

COUNT YOUR CARBON

Decarbonisation Guide

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About this guide

This guide has been developed by Eco-Schools, in partnership with carbon reduction experts PNZ Advisory, to support you in creating a tailored Decarbonisation Plan for your setting.

Designed to be used alongside the Count Your Carbon Decarbonisation Planner, it will help you understand and interpret your carbon footprint report, identify focus areas for emissions reduction, and prioritise actions for your setting.

What is a Decarbonisation Plan?

Your Decarbonisation Plan should set out the practical steps your setting will take over the next 1–3 years to reduce your carbon emissions. It is a dynamic document which you should revisit often in order to maintain momentum and track progress. We recommend reviewing the plan in full on an annual basis, once you've completed your annual carbon footprint report.

Your Decarbonisation Plan should form a section of your wider Climate Action Plan. There is more information about how Count Your Carbon fits into Climate Action Planning on page 5.

How to create a Decarbonisation Plan

1

Assemble a planning team: If you haven't already, bring together a small group of people from your setting to help develop your Decarbonisation Plan. This should include senior leaders who can make budget decisions, as well as your site manager (or equivalent).

2

Read this guide: Ask all members of the planning team to read this guide so they understand the Decarbonisation Planning process.

3

Review your report and identify focus areas: Using the guidance on page 6–10 to support you, review your Carbon Footprint Report and identify focus areas for your Decarbonisation Plan.

4

Select actions and populate your plan: Using the guidance on page 11–16 to support you, select actions from the Decarbonisation Planner to populate your Decarbonisation Plan, prioritising those that are within your focus areas and align with your budget and capacity limitations.

Why carbon reduction matters

Why is carbon reduction important?

Carbon reduction is vital because carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gases trap heat in the atmosphere, driving global warming. According to the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#), exceeding 1.5 degrees of warming will have “severe climate change impacts, including more frequent and severe droughts, heatwaves and rainfall”, which will significantly impact our habitats, the way we live, and what we eat.

With over 30,000 schools in the UK serving a population of 7.7 million students, the education sector has the potential to make a significant impact in the fight against climate change. By making smart choices to decarbonise now, we can slow climate change and protect the planet for future generations.

What is carbon offsetting?

Carbon offsetting is when you compensate for the emissions you produce by supporting projects that reduce or remove carbon dioxide elsewhere. Examples include planting trees, funding renewable energy projects, or capturing methane from landfills.

Can we offset our entire carbon footprint?

Carbon offsetting should not replace efforts to reduce emissions. Whilst offsetting helps balance carbon impact by supporting climate-positive actions, it doesn't reduce emissions directly. Prioritise reducing your carbon footprint before considering offsetting any remaining emissions.

What does 'Net Zero' mean?

Your setting will be 'net zero' when you have cut your carbon emissions as much as realistically possible, typically by 90 to 95% and balanced any remaining unavoidable emissions through verified carbon offsetting. For educational settings, net zero is the preferred goal because it prioritises taking action to make lasting reductions.

What does 'Carbon Neutral' mean?

Being carbon neutral means balancing the amount of carbon you emit with an equivalent amount removed or offset, without necessarily taking steps to actively reduce emissions. Your setting will be carbon neutral if you balance your emissions through offsetting, even if you have not yet taken steps to reduce your emissions.

Climate action planning

The [DfE's Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy](#) set schools and nurseries the target of having a sustainability leadership team and a Climate Action Plan by 2025. A Climate Action Plan should set out practical steps you plan to take in order to make a positive impact in the following four areas:

- **Adaptation and resilience** - actions to prepare your setting for future impacts of climate change e.g. flood mitigation
- **Biodiversity** - actions to improve the range of plants and animals living on your site
- **Climate education, green skills and careers** - actions to help pupils gain 'green skills', knowledge around climate change, and understanding around 'green careers'
- **Decarbonisation** - actions to reduce your setting's carbon emissions

How does Count Your Carbon fit into our Climate Action Plan?

By using Count Your Carbon to calculate and track your carbon footprint and develop a Decarbonisation Plan, you have the decarbonisation section of your Climate Action Plan covered. Simply reference your report and transfer the relevant action planning content into your chosen Climate Action Plan template.



