



Managing sustainability in the classroom and the estate

The end of the 2020/21 academic year was marked by extreme climate events – floods and fires in Europe and Asia, extreme heat, wildfires and drought in North America – amidst the rise of another wave of coronavirus cases. For those working in education at all levels, it was also one of the most challenging years ever experienced, handling many changes to the way classes are taught and managed, while balancing the welfare of children and staff. In this context, new themes around sustainability – both how to manage it physically in our organisation and as a topic in the classroom – are likely to be high on the agenda now.

Emerging eco-anxiety

Our young citizens are carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. At least that is how they feel. A 2020 survey of 2,000 young people aged eight to sixteen indicated that 73 percent of respondents were worried about the state of the planet and three out of five said they felt that their voices aren't being heard.

Research reports in the Lancet in September 2020 also points out that those in the 10-24 age group 'might be disproportionately affected' by feelings of eco-anxiety. This shouldn't be surprising. Pupils are often presented with brutal facts around the science of climate change without an accompanying action or solution, and also feel that they are the ones, that are going to face the consequences of previous generations' inaction.

Moreover, there is a perception that those in power, or adults in a position of respect such as teachers and parents, aren't taking action or preparing children to be able to contribute solutions to the climate crisis. Empowering staff and children to transition from feeling like passengers on a sinking ship to deck hands and eventually captains able to steer the course, will help combat the sense of helplessness and disconnection that is associated with eco-anxiety.

A road map for action

One of the strengths of a roadmap is how it can include children as partners in implementing actions whilst identifying and creating our own roadmap.

It cannot be forgotten that there is less than a decade left in which to take meaningful action. Setting out a strategy for the coming years and reflecting on how changing regulations or the physical impacts of the changing climate might impact your site (for instance removal of gas boilers) will become business critical, particularly as some of these initiatives may well require external funding.



Wellness, nature and COP26

If anything has been hammered home over the past eighteen months, it's the fact that wellness and mental health are not to be neglected. This year's theme for Mental Health Awareness Week was on nature and the environment.

The aim is to add patches regardless of size, of greenery, water or even just piles of wood, that help connect people to nature and wildlife no matter the location. Improving our mental resilience through contact with nature, be in making a bird box, putting up a bat box or making a bug 'hotel' is very important indeed.

Decarbonising

What actions has School taken to work towards decarbonising the estate?

LED lighting, heating on timers and replacing the boilers with more efficient models. Changing to Aircon – thereby reducing our gas usage. Large rain water tanks under our Allotment area. Composting. Less plastic in packaging and in snacks. Pupils' own water bottles.

Why and when did we begin the process? We began this when the Elizabeth Price building was built. Using modular design has really helped with efficient insulation, heating and lighting.

What were the reason for the school's specific initiatives? We wanted to reduce our overall energy use, by firstly, reducing waste (food, water, consumables) and increasing recycling. It was important for us to source food responsibly using local producers and ensure that our menus minimise our carbon footprint and, as well as that, we felt we needed to improve biodiversity on the school's grounds and eliminate the use of chemicals that have a detrimental effect on the environment. By doing all this, we have raised awareness of our duty to act in a sustainable manner and it has helped to educate our pupil, staff, parent and alumni body of the importance of making sustainable choices.

Have pupils influenced the decision? We have a variety of pupil committees, and particularly Eco Prefects and including our Estates and Maintenance and Food Committees that champion sustainability issues in the school. Pupil representatives also sit on our environmental committee. Already, our pupils have been active in influencing menus, recycling and education of their peers and families.



Did we experience any pushback from stakeholders? The response to our initiatives have been very positive.

What has the reaction generally been from stakeholders, including our Advisory Board, parents, pupils and staff? Our community is generally very accepting of the actions we are taking and we had a positive and enthusiastic.

- "Didn't buy any shoes, cosmetics, make up or clothing during September and October"
- "I signed up to the cycle to work scheme"
- Changed to "Green energy tariff and turned my thermostat down by one degree"
- "I try not to buy new clothes but when I have to do so, I go to sustainable companies"
- "I walk more, use the car less, eat less meat and turn off lights"

Schools are community hubs and the ripple effects they can have has the potential to be enormous. We hope to work with parents to:

- Ensure that our pupils and staff breathe cleaner air by promising not to not idle their engines, when stationary.
- Help us send less waste to landfill by promising not to use disposable plastic food containers or water bottles in School.
- Make sustainable school uniform choices by promising to take advantage of our pre-loved (second hand) uniform sales.

The main issue is our ability to provide the means by which everyone can change their behaviours positively – the biggest challenges at our school now are around travel to and from school and air travel.

What further work would we like to undertake at the school?

- Electric vehicle charging points for use by staff who come to work by car
- Rainwater storage tanks
- More outdoor learning spaces

What do we think the Government could do to replace this and incentivise schools to take action? Biomass and biogas heating systems, but these are not always suitable for use in schools.



Do our green credentials feature in our marketing and advertising of the school? We are keen to promote ourselves as an eco school to show that we are aware of our duty to minimise our impact and educate the next generation. We know that our children will need to leave school equipped with the knowledge, skills and mindset to thrive in a largely carbon-zero country, by the time these children are in the middle of their careers, the Government's legally binding net zero by 2050 target will have been met. To not teach and educate in this way would be like not using computers and the acknowledgement of this will be increasingly important for parents when choosing a school.

