Sustainable Schools in England: background and lessons learned

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Following a period of uncertainty with sustainable schools since the change of Government in May 2010, this article describes the key events and lessons learned over six years of partnership between the Sustainable Development Commission and the Department for Education, and offers pointers on where we might be headed over the next few years.

Background

Between 2004-2010, the Department for Education (DfE), whose remit covers children, young people and schools in England, entered into a partnership with the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC), the Government’s advisory body on sustainability issues. SDC advisers were embedded in the Department to evolve ideas that were ambitious for sustainable development and which also would improve the lives of children and young people – and hence were supportable politically by an education ministry. The partnership was highly successful, twice gaining recognition from the Government as a whole through its Civil Service Awards programme. A timeline noting key events in this cooperation is included at the end of this article.

In the very early stages of the partnership many parts of the stakeholder community across England were mistrustful and unbelieving about the DfE’s commitment to sustainable development. They argued that sustainability was not a priority for DfE; that any support it did give amounted to warm words and the occasional ‘random act of kindness’. Over the last five years, however, perceptions have shifted greatly. Putting the Department’s relationship with stakeholders onto a strong and positive footing has been crucial to driving forward a shared agenda and improving cooperation between voluntary sector organisations.

Internally within DfE, the greatest challenge was to reframe sustainable development as a positive opportunity for children and young people; in other words to show how it could enable the Department to deliver its objectives more effectively through it than without it. The language of ESD was getting in the way so a new way of describing it was invented: “care for oneself, care for each other (across cultures, distances and generations) and care for the environment (both far and near)”. This simple message was understandable by teachers and built on what they thought they were already doing, but extended their horizons to the environment. It was also sellable internally as it was a ‘good thing’ for children (no justification for not supporting it) and elicited a positive response from the education community.

Eight sustainable schools doorways were chosen to cover a broad social and environmental spectrum. Thus, alongside energy, water and waste (but not biodiversity which in retrospect would have been well received by stakeholders) there were inclusion, participation, local wellbeing and the global dimension. The resulting National Framework for Sustainable Schools was holistic and far-reaching – it urged schools to consider SD in teaching and learning, school management and community engagement (‘curriculum, campus, community’).

The framework offered schools recommendations on where they should be by 2020, encouraging them to set their own path to success without central prescription. The doorways could be tackled
one by one, in groups, and in any order, based on local needs and priorities. They are all interconnected and progress in one area could open up opportunities to tackle others.

DfE realised from the start that schools could not meet the recommendations without considerable support from the wider education system in which they are situated, including local government, school inspection, teacher training, leadership development, national curriculum, architects and building contractors, and of course children and parents themselves. This has been the focus of much of DfE’s work on sustainable schools since the framework was originally launched.

When UK charity Groundwork surveyed the uptake of sustainable schools in 2008, they found that around 70 per cent of schools in England had travel plans, 70 per cent had obtained the healthy schools mark, and 50 per cent were registered with Eco-Schools.¹ This indicated that a large number of schools were engaged in some aspect of sustainable development, as countless school case studies across the country also suggested.

School action on sustainability made a vital contribution to local efforts to secure sustainable communities, both through tangible outcomes such as reduced carbon emissions and social cohesion, as well as through the formation of positive sustainable behaviours in young people and their families. The concept of the school as an engine of social change in communities was central to the sustainable schools vision.

This impact has been achieved with very little public funding beyond modest financial support for networking in the nine English regions, a national award established through the Teaching Awards Trust, and a small budget to support pilot work and school guidance.

Key lessons for getting schools involved

The key lessons from this experience include recognising the value of:

- endorsement / leadership from the education ministry in order to create an ‘atmosphere of permission’ amongst schools
- using language that resonates with education professionals to communicate sustainable development
- a strong vision from the centre in which schools act as hubs of social change in their communities
- not having heavy handed performance targets, prescription, or significant funding, which has made progress feel slow at times, but more resilient in the long-term
- good quality guidance for different constituencies within schools – head teachers, business managers, teachers, governors, young people
- a clear message from Government that the whole sector should support schools in their efforts to become sustainable, and that they are not expected to succeed alone

¹ Progress Summary for Mainstreaming Sustainable Schools, Groundwork UK, March 2009.
strong support from the National College for School Leadership in promoting sustainable development as a characteristic of effective school management and leadership; and from the national curriculum authority in developing sustainability as a cross-curriculum dimension

- the supportive stance taken by NGOs, local authorities and others in helping schools explore the importance of the idea of a sustainable school, and its implications for enhanced community involvement and increasing social capital

- the existence of Eco-Schools and other schemes, plans and awards (International Schools, Healthy Schools, Travel Plans, Teaching Awards, Ashden Awards) which provide simple ways for schools to engage, and succeed, with sustainability.

Evidence of impact of sustainable schools

In 2009 the DfE commissioned the University of Bath to investigate the educational and social benefits to young people of learning in a sustainable school. The resulting report was written for leadership teams in primary and secondary schools and other educational settings across England.  

