



European Education Area Strategic Framework  
**Working Group on Schools: Learning for Sustainability**  
Input Paper:  
**School Self Evaluation for Sustainability**





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# Overview

The *Working Group on Learning for Sustainability* is exploring how policy can support school self-evaluation as a key mechanism for the implementation of whole-school approaches to sustainability.

School self-evaluation (SEE) has the potential to improve learning quality and educational outcomes. When applied to learning for sustainability, it can also help attain a more sustainable school. This is achieved through the engagement of leaders, educators, learners and stakeholders in the process of transitioning educational systems and experiences towards a greener and fairer world.

This input paper: i) briefly introduces the term SSE in the context of learning for sustainability; ii) sets out key considerations arising from research and documented experiences of schools; and iii) provides an example of a national SSE framework on learning for sustainability. It ends with the identification of a number of core questions for those involved in shaping, designing and/or implementing policy. Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is to encourage a deeper understanding of whole-school approaches to learning for sustainability and to explore how these approaches can be advanced through self-assessment processes.







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# Introduction



**What is School self-evaluation?** School self-evaluation is a collaborative, inclusive, and reflective process of internal school review. An evidence-based approach, it involves gathering information from a range of sources, and then making judgements. All of this with a view to bring about improvements in students' learning.<sup>1</sup>

The European Commission proposal for a Recommendation on learning for environmental sustainability<sup>i</sup> and the accompanying handbook<sup>ii</sup> from 2022 seek to support education institutions, national bodies and agencies engaged in learning for sustainability and to encourage a wider adoption of policy and practice. As schools increasingly strive for sustainability, climate action and ESD, school self-evaluation (SSE) can be a potentially powerful tool to drive change and to self-assess progress in this area.

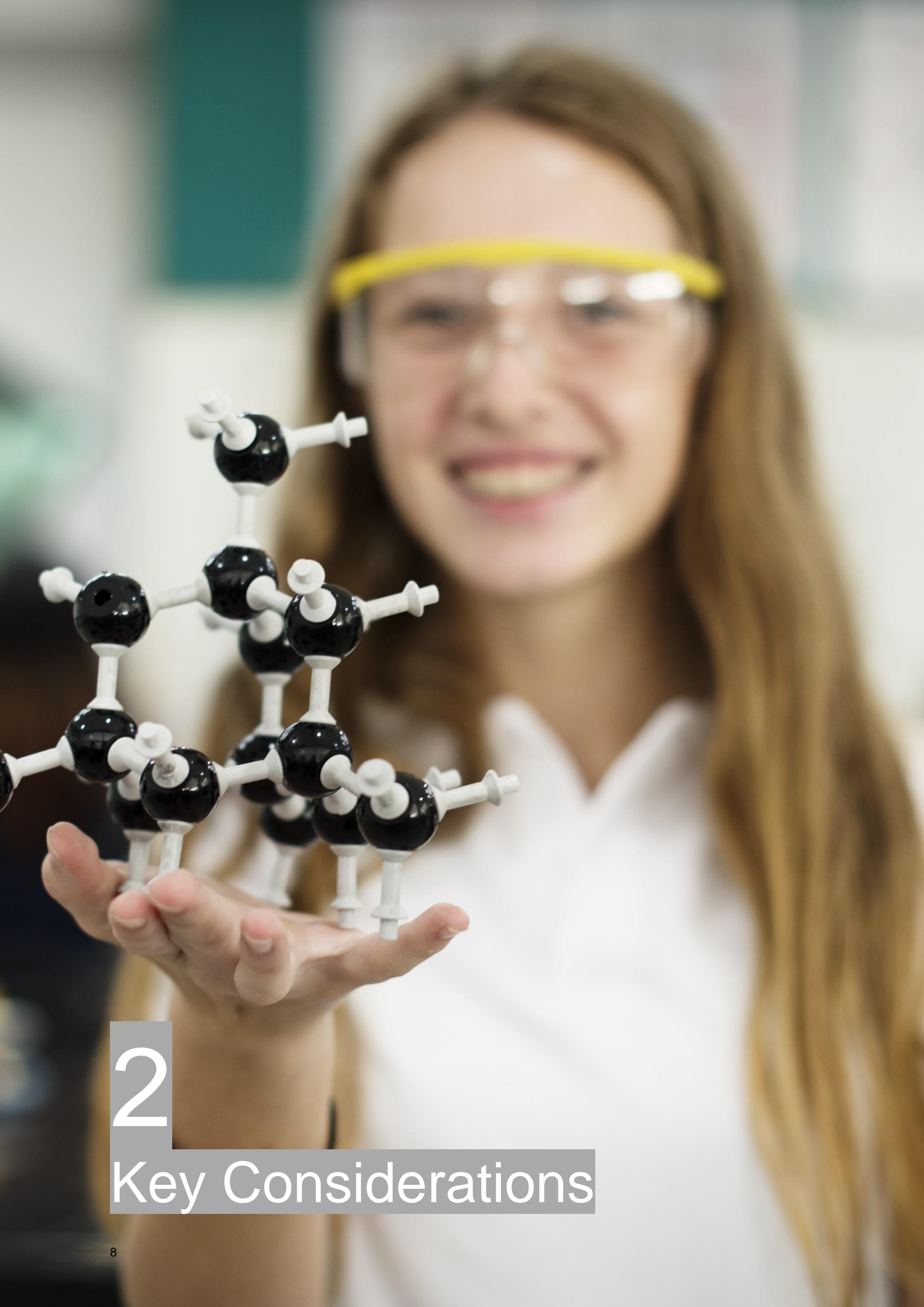
School evaluation has experienced some significant changes over recent years, evolving from a focus on compliance with school inspection processes towards an emphasis on internal review and school self-evaluation<sup>iii</sup>. Self-evaluation is not only an evaluation process but also an effective means of driving school development<sup>iv</sup>. This is because it can lead to a better understanding of the changes needed by those responsible for implementing them<sup>v</sup> (see Table 1).

