



# Sustainable Schools Consultation

by Dr Jake Reynolds

**T**he Department for Education and Skills has reaffirmed its commitment to sustainable development by publishing a two-year action plan to achieve outcomes to underpin a sustainable society.

Schools are a key strand of this action plan, and in May the department will launch a consultation with schools and their stakeholders on how we can work together to turn issues like climate change, global poverty and social cohesion into engaging learning opportunities for pupils – and a focus for action among the whole school community.

Sustainable development is a lot more than recycling bottles or giving to charity. It's about finding ways to improve people's quality of life without damaging the environment or storing up problems for the future, or transferring them to other parts of the world.

Schools are important to this agenda because they have a special role to play in securing the future for young people: they can help young people be part of the solution to the world's big challenges, rather than part of the problem.

They're important too because they have the potential to be the hearts of their communities – demonstrating care for pupils, their environment and their futures in a way that will inspire parents and carers, businesses and others to take similar action.

*Sustainable development is a lot more than recycling bottles or giving to charity.*

Many schools are already some way down the path to sustainable development – even if they're not calling it that. For example, many schools are working to improve

the food they offer, encouraging healthy ways to travel to school, and looking at how they can use energy and water more efficiently.

In developing this consultation, we've tried to find a way for schools to draw together all of these activities, link them to other agendas, and highlight the opportunities for school improvement. For example, core to Every Child Matters is the principle that every child should have the opportunity to positively shape society, and their

own future. By building sustainable development into all areas of school life (their “curriculum, campus and community”) schools can help children grasp that opportunity.

And it’s not just about ‘saving the planet’, although this is undoubtedly an important driver for many people. Sustainable development is an issue of strategic school improvement. The case studies in the consultation show that it contributes to achievement-raising, behaviour improvement and cost savings, as well as providing a means to engage staff, parents and the wider community in the life of the school. As St Matthew’s headteacher Joe McGuinness said, “I didn’t know I was doing sustainable development until somebody told me. I was simply looking for ideas that would address the needs of my pupils.”

We recognise that transformations like those at St Matthew’s don’t happen overnight, and that schools and their stakeholders will need support to develop as models of sustainable development. So this consultation will be followed by a year of action from the DfES, during which we’ll develop and launch a variety of tools that will help schools and their stakeholders translate their enthusiasm and growing knowledge into action.

Some of the tools that will be launched throughout the year include:

- **The framework** – a clear statement of expectations across eight sustainability themes, with pointers on how to achieve them
- **The sustainable schools website** – a place for schools and those working with them to share best practice, with links to organisations and networks that can provide support across all eight themes
- **A self-evaluation tool** – for schools to assess their level of progress and next steps across each of the eight themes, structured around Ofsted’s self-evaluation headings

And of course we’ll make sure our work is joined-up with other Government departments and initiatives – like funding for microgeneration schemes in schools, and the huge investment being made by Government in school buildings between now and 2020.

The broad and inclusive nature of sustainable development means the consultation will be of interest to a lot of different audiences. We’re seeking responses from schools and all those who work with them, including:

- School leaders, including headteachers, governors, parent associations
- Wider workforce, including bursars and caretakers/site managers
- Teachers/Teaching assistants
- Subject associations, unions, peak bodies representing school staff
- Local authorities
- Young people, including school councils
- Regional bodies like Government Offices, RDAs and Regional Assemblies
- Non-profit sector – many of who already work with schools in this area
- Business organisations and associations, large and small
- Central government and its agencies







The consultation runs from May 15th to 1st September and the full documents and response forms are available at:  
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/>

The consultation document asks schools to consider how they can make their curriculum, campus and community more sustainable across a framework comprising eight key areas – or doorways. Each of the doorways is outlined on the next two pages, along with an example of a school tackling this area.

### Doorway 1: Food and drink

An unhealthy diet contributes to obesity and poor pupil concentration. Healthy, ethically sourced food can reverse these effects while protecting the environment and supporting local producers and suppliers.

Pupil behaviour, self-esteem and diet have improved at **St Matthew's Primary School in Belfast** through a fruit cooperative scheme that sources from local traders. Children buy fruit at the school each morning, and profits from sales are put into pupil savings accounts managed by a local credit union. The profits have also allowed the school to buy water units that provide chilled, filtered water to pupils throughout the day, and each child has a reusable plastic bottle to carry their water.



### Doorway 2: Energy and water

Rising demand for energy and water is storing up problems for future generations. Energy and water conservation can tackle this problem while saving schools money.

