

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS

December 2008

This note describes the policy context for sustainable schools and sets out six strategic priorities to take the strategy to its next stage.

Context

Government has committed to embedding sustainable development through the education and children's services systems through the DCSF's Sustainable Development Action Plan (SDAP), *Brighter Futures - Greener Lives*. The aim of this plan is to establish sustainable development as an integral part of how policy on children and young people is developed and implemented, rather than being a 'bolt-on'. It's three goals are to lead change in the system (in concert with delivery partners); lead by example (in terms of its own behaviours and operations); and empower and educate young people for life in a sustainable world.

The *Children's Plan* describes sustainable development as "a non-negotiable for children's wellbeing". The implication is that, without it, the aim of making this country "the best place in the world for our children and young people to grow up" will not be realised. The SDC's 2007 publication, *Every Child's Future Matters*, provides comprehensive evidence for why this is the case.

The *Children's Plan* reaffirmed DCSF's commitment that all schools should be sustainable schools by 2020, as defined by its 2006 *National Framework for Sustainable Schools*. This sets out eight sustainability themes or 'doorways' for schools to focus on in the **curriculum** (eg learning about key issues like poverty, waste, climate change), **campus** (eg reducing the energy and water usage of the school) and **community** (eg working with the community to improve local well-being).

Ofsted recently reviewed progress with sustainable schools in its 2008 report *Schools and Sustainability: A climate for change?* The picture was characterised by a lack of consistency and awareness both about the operational impacts of the school itself, and the opportunities to use sustainable development to drive school improvement. Notwithstanding this, independent schemes such as Eco-Schools and Generation Green have grown extremely quickly in recent years, with 11,000 and 7,000 schools registering in England, respectively. This suggests considerable appetite for change in schools.

Pupil well-being and empowerment

At the heart of sustainable schools is the recognition that children depend on many factors for their well-being, including environmental factors, and are at risk from poor access to green and natural areas, road danger, pollution, noise and climate change. The phrases 'environments fit for children' and 'child-friendly community' refer to places that encourage physical activity, health and contact with the natural world. Factors such as road danger, poor connectivity in neighbourhoods, and overdevelopment render many areas 'obesogenic' and socially barren leading to long-term physical and mental health problems, and diminished community cohesion.

Schools cannot address all of these issues directly, but they do form an important backdrop to schools' efforts to promote the health and well-being of pupils. **A sustainable school is a '21st century school' that is conscious of its role in the wider global community. Much of the thinking (and guidance) that supports schools taking a greater role in addressing the sustainable development needs of their communities has been developed with partners following the sustainable schools consultation.**

Without ceding responsibility for sustainable development to young people, there is a definite need to empower them to tackle look after the planet in adulthood and, where necessary, to question and challenge the practices of present-day decision-makers. Schools have considerable opportunity to

support this aspiration in young people, individually and collectively, and to increase their sense of achievement and worth in the process. Schools that are doing this are reporting improvements in pupil behaviour, achievement and personal responsibility, and an optimistic school culture.

Six strategic priorities

The National Framework for Sustainable Schools sets out a series of objectives for schools to accomplish by 2020. Great progress has been made in developing supportive materials for schools to support them on this journey, and in engaging the early adopters and relevant non-profit and corporate interests. However, as Ofsted has pointed out, we are at the start of the journey towards mainstreaming sustainable development in schools, and the departmental effort going into this is small in comparison with many other policy areas.

Sustainable schools therefore remains a niche idea in the education system, characterised by pockets of excellent practice, driven by passionate individuals, within a generally inconsistent picture. There is no reason to lay the responsibility for this situation with schools; in fact the data which do exist (eg from NCSL's surveys of head teachers and our own consultation) suggest a high level of interest in sustainable development.

The answer may lie closer to home, with the signals given to the sector by the Department, the low priority accorded to the area by some of the Department's family of NDPBs, an almost complete lack of measurement other than occasional surveys by Ofsted, and the resulting mixed messages arriving at local authorities and at the front line. The profile of sustainable development in school regulation, teacher development, and education support services is currently very low, and there is a definite sense among some of the leading practice schools that progress has been made despite government policy rather than as a consequence of it!