Carbon impact vs. environmental impact

This guide focuses specifically on decarbonisation. The actions we recommend either directly reduce carbon emissions or encourage behaviour changes that can lead to future carbon savings.

You may be surprised to see some actions rated as having a relatively low carbon impact (such as recycling), whilst other activities (such as creating wildlife habitats) are not included at all. These actions provide significant environmental benefits, but they do not always have a meaningful impact on carbon emissions. These actions should instead be considered as part of your wider Climate Action Plan.

Many actions can contribute to more than one area of your Climate Action Plan. For example, rainwater harvesting helps reduce water use and carbon emissions, while also improving the school's adaptation and resilience to climate impacts such as water scarcity.



**Review your report and
identify focus areas**

Reviewing your carbon footprint report

Your carbon footprint report contains the following:

Your total carbon footprint: This is the estimated total amount of carbon emissions produced by your setting each year.

Average emissions per pupil: This is your setting's total carbon footprint divided by the number of pupils.

Breakdown by operational area: This section shows how your total carbon footprint breaks down across eleven operational areas. This is the most useful section of your report, which will allow you to identify where your emissions are coming from.

Breakdown by Scope: This section shows how your total carbon footprint breaks down across the three emissions scopes. It is provided for additional context and is generally most relevant for academies who must report on their emissions broken down by scope as part of their annual accounts. Scope 1 covers direct emissions, these come from sources you own or control, such as fuel use in boilers or vehicles. Scope 2 covers indirect emissions from the electricity, heat and steam you purchase. Scope 3 covers all other indirect emissions that happen outside your direct control, such as those from your supply chain, waste, and staff travel.

Reviewing your results

The table on the next page presents average carbon footprint figures for primary, secondary, all-through and SEND settings, taken from the 2026 Count Your Carbon statistics report. Comparing your report with these figures can help put your carbon footprint into context, showing how your emissions compare with national averages.

A note on comparison - always aim for reduction!

The averages should not be viewed as targets. Even if your emissions are lower than the average for your setting type, there is still room for improvement. Net Zero is the ultimate goal, so you should always look for opportunities to keep reducing your carbon footprint further.

Want to explore the statistics report further?

To review the latest Count Your Carbon statistics report in full click [here](#) or visit www.countyourcarbon.org/statistics

	Primary	Secondary	All-through	SEND
Average emissions per school (tCO ₂ e/school)	204	1,031	1,155	435
Average emissions per pupil (tCO ₂ e/pupil)	0.72	0.95	1.20	1.80

Reporting category	Average emissions per school (tCO ₂ e/school)				Average emissions per pupil (tCO ₂ e/pupil)			
	Primary	Secondary	All-through	SEND	Primary	Secondary	All-through	SEND
Fuel	36	170	163	62	0.12	0.16	0.17	0.25
Electricity	21	140	167	51	0.08	0.12	0.15	0.22
Waste	0.1	1	1	0.1	0.0004	0.0005	0.0001	0.001
Water	1	2	2	1	0.002	0.002	0.003	0.004
Vehicles	3	6	27	10	0.01	0.005	0.03	0.04
School Trips	4	97	128	14	0.01	0.09	0.14	0.06
Pupil commute	44	248	226	79	0.15	0.23	0.23	0.31
Staff commute	26	122	190	129	0.09	0.11	0.20	0.54
Food	45	139	162	34	0.16	0.13	0.17	0.14
Purchases	35	172	244	55	0.12	0.16	0.25	0.23

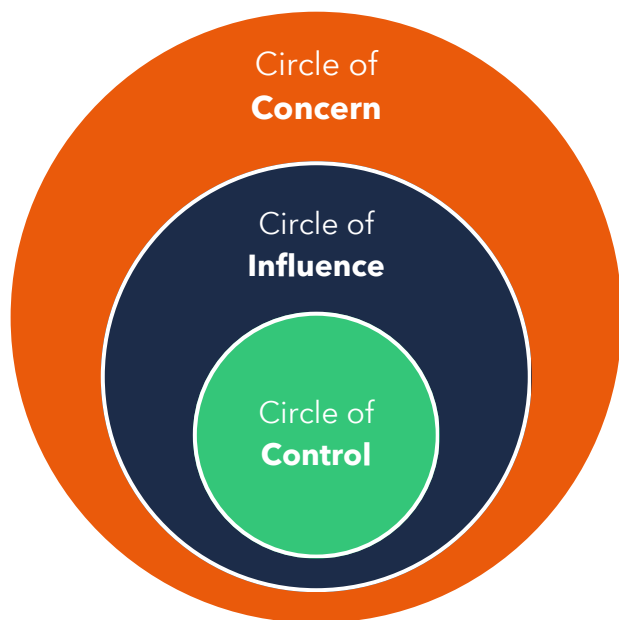
Statistics from the 2026 Count Your Carbon statistics report. 2027 statistics will be released in January 2027.

