

42,000 jobs can be created making UK schools safer, greener and more energy efficient

3 years ago



Making UK school buildings energy efficient and fit for the future is a win-win, according to a new report published by the TUC.

The report looks at the current spending on schools through the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme (PSDS), and estimates how much more investment is needed.

Current funding and retrofit needs

A fifth of all PSDS funding to date (£335 million) has benefited schools, showing huge demand from schools to improve energy efficiency. But the funding available through PSDS still falls far short of what's needed.

Funding allocated through PSDS so far represents just 3% of UK schools' total need for retrofits. And the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy suggested last week that even this funding may be cut.

Schools typically need between £300,000 and £700,000 in repairs (based on data for England). And more than 80% of schools still have deadly asbestos present in buildings, much of which could be safely removed while retrofitting for energy efficiency.

The avoidable financial pressure that this puts on schools is rising. The House of Commons Library estimates that school energy bills have risen by 93% in the past year. And some schools have reported energy bills rising by tens of thousands of pounds, stretching resources that they want to allocate directly

to education.

Threat to current funding

Last week, Energy Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng told the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee that funding to decarbonise public buildings could be cut, with funds transferred to pay energy companies to improve domestic energy efficiency.

But as the official Climate Change Committee noted in its most recent progress report, the energy efficiency of UK non-residential buildings has barely changed at all in the last eight years.

The TUC says that instead of cutting funding for public buildings to reallocate to other schemes, the government should increase overall funding for energy efficiency. This would maximise financial savings and carbon reductions across the whole economy.

Action needed

The report shows that there is an opportunity to save schools money, help reach net zero, and create thousands of good quality jobs by measures like installing insulation, draughtproofing, and mechanical ventilation. Retrofits would also help classrooms stay cool in summer heatwaves.

The report recommends a retrofitting programme with £13.5bn of government investment over ten years, creating 42,000 construction jobs and cutting 1.2 million tonnes of annual CO2 emissions. The programme should:

- Be delivered by local authorities to maximise economies of scale.
- Engage school staff and students in the design of individual retrofit projects.
- Use the opportunity to remove asbestos from buildings.
- Maximise directly-employed labour in construction – to provide good-quality jobs for construction workers, and secure the skills needed for high-quality retrofits.
- Employ a Good Jobs Charter for procurement standards – to ensure good quality employment across supply chains.

TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady said: “We all want the best education for our kids, with schools putting as much as possible directly into teaching and learning.

“But school buildings have been leaking energy for far too long. And with energy costs surging, this is hitting school budgets hard. It would be irresponsible to let this go on when we have the technology to fix it.

“If we invest now to make schools energy efficient, we will save a lot more in the long run. That means more money from school budgets going to education. It means a big cut in carbon emissions. And it means lots of good quality new jobs.”

NEU Joint General Secretary Mary Bousted said: “Current government commitments to upgrade the schools estate as part of the DfE’s Climate and Sustainability Strategy are woefully inadequate. We need a bold plan to urgently retrofit the entirety of the UK education estate to help meet the challenge of climate change and ensure that schools are shielded from sky-high energy bills. Local authorities are the best

vehicle to drive this programme in terms of economies of scale and quality assurance and we urge the Government to adopt this proposal.

“Our children will reap the benefits of such an approach. Less money spent on maintenance and energy bills mean more money spent on their education. And witnessing their school becoming more sustainable will be an education in itself, inspiring their future lives.”

NAHT General Secretary Paul Whiteman said: “For too long the government has underinvested in the school estate. We know from the government’s own estimates that more than £13 billion is needed just to get schools back up to a reasonable state of repair, let alone turn them into the sustainable carbon-zero buildings we need. And – like everyone – schools are facing energy prices spiralling out of control.

“The government should take action now and invest so that schools can be at the forefront of the national sustainability agenda, and to save money on energy bills in the longer term. This report shows examples of schools that have been able to offset the cost of installing solar panels in just five years. This is precisely the sort of project government should be looking to roll out more widely.”

NASUWT General Secretary Patrick Roach said: “Education has a critical contribution to make in educating for climate justice and helping to secure a more sustainable world for future generations. Schools need greater support and resources from government to de-carbonise and ensure they can be sustainable. We need to see much more action from the government to deliver substantial improvements to the energy efficiency of existing school buildings which have suffered from significant under-investment over decades.”

UNISON General Secretary Christina McAnea said: “Pupils and staff are paying the price for years of government disinterest in maintaining school buildings properly.

“The pandemic showed ageing schools are unfit for purpose. Classrooms are too hot in summer, too cold in winter and ventilation is poor. Many still contain asbestos, which puts lives at risk.

“Patching up crumbling buildings is no longer an option. The government needs to urgently invest in properly upgrading school buildings, so they’re greener and safer for pupils and staff, as well as creating jobs.”