Evidence of the impact of sustainable schools is supported by a growing research, policy, and practitioner literature, in the main from the UK, but also internationally. Multiple sources of evidence now show that being a sustainable school raises standards and enhances young people’s well-being. The research evidence supports the idea that this is because sustainable schools engage young people in their learning so improving motivation and behaviour, and also promote healthy school environments and lifestyles. In addition, evidence shows that sustainable schools advance community cohesion by making valuable connections between the school and its parents and carers and the wider community.

Under five themes, the University of Bath report sets out 15 recommendations (top tips) based on the impact of sustainable schools and education for sustainable development on school improvement and young people’s well-being as defined by every child matters outcomes. In doing this, it set out to be useful in the context of schools striving to enable learners to become successful, confident individuals, and responsible, caring citizens.

The five themes were:

1. Improving schools: enhancing young people’s learning and wellbeing
2. Bringing young people’s learning experiences together
3. Developing young people’s participation
4. Contributing to school, community and family life
5. Modelling sustainability practices, thinking and planning

The report sets out the recommendations for each theme together with a short summary of the underlying evidence.

Related policy cooperation

2 http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00344-2010
In addition to sustainable schools, DfE and SDC also focused on a number of other significant policy challenges over the period 2007-10, including:

- **Management of carbon emissions.** Strong analysis from the SDC of the current footprint and future / backward trends was commissioned by DfE to establish how schools in England should respond to national (and international) climate objectives (see figure below\(^3\)). The whole carbon footprint was assessed, not just building energy, with policy tailored to suit each category of emissions (energy, procurement, travel, waste). Opportunities to cut cost and carbon together were identified, with the implication that environmental underperformance should be regarded as inefficiency. Parallel work undertaken by the UK Department of Energy and Climate Change concluded that schools were essential hubs for carbon reduction in communities, with three quarters of DECC’s *low carbon community* projects involving direct cooperation with schools.

![Schools GHG Footprint 2006](image)

- **Child health and wellbeing.** With support from the DfE, the SDC published *Every Child’s Future Matters* in 2007, a hard-hitting look at how the environment affects child wellbeing. The report urged Government to look beyond the usual boundaries of children and families policy to tackle factors such as urban design, green space, road traffic and climate change. It linked improvement in these areas to important outcomes for children like good mental and physical health, reduction in deaths and serious injuries, obesity, respiratory illness and poor behaviour – many of which have an environmental explanation.

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\(^3\) Climate Change and Schools: A carbon management strategy for the schools sector, DfE, April 2010.
• **Inequalities and disadvantage amongst young people.** Environmental activities can increase self-esteem, boost resilience and improve the employment chances of disadvantaged young people, as well as increase their awareness and ability to look after the environment in future. SDC research has shown that a focus on sustainable development within policy and services for young people can enhance the delivery of existing policy objectives and prevent problems from developing in young people in the first place. The SDC called for a ‘green thread’ to be woven through all policy and service delivery for young people in order to enhance outcomes for them now and in the future.

The future of sustainable schools

Following the change of Government in May 2010, the future of the sustainable schools strategy at first looked in doubt, with ministers declaring that they did not wish to maintain a ‘separate strategy’ for sustainable schools nor continue with a corporate sustainable development action plan. Furthermore, over the summer of 2010 it was announced that the SDC would close in March 2011, and in fact spending constraints brought the DfE’s partnership with the SDC to a close in November 2010. The future of sustainable development in education and children’s policy therefore looked bleak.

However, immediately following these announcements, a number of umbrella groups representing sustainability interests in the education sector began working with the DfE to discuss how best to promote sustainable schools in the absence of central leadership. By Autumn 2010, a Sustainable Schools Alliance was under consideration by the umbrella groups (SEEed, Think Global – the Developmental Education Association, and the National Children’s Bureau) which together represent over 500 organisations.

The principal aim of the Alliance is to provide a clear and compelling offer of support to all schools in the country, in order to help and encourage them to put sustainability at the heart of what they do. The Alliance also aims to provide a powerful, coordinated and coherent voice to Government on sustainable schools matters. The concept of an NGO-led Alliance has significant appeal for the DfE as
a tangible example of the ‘Big Society’ in action, with partners self-organising to deliver high quality support to schools. The Alliance is set to launch with ministerial support in March 2011.

In December the DfE posted the following message on its web site to clarify its position on sustainable development and sustainable schools:

The Government is fully committed to sustainable development and the importance of preparing young people for the future. Our approach to reform is based on the belief that schools perform better when they take responsibility for their own improvement. We want schools to make their own judgements on how sustainable development should be reflected in their ethos, day-to-day operations and through education for sustainable development. Those judgements should be based on sound knowledge and local needs.

Over the next few years, the DfE would like to see schools value sustainable development for the benefits it brings, even when not driven centrally. It would also like to see an effective platform built for cooperation on sustainable schools through regular dialogue with the Alliance and other stakeholders.

