

Delivering Sustainability through Behaviour Change in Schools

A practical, evidence-informed guide to increasing engagement and ensuring the longevity of initiatives.

1. Purpose

This guide helps schools turn sustainability intentions into everyday actions by applying behaviour change principles. Although it is aimed at all school stakeholders, it is designed for use by senior leaders, sustainability leads, estates and operations teams, teachers, pupil leaders, and parent groups.

2. Why Behaviour Change Matters

Infrastructure upgrades usually deliver the biggest carbon reductions, but they take time and funding. Behaviour change can deliver immediate, low-cost improvements and helps protect savings made from new technology by ensuring it is used well.

Behaviour can influence energy use significantly; studies suggest 5–20% energy savings are possible through behaviour change alone.

Sustained change is a process, not a one-off event; it needs reinforcement, adaptation, commitment and visible leadership.

Information helps build understanding but is rarely sufficient on its own: social norms, convenience, and feedback loops matter.

3. What Good Looks Like: A Whole-School Approach

A whole-school approach aligns governance, operations, teaching, and community partnerships. This makes sustainability normal, expected, and easy to do.

4. The Behaviour Change Recipe

This guide uses three complementary, practical frameworks:

COM-B Behaviour happens when people have Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation.

EAST Make actions Easy, Attractive, Social, and Timely.

TESTS Target, Explore, Solution, Trial, and Scale (a simple cycle for designing and improving interventions).

5. Step-by-step: design and deliver a school campaign

Step 1	Target	Pick one behaviour to change. Write a SMART target and decide what you will measure.
Step 2	Explore	Map barriers and enablers using COM-B for each audience group (students, staff, parents, contractors, parents).
Step 3	Solution	Design interventions using EAST (reduce friction, use positive framing, show what peers do, time prompts to decision points).
Step 4	Trial	Pilot in one year group, department or building for 2–6 weeks. Collect simple baseline and follow-up data.
Step 5	Scale	Share results, adapt, and roll out. Refresh annually to avoid “green fatigue”.

6. Template: one-page behaviour change brief

Field	Notes (complete for your intervention)
Target behaviour (what exactly?)	
Audience (who?)	
When/where does it happen?	
Barriers (COM-B: capability, opportunity, motivation)	
Interventions (EAST: easy/attractive/social/timely)	
Owner(s) and student role	
Measures (baseline, outcome, process)	
Trial period and review date	
How will we celebrate and share?	

7. Practical menu of school-ready interventions

7.1 Energy & Buildings

- Switch-off routines: end-of-day checklist for classrooms and offices; pupil energy monitors in each class.
- Default settings: printers double-sided and draft; devices set to sleep; timers in shared spaces.
- Feedback: simple weekly dashboard per building and department (kWh, cost, % change).
- Seasonal shutdown: holiday power-down campaign with a signed checklist for rooms.

7.2 Waste & Consumption

- Make recycling the easiest option: consistent bin systems and clear, visual signs; reduce contamination.
- Reuse norms: second-hand uniform shop and “pre-loved” swap events; normalise borrowing and repairing.

- Digital-first admin: reduce printing through defaults, shared resources and simple prompts (only print when essential).

7.3 Food

- Choice architecture: put plant-based options at eye level and name dishes for taste (not labels).
- Food waste weigh-ins: pupil-led measurement and visible progress chart in the dining hall.
- Bring-your-own culture: reusable cups and bottles as the norm; limit disposables to “on request”.

7.4 Travel & Air Quality

- Walk-to-school week plus monthly “active travel” days; use class or house challenges.
- Anti-idling at gates: friendly prompts at decision points and parent communications.
- Low-carbon trips: design at least one carbon-aware trip (route, transport mode, learning purpose).

8. Worked Example: “Changemaker” House Point Campaign (from a school action plan)

The example below shows how existing activities can be strengthened using behaviour change design.

Priority 1: All pupils to achieve a 'Changemaker' house point

Action	Lead	Support	When	Status
Non-uniform day to raise food for the food bank	KTH	Global Perspectives	Autumn 1	DONE
Year 7 and 8 MOCK COP	KTH	Climate Action Amb	Autumn 2	DOING
Thomas Franks Biodiversity Challenge	KTH	Eco Club	Autumn 2	STUCK
Call to Earth Day - Guard your green space	KTH	Eco Club	Autumn 2	DOING
Good Life Schools	KTH	Global Perspectives	Spring 1	

Priority 2: Transport (offsetting)

Action	Lead	Support	When	Status
Sampling of air pollution around site	Eco Club		Autumn 2	STUCK
Design and implement a carbon neutral and low carbon trip	MJU	Global Perspectives	Spring 2	DOING
Support Walk to School Week	KTH	Eco Club	Spring 1	
Carbon capture plants and playground seating	Eco Club	KGL	Spring 1	STUCK

Priority 3: Responsible Consumption

Action	Lead	Support	When	Status
Pre-loved events	Pastoral		Autumn 1	DOING
Second hand uniform	CHSA		Spring 1	DOING
Earth Hour	Eco Club	KTH	Spring 1	DOING
Winter Warmers Drive	Global	KTH	Autumn 2	DOING

Behaviour Change Tips:

- Make the desired action the default where possible (e.g., automatic sign-up or opt-out choices).
- Use social proof: publish participation by house and year group and celebrate improvement.
- Provide timely prompts at the point of action (tutor time, end-of-lesson, school gate).

9. Measuring What Matters (without overloading staff)

Use a small set of measures for each campaign:

- Outcome: what changed? (e.g., kWh, kg waste, % pupils walking).
- Process: did people engage? (e.g., participation rate, number of classes involved).
- Learning: what improved in understanding or skills? (e.g., short pulse survey).

10. Support and Ready-Made Resources

Use these national and sector resources to reduce workload and improve quality:

- [Sustainability Support for Education](#): quality-assured actions and resources to implement your climate action plan.
- [DfE Sustainability Leadership and Climate Action Plans guidance](#) (whole-setting approach and four pillars).
- [National Education Nature Park](#): free programme and curriculum-linked resources to map habitats and improve grounds for biodiversity.
- [UNESCO Greening Education Partnership](#): whole-of-system / whole-institution approach; Green School Quality Standard.
- [FIDA](#): free challenges and teacher resources aligned to the UN SDGs to build student agency.

References

1. Source paper: "Assisting ISC Schools to Deliver Sustainability Through Behavioural Change" (Oct 2025).
2. DfE Sustainability Leadership and Climate Action Plans guidance (GOV.UK).
3. Sustainability Support for Education (DfE commissioned service).
4. UNESCO Greening Education Partnership – Greening the Future.
5. National Education Nature Park (Natural History Museum / RHS).
6. FIDA (Futures Institute at Dollar Academy).