

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT DRAFT CLIMATE CHANGE PLAN CONSULTATION

RESPONSE FROM LEARNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY SCOTLAND

29th January 2026

Introduction

This response is from Scotland's United Nations University - recognised Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development, [Learning for Sustainability Scotland](#), part of a global network of 200 Centres. As a network organisation, with 1,134 members and an elected steering group, we work in partnership with educators, learners, communities and policy-makers to weave and embed sustainability across every aspect of learning.

Summary

- Publication of the new Climate Change Plan, in draft form, is welcome, setting out how Scotland will meet its legally binding target to reach net zero, or neutral emissions, by 2045.
- The Plan must set out ambitious, fair actions that we need to tackle the climate crisis and deliver real benefits to our lives.
- Considerable evidence demonstrates that equitable and long-term access to Learning for Sustainability opportunities will be required to ensure a Just Transition for communities and learners of all ages.
- We urge the Scottish Government to include Education and Learning as a Sector in the main body of this Plan, with a focus on actions on Learning for Sustainability, ensuring a holistic, policy-coherent approach across all sectors and areas of sustainability.
- Education and Learning for Sustainability must be strengthened in communities, schools, colleges, universities, professional learning and continuing professional development.
- The Education and Learning component of the Action Plan will require meaningful support, including funding and resources to transform learning spaces as well as participatory approaches to education and learning which bring about action on climate and other interconnected challenges.

Learning for Sustainability

Learners of all ages require the knowledge, skills, values, capacities, and agency necessary to address interconnected global and local sustainability challenges, for example, climate change, loss of biodiversity, poverty, unsustainable resource use, inequality, and wider social and environmental injustices. This approach to learning, Learning for Sustainability, is active and participatory. It responds to real-world complexity, developing skills such as critical, systems and futures thinking, reflection, collaboration, and action. It also cultivates values such as solidarity, inclusion, compassion, and care.

Education and Skills as an Enabling Sector

Evidence demonstrates that education, learning and skills development are fundamental enablers in achieving the successful delivery of any Climate Change Plan actions, and must be positioned as central to the plan, rather than relegated to an annex.

- Mainstream and formal education in schools, colleges and universities plays a central role in helping to realise this transformative approach to learning and skills to enable individuals, communities and professional roles to innovate, adapt and flourish. This approach to education can help us understand our changing planet, mitigate our negative impacts on system sustainability, and develop resilience for future complex and unpredictable issues.
- OECD's Education for Human Flourishing report_(OECD, 2025) states, '*education systems should nurture a broader range of capabilities, help restore meaning to young people's lives and equip them with the skills and ambition to remake our societies, economies, and organisations. To flourish over a lifetime, people will need to be adaptive problem solvers, ethically competent, and able to understand, appreciate and act in the world*'.
- UNESCO Guidance states that a net zero future will require a broad and integrated skills base, extending well beyond narrowly defined "green jobs". Interdisciplinary sustainability competencies are critical for effective climate delivery across sectors, not only within traditional "green jobs" (UNESCO, 2024).
- Non-formal and informal learning is also important to enable communities to explore and act in local places and to create a culture of learning in Scotland in which individuals and communities are empowered to understand the sources and content of information on climate change and to make critical decisions regarding behaviour, practices and priorities for individual, local and national benefit.
- Indicators of improvement should include a range of education and learning measures, for example quantitative assessment of participation in funded professional learning across education and training pathways and qualitative analysis of the outcomes and impact of participative engagement.

Adopting a Whole Systems Approach to Learning for Sustainability

- We welcome the Draft Climate Change Plan's intention to embed Just Transition principles across all sectors rather than treating them as a standalone policy area. A whole systems approach also requires working across topic sectors. Hence, agricultural policy and conservation policy should be tested to minimise negative effects on climate change emissions and to maximise positive synergies.
- Tackling the climate, biodiversity, pollution, and health crises cannot be achieved without significant changes in how we learn, live and work. Formal, informal and non-formal education and learning are central to enabling these shifts, and Education and Learning should therefore be highlighted as a key sector to address these interconnected challenges. Education and learning-related actions across every sector should also be embedded across the Plan.
- For all 3-18 yrs educational settings the national Learning for Sustainability Action Plan 'Target 2030: 'A Movement for People, Planet and Prosperity' (2023) states that Learning for Sustainability is an ethos for life and learning that permeates and should be woven through all aspects of the 'totality of experience'. Actions

ensuring that every learning setting for pupils aged 3-18 will become Sustainable by 2030 through the four areas of Culture, Curriculum, Campus, and Community should be included and adequately resourced.

- Development activity is underway, through current education reform agendas and other initiatives, to embed Learning for Sustainability within all levels of formal and informal education across early years, schools, colleges and universities, and through vocational and apprenticeship programmes, enhancing Learning for Sustainability professional learning and standards particularly within the education sector and development of educational resources. Commitment to future actions in this Plan will strengthen support across the Scottish Government and ensure learners of all ages have the knowledge, skills, values, and agency necessary to address interconnected global and local sustainability challenges, including climate change.
- A whole-systems approach must also be designed across private, state and civil society sectors, whilst recognising the hybrid nature of some organisations. This means supporting responsible business practices and maintaining a rigorous regulatory context to create a fair marketplace for responsible companies to thrive. It includes policy coherence across government departments and across scales of action, such as national government to local authorities. For example, this would include ensuring that the refreshed National Performance Framework is reflected in outcomes for local authorities.
- This whole-of-government, whole system approach to delivery means making sure all policies, budgets, and government Directorates, including Education and Justice as well as Net Zero, are aligned with action and are also held accountable for delivering real progress. The Plan should detail roles, responsibilities and resources across national, regional and institutional levels, focusing on delivery.

Meeting the Needs of a Greener Economy and a Just Transition

- We consider that the Plan should acknowledge that a Just Transition to Net Zero that addresses inequalities will rely on the support of every aspect of the education system and lifelong learning (formal, informal, non-formal) across all sectors and communities. This includes those living in communities most affected by climate change along with those whose jobs will be affected.
- Net Zero-related employment projections in the UK indicate a need to address workforce diversity to ensure equitable and inclusive climate action (Reay, 2024). Scotland has the highest growing market in the UK for 'green jobs' (PWC n.d.).
- A Net Zero future will require a broad and integrated skills base, extending well beyond narrowly defined "green jobs". Essential technical and sector-specific skills, such as renewable energy engineering, low-carbon construction, clean heat installation, land-based restoration and environmental monitoring, must be complemented by transversal and enabling skills. Learning for Sustainability provides the foundation for learners to learn, live and work in a greener economy and for a fairer society. Enabling skills include systems and futures thinking, digital and data literacy, project management, community engagement and change leadership. Business and employers need learners who can innovate, adapt, are collaborative problem solvers, and are critical, futures and systems thinkers.
- Learning for Sustainability therefore has a central role in preparing learners to contribute meaningfully to the Net Zero transition regardless of discipline, occupation or career stage. Embedding Learning for Sustainability across early years, school, vocational, undergraduate and postgraduate provision ensures that future society

including businesses, agriculture and forestry workers, engineers, educators, health professionals, planners and policymakers are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values required for a net zero society. While progress is being made through initiatives such as education reform and next-generation frameworks and recommendations from the Land-Based Learning Review (Scottish Government, 2023), this integration remains uneven and insufficiently resourced.

- The Climate Change Plan should highlight the new and then ongoing professional development that will be required to ensure that professionals can adopt new technologies, understand new knowledge, work across sectors in a holistic way and contribute to solutions to mitigate and respond to climate change in all sectors. This includes professionals in education, agriculture and food, conservation and nature-based solutions, forestry, construction, local and national government, planning, transport, tourism and more. Staff time, available professional learning and stable long-term institutional funding will be required.