Proponents of SSE argue that improvement should come from within rather than beyond the school - the school itself being the 'unit of change'. Improvement is therefore seen as a bottom-up process involving the school community, students, staff, parents and other stakeholders. SSE is increasingly present in education systems, however it takes different forms in different countries and contexts. In some jurisdictions it is a requirement mandated through policy, whereas in other contexts the school itself defines its own approach to SSE.<sup>vi</sup>

Figure 1 School Self-Evaluation on Learning for Sustainability

### School Self-Evaluation on Learning for Sustainability

- **What?** School self-evaluation is a process by which a school reflects on its practice and identifies areas for improvement. It is primarily about schools taking ownership of their development pathways.
- **How?** Self-evaluation involves reflective enquiry which leads to action, as informed by evidence gathered by the school. It can include: summative-formative assessment; internally or externally driven review; top-down and/or bottom-up processes.
- **Why?** As schools strive to improve their contributions to sustainability, self-evaluation can be a powerful tool to drive change and monitor progress towards the school's ambitions in this area.
- **Who?** A whole-school approach to sustainability encourages the involvement of the community and external stakeholders in the process of self-evaluation, so that it is not limited to staff and students of the school. This systemic approach makes it possible to view the process from multiple perspectives and encourages and questions what learners experience as members of the institution as well as the through the taught curriculum.



# 2

## Key Considerations

This section considers a number of key components underpinning effective SSE practices related to sustainability<sup>vii</sup>:

1. **Developing a holistic vision:** Defining the bigger picture is an important first step. Why is the school engaging with sustainability and what does it wish to achieve through its actions? This involves taking all aspects of the schools activity and operation into account from curriculum to infrastructure and includes professional development as well as the engagement of students and parents. All actors involved in a SSE need to be aware of the school's aims regarding sustainability and be actively involved in constructing and updating this vision.
2. **Agreeing on a phased plan:** Understanding that change takes time is critical to any process. Defining the different stages of the transition can help those involved to understand whether they are making progress and whether things are moving in the right direction.
3. **Defining Progress:** There are two distinct but also complementary approaches to defining what progress looks like. Some schools use *statements of practice* and others use *indicators* both help navigate school self-evaluation processes. Statements of highly effective practice can serve as benchmarks for schools to assess existing strengths and work towards excellence<sup>viii</sup> (see appendix 1). Meanwhile, indicators can take many forms and be used to assess progress at the input, output or outcomes stages, depending on where the school is placed on its school development journey. Indicators can also be used to monitor national policy progress towards the implementation of ESD in schools and across the education system<sup>ix</sup> (see appendix 2).
4. **Gathering evidence:** SSE needs to be evidence-led and could involve the use of reflection sheets, checklists, focus groups, interviews, observations, questionnaires, professional collaborative reviews and student reflections. It is important to spend time identifying what data the school already has and what evidence needs to be collected. Involving all stakeholders in gathering evidence is important; thus understanding the motivation and capacity of actors to gather, analyse, interpret and use a range of qualitative and quantitative data is key to the success of any SSE effort.
5. **Professional Development:** Continuing professional development is critical to the transition towards new pedagogical approaches associated with sustainability. As such it is an important component of a SSE process. Few educators and leaders have received teacher education or leadership training in this area. Professional development is also needed to address the more technical considerations associated with operational and management practices that contribute to sustainability across the school.
6. **Leading from the Top:** School leaders have a key role to play in raising awareness, motivating and involving all staff as well as parents and students in a school self-evaluation process. Supporting broad stakeholder engagement in this quality improvement process is crucial; it can promote transparency, trust, shared responsibility and ongoing reflection on how to make progress. A distributed leadership model is deemed most effective in this context.
7. **Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement:** This requires developing a high level of trust towards actors with clearly defined roles and responsibilities and establishing a structure for



