

Introduction

[The Education for Sustainable Development Forum \(ESDF\)](#), established in 1995, aims to enhance the profile of environmental education in both curricular and extra-curricular activities. Our members work collaboratively to develop positive attitudes and behavioural changes toward the environment. The Forum committee includes representatives from universities, DAERA, environmental NGOs, local councils, the Education Authority, CCEA, Eco Schools, and Field Studies Ireland. As part of Northern Ireland Environment Link, we maintain strong working relationships with the NI Assembly and the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

The Forum's unique position in Northern Ireland, with a network spanning schools, universities, students, further education, lifelong learners, environmental NGOs, makes us particularly well-suited to support ESD. In 2021, Northern Ireland Environment Link launched a new Strategy and Action Plan for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The [ESDF Strategy and Action Plan](#) for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), is highlighted in the [Northern Ireland Executive Environmental Improvement Plan](#)'s actions and targets.

Education for Sustainable Development - Locally, Nationally and Globally.

The Northern Ireland Assembly have recognised the benefits of outdoor learning and engagement and passed the [Strategy for Outdoor Learning in Schools 2025](#), and is evidenced by the [Outdoor Education in NI: impacts and issues research paper by RAISE](#). It is crucial that children and young people understand the importance of nature, biodiversity, the environment, and our planet as we face a climate crisis. Education represents our most significant social intervention to address climate change. Instilling this awareness from an early age can foster the passion and urgency needed to adapt to and improve climate conditions through lifelong learning and understanding. This approach can also guide future skills development, green careers, and green growth, further supporting climate initiatives.

The importance of this at a local, national and global level is evidenced by the [The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015.



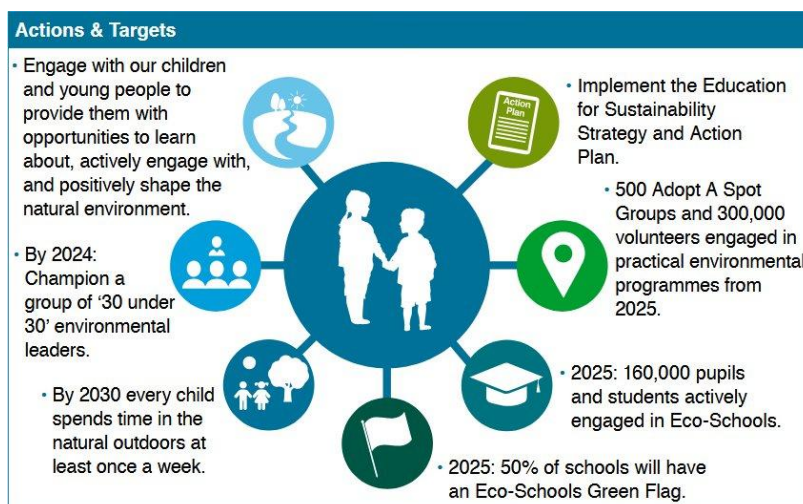
These goals provide a shared aim for global intervention at all levels. At its core are the [17 Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), including SDG 4 - Quality Education. They offer tangible targets with measurable impacts for schools, businesses, and government. The NI Environmental Improvement Plan aims to link each set of proposed actions and targets to improve our environment to the relevant SDGs.

Equally, the NI Curriculum aims, as outlined in [A strategic Review of the NI Curriculum](#) review, are to provide learning opportunities for each young person to develop as:

1. An individual
2. A contributor to society
3. A contributor to the economy and the environment

To achieve this, with the reality of the issues faced today and outlined in the [The Climate Act NI 2022](#), the ESD Forum propose it is crucial that Education for Sustainable Development should be fully embedded into the NI Curriculum. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), while acknowledged in principle as a 'key element' in the Northern Ireland curriculum review, is not yet fully embedded within the proposed curriculum review framework. As the author of the review noted, *'these are no longer abstract possibilities, but realities that today's young people are growing up with and are concerned about'*. Yet, without statutory content, there is a risk that ESD will remain inconsistently delivered across education in the new NI Curriculum.