Visit www.countyourcarbon.org/statistics to download the full report

Understanding your level of control

This indicator can help you to identify where you are most likely to achieve meaningful carbon reductions. While it may be tempting to focus only on the areas that produce the most emissions, it's also important to consider how much control or influence you have over them.

Reducing emissions is easiest where you have the most control to make changes. When determining your focus areas, you should consider the size of the emissions alongside how much control or influence you have to make change.



Circle of control: For areas under your circle of control, you can make decisions that will have a direct impact on carbon emissions, for example, switching to a renewable electricity tariff or reducing the amount of meat you serve. Generally covers electricity, fuel, waste, water and food related actions.

Circle of influence: For areas under your circle of influence, you can educate and influence behaviour but ultimately cannot control the outcome. Generally actions are behaviour-change focused, relating to transport, food and purchasing. For example, running an active travel campaign may help to influence behaviour, but ultimately the decision lies with students and their families.

Circle of concern: These are areas where your ability to make change is limited. For example, some emissions may be linked to supply chains, industry practices or government policy. While it is important to acknowledge these emissions, opportunities to reduce them depend on actions taken by external organisations rather than your setting.

When selecting actions, you'll see a Control, Influence or Concern indicator for each one. Use these ratings to help prioritise actions where you can have the greatest impact on reducing emissions.

Identifying your focus areas

Taking into consideration the guidance on pages 6 to 9, it's time to identify your focus areas for your Decarbonisation Plan.

1

Identify your highest and lowest sources of emissions.

2

Compare your figures with the averages on page 8, identifying where your results are higher or lower than average.

3

Consider what might be driving your results, for example the age of your building or travel distances and how much control or influence you have over each area.

4

Bring this together to identify your focus areas, prioritising:

- The areas where you emit the most carbon
- The areas where you emit more carbon than average
- The areas where you have the most control or influence to make change



Creating your Decarbonisation Plan

Using the Decarbonisation Planner

The decarbonisation planner spreadsheet contains over 100 actions that span all operational areas, each with varying levels of impact, expenditure, and implementation requirements. Actions are categorised and presented alongside several key metrics, as outlined on the following three pages.

These categories and metrics allow you to easily filter the actions in order to find those most appropriate to your context, helping you to identify the most appropriate measures to include in your decarbonisation plan.



Using the Decarbonisation Planner: Overview

Operational area	Subcategory	Action	What is it?	Boundary	PCR	CAPEX	OPEX	EOI	Requires paid-for external support to implement ?
Energy (electricity and fuel)	Renewable energy	Install solar panels	Solar panels convert sunlight into electricity and produce no carbon emissions. Installing solar panels allows you to generate your own electricity on-site, reducing reliance on the grid and ensuring at least a portion of your electricity supply is 100% renewable.	Control	↓↓↓	£ £ £ £ £	£ £ £	👤 👤 👤 👤	Yes

Operational area: Allows you to filter by operational area. Electricity and fuel are combined under 'Energy'.

Subcategory: Further groups actions so you can be more targeted in your filtering. See page 14 for further guidance.

Action: Briefly describes the action

Description: Describes the action in more detail

Boundary: Indicates whether the action sits within your circle of control, influence or concern. See page 9 for more guidance.

PCR/CAPEX/OPEX/EOI: Indicates potential carbon reduction, capital expenditure requirements, operational expenditure requirements, and ease of implementation. See page 15 for further guidance.

Requires paid-for external support to implement?: Indicates whether the action requires external support to implement.

