

POLICY BRIEFING

FOR THE

2026 SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

Transforming Learning for a Just and Sustainable World

Learning for Sustainability Scotland is Scotland's United Nations (UN) University-recognised Regional Centre of Expertise in Education for Sustainable Development, and is part of a global family of 200 Centres. As a network organisation of more than 1,100 members, with an elected steering group, we bring people together to advance sustainability issues and outcomes in Scotland. We work in partnership with educators, learners, communities and policy-makers to weave and embed sustainability across every aspect of learning. We also lead projects, produce key resources and advocate for policy to support Learning for Sustainability.

What is 'Learning for Sustainability'?

Learners of all ages require the knowledge, skills, values and agency necessary to address interconnected global and local sustainability challenges. These include climate change, loss of biodiversity, poverty, unsustainable resource use, inequality, and wider social and environmental injustices. This approach to learning 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.

Together, we can make Scotland a more positive place where:

- Nature is valued, protected, and supports people and communities
- Societies are thriving, inclusive and equitable
- A well-being economy delivers prosperity, shared opportunities, and contributes to social justice and the flourishing of human populations and ecosystems

We face common challenges, including:

- **Uncertainty, unpredictability** and the complexity of our rapidly-changing world
- **Multiple crises** including climate, nature and international conflicts, with unequal impacts across communities
- **Sustainability values** such as social justice, compassion and care are **under threat**
- **Misinformation** leading to loss of trust and transparency in communications
- **Approaches** to learning are often '**siloed**', **fragmented** and **reductionist** rather than holistic
- **Social inequality** and lack of opportunities for young people
- **An ever-increasing need** for democratic engagement and critical thinking

With just 17% of the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets on track for 2030, global challenges are increasingly Scotland's local challenges.

Learning for Sustainability enables effective responses to these challenges.

The need for Learning for Sustainability

International Leadership

Scotland was an early adopter of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Developmentⁱ, with education and learning underpinning all 17 of the global UN SDGs.

Our country is currently seen as an international leader in re-imagining and transforming education and learning to forge a greener, healthier and more socially just worldⁱⁱ. Evidence demonstrates the multiple benefits of learning for sustainability for quality educationⁱⁱⁱ, supporting statutory United Nations Convention on Children's Rights' obligations to children and young people.

Current education reforms, following the results of the [OECD report into Scottish education](#) in 2021^{iv}, offer the opportunity to strengthen and embed Learning for Sustainability across Scotland's education system, as recommended by OECD's recent conclusions about the future directions of education and its PISA student assessment programme globally^v.

Young learners demand Learning for Sustainability

Young learners' voices are strong and clear regarding desire for access to Learning for Sustainability in their everyday learning opportunities^{vi vii viii}. They strongly express eco-anxiety and need routes to individual agency and action as well as reliable knowledge and skills. They seek informed digital literacy and improved political education.

Meeting the needs of a Greener Economy

A wealthier, healthier and greener Scotland requires a Just Transition^{ix} away from use of fossil fuels, ensuring fairness and addressing inequalities whilst tackling the nature, climate, pollution and health crises which disproportionately affect disadvantaged communities. Learning for Sustainability provides the foundation for learners to live and work in a greener economy and for a fairer society. Scotland has the highest growing market in the UK for 'green jobs'^x. Business and employers need learners who are able to adapt, are collaborative problem solvers, and are critical, futures and systems thinkers.

College and university staff and students seek sustainability learning

Learning for Sustainability is now compulsory within benchmark statements for all university subjects^{xi}. University and college staff want to develop their skills in education for sustainable development and develop stronger links with their sustainability research. Scottish Funding Council must continue to support sustainability in their outcome framework with universities and colleges^{xii}. Over 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^{xiii}.

Communities want local and global action

Our members from Scotland's communities and the Third Sector are seeking to develop capacities for action on climate change, biodiversity and to enhance places. For example the Scottish Communities Climate Action Network (SCCAN) now has a robust, pan-Scottish presence. A thriving network of groups is developing capacities for community food production and exchange, a shared economy and stewardship of local places and nature. Other organisations such as SDG Network Scotland are galvanising action across the SDGs.