Clearly, all of these challenges can be resolved to some extent by the Department through a strategic, long-term commitment. The following six priority changes would make a considerable difference in this regard.

➡ **Priority 1** A carbon reduction strategy, comprising sector target, schedule/ scenario, and action plan focused on procurement, buildings and travel.

With the advent of the Climate Change Bill, and the confused state of public services with regard to their role in leading by example on carbon emissions reduction, this is now urgent. It extends far beyond the flagship new building programmes, not only to the existing stock of schools, but to the supply chains for schools (responsible for 45% of school greenhouse gas emissions), travel to and at school (16%), and school waste (2%). **Schools sit at the heart of 24,000 communities nationally and their opportunity to support behaviour change around carbon emissions has barely been tapped.** They represent probably the leading resource nationally to enable communities to learn about and adopt low-carbon lifestyles.

➡ **Priority 2** A regulatory framework that encourages schools to improve outcomes for children by applying sustainable development.

Some of the responsibility for the patchy progress of sustainable development in schools must be attributed to a system of regulation that has not previously recognised the link between sustainable development and child well-being. **As its own studies confirm, Ofsted has a clear opportunity now to advantage children and their families by using the regulation process to embed sustainable development throughout the system.**

➡ **Priority 3** A curriculum from EYFS to 14-19 that recognises sustainable development as a key context for 21st century learning.

Children need to acquire new skills at school if they are to become part of the solution to global challenges, not part of the problem like their parents, and that means developing the confidence to challenge old patterns of behaviour. Listening, expressing points of view, weighing evidence, cooperating, thinking critically, seeing patterns, participating in decisions, making informed choices, tackling real problems – these are the skills necessary for sustainable development.

Sustainable development is clearly not a subject, but a way of thinking that pervades and enriches all subjects in a relevant and engaging way for learners. The idea currently struggles for attention in the 14-19 space, in early years, and the existing primary curriculum. **Progress has been made in the secondary curriculum, but more could be done to emphasise the fundamental role of the curriculum in preparing young people for life in a just and sustainable world – an objective of DCSF and the whole sector.**

➡ **Priority 4** Workforce development that enables teachers and staff to lead sustainable development in their schools in whatever roles they occupy.

The infrastructure supporting teacher development (curricula, standards etc.) does not encourage this capability systematically, despite much work having been undertaken in defining sustainable development competencies such as thinking in longer-term, broader-based and more inclusive ways. This contrasts with head teacher development where NCSL has recently started to integrate sustainable development within its provision, having researched the opportunity in 2007. **An opportunity exists now to link teacher training and development to the twin purposes of enabling children to reach their potential, and preparing them for life in a just and sustainable world.**

➡ **Priority 5** A vision of a 21st century school fit for 21st century challenges.

A 21st century school has to be a sustainable school, and much of the thinking about the role of schools in their communities and wider world has been agreed with partners through the sustainable schools consultation. **Action is urgently needed to bring these two concepts together, breathing greater life into both.**

➡ **Priority 6** Effective, consistent signalling from the Department about the importance of sustainable development in local delivery.

This priority is linked closely with Priority 5 (vision of a 21st century school). Policy initiatives, funding priorities, remit letters, ministerial speeches, press notices, KPIs of key programmes, sector targets, national indicators, tender specifications, stakeholder communications – all of these influence how local authorities and schools make decisions, and all have the potential to showcase sustainable development thinking. Take Extended Schools as an example: present communications with schools offer no indication that the programme contributes to sustainable development, or that sustainable development is an important context in which to make operational decisions. It is therefore regarded by schools to be running parallel to sustainable development, rather than being part of it. More positively, the health and sustainability agendas are increasingly linked in school food policy, with the effect that many schools are now bringing these issues together in their sourcing. **Sustainable development is the ultimate joining-up agenda, pointing to many synergies and efficiencies in the process.**