The Role of Colleges and Universities

- We welcome the recognition that the impacts of a Just Transition to Net Zero will vary significantly across Scotland, requiring place-based approaches to ensure that action does not exacerbate existing inequalities.
- At a regional and vocational level Colleges play an important role in skills development and provision for the transition to Net Zero, supporting the skills and workforce needs of the key economic sectors listed in this consultation.
- Universities in Scotland have international reach and deliver world-class research, teaching and innovation to help tackle sustainability challenges, including climate change. They play a vital role in providing high-level education and learning to ensure students are not only prepared for the impacts of climate change but are also empowered to become agents of change - driving positive action towards a flourishing future for people and planet. Such learning is connected to and reinforces the world leading research and innovation for Net Zero undertaken in Scotland, for example, through research led teaching, teaching and learning with undergraduate and postgraduate students, and deepening scholarship to enable us to understand, predict and tackle the challenges of climate change and other associated issues.
- There is evidence that college and university staff and students seek sustainability learning. More than 80 per cent of students want their institutions to be doing more on sustainable development to enhance employability and enable them to be change agents (SOS-UK Sustainability Survey, 2025). Learning for Sustainability is now compulsory within benchmark statements for all university subjects (QAA, 2025) and surveys indicate that University and college staff want and need to develop their own skills in Learning for Sustainability and develop stronger links with their sustainability research. The Scottish Funding Council must continue to support sustainability in their outcome framework with universities and colleges (Scottish Funding Council n.d.) to ensure ongoing commitment to Learning for Sustainability as well as campus-related sustainability action.
- Tertiary sector institutions are not only providers of education and skills, but also public bodies and major employers that are embedded in communities across Scotland. Some have existing roles in sustainability action as partners in local planning, community engagement and delivery of just transition activity. They have the potential to be explicitly supported to act as regional hubs for skills, innovation and community engagement, enabling locally tailored responses to transition challenges. Such activity should be acknowledged and resourced

as a key strategic element of the Plan, providing institutions with clarity and confidence in order to invest in contributing to the Net Zero transition.

Community Engagement and Participation

- We welcome the recognition that communities must be active participants in shaping the Just Transition, rather than passive recipients of decisions made elsewhere. This Plan does not fully set out the political and participatory aspects required for societal change. Making active participation a reality requires clear commitment to ensuring funding certainty and guidance to support delivery.
- Clearer connections should be made in the Plan to the central role of community engagement and participation. This includes commitment to actions as a result of the 2025 Public Engagement Strategy mid-point review, including the recommendation for 'a clear and positive vision for the future and include multiple approaches, including coordinating large-scale engagement and supporting smaller local engagement' (7. Conclusion) and 'concerted efforts, consistent support, and greater investment' (Scottish Government, 2025) This engagement demonstrates the power of communities (communities of place and local NGOs) to collectively act in ways that go beyond capacities of individual citizens.
- International evidence indicates that successful Just Transitions are those that co-design solutions with communities, with the involvement of trusted institutions ([European Commission](#), 2022), rather than consulting only after key decisions have been made. While the Draft Climate Change Plan recognises the importance of place-based approaches, meaningful participation needs to be inclusive, resourced and embedded early in planning and delivery processes.
- The Scottish Government can support this by strengthening requirements and guidance for participatory planning within sectoral funding programmes, such as transport and infrastructure. These should include expectations and support for participatory processes including early-stage engagement and ongoing engagement to show how community input has influenced outcomes.
- The mid-point review of the Public Engagement Strategy also indicates that the current community-based initiatives, including climate hubs, do increase uptake of sustainable practices by building confidence and social norms. More ambition is required given the role of communities in supporting action on emissions reductions, for example through engagement in tree planting and restoring natural habitats. Support for locally led projects, community ownership and long-term skills development is likely to secure long-term climate and biodiversity gains.
- A significant risk in this Plan is that behaviour change is assumed rather than enabled. References to behaviour change do not clearly set out models for effective participation or the levers, incentives and education and learning pathways through which participation will be achieved. Models of social practice recognise the additional structural barriers to individual or community behaviour change and highlight policy, infrastructure and enabling activities that facilitate such behaviour change (Merricks and White, 2021).

We strongly encourage the Scottish Government to position education, learning, and skills development as a central enabler of the Climate Change Plan, recognising their critical role in the successful delivery of its actions. As a cross-sectoral, pan-thematic network organisation operating across Scotland, Learning for Sustainability Scotland welcomes

further collaboration with the Scottish Government to support effective implementation of the Climate Change Plan and the achievement of its objectives.

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