

Delivering on Climate Action: Departmental Requirements Under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022

I note the recent publication of the third Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme ([NICCAP3](#)), and the updated Sustainability Reporting Guidance and Template for 2025-26. This Statement sets out how the Department of Education will meet its statutory duties under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 ([Climate Change Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#)) and contribute to the NICCAP3 2023–2027 going forward with regards to the school estate.

While the Department is not a sectoral lead under the legislation, we hold significant responsibilities as a major public body, a reporting authority, and the organisation overseeing Northern Ireland’s extensive education estate. The scale of our estate, our workforce, the Education Authority fleet, and our central role in embedding climate literacy within the curriculum means that the education sector has an important and visible contribution in achieving the aspirations of the programme.

This Statement is designed to provide clarity, direction and assurance to schools, educational partners, public bodies and wider stakeholders on the Department’s approach to meeting its legal obligations and demonstrating leadership across the education system.

Statutory Duties

The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 places a legal obligation on all Northern Ireland departments to exercise their functions so far as reasonably practicable in a manner consistent with achieving emissions reduction targets. In practice, this requires the Department of Education to:

- Have regard to ensuring that departmental functions support the achievement of Northern Ireland’s emissions targets and carbon budgets.

- Co-operate fully with other lead departments in the preparation and delivery of sectoral plans.
- Contribute, where appropriate, to plans, policies and strategies that contribute to mitigation, adaptation, and resilience.
- Comply with mandatory public-body climate reporting from 2025–26.
- Have regard, where appropriate, to alignment of plans and policies with neighbouring jurisdictions.

The Department will endeavour to promote climate and sustainability issues through its functions, including in relation to the following areas: –

Sustainable Buildings and the Education Estate

The Department will continue to promote high standards of sustainability. The Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) is used to assess the environmental performance of new and existing buildings. Where possible, the Department aims for all Major Works for schools to achieve a BREEAM rating of ‘excellent’ in new school builds and ‘very good’ for refurbishment projects.

This work is underpinned by the Department’s Building Handbook which set out the mandatory technical requirements for all new school buildings and major refurbishments. The Handbook is designed to support the achievement of the appropriate BREEAM rating, within the affordability envelope for each project.

The Handbook ensures that all projects are aligned with current best practice in sustainable design and construction while meeting the latest building regulations covering energy efficiency, ventilation, insulation, accessibility and health and safety. Through regular review and updating, the Handbook provides a clear framework for architects and contractors to design schools that are resource efficient, resilient to climate impacts and supportive of modern teaching and learning.

Building to BREEAM Excellent means delivering a school that achieves very high performance across a wide range of sustainability indicators including energy use, water consumption, materials, waste, pollution, health and wellbeing, transport and ecology. A BREEAM Excellent rating places a building within the top ten per cent of United Kingdom

new construction projects in terms of environmental performance. Achieving this standard requires evidence that the building has been designed and constructed to minimise carbon emissions, reduce running costs, enhance indoor environmental quality and support long term adaptation to climate change. The Department has set minimum requirements for all new school buildings to support reduced carbon emissions and, where feasible, progression towards net zero operation, and this target is being adopted for the new major capital works projects announced in 2022 and Special schools announced in 2024.

The Department will continue to work with design teams and delivery partners to ensure that BREEAM principles are embedded from the earliest stages of project planning through to completion and operation of new school buildings.

Transport and the EA Fleet

The Department will support the Education Authority (EA) in developing its fleet policy and in creating a sustainable school transport service. The provision of transport assistance is a statutory requirement rooted in Department of Education policy and I remain committed to ensuring that pupils receive the transport support they need to enable them to access education. The EA is currently reviewing its transport service to identify potential efficiencies, savings and any alternative delivery options. The Taskforce for Future Financial Stability of Education will take a holistic overview, strengthening joint working between my Department and the EA to identify where policy or legislative change may be required. To protect this essential provision, we must ensure that the school transport service is both affordable and sustainable.

Curriculum

Northern Ireland is undertaking significant curriculum reform following the Strategic Review. Sustainability will remain part of the new framework. This reflects both the needs of the Northern Ireland economy and the wider global context in which young people will live and work.

The new curriculum will enable pupils to study the scientific, geographical, technological and economic concepts that help explain environmental change, including climate systems, energy production, ecosystems, resource use, interdependence and environmental decision-making. Teaching this knowledge equips pupils to understand the evidence for

climate change, the processes that shape weather, climate and ecosystems, and the ways in which human activity affects environments locally and globally.

The new curriculum will also support future economic opportunity. As Northern Ireland grows its green economy, pupils with strong foundations in disciplines such as science, engineering, geography, digital technology and design are well placed to pursue diverse routes into renewable energy, environmental science, sustainable agriculture, resource management, green construction, digital innovation and emerging low-carbon industries.

Conclusion

This Statement demonstrates the Department's commitment to meeting its statutory responsibilities while supporting the education sector to contribute effectively to Northern Ireland's climate goals.

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Minister of Education