



# Growing Greener Futures in the Early Years

About the  
**AUTHOR**

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“Children are not only our future; they are our most powerful agents for change today.”

UNICEF, 2020



Young children are natural explorers. Whether they're watching worms wriggle through soil or carefully collecting "treasure leaves," the Early Years is full of opportunities to build curiosity, environmental responsibility and a deep connection with nature.

With outdoor learning already central to the EYFS, Early Years settings are perfectly placed to introduce sustainability in a way that feels playful, hands-on and meaningful.

At the same time, national expectations are shifting. In April 2022, the Department for Education published its first Sustainability and climate change strategy, and now expect all education settings to have both a sustainability lead, and a climate action plan (CAP).



## The National Picture

The DfE's [\*Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy\*](#) sets out clear expectations: all settings must develop CAPs covering **four key pillars**-

★ **Adaptation and Resilience**- making your physical spaces more comfortable and ready for a changing climate, meaning less disruption and better learning outcomes for children.

★ **Biodiversity**- supporting learners to have hands-on experiences in nature through creating green spaces that provide habitats for wildlife, enhance wellbeing and bring learning to life.



★ **Climate education & green skills-** build confidence to weave climate and sustainability throughout the curriculum, supporting learners to develop the skills and knowledge they'll need for a changing world.

★ **Decarbonisation-** supporting your setting to cut carbon emissions and save money – from heating and lighting to travel and food – while engaging children in real-world problem-solving.



These pillars span teaching and learning, outdoor provision, leadership, family engagement, and even the physical estate. This whole-setting approach encourages settings to look beyond isolated “green activities” and instead consider sustainability as part of everyday practice — from the curriculum to energy use to partnerships with families.



Climate action in Early Years is not just an “add-on”, it is an opportunity to:

- ★ Enhance children’s wellbeing, agency, and connection with nature
- ★ Reduce running costs through reduced waste, energy savings, and greener procurement
- ★ Strengthen leadership and whole-team collaboration
- ★ Develop outdoor spaces that support learning, biodiversity, and community pride

When children learn to care for their environment from a young age, they carry that responsibility into later life — influencing families, friends, and future communities.

EYFS practitioners already understand the power of outdoor learning: it builds resilience, problem-solving, collaboration, and emotional wellbeing. High-quality outdoor experiences help children develop appreciation for the natural environment — a foundation for sustainability later in life.

This aligns closely with the goals of climate education. Natural curiosity becomes a catalyst for exploring weather, seasons, habitats, and cause-and-effect — all essential for early climate literacy. Many settings are already doing this intuitively through loose-parts play, gardening, woodland walks, and child-led inquiry, but need support expanding this work and taking a whole setting approach.

***What sustainable practices are already happening in your setting — and how might you build on them to support your Climate Action Plan?***

## Support from the Climate Ambassadors Programme



The Department for Education has commissioned a number of projects and programmes delivered by multiple partners to support the delivery of their Sustainability and Climate Change strategy. Climate Ambassadors is one of these support programmes, mobilising and supporting education settings in England to act on climate change with the help of skilled volunteers.

Climate Ambassadors from across the private, public, charity, university and community sectors can provide you with free, tailored guidance to progress Climate Action Plans, wherever you are on your sustainability journey. Climate Ambassadors are fully DBS checked and have access to a suite of training to complement their existing expertise and skillsets.

Climate ambassadors are working with increasing numbers of early years settings across England, responding to the needs that settings themselves have identified – this could be about how to make a start and recognise how much is already happening; or it could be some more detailed support to progress decarbonisation and energy saving, for example.

Climate Ambassadors work alongside other initiatives in the DfE's strategy including:

- [National Education Nature Park](#) supports settings to develop their outdoor spaces and nature-positive behaviours and includes extensive quality-assured cross-curricular resources.
- [Sustainability Support for Education](#), signposts a development pathway through a wide range of quality-assured resources.
- [Let's Go Zero](#) is not funded by DfE but also works in partnership with these projects, offering support to education settings to develop climate action plans.

If you are an education setting interested in accessing free support for climate and sustainability initiatives please contact [climateambassadors\\_se@reading.ac.uk](mailto:climateambassadors_se@reading.ac.uk).



## Next Steps and Initial Support

Early Years settings already have the foundations for meaningful climate action through outdoor learning and child-led inquiry. With the support of the Climate Ambassador programme, these everyday practices can evolve into a whole-setting Climate Action Plan that benefits children, staff, and the wider community.

To get you started the Thames Valley and South Central Early Years Stronger Practice Hub have partnered with the Climate Ambassadors scheme to run a fully funded climate action planning workshop for EYFS settings across the South East.

During the workshop we will provide information on the DfE Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy, direct you to programmes and resources to help you with climate action planning, support you in developing actions for your climate action plan and showcase some best practice examples from nurseries in the south east. Following further refinement and discussion we hope that you will be able to put a climate action plan into operation and help take climate and nature action in your education setting.

The next workshop is taking place on Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> February 2026 at Reading University. For more information and to book your place [please click here](#).

## References:

Department for Education (DfE) (2022) [Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children's services systems](#). London: Department for Education.

Department for Education (DfE) (2024) [Statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage](#). London: Department for Education.

UNICEF (2024) The State of the World's Children 2024: For Every Child, Climate Change, UNICEF, available at: [UNICEF \(2020\) Children are not only our future; they are our most powerful agents for change today. New York: UNICEF.](#)



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