participatory decision-making. Representativeness of stakeholders needs to be ensured and all voices heard, including those of disadvantaged groups.

8. **Pre-empting Challenges to SSE and Learning for Sustainability:** Schools face challenges when implementing SSE within the context of learning for sustainability. These challenges may result from a: lack of time and capacity from staff to take on SSE, lack of professional development or support to help develop a shared understanding of sustainability, learning for sustainability or evaluation processes, or poor engagement from external stakeholders. Identifying these challenges from the start and devising a plan to address these can increase the success of SSE initiatives.
  
9. **Policy Support:** Policy makers can also provide various tools, guidelines and approaches to support schools in their self-evaluation and development. These tools may be adapted to local contexts and needs. Together with school leaders, policy makers can allocate sufficient human and financial resources and time to conduct effective school self-evaluation. Policy makers may also invest in research and development of digital tools to support the process and provide schools with data in easy, understandable formats. They can also promote collaboration within and between schools, building bridges with the wider community, including researchers.

A young girl with dark hair in two pigtails is seen from behind, wearing a blue backpack. She is wearing a white t-shirt and a blue ruffled skirt. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape with yellow and green tones, suggesting a field or park. The lighting is bright and natural, likely from the sun being high in the sky.

3

Learning from Experience:  
Scottish Case Study

## Scotland's whole-school self-evaluation and improvement framework in learning for sustainability

Scotland's Learning for Sustainability (Lfs) self-evaluation and improvement framework is intended to stimulate dialogue and action towards a whole-school approach to learning for sustainability. It encourages the school to look 'inwards, outwards and forwards' and thus build a shared understanding of sustainability and its relevance to learners. The approach encourages members of the school to ask questions about their efforts; to work with others to assess progress; and to look forwards in a cycle of continuous improvement:

Figure 2 Learning for Sustainability Cycle





- The initiative is supported by a matrix that includes progression statements from 'Starting the journey' through to 'Features of highly effective practice'. These guide the schools' ambitions and help them benchmark their practice. The statements are organised under three main categories: *Leadership and Management, Learning Provision, Successes and Achievements*.
- Each of these three categories have a group of linked Quality Indicators (QIs) which are matched to school priorities. The categories within this framework can be used flexibly and addressed collectively or one at a time.
- Challenge questions are provided to support professional dialogue and engage those driving and supporting the change.
- The framework also provides a pro-forma to record self-evaluation and actions against the chosen focus. Over the course of the planning and improvement cycle schools are encouraged to return to their recorded evaluations and actions to reflect on progress and identify where practice in relation to learning for sustainability has improved.

Source: Education Scotland (2021)