The importance of this subject for society in today's realities of the climate emergency is mirrored in Northern Ireland Executive documents. The Environmental Improvement Plan outlines that *'Education is one of the most important keys to tackling climate change. The Northern Ireland Curriculum will continue to play a vital role in supporting the green economy and nurturing environmentally conscious citizens. Through the integration of topics related to sustainability, climate change and green growth, schools can equip children and young people with the knowledge, understanding, skills, and values necessary to contribute actively to a greener future; a curriculum that emphasizes the green economy can also prepare our children for future careers in sectors such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and green technology.'* The Environmental Improvement Plan includes visions and outcomes for *'Highly engaged and well-educated future generations with the necessary knowledge, skills and behaviours to drive societal change.'* And *'Children and young people can: access and interact with the natural environment at home, in school and in daily activities; and work to improve and enhance the quality of the environments in which they live, learn and play.'*



Education and skills for Sustainable Development is a right for children and young people. The [UNCRC General Comment 26 \(2023\)](#) on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change, with reference to UNCRC Articles 28, 29 states that *“Children should be given environmental education that is accurate and in ways they understand. Environmental education should support children to connect with, and respect, the environment. The places where children learn should be safe from environmental harm”*. As Duty-Bearers of children and young peoples' rights, it is imperative that Education and skills for Sustainable Development be part of our school life and curriculum. Closer to home, Belfast City Council's (2021) online survey with 1200 young people reported that:

- 52% of young people suggest that they are very or extremely concerned about climate change
- 88% of young people thought something could be done to reduce the negative effects of climate change.
- 67% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the view that it was too late to do anything about climate change.
- 83% trust information about climate change either a lot or a little from a school/college teacher.

The suggestions for steps to take, from respondents, included sustainability budgets at school level, access to sustainable travel, timetable time and specific curricula on Sustainability as well as a focus and action addressing issues in Lower Economically Developed countries. Respondents also said that they would like to contribute to a school level and system level sustainability policy.

The time for listening to our young people and taking action for Sustainable Development and Climate Change is now.

How do we do ESD?

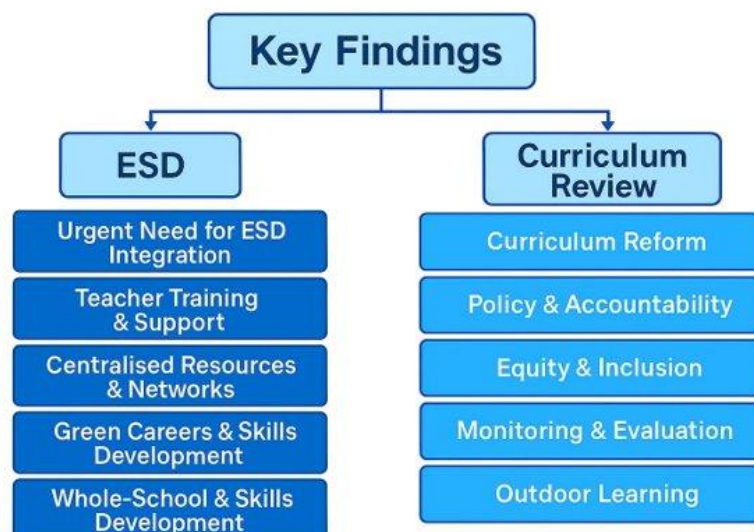
The Pillars of Sustainability are core to the delivery of Education for Sustainable Development, and Sustainable Development Goals help deliver on the Northern Ireland Executive Environmental Improvement Plans Strategic Environmental Outcomes.



ESD equips learners with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for a sustainable future. As outlined by [UNESCO \(2020\)](#), it is delivered through

- advancing policy
- transforming learning environments
- building the capacity of educators
- empowering and mobilising youth
- accelerating local-level actions

Northern Ireland Environment Link and its network of members work towards these priority action areas in their daily delivery. At the Education for Sustainable Development Forum conference in October 2025, attendees from our network of environmental organisations, educational institutions and educators told us, through workshoping on the theme of the NI Curriculum, their key asks.



Findings from attendees on ESD:

1. [Urgent need for ESD integration](#) across curriculum, institutions, and sectors
2. [Teacher education & support](#), at Initial Teacher Education stage (BEd; PGCE) and structured Continuing Professional Development (CPD)
3. [Centralised resources & networks](#) quality-assured and curriculum-aligned
4. [Outdoor & experiential learning](#) as a core pedagogy
5. [Green careers & skills development](#)
6. [Whole-school & community approach](#)

Key findings of what attendees would like to see in the Curriculum Review are:

1. [Curriculum reform](#)
2. [Policy & accountability](#)

3. [Equity & inclusion](#)
4. [Monitoring & evaluation](#)

Benefits and Rewards

The benefits and rewards of embedding ESD, including outdoor learning into the NI Curriculum, are evidenced in the [Outdoor Education in NI: impacts and issues research paper by RAISE](#). These include the findings listed below such as physical skills, social skills, concentration, connection, confidence and knowledge for participants.

The positive impacts on pupils include, but are not limited to:

Enjoyment of lessons (95%)

Engagement with and understanding of nature (94%)

Social Skills (93%)

Engagement with learning (92%)

Health and wellbeing (92%)

Behaviour (85%)

Attainment (57%)

Benefits are not limited only to pupils, but also to staff. Positives reported for teachers are in relation to:

Teaching Practice (79%)

Health and wellbeing (72%)

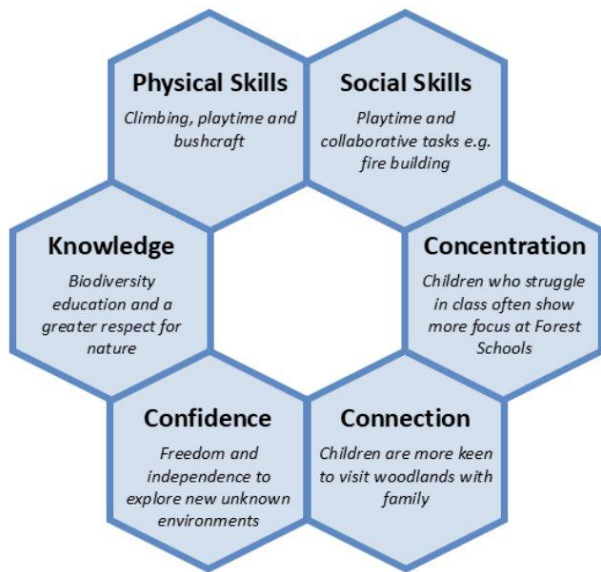
Professional development (69%)

Job satisfaction (69%)

The ESDF strategy for ESD highlights that a whole school approach to education for sustainable development can have environmental impacts and potential positive outcomes for the curriculum, teaching and learning but also the campus, school management and leadership and community links.

Conclusions and recommendations

Education for Sustainable Development is not only aligned with Northern Ireland's Environmental Improvement Plan, but also actively supports the aims of the NI Curriculum, helping learners develop as individuals, contributors to society, and contributors to the economy, environment and fulfils our role as duty-bearers for children and young people. ESD, including outdoor learning, has benefits that are beyond academic outcomes, but also strengthen curriculum outcomes and children's development in key areas, including health



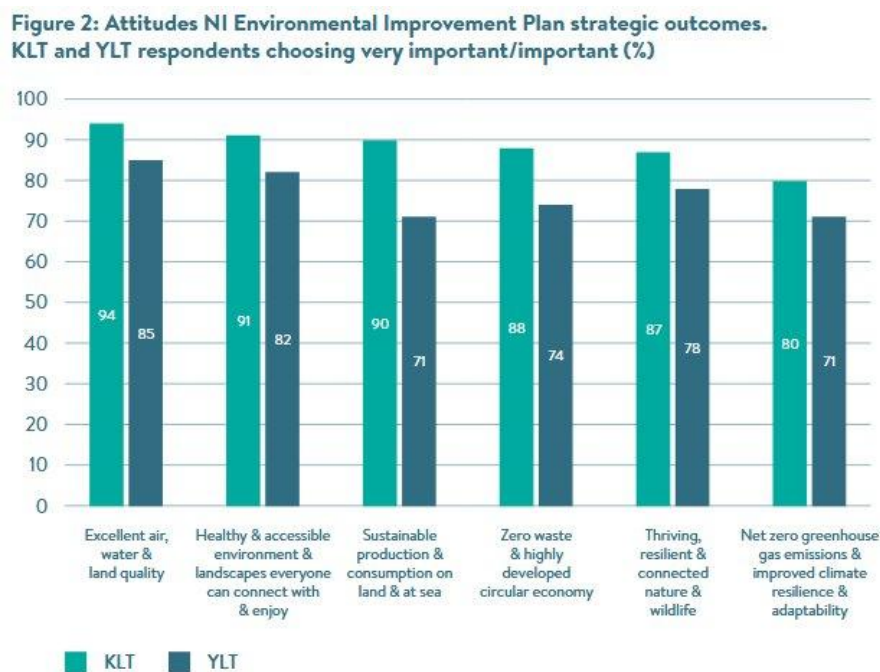
Outdoor Education in NI : RAISE

and wellbeing, engagement, skills development, and the importance of future generations to drive environmental improvement.

Given the significant advantages, the NI Curriculum review opens the opportunity for ESD to be fully integrated, consistently delivered, and supported across all phases of education, as demonstrated in the [Progression of Big Ideas Sustainability Framework progression statements](#).

[Evidence shows, via Queens University Belfast Access Research Knowledge \(ARK\)](#), that the NI Environmental Improvement Plan strategic outcomes are rated highly, as very important or important to children and young people at pivotal ages in their education.

It is vital to harness this importance to improve Northern Ireland's education through Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, Values in line with the environmental realities we all face today.



This paper accompanies a presentation delivered by Beth Frazer (ESDF/NIEL) and Dr Karen Kerr (Queens University Belfast) on the 3rd February 2025 at a NI Assembly, Education Committee event.

For further information, please visit

www.esdforum.org.uk

beth@nienvironmentlink.org