Why do we think decarbonising schools is important for the sector and what contribution do you think schools can make? Schools have a vital role in educating our children and setting standards, because we need to leave the world in a good position for future generations. Every sector of the economy should be decarbonising and schools are no exception – schools have a huge reach – pupils go home to an average of two parents or guardians, those adults have their own sphere of influence in their social and work circles, so if the changes we make at school reach our pupils, and those pupils influence their friends and family the ripple effect is enormous. We can and should use our privilege to generate positive change (e.g. encouraging people to switch to ethical banks) in the same way that we promote healthy relationships and healthy eating. The climate crisis isn't just a scientific problem, it's a communication problem, and teachers and schools are excellent communicators. People and communities are shaped by stories and role models – schools are perfectly placed to tell those stories and be those role models.

A child who started primary school in September 2021 will leave school in 2035, the same year the UK Government's law to reduce carbon emissions to 78 percent of 1990 levels needs to be reached (if not sooner).

Empowering children to set up eco networks. Our children would like to join the London School of Eco Network (LSEN)

Integrating environmental education into their curriculum. We are reviewing our Science & PSCE Curriculum to ensure we cover the important areas of environmental education.



Sustainability and food – what can we do?

Food is an imperative factor in combatting climate change and we can impact this.

The food we produce and eat has an impact on climate, nature and health. Food is the one thing that inextricably links these three fundamental issues affecting all our lives.

Our current food systems contribute to climate change. Food production alone makes up for an enormous 26 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. The good news is that we all have the choice to decide whether the food we produce and eat increases the rate of climate change or mitigates against it.

These are our key promises to ourselves:

Minimise waste

- On average, 18 percent of food purchased by the UK's hospitality and food service industry is being thrown away. For every gram of that food lost, there is an environmental cost. The production of food releases CO₂ (and equivalent gases) into the atmosphere, which only worsens when the food ends up in the bin. Reducing food waste saves budget and the planet.
- We have a comprehensive food waste minimisation plan covering all aspects of food – from the food that is in the kitchen to plate waste. We ensure waste is tracked and weighed so you can see what progress is being made
- We look at portion sizes and food that is regularly thrown away. We also ask if there are any small changes that can be made to our menus to change less popular dishes?
- We make sure pupils are given enough time to eat their food and have asked ourselves if their lunchtime environment allowing for a calm, sociable and enjoyable meal break
- We don't forget about packaging waste. We speak to our food suppliers to see if this can be reduced and /or returned
- We will be signing up to the Guardians of Grub campaign, where there are great tools and resources to help you <https://guardiansofgrub.com/>

Use less but better meat

16 percent of the greenhouse gas equivalents (GHGEs) associated with food come from the production of meat. Intensified farming of livestock also brings other issues around animal welfare and routine antibiotic usage. Around 60 percent of all antibiotics used are used in farming. We are also seeing global deforestation to make room for more livestock, worsening the overall impact



on climate. Using less meat means there is a budget to buy organic, free-range meat, which has a lower impact:

- We have introduced one meat-free day per week and are looking at plant-based alternatives such as pulses and beans rather than the ultra-processed alternatives
- We are considering reducing meat in dishes and replacing them with other proteins. For example, half minced beef/half red lentils works well in a Bolognese sauce. Mushrooms or root vegetables also work well in a meat stew
- We are looking at the cuts of meat we use and asking if there are cheaper alternatives? Some require a longer cooking time but these can be tasty and economical if used correctly – for example shin beef cooked the day before for a pie or chicken thighs in a curry rather than fillet. We continue to ask our local butchers, 'Carnivore' in Sidcup, for advice.

Reduce ultra-processed foods in menus

Research associates ultra-processed foods with obesity, cancer, type-2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. These foods also typically have a much higher environmental footprint than fresh, whole foods.

- We plan our menu so all dishes are cooked from scratch and made from unprocessed ingredients
- When looking at non-meat days, we stay away from the ultra-processed meat alternatives and use plant-based ingredients instead
- We keep processed meat products to a minimum
- We use locally sourced fruit and vegetables, delivered fresh weekly

Use less (or better) palm oil

Palm Oil is the most widely consumed vegetable oils in the world. Its increasing use is driving deforestation and the loss of key species, such as orangutans, as land is cleared for plantations. Maintaining rainforests is also important in the fight against dangerous climate change, as they are important absorbers of carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas. To make sure our food isn't contributing to rainforest destruction, we choose a more environmentally sustainable oil, or opt for palm oil which comes from certified sources.

Lots of products are palm oil free, which is the ideal. We continue to speak to our suppliers and ask to see food specifications to check what's in there.



Introduce more whole foods

Increasing whole foods is great for health and for the planet. These foods generally aren't as processed and likely to require less energy overall so we:

- Switch white rice and pasta to wholemeal
- Bulk up dishes with lots of fruit and vegetables, we think about using squashes, sweet potatoes and mushrooms to add texture and flavour
- Look at using a variety of different pulses and grains, such as a quinoa or dahl type lentil, and couscous which typically have less of an environmental impact.

How to engage our school community

Staff, children and parents

We are involving the whole school community – all staff, children and parents in issues around food as these can have a huge impact when changes are being made to menus. Children are increasingly aware of coverage around climate change and having a group within school, involving the kitchen team and pupils helps bring about positive change and gets everyone working together.

When pupils are involved in the decisions around menu choices, they are more likely to try new foods and encourage their peers to try them too. This, coupled with taster pots of new dishes offered at mealtimes, really does help.

In-house catering team

We have ensured our in-house catering teams are briefed and on board with our vision for sustainable, climate-friendly menu. Having a catering team that is employed directly by the school, is so much better than having contract caterers as it makes changes and decision-making simpler and more straightforward.

Regular meetings help with this and keeps the focus on delivering the very best service for our children.