Figure 3 Summary Version of Self-Evaluation and Improvement Framework

 		<b>Whole school and community approach to learning for sustainability (Lfs)</b> Self-evaluation and improvement framework - summary version	
EMERGING PRACTICE			HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PRACTICE
<b>Self-evaluation for self-improvement</b> We have identified LFS as an area for improvement in our establishment. Looking inwards, outwards and forwards, we are building a shared understanding of LFS and its relevance to our learners. Planning is underway to gather baseline LFS information. (HGIOS4? Q.I. Links 1.1, 2.6)		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Our next step:	Planning for LFS is well embedded in our culture. Almost all stakeholders have a good understanding and a strong and well-established vision for LFS and its relevance to learners. We are looking inwards, outwards and forwards more effectively and systematically, gathering a wide range of evidence to demonstrate the impact of LFS.
<b>Leadership of learning</b> Some staff have benefited from LFS career-long professional learning (CLPL) opportunities. Some coordinators lead LFS with groups, such as the Pupil Council, but groups have yet to work together in a coordinated way. (HGIOS4? Q.I. Links 1.2, 2.7)		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Our next step:	We have a collegiate learning culture within our school aligned to the GTCS professional standards. The effectiveness of our CLPL is evidenced by a range of reliable data demonstrating improved outcomes for learners. There is leadership at all levels in relation to LFS. There is a strategic balance across the different aspects of global citizenship, sustainable development education, outdoor learning, participation and learner voice. All of our LFS activities are recognised as contributions towards a coherent and holistic whole school approach to learning for sustainability.
<b>Leadership of change and management of staff</b> Our staff are aware of some LFS themes and can identify what these look like in their context. There is good practice in some aspects of LFS. A coherent unifying vision for LFS has yet to be developed. Some of our policies reflect LFS themes and some attempt has been made to make decision-making processes more inclusive. Driving forward the LFS agenda is largely left to one or two practitioners, co-ordinators or champions. (HGIOS4? Q.I. Links 1.3, 1.4, 2.7)		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Our next step:	Our LFS culture is fully embedded in our establishment and all stakeholders are fully involved in decision-making and planning. A positive, open and participative ethos is exemplified in a warm, respectful and caring atmosphere and a strong community spirit. Staff have ownership of the LFS vision and LFS themes are reflected through policies and inclusive decision making processes, from ethical purchasing to CLPL provision. Staff engage effectively with a range of partners to ensure all learners receive their LFS entitlement.
<b>Management of resources to promote equity</b> We are beginning to explore how our school buildings and grounds can support LFS. Some work has been done to improve environmental practice in relation to waste minimisation and energy and water usage. Some effort has been made to improve our school grounds. The grounds are beginning to support daily contact with nature. We have a basic school travel plan. (HGIOS4? Q.I. Links 1.5,2.1, 2.2, 2.5, 2.7)		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Our next step:	We have evidence and data to demonstrate improvements to the sustainability of our school building and grounds. Our grounds are varied and provide stimulating opportunities for learning, developing skills and engaging with nature. Our outdoor learning practice aims to tackle inequity and is informed by research. Our school travel plan is linked to our curriculum. Learners lead action plans and we have gathered data to show that active travel has increased.

EMERGING PRACTICE			HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PRACTICE
<b>Curriculum, Learning, teaching and assessment</b> LFS themes have been embedded in a few obvious curriculum areas as a result of the commitment of a small number of dedicated practitioners and/or involvement in award programmes. Some attempt has been made to connect learning across a small number of subjects or curriculum areas through one-off focus days/ theme weeks. Learners in some classes or pupil groups are developing skills for learning, life and work through LFS. There is some evidence of high-quality learning experiences relating to LFS in our school but a consistent approach is yet to emerge. Learners have some opportunities to contribute to the life of the school and wider community. (HGIOS4? Q.I. Links 2.2, 2.3, 2.6, 2.7, 3.1, 3.2)		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Our next step:	The development of our curriculum is underpinned by a whole school approach to LFS. LFS themes and approaches are embedded in the four contexts for learning. All practitioners demonstrate LFS in their practice and all learners receive their entitlement to learning for sustainability. Outdoor learning is a regular, curriculum-led experience. Learners engage in motivating and relevant interdisciplinary activities relating to topical LFS themes. LFS is being used to promote skills for learning, life and work including leadership and higher order thinking skills. Our learners contribute effectively to the life of the school and wider community. Learners' LFS achievements are recorded, recognised and accredited, where appropriate.
<b>Partnerships</b> Our school has partnerships with a number of local organisations, businesses and national third sector organisations including charity and voluntary groups. Some parents are involved in our LFS work through the parent council or volunteering for one-off events. (HGIOS4? Q.I. Links 2.5, 2.7)		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Our next step:	Our school effectively engages with partners to promote a coherent whole school approach to LFS. We have a clear strategy for growing existing LFS partnerships and establishing new ones. The school is recognised as being open to new ideas and is highly regarded for the active role it plays in personal development and active citizenship. LFS activities have significantly enhanced parental and community engagement. Relationships between staff, learners, parents and wider community groups are wholly positive and mutually beneficial.
<b>Ensuring wellbeing, equality and inclusion</b> <b>Raising attainment and achievement</b> <b>Creativity and employability</b> Some learners have the opportunity to engage in activities such as charity fundraising, conservation work, campaigning and awareness raising through committees, clubs and societies. Pupil councils and focus groups are in operation but we have yet to consider how their work relates to LFS across the whole school. LFS activities are improving outcomes for some learners particularly through participation of pupil groups or as a result of a small number of committed practitioners. Some learners are being given an opportunity for personal achievement in LFS. Staff are beginning to engage children and young people in meaningful discussion about their skills development in relation to LFS activities. (HGIOS4? Q.I. Links 3.1, 3.2, 3.3)		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Our next step:	LFS activities support our ethos and culture of participation and inclusion (linked to GIRFEC and the UNCRC). There is a strong focus on learner voice in decision-making and planning. We value and celebrate diversity and challenge discrimination and prejudice. LFS is helping to achieve the best possible outcomes for all learners. Motivating and engaging LFS experiences are raising attainment and promoting a culture of achievement. Particular attention is given to removing barriers to learning and raising attainment of our most disadvantaged learners. Learners contribute to the school and society as global citizens, developing an international mind-set to help them thrive in an increasingly globalised world. LFS methodologies support creativity and encourage learners to think critically, be imaginative, open-minded and solution-focused. Information about careers linked to the breadth of the LFS agenda is embedded within learning and teaching.

