework to evaluate the impacts of the actions set out within the strategy”*.

This document provides a framework outlining the key principles of how we will evaluate activities that are being conducted and/or will be conducted so that we can determine what works and why, relevant to the five action areas in the S&CC Strategy.

The evidence base generated will feed back into the implementation of the S&CC Strategy activities and policies across DfE. This will strengthen the evidence-informed approach for improving existing policies as well as developing new sustainability and climate change activity. The framework is designed to be flexible and allow the approach to evolve as delivery of the strategy progresses.

## Developing an evaluation framework for the S&CC strategy

Our approach to the Evaluation Framework applies to all of the five strategy Action Areas found in the S&CCU strategy and the key policies and initiatives being implemented within these <sup>2</sup>:

- Action Area 1: Climate Education
- Action Area 2: Education Estates
- Action Area 3: International
- Action Area 4: Green skills and economy
- Action Area 5: Operations and Supply Chain

We take a portfolio approach to manage the delivery of the projects and initiatives in these five Action Areas, working towards our strategic aims seen below. The key projects are listed in Table 1 on page 11.

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<sup>1</sup> [Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children’s services systems - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Sustainability and climate change strategy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

## Strategic aims

DfE's S&CC Strategy sets the vision: *the United Kingdom is the world-leading education sector in sustainability and climate change by 2030*; and lays out four strategic aims (for England):

1. Excellence in education and skills for a changing world: preparing all young people for a world impacted by climate change through learning and practical experience.
2. Net zero: reducing direct and indirect emissions from education and care buildings, driving innovation to meet legislative targets and providing opportunities for children and young people to engage practically in the transition to net zero.
3. Resilience to climate change: adapting our education and care buildings and system to prepare for the effects of climate change.
4. A better environment for future generations: enhancing biodiversity, improving air quality and increasing access to, and connection with, nature in and around education and care settings.

## Aims and scope of the Evaluation Framework

The breadth of sustainability activities across the 5 Action Areas is considerable. This Framework seeks to bring about a consistent approach to capturing information, guiding evaluation activities, steering data collection, preventing duplication, and improving consistency of monitoring and evaluation across the breadth of the sustainability portfolio.

This framework aims to:

1. Outline key principles and approaches that are being applied by policies and projects within the portfolio, to determine evaluation plans and answer key questions on what works and why.
2. Where relevant, strengthen the evidence-informed approach for improving existing policies, as well as adapting and developing new sustainability and climate change policies.

# Evaluation principles based on government and DfE strategies and good practice

## Introduction

*Evaluation is a systematic assessment of the design, implementation, and outcomes of an intervention. It involves understanding how an intervention is being, or has been, implemented and what effects it has, for whom and why. It identifies what can be improved and estimates its overall impacts and cost-effectiveness.*

- The Magenta Book, pg. 5 (2020)<sup>3</sup>

As set out in the Magenta Book (and Green Book<sup>4</sup>), evaluation is crucial for government, providing both learning on what works (and for whom) as well as vital accountability and transparency for taxpayers' money. For these reasons it is important to align evaluation with business planning.

Our governance involves promoting and monitoring evaluation across the portfolio as well as determining whether as a whole all of the initiatives and projects are driving towards us meeting our strategic aims via our benefits management strategy, which will also generate new indicators/data sources over time and will help to make important investment decisions.

## Portfolio benefits and evaluation approaches are complementary

Alongside evaluation, we plan to assess the impact that the portfolio is having based on best practice as set out in the Infrastructure and Project Authority's *Guide for effective benefits management in major projects*<sup>5</sup>.

Benefits management and evaluation are complementary, but distinct, functions and in the context of the DfE sustainability portfolio, and our evaluation analysts and researchers work closely with benefits management experts.