Using the Decarbonisation Planner: Actions subcategories

Actions subcategories	
Review and planning	Planning that comes before material actions e.g. energy audit or travel review.
Building and equipment	Physical upgrades to your building or equipment, e.g. insulation, LED lighting, or energy-efficiency appliances.
Renewable energy	Low carbon energy generation and supply, e.g. switching to a renewable electricity tariff, or installing solar panels.
Efficiency and reduction	Reducing demand, improving efficiency, and wasting less, through generally low cost and low effort actions e.g. reprogramming thermostats, improving recycling facilities, and reducing meat in meals.
Policy	Policy changes which will have an impact over time e.g. prohibiting purchase of single-use items and implementing a zero-flight policy for school trips.
Behaviour and leadership	Activities that have an impact on culture and behaviour within your setting, usually by raising awareness e.g. running educational assemblies, taking part in Eco-Schools, and building sustainability into internal and external communications.

Using the Decarbonisation Planner: PCR, CAPEX, OPEX and EOI

PCR (Potential carbon reduction) refers to how impactful the action could be in reducing your total carbon footprint	
↓	< 1% reduction in total carbon emissions
↓↓	2% - 5% reduction in total carbon emissions
↓↓↓	6% - 10% reduction in total carbon emissions
↓↓↓↓	11% - 15% reduction in total carbon emissions
↓↓↓↓↓	> 15 % reduction in total carbon emissions

CAPEX (Capital expenditure) refers to upfront costs of implementing the action	
£	Only internal resources required
£ £	Small project which may require an external consultant
£ £ £	Big project/small installation of a product/good requiring an external consultant
£ £ £ £	Installation of building retrofits or technological improvements
£ £ £ £ £	Substantial budget required, involving feasibility studies, and obtaining numerous quotes

OPEX (Operational expenditure) refers to the costs of running/operating the action, including any recurring fees	
£	Minimal (e.g. routine maintenance by internal staff)
£ £	Low (e.g. occasional external service required)
£ £ £	Moderate (e.g. periodic external service or supplies)
£ £ £ £	High (e.g. regular external service or expensive supplies)
£ £ £ £ £	Very high (e.g. frequent external service, specialised staff needed)

EOI (Ease of Implementation) refers to how easy the measure may be to implement	
👤	Easy to implement with no external support required
👤 👤	Easy but may require minor external support
👤 👤 👤	Requires external support to plan and install, but can be implemented quickly
👤 👤 👤 👤	Challenging, may require multiple external partners
👤 👤 👤 👤 👤	Very challenging, requires multiple external partners

Selecting actions

Now you've identified your focus areas, the next step is to agree on the actions that will help reduce your carbon footprint. Your whole planning team should be involved in this process. As a guide, aim to include no more than ten actions in your Decarbonisation Plan each year.

1

Use the available filters to create a provisional list of actions that align with your focus areas and are appropriate for your setting (e.g. budget and capacity).

2

Discuss the possible actions with your planning team and narrow the list down to a maximum of ten.

3

Tick the boxes next to each of your chosen actions to add them to your Decarbonisation Plan on the following tab.

4

Add information, such as responsible staff member and target completion date, next to each action.

5

Save your Decarbonisation Plan in a safe place, and update it throughout the year as you implement actions. Your plan should be fully reviewed and updated with new actions annually.



Extra guidance: Operational areas

Energy (Fuel and Electricity)

Fuel and electricity should be high priority areas at the start of your decarbonisation journey, as they are areas where most settings have a high level of control.

Actions in this area involve improving energy efficiency and reducing energy demand. This includes upgrading buildings and equipment, introducing energy management policies, promoting behaviour change through staff and student engagement and switching to renewable energy sources. There is a wide range of potential actions to consider, with varying costs and staffing requirements.

The hierarchy on the right sets out a roadmap for prioritising fuel and electricity related measures.

Waste and Water

Waste and water combined typically account for less than 1% of a setting's carbon footprint, making them low priority areas when it comes to decarbonisation. Whilst waste reduction and conserving water may not deliver high carbon savings, they both remain important areas to take action as part of wider environmental and sustainability goals.

Understand your energy use

Carry out an energy audit, assess your current energy consumption and identify opportunities to reduce demand.