Source: Education Scotland (2021)





4

Further Questions

Q. If you had to rank the key considerations listed above, which would you select as the three most important ones (see Section 3)? Given your experience, are there any missing?

Q. How would you define or categorise the different phases or stages in a self-improvement cycle in the context of learning for sustainability?

Q. What should be the role of school leadership teams and senior education staff in the SEE process in the context of learning for sustainability?

Q. How could the use of SSE, in the context of learning for sustainability, help develop a culture of self-improvement at all levels of the school and complement wider conversations around school evaluation?

Q. How useful are statements of effective practice for schools taking their next steps towards a whole-school approach to sustainability? Considering the Scottish case study, what is the value (and the limitations) of this tool in your own national or regional context?

Q. What indicators would you find useful for monitoring national progress towards a whole-school approach to learning for sustainability and how would these differ from those used in SSE?





5

Conclusion

The SSE process can help transition educational systems and experiences so that these can contribute towards a greener and fairer world<sup>x</sup>. The process helps schools reflect on and review their day-to-day practices and policies and seek improvement for more sustainability. The evidence collected in the process can be used to identify meaningful and specific targets and actions, to create and implement improvement plans, and to measure progress. Various tools exist to support the adoption of SSE in schools and there is considerable potential to extend practice through national policy support and incentives. Schools face some challenges when implementing SSE, such as time limitations or lack of shared understanding of the ambitions of the school and/or poor engagement of external stakeholders. Nevertheless, SSE deserves further consideration as a crucial process for advancing learning for sustainability through a whole-school approach.





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# Appendices



## Appendix 1: Ireland: An Example of Statements of Effective Practice

A list of sample statements can be accessed from: The Inspectorate (2016) 'School Self-evaluation Guidelines 2016-202: Primary' Department of Education and Skills, Ireland Dublin <https://assets.gov.ie/25262/f4a6f2a21e1c4c26a55234511085d5a3.pdf>

Figure 4 Sample statements of effective and highly effective practice

STANDARDS	STATEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE	STATEMENTS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PRACTICE
<b>Pupils reflect on their progress as learners and develop a sense of ownership of and responsibility for their learning</b>	Pupils assess their progress and are aware of their strengths and areas for development as learners.	Pupils assess their progress <b>realistically</b> and can describe their strengths and areas for development as learners.
	They take pride in their work and follow the guidance they receive to improve it.	They have a <b>sense of ownership of their work</b> , take pride in it, <b>and take responsibility for improving it</b> .
	They reflect on their behaviour and attitude to learning, and are able to contribute to setting meaningful goals for themselves.	They reflect on their behaviour and attitude to learning, <b>and are able to set meaningful personal goals as a result of their reflection</b> .
	Where the curriculum provides opportunities to do so, pupils are able to negotiate their learning thereby increasing their autonomy as learners.	Where the curriculum provides opportunities to do so, <b>pupils negotiate their learning</b> thereby increasing their autonomy <b>and effectiveness</b> as learners.
	Pupils take responsibility for their own learning, and use the learning resources provided to them to develop their skills and extend their knowledge.	Pupils take responsibility for their own learning, and use both the learning resources provided to them, and <b>those that they source themselves</b> , to develop their skills and extend their knowledge.