**Cassop Primary School in County Durham** has reduced its energy bills by a third thanks to the wind turbine installed in the school grounds in partnership with Durham County Council and Northern Electric. Low-energy light bulbs are in use throughout the school and elected pupils, known as Energy Monitors, graph and analyse the school's energy and water use to identify opportunities for reduction.

### Doorway 3: Travel and traffic

Rising vehicle use adds to congestion, road accidents and pollution. Car-sharing and public transportation help ease these concerns, while walking and cycling also boost fitness and well-being.

At **Kesgrave High School in Suffolk**, a clever mix of travel initiatives makes it easy for pupils to reduce their environmental impact, and to keep fit. Safer routes to school, a separate entrance for walkers and cyclists and designated cycle parking mean that 75% of its pupils choose to walk or cycle to school.

### Doorway 4: Purchasing and waste

Waste, and the throw-away culture that encourages it, can be addressed through sustainable consumption. Schools can reduce costs and support markets for ethical goods and services at the same time.

Pupils at **Culcheth High School in Cheshire** have become 'Winners or Binners' in a waste-minimisation education programme led by Groundwork. Pupils visit a landfill site, incinerating plant or recycling centre to understand the volume of waste produced in their local area and its impact on the environment. What they learn is taken back to core subjects - in literacy, pupils write reports on their trips to the sites, or instructions on how to recycle. In design and technology they make recycled paper for posters that raise awareness of recycling and waste reduction around the school.

### Doorway 5: Buildings and grounds

Good design of school buildings and grounds can translate into improved staff morale, pupil behaviour and achievement, as well as opportunities for food growing and nature conservation.

The Eco Working Party at **Thomas Tallis School in London** has had a profound impact on the school environment. When an audit identified the need to improve the school concourse, pupils created a cottage

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garden with flowers and herbs, with the herbs being used in recipes during food technology. The pupils are now contributing to a travel plan that will allow the school to expand its facilities for walking and cycling, encouraging healthier travel choices and providing a further avenue for exploring environmental issues across the curriculum.

### Doorway 6: Inclusion and participation

Schools can promote a sense of community by providing an inclusive, welcoming atmosphere that values everyone's participation and contribution, and challenges prejudice and injustice in all its forms.

Pupils at **Glebe School in Kent** are finding motivation and encouragement grows in their schoolgrounds. The pupils, who have moderate learning difficulties, are putting the geography curriculum to practical use by tending an organic fruit, vegetable and flower garden and learning about organic production and food miles. Pupils sell their produce at the local farmers' market, building bridges with farmers, stallholders and market staff, gaining valuable skills in organising and running the stall - and the satisfaction of serving returning customers.

### Doorway 7: Local well-being

With their central locations and extensive facilities, schools can act as hubs of learning and change in their local communities, contributing to the environment and quality of life while strengthening key relationships.

Sustainable development principles have moved from the classroom to the community at **Bowbridge Primary School in Nottinghamshire**. Extended services like a parenting class which focuses on cooking draw the link between healthy eating and children's achievement, and connect with what children learn about food in school.



### Doorway 8: Global dimension

Growing interdependence between countries changes the way we view the world, including our own culture. Schools can respond by developing a responsible, international outlook among young people, based upon an appreciation of the impact of their personal values, choices and behaviours on global challenges.

Placing a global dimension in the curriculum at **Alderbrook Primary School in London** has made learning more interesting and relevant, and has helped pupils appreciate each others' cultural backgrounds. By linking with a school in Ghana, pupils have developed understanding of the problems faced by farmers in developing countries, and appreciation of the value of fair trade. While Alderbrook pupils grow carrots, beans and tomatoes, their peers in Ghana grow plantain, cassava and gourds, sparking a discussion about seasonal changes, climate and vegetation in different parts of the world. ■

### Author Notes

Jake joined the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) in January 2005 as its Senior Advisor, Education, based inside the Department for Education and Skills. Working with DfES teams as well as Defra and other stakeholders, his role is to accelerate and deepen the Department's commitment to sustainable development as a policy goal, and as an operational imperative. Before joining the SDC Jake was the Deputy Director of the University of Cambridge Programme for Industry, the University's centre for leadership and change for sustainable development. There he led the development of Chronos, an e-learning tutorial on the business case for sustainable development and was the author of two research studies on learning and change in organisations. Prior to CPI, Jake led the capacity building efforts of the UN's World Conservation Monitoring Centre, working on projects in Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia. He has a DPhil from the University of Oxford.

### Photographs

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