Improve energy efficiency

Improve the energy efficiency of your building and optimise energy management. This might include a combination of building upgrades, alongside behaviour change initiatives.



Switch to renewables

Transition to a renewable energy tariff and explore opportunities to reduce or eliminate fuel usage.



Generate renewable energy on-site

Install solar panels or wind turbines on site to generate your own renewable energy.

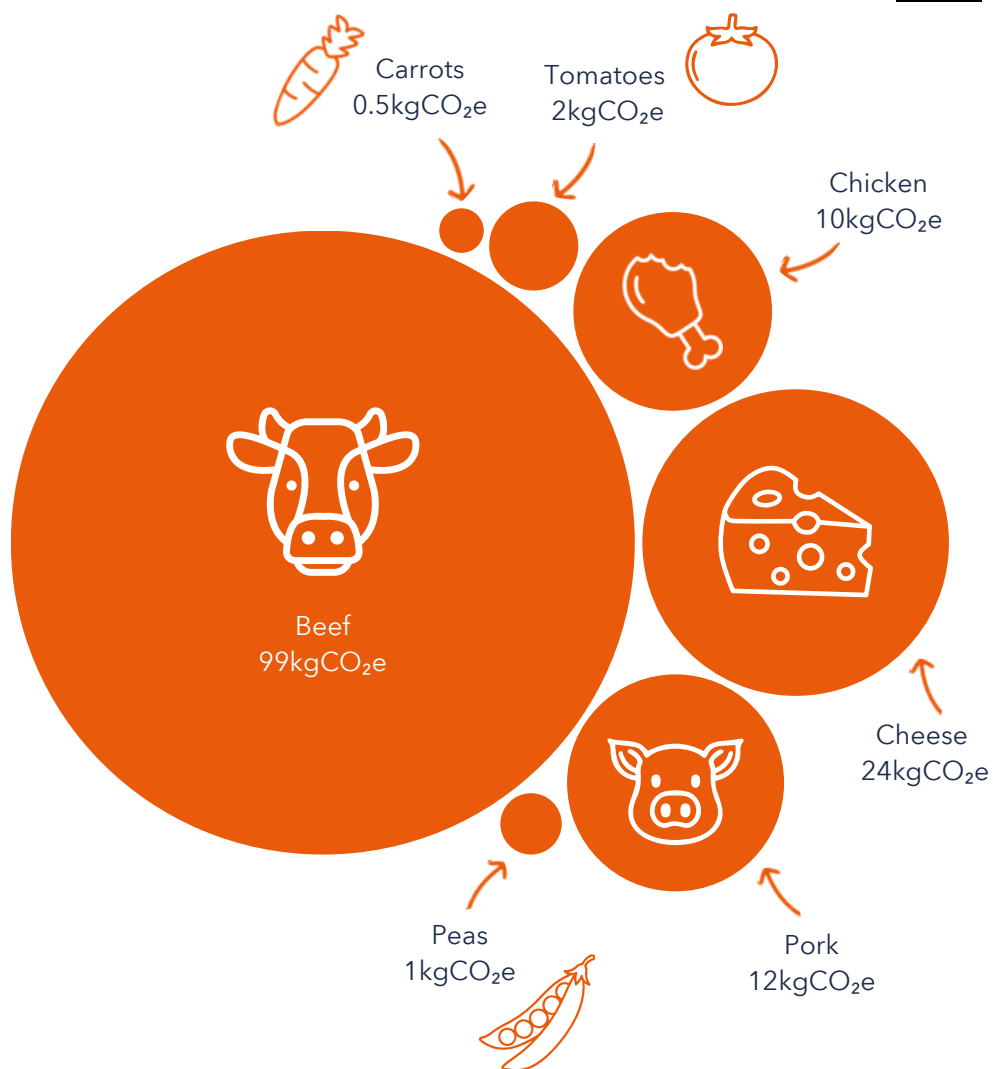
Food

The production of different meal types have a hugely varied impact on emissions. Meat-based meals generate significantly more carbon than vegetarian meals and fully plant-based options are even less carbon intensive than those containing eggs and dairy. The infographic on the right demonstrates just how varied food emissions can be.