We will be taking a two-pronged approach to Portfolio Benefits, top-down where they are derived from the strategic objectives, and bottom-up, where they are aggregated from initiative-level benefits. This provides a golden thread showing how each project feeds right up to the Strategic Objectives. The top-down work is underway, and the bottom-up

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<sup>3</sup> [HMT Magenta Book.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [The Green Book \(2022\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Guide for effective benefits management in major projects - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

work is scheduled to commence during 2024. The four benefits below have been agreed at portfolio level:

**Benefit 1:** Minimise the impacts of climate change on education services, including DfE's Corporate Operations (through adaptation)

**Benefit 2:** Reduce emissions in DfE and education settings towards net zero to meet our legislative requirements (and mitigate further impacts of climate change)

**Benefit 3:** Improve the environment (air quality, biodiversity & waste) of DfE and education settings

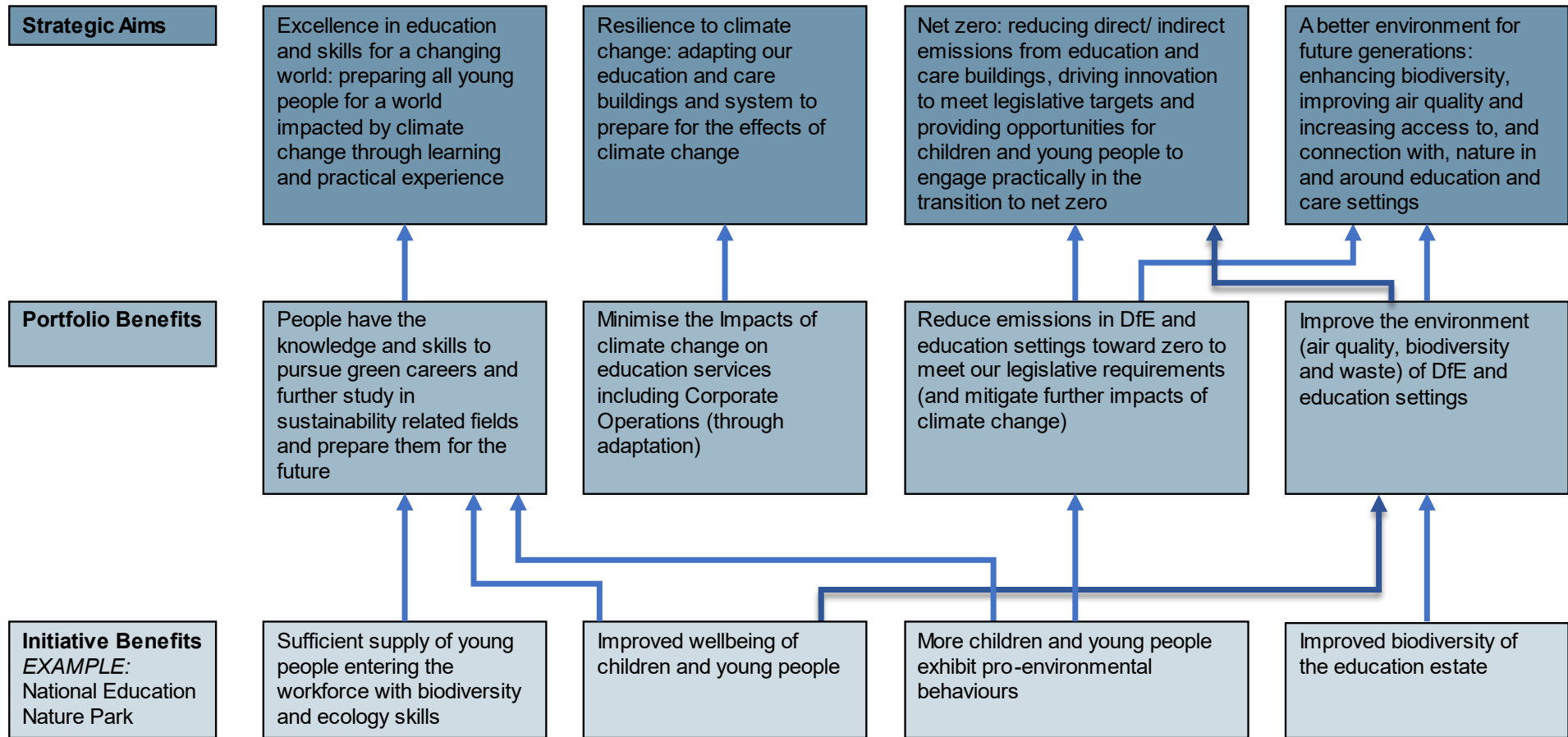
**Benefit 4:** People have the knowledge and skills to pursue green careers and further study in sustainability-related fields and prepare them for the future

The development of this benefits management approach, which will be operated across the portfolio, is at an early stage and will be reviewed periodically in line with data availability.

The Benefits Map below (Figure 1) shows the link between strategic aims of the strategy, the portfolio benefits and the specific benefits a project/programme is seeking to achieve in order to contribute to the portfolio achieving its strategic objectives, using the National Education Nature Park programme as an example.



**Figure 1: Benefit Map**



Each initiative is responsible for determining their own benefits and working with the Portfolio analysts. They will map these to the Portfolio Benefits and Strategic Objectives.

## How this framework aligns with the DfE Evaluation Strategy

As set out in the Department for Education's [Evaluation Strategy](#)<sup>6</sup>, the department's evaluation approach is to ensure that evaluations are overseen by analytical experts to:

- **Ensure evaluations are proportionate and well planned,**
- **Enhance the robustness of our evaluations,**
- **Encourage efficiency in evaluation.**

The DfE Evaluation Strategy sets out that high cost, high risk, and novelty are three key factors to consider when planning an evaluation.

The sustainability team's approach to evaluation is in line with this approach, so that evaluation plans are **proportionate** (taking into account the amount being invested in the policy), **comprehensive** (answering the full set of questions required to take a decision on the future of the policy) and **consistent** (designing evaluations of the right standard across DfE).

Therefore, within the sustainability portfolio, evaluation activities will be considered and scoped using a tiering approach, as noted below:

- **Tier 1: High-value and/or high-risk policies that are highly novel or innovative**
  - These policies will likely require theory-based, experimental, or quasi-experimental evaluation; counterfactual impact and process, with value-for-money if suitable.
- **Tier 2: Medium-value and/or medium-risk policies which may contain aspects which are novel or innovative**
  - These policies will likely require non-experimental or small-scale evaluation, e.g. an internal process evaluation, etc.
- **Tier 3: Low-value and/or low-risk policies that are not novel or particularly innovative**
  - These policies will likely require tracking data or management information; but likely no formal evaluation required.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on the Department's Evaluation Strategy and underlying principles, please see the [DfE evaluation strategy 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

At the point of publication of this document, the key projects are at different phases of implementation and delivery with developing evaluation plans depending on the project.

Table 1, below, provides examples of some of the key projects and an indication of the evaluation and/or monitoring approach which is taking place or is planned for each at the time of publication. It is intended to provide an illustration of the variation and range rather than be an exhaustive list.

**Table 1: Indication of the range of evaluation and/or monitoring approaches being taken across the Action Areas**

Tier	Action Area	Examples of key projects delivering across the Action Areas	
Tier 1	Green skills and careers	Green Skill Bootcamps	
	Cross-cutting initiatives	National Education Nature Park	
		Climate Action Award	
Tier 2	Education Estates	Resilient Schools Programme	
		GenZero pilots to test construction of ultra-low embodied carbon buildings	
		GenZero Pathfinders	
		Sustainability pods	
		Energy pods	
	Flood resilience (water strategy)		
Green skills and careers		Higher Technical Qualifications	
		Greening T-Levels	
Tier 3	Education Estates	Net Zero Carbon Pathfinders	
		Sustainability pilots	
		Passivhaus pilots	
	Green skills and careers		Free Level 3 Quals
			Green Apprenticeships
			Institutes of Technology
	International		International Initiatives
	Climate Education		Natural History GCSE
			Environmental science A-level
	Cross-cutting initiatives		CAPs & Sustainability Leadership

## Types of evaluation

As is set out in the Magenta book,<sup>7</sup> evaluations undertaken in DfE will vary, and can focus on:

- **Process:** how a policy is implemented and operated in delivery.
- **Impact:** the causal effect of a policy or initiative
- **Value for money:** comparing the benefits of a policy with its costs.

Different approaches will be taken to answer the most relevant research and evaluation questions for a policy or initiative, with a focus on actionable insight for both formative and summative evaluations.

## Ethical considerations

Considering the ethical implications of social research is key to all our evaluation activities and DfE follows the Government Social Research (GSR) guidance on ethics<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, our evaluations will align with the following principles on ethics set out in the guidance:

- Research should have a clear user need and public benefit.
- Research should be based on sound research methods and protect against bias in the interpretation of findings.
- Research should adhere to data protection regulations and the secure handling of personal data.
- Participation in research should be based on specific and informed consent.
- Research should enable participation of the groups it seeks to represent.
- Research should be conducted in a manner that minimises personal and social harm.

These are particularly important to the sustainability and climate change policies that focus on children and young people.

Within the department (and for any externally commissioned research), each research project is assessed against the GSR Code of Practice and its key ethical principles (with specific focus on research with children and young people). If deemed necessary, any ethical concerns will be referred to the external Ethics Advisory Panel.

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<sup>7</sup> [The Magenta Book - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

<sup>8</sup> [2021-GSR Ethics Guidance v3.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

## Data sources and security

Evaluations require data from various sources, including developing new data collection for monitoring and evaluation requirements. This data will likely include:

- High-level indicators against key benefits.
- Survey, feedback, and management information from stakeholders of the portfolio.
- Emissions, biodiversity, and other environmental data on the education estate.
- Qualitative information from those involved in the policies.

Individual projects will develop their own specific data sources as relevant and required, to inform evaluation and research activities.

In all relevant activities, the department will comply with the data protection legislation. Particularly, the UK data protection regime set out in the Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018, along with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR).

Internally to the department, all research, analysis, and evaluation activities follow guidance from the Office of the Data Protection Officer, including Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA), and if required, data-sharing agreements. This includes analysis of all data that includes personally identifiable information.

As above, personal data will only be collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes and not further processed in a manner that is incompatible with those purposes.

Where relevant, it will be explored how to promote cross-governmental collaborations to ensure data efficiency.

## Areas of Research Interest (ARI)

DfE is interested in more research and new evidence across the education sustainability policy area. Given the broad policy agenda of the department in this space, it is not practical to provide an exhaustive list of research questions of interest.

Instead, this is a targeted list of areas which are both key departmental priorities and where we feel the research community is currently well placed to add to our evidence base. In terms of approaches to answer the questions, we are interested in both primary qualitative and quantitative research, secondary data analysis, and literature reviews/synthesis of existing evidence. In particular, any experimental evidence of impact of sustainability policies across education or similar settings is of interest. We welcome analysis that goes beyond describing problems and starts to establish causality or explain mechanisms for change.

For all questions we are also strongly interested in international perspectives and what has worked, or not, in other countries.

For all our questions we are interested in how results differ for relevant sub-groups such as pupils eligible for Free School Meals or Pupil Premium, pupils with Special Educational Needs, Black and Minority Ethnic pupils, and gender. Especially relevant would be different results across geographies or access to nature.

### Research questions of interest

How can education and care sectors best respond to environmental climate-related risks to limit the impact on education? And in particular, but not limited to:

- **Risks to education** (including loss of learning, safeguarding, risks to the estate, and unequal impacts)
- **Educational opportunities** (climate education, health, well-being, outdoor learning, access to nature, pro-environmental behaviour etc.)
- **Effective solutions** (for guidance on awareness, good practice; and on estates; for climate mitigation, adaptation, and nature-based solutions)

Specifically, as an indication we are asking about the following:

- i. What are the biggest environmental risks impacting on the educational system and student outcomes, and how can they be mitigated?
- ii. How do we harness technological advances to support our sectors reduce exposure and vulnerability to climate risk?
- iii. What are the different ways that outdoor learning can affect young people and how can they be measured?
- iv. What is the impact of children's access to nature from an educational and wellbeing perspective?

- v. What are the most effective education strategies for raising awareness and promoting behaviour change toward sustainable lifestyles among different demographic groups?

Please contact our shared inbox with any sustainability and climate change-related research or analysis of interest: [DFE.SUSTAINABILITY@education.gov.uk](mailto:DFE.SUSTAINABILITY@education.gov.uk).

The latest version of the ARI document is available online at [Department for Education Areas of Research Interest - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk).

For any enquiries regarding the Areas of Research Interest publication, contact us at: [research.engagement@education.gov.uk](mailto:research.engagement@education.gov.uk).

If you would like to use DfE data for your own projects, [please contact the DfE data sharing team](#).



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