Learning for Sustainability Scotland seeks the following key commitments for education and learning in the next Scottish Parliament through political commitment, accelerated action at scale, and sustainable resourcing:

1. **Join up action and collaboration** through learning and education across all sectors to deliver a socially-just and sustainable Scotland through an integrated systems approach
2. **Escalate and scale up** the delivery of Scotland's Learning for Sustainability Action Plan 'Target 2030: A Movement for People, Planet and Prosperity' for Early Years and Schools
3. **Champion** the Learning for Sustainability 'Movement for Change' across all Scotland's Universities and Colleges
4. **Strengthen** sustainability understanding and action through community learning and development, including youth work
5. **Enable** equitable and long-term access to Learning for Sustainability opportunities to ensure a just transition for communities and learners of all ages

Scottish Parliament actions that can help achieve these commitments are:

Join up action and collaboration through learning and education across all sectors to deliver a socially-just and sustainable Scotland

- Ensure a policy coherent approach across all sectors and areas of sustainability
- Reform the National Outcomes, and National Performance Framework for Scotland's future, connecting education and learning across all themes for example climate and wellbeing, and aligning with the UN SDGs
- Promote collaboration for the Common Good across Parliament and Society
- Consider a further Voluntary National Review (VNR) of Scotland's progress toward the UN SDGs before 2030, including in education
- Consult and publish Scotland's view on the post-SDG global framework, including education and learning across all aspects.
- Continue visible participation in UN Climate and Nature Conferences and UNESCO Education initiatives

Escalate and scale up the delivery of Scotland's Learning for Sustainability Action Plan, 'Target 2030: A Movement for People, Planet and Prosperity' for Early Years and Schools

- Implement and resource the Learning for Sustainability Action Plan 2023-30^{xiv} and prioritise key areas such as professional learning
- Embed Learning for Sustainability across all Education Scotland's Curriculum Improvement Cycle activities
- Ensure that delivery of the welcome Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Act^{xv} enables young people to develop meaningful connections with nature, in the context of the Learning for Sustainability Action Plan

Champion the Learning for Sustainability 'Movement for Change' in all Scotland's Universities and Colleges

- Convene a partnership group with the ambition to make every University and College a sustainable institution
- Make addressing Learning for Sustainability a requirement of funding from the Scottish Government through the Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
- Enable critical debate and sharing of good practice in Higher Education by resourcing the Community of Practice hosted by EAUC and Learning for Sustainability Scotland

Strengthen sustainability understanding and action through community learning and development, including youthwork

- Invest in long term programmes that deepen community understanding of sustainability and support community action and resilience
- Support disadvantaged communities to leverage resources and processes to enable community development, for example, through targeted funding or by facilitating collaborative community projects requiring their inclusion
- Invest to ensure that all young people can access their right to youth work across the learner journey - in school, college and community - by strengthening Community Learning and Development as well as formal education requirements

Enable equitable access to Learning for Sustainability opportunities to ensure a just transition for communities and learners of all ages

- Align Just Transition skills initiatives for adults with 3-18 yrs curriculum changes, ensuring effective pathways for learners and supporting individuals and communities to access opportunities
- Ensure that Scotland's skills system meets climate, biodiversity and social justice goals through programme availability in colleges and universities, apprenticeships and continuing professional development for existing workers

We strongly encourage the next Scottish Parliament and Government to consider the recommendations from the following organisations, which align to our visions and values: 2050 Climate Group, Scottish Communities Climate Action Network, Scottish Environment Link, Scottish International Development Alliance, Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, SDG Network Scotland, Teach the Future Scotland, YouthLink Scotland

Contributors: Dr Beth Christie, Jennifer Haggarty, Betsy King, Kirsten Leask, Cecilia Mañosa Nyblon, Sara Smith, Professor Rehema White

Contact: Cecilia Mañosa Nyblon, Development Manager, Learning for Sustainability Scotland
ceciliananosa@lfsscotland.org
enquiries@lfsscotland.org
<https://learningforsustainabilityscotland.org>



Learning for Sustainability Scotland
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- iii. Chistie, B. & Higgins, P. (2020) [Educational outcomes of Learning for Sustainability: literature review - gov.scot](#)
- iv. OECD (2021) [Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future | OECD](#)
- v. OECD (2025) [Education for human flourishing. | OECD](#)
- vi. Scottish Government (2025) [Young People and the Future of Scotland: participatory horizon scanning engagement - gov.scot](#)
- vii. Scottish Youth Parliament (2025) [Dear Scotland's Future - Scottish Youth Parliament Manifesto 2026-2031](#)
- viii. Scottish Children's Parliament (2025) [Learning for Sustainability Report Phase 3: Children at the Centre: Exploring the Four Learner Settings of Scotland's Target 2030 Action Plan.](#)
- ix. Scottish Parliament (2009) [Climate Change \(Scotland\) Act.](#)
- x. PWC (2024) [Green Jobs Barometer](#)
- xi. QAA (March 2022-ongoing) [Subject Benchmark Statements](#)
- xii. Scottish Funding Council (2024) [Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model - Scottish Funding Council](#)
- xiii. SOS-UK (2025) [Sustainability Skills Survey - SOS UK](#)
- xiv. Scottish Government (2023) ['Target 2030': Learning for Sustainability: action plan 2023 to 2030 - gov.scot](#)
- xv. Scottish Parliament (2025) [Schools \(Residential Outdoor Education\) \(Scotland\) Act | Scottish Parliament Website.](#)
Currently awaiting Royal Assent.