Decreasing the amount of meat you serve is the key to reducing your food emissions. This can be achieved through reducing the proportion of meat in meat-based meals, and introducing more meat-free and plant-based meal options. A gradual approach allows staff and students to adapt, supporting lasting behaviour change.

To build acceptance and avoid increased food waste, start by raising awareness. Actions could include running workshops to demonstrate how tasty plant-based foods can be, delivering an assembly to educate staff and students about the climate impact of different food groups, and getting students involved in redesigning menus. Consider using positive, engaging messaging to encourage participation - frame plant-rich meals as 'climate-friendly' and meat-free days as 'Planet Protector Days'.

Source



Student and staff commuting

While these are areas where settings can only influence behaviour rather than directly control emissions, there are many opportunities to reduce the impact of commuting, so don't be dissuaded if your emissions in these areas are high.

Efforts should focus on encouraging behaviour change. Actions may include providing cycle proficiency training, installing secure bike and scooter storage facilities, running active travel campaigns, and offering incentives that encourage staff and students to choose more sustainable travel options. Safety is also a key consideration when it comes to people choosing how they travel, so exploring whether you could implement a 'School Street' and mapping safe walking and cycling routes to share with students and staff might help too.

Vehicles

Minimising the use of school vehicles by prioritising active travel methods where practical is an effective way to reduce emissions in this area. In addition, ensuring that future vehicle purchases are electric can significantly lower emissions over time. Consider adding a clause to your procurement policy that prioritises electric vehicles, to ensure that as vehicles are replaced they produce no/low emissions.

Trips

Trips can be a significant source of emissions, particularly where flying is involved. Unlike commuting, however, educational settings often have greater control over how trips are organised and the modes of transport used, making it easier to reduce emissions in this area.

If you take students on trips by flying, consider whether journeys could be taken by road, rail, or sea instead, or go one step further and implement a zero-flight policy. For trips within the UK, consider whether you can take active transport methods to local attractions, or whether you can take public transport instead of using school vehicles or private hire coaches.

Travelling 1 mile by these methods of transport produces...



...and best of all, walking or wheeling 1 mile produces no emissions!

[Source](#)

Purchasing

Purchasing emissions primarily arise from the supply chain, including the production, packaging, and transportation of goods and services. While you have limited control over these emissions, your purchasing decisions can help reduce them.

Reducing unnecessary purchases, extending the lifespan of existing items through repair and reuse, and choosing refurbished or second-hand products can all help lower purchasing emissions. Adopting a circular economy approach, as illustrated in the diagram opposite, can help maximise the value and lifespan of products and materials.

Uniform

Whilst uniform related emissions sit outside the scope of a school's carbon footprint under the Greenhouse Gas Protocol, schools can still take meaningful action to reduce them, which is why we include uniform emissions in your report.

You can decrease these emissions by encouraging the reuse of uniforms through initiatives such as uniform banks, swap shops, or second-hand sales - this helps to reduce demand for new items whilst extending the lifespan of existing garments.



More resources to support the creation of a Climate Action Plan

Eco-Schools

Eco-Schools is the nation's leading environmental schools programme. It provides a simple framework to support schools and pupils to cover environmental topics in the classroom and to reduce their school's carbon footprint. Over 50% of the schools in the country have taken eco-action under the Eco-Schools banner in the last 5 years, increasing green skills and raising awareness of green careers.

To find out more, visit eco-schools.org.uk

Eco-Schools: 'Net Zero Heroes'

Check out Eco-Schools' 'Net Zero Heroes' guide, which outlines 10 steps to help you form your sustainability leadership team and create a Climate Action Plan.

Visit eco-schools.org.uk/eco-projects/net-zero-heroes to access the guide.

Let's Go Zero

For free support in creating your Climate Action Plan, please reach out to the climate action team at Let's Go Zero. No matter where you are on your journey to zero carbon, they can provide free support and guidance to help you on your way.

For more information, visit letsgozero.org/climate-action-advisors or email hello@letsgozero.org

Climate Ambassadors

Climate Ambassadors offers every education setting in England free access to volunteer support to develop and deliver impactful climate action plans.

For more information, visit www.stem.org.uk/climate-ambassadors/teachers-and-schools



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Registered Charity No. 1071737