Figure 5 A quick guide to developing national ESD indicators

## A Quick Guide to Developing National ESD Indicators



### Indicator types: Countries can show different types of progress depending on which type of indicators they use.

Different indicator types give different results. Understanding which types of indicators are available is important. In addition, moving beyond what one already knows and learning from others is key to developing knowledge about ESD indicators.

Indicator types differ in why they are used and, therefore, what they assess. Table 1 highlights the different indicator functions, along with an example of each indicator type for teacher education.

Indicator categories assist stakeholders to think about the various stages of ESD progress: the ESD starting point, the increasing number of activities during the DESD, the achievements made and the communication of these achievements. There are three categories:

- i. **Status Indicators:** assess variables that determine the position or standing of ESD in a country. *Baseline* indicator types belong to this category;
- ii. **Facilitative Indicators:** assess variables that assist, support or encourage engagement with ESD. *Context, process, and learning* indicator types belong to this category; and
- iii. **Effect Indicators:** assess variables relating to initial, medium and long-term achievements during the DESD. *Output, outcome, impact* and *performance* indicators belong to this category.

**Table 2: Quantitative and Qualitative Data Collection Methods**

Methods of Data Collection	
Quantitative data	Qualitative data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrative data collection                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- financial data</li> <li>- performance data</li> <li>- resource allocation</li> <li>- school census</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Surveys and questionnaires                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- door-to-door</li> <li>- election-type polls</li> <li>- national census</li> <li>- phone interviews</li> <li>- school/teacher interviews</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case studies</li> <li>• Content analysis</li> <li>• Focus groups</li> <li>• Interviews (individual, community)</li> <li>• Observations</li> <li>• Research (action research)</li> <li>• School inspections (formal education)</li> <li>• Story-telling</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Indicator Types Using Teacher Education as an Example**

	Indicator Type	Function	Indicator Example
Status	Baseline	To identify the status of the overall ESD picture	<i>% of new teachers currently receiving pre-service training in ESD</i>
	Context	To identify the existence of ESD support systems	<i>National education policy exists that requires pre-service teacher education courses to provide training in ESD</i>
Facilitative	Process	To identify the existence of ESD processes and activities	<i>All pre-service teacher education courses provide training on ESD-related content and pedagogy</i>
	Learning	To promote learning and reflection on ESD	<i>Lessons learned in the process of training pre-service teachers in ESD are captured</i>
Effect	Output	To assess outputs such as tools and learning resources, and the immediate results of an activity	<i>% of new teachers certified as having received pre-service training in ESD</i>
	Outcome	To assess outcomes related to changes or improvements that result from ESD efforts	<i>% of new teachers using ESD-related content and pedagogy in the classroom</i>
	Impact	To assess impacts that result from ESD efforts	<i>Learners use sustainable practices in daily life</i>
	Performance	To assess the change in the status of the overall ESD picture in a region or country	<i>Increase in the number of new teachers receiving pre-service training</i>

(Tilbury & Janousek, 2006)





*Extracts from: Tilbury et al. (2007)*

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- <sup>i</sup> European Commission (2022a)  
<sup>ii</sup> European Commission (2022b)  
<sup>iii</sup> Brown et al (2021)  
<sup>iv</sup> OECD (2013)  
<sup>v</sup> Nevo (2001)  
<sup>vi</sup> Chapman and Sammons (2013)  
<sup>vii</sup> The Inspectorate (2016); O'Brien et al (2021); Chapman and Simmonds (2022); Education Review Office (2016); Dept of Education (2021); EC 2020.  
<sup>viii</sup> See The Inspectorate, Dept of Education Ireland (2016) *as an example*  
<sup>ix</sup> See Waltner, et al (2018); Tilbury et al (2007); UNECE (2006); Tilbury and Janousek (2016); UNESCO 2020; Goad 2020.  
<sup>x</sup> Tilbury and Galvin (2022)