The DfE also intends to promote the needs of children and young people across government in areas of policy where sustainable development has an important contribution to make. Examples include public health (affected by children’s travel patterns, diet and quality of environment), the natural environment, citizenship (including the National Citizen Service), climate change and energy. Later in 2011, for example, the DfE will lead a national procurement exercise for energy services in schools which is expected to significantly cut energy use, bills, and carbon emissions from the school estate, at little or no cost to the public purse.

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Disclaimer

This article represents the views of the authors only and does not imply any particular policy positions of the Department for Education or any other body.
Annex A: Timeline for Sustainable Development at the UK Department for Education (DfE)

1998-2003: Sustainable Development Education Panel sponsored by the UK Department of Environment (with major NGOs and local govt) to explore role of Government in supporting ESD. Makes large number of detailed recommendations to DfE, many of which are ignored.

2000: UK Sustainable Development Commission founded under chairmanship of Jonathon Porritt, CBE.


2004: SDC asked by Charles Clarke to advise on embedding sustainable development in all aspects of DfE policy, from early years to higher education and skills, and assist with implementation of Sustainable Development Action Plan.

2005: Second (follow up) EAC enquiry also damning, but largely ignored by new Secretary of State Ruth Kelly. Political atmosphere for ESD difficult, but SDC advisor begins reframing of ESD as an educational and children’s priority that resonates with Every Child Matters, the Government’s emerging outcomes policy framework for children.

2005: UK Sustainable Development Strategy (Securing the Future) launched by Prime Minister Tony Blair; includes focus on education and skills policy, and a requirement for all departments to prepare Sustainable Development Action Plans (SDAP).


2005: Second (follow up) EAC enquiry also damning, but largely ignored by new Secretary of State Ruth Kelly. Political atmosphere for ESD difficult, but SDC advisor begins reframing of ESD as an educational and children’s priority that resonates with Every Child Matters, the Government’s emerging outcomes policy framework for children.

2005: DfE establish Sustainable Development Unit led by an experienced official.

2007: DfE establish a national award for top sustainable school through the Teaching Awards Trust.

2007: SDC publish Every Child’s Future Matters, hard-hitting study of how the environment affects child wellbeing, and further adviser embedded in children and families directorate to support policy on child health and wellbeing.

2008: DfE publish Brighter Futures, Greener Lives, its third Sustainable Development Action Plan, focusing on schools, children and families, and young people.
2008: *Play Strategy* launched with strong focus on environmental dimension of child wellbeing, particularly independent mobility and quality of streets/place.

2008: SDC publish *Carbon Emissions in Schools: Where they arise and how to reduce them* providing scenarios and policy options for DfE to both 2020 and 2050.

2008: DfE supports publication of *Teach Your Granny to Text* from the charity ‘We Are What We Do’, capturing ideas from hundreds of children on how to make the world a better place.

2008: DfE’s *Young Activists for Sustainable Development* programme launched, with four civil society partners (We Are What We Do, Groundwork, Envision and National Children’s Bureau), to enable young people to take action on local and global sustainability issues.

2008: The UK National Commission for Unesco publishes *ESD in the UK in 2008: A Survey of Action*, identifying baseline data, areas for further research and possible UK ESD indicators. Publication marks the mid point of the UN Decade of ESD.

2009: DfE and SDC jointly shortlisted for a *Civil Service Award* for leadership of sustainability in the school system.

2009: DfE organises UK delegation to the Unesco World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Bonn.

2009: DfE facilitate *Children’s Statement on Climate Change* as an input to Copenhagen talks, based on contributions from over 1000 children in England.

2009: The UK National Commission for Unesco reconstitutes its ESD committees to form a small policy-focused *Co-ordinating* Group, and a larger stakeholder Forum.


2010: DfE publish *Evidence of impact of Sustainable schools* compiled by the Centre for Research in Education and the Environment, University of Bath, detailing positive effects on children’s achievement, motivation and wellbeing.

2010: *Climate Change and Schools*, DfE’s carbon management strategy for schools in England is published with ambitious targets.

2010: New Prime Minister David Cameron voices commitment to make his administration “the greenest Government ever”, but departments as yet unclear what this means for policy.

2010: In response to ‘Big Society’ push in UK politics, DfE seeks to shift responsibility for promoting *Sustainable Schools* to consortium of civil society groups led by Development Education Association (DEA, National Children’s Bureau (NCB) and Sustainability and Environmental Education (SEEd).)

2010: DfE shortlisted again for a *Civil Service Award* for the Young Activists programme.

2010: DfE Sustainable Development Unit relocated under the umbrella of the central Policy Impact Division, with an objective to mainstream sustainability in policy development and impact assessment across the Department. This is a good location from which to influence education policy at a strategic level.

2010: The UK National Commission for Unesco publishes *Education for Sustainable Development in the UK in 2010*, as part of its ongoing work in identifying, reporting and making progress towards meeting the goals of the UN Decade of ESD.

2010: DfE publishes the Coalition Government’s position on sustainable development and sustainable schools on its web site.

2011: Sustainable Schools Alliance (led by SEEd, Think Global and the National Children’s Bureau) to be launched in late March.

Citation: