

## Supporting teachers, supporting learning ~ thinking critically about Sustainable Development

This document reflects key messages from teachers in the West Midlands who responded to the challenge:

*How do we build learners' capacity to think critically about sustainable development issues?*

“ It's been a bit of a Bill Scott journey ... my teaching has changed, it is no longer primarily What They Need To Know: it is what will they discover, what will they question, what will this look like at the end of this week, this term, this year ”

Lezli Howarth, Chandos Primary School

“ It was the real difficulties of maintaining this [school partnership] that got us into real ESD2, where we critiqued the purposes of links, fair trade, approaches to learning about places, food growing, co-operatives and so on ”

Martin Crabbe, Glebe Special School

### Taking young people seriously

#### Challenges

How can we turn frightening facts and figures into exciting learning opportunities?

How does a school community demonstrate sustainable development in relation to young people?

Who owns the learning in schools?

### Giving ourselves permission

#### Challenges

What is the relationship between content and purpose in the curriculum?

How can we enable creative curriculum development?

### Making it real

#### Challenges

What are the real sustainable development issues facing the world, the country, the local community, the school, and young people?

What do young people engage with in school (and how), in order to develop the knowledge and skills to engage with the wider world?

Who sets the learning agenda?

### Teachers letting go

#### Challenges

How can we support and encourage responsible risk taking?

What is the role of school leadership in achieving this?

## Taking young people seriously

Our discussions recognised the need to put young people at the centre of the debate about the sustainable school and to take their needs seriously as learners and active participants. We recognised that it would be easy for young people to be overwhelmed with doom and gloom when considering issues of sustainability. However, research shows us that engaging in discussions within school generates a more positive and empowered outlook, as shown by this quote from the Primary Review Community Soundings report: "... children who were most confident that climate change might not overwhelm them were those whose schools had decided to replace unfocussed fear by factual information and practical strategies for energy reduction and sustainability."

We recognised that sustainable development is a lived experience where theory complements action and vice versa. A school where the need to reduce energy is highlighted in lessons, but the computers are left on all night sends mixed messages to young people. But we felt that this is not a question of teaching the 'right' answers; rather it is about supporting young people's own developing understanding so that when they need to make decisions about as yet unknown situations they will have the skills, knowledge and confidence to do so. Taking care of young people means exposing them to difficult ideas and valuing them as trusted partners in a shared learning journey.

### Challenges

- How can we turn frightening facts and figures into exciting learning opportunities?
- How does a school community demonstrate sustainable development in relation to young people?
- Who owns the learning in schools?

## Giving ourselves permission

### ~ empowered curriculum development

As teachers, we are the principal makers of the curriculum. This is our starting point when we ask 'how do we build learners' capacity to think critically about sustainable development issues?' Questions about content, organisation and methodology are influenced by what we see as the purpose of the curriculum. They form the background to our thinking, as we consider how best to meet the present and future needs of the young people we work with.

If we are serious about addressing the central challenge of this project, it is not a question of **if** we innovate, but **how** we innovate. The role of school leaders is crucial in creating the right environment to empower staff, to take educational risks, to understand and respond to challenges in order to design a curriculum fit for purpose. Subject specialists can identify how to make the most of the strengths of individual subjects in terms of approach and content. The process for, and extent of, curriculum development needs to be negotiated within individual schools: building on strengths, addressing weaknesses and responding to particular circumstances. This may mean we need to rethink our role as teachers, and challenge preconceptions about the relationship between subjects, so that we are better placed to address the central purpose of the curriculum.

### Challenges

- What is the relationship between content and purpose in the curriculum?
- How can we enable creative curriculum development?

*"Before I thought it wouldn't make a difference if for example I turned off lights, but if children in India are doing the same and children all round the world, then together we really can make a difference!"*

Year 6 child, Rookery Primary School

## Making it real

### ~ keeping it relevant

At the heart of our discussions was an understanding that sustainable development is not a theoretical topic which can be taught by assimilating facts, or 'delivered' through a series of pre-determined behaviour-change activities. Rather, we perceive it as a process of dynamic engagement with live issues, the relevance of which changes over time, with new knowledge influencing understanding. The key concepts from the Holland report (see last page) encompass big ideas, which our young people will have the responsibility for addressing in the future. Opportunities to engage in real contexts and make relevant decisions will lead to increased motivation and curiosity, and deeper, more meaningful learning experiences. This will mean that outcomes which seem unquestionably 'right', such as recycling or fair trade purchasing, are questioned; but ultimately this is a more rigorous and valuable approach to learning.

However, the need to address real issues is not an excuse to restrict learning in terms of subject knowledge or skills. We need to anticipate young people's needs in order that they have the capabilities to address sustainable development issues in the future. Our schools provide a safe, structured learning environment to find out about the world, explore values and develop knowledge, so that they are prepared for the challenges ahead.

### Challenges

- What are the real sustainable development issues facing the world, the country, the local community, the school and young people?
- What do young people engage with in school (and how), in order to develop the knowledge and skills to engage with the wider world?
- Who sets the learning agenda?

*“ Practising sustainability is a great way to teach it ”*

*Every Child's Future:  
leading the way. NCSL (2009)*

## Teachers letting go

Sustainable development is controversial, which can be uncomfortable, and requires us to rethink traditional roles of teachers and learners. This may include allowing learners to decide priorities, and rethinking the organisation of learning. This in turn requires careful planning, a sensitive approach and a willingness to take risks.

Uncertainty and risk were recurring themes in the projects and at the conference. We were challenged to think about what they mean in an educational context. From our discussions we suggest the following as starting points:

- nobody has all of the answers – not even teachers!
- sometimes the teachers will be the learners;
- taking well thought through educational risks is scary - but valuable;
- what we know now isn't necessarily what we will need to know in the future;
- let learners' interests lead the learning;
- question ourselves and our colleagues;
- develop knowledge-getting skills;
- value all learning experiences – not just those that happen in the classroom;
- help young people explore controversial issues in an open-minded way;
- use a range of different approaches to teaching and learning;
- trust colleagues to do things differently, and different things.

There is value in recognising **all** of the above - and coming up with more!

### Challenges

- How can we support and encourage responsible risk taking?
- What is the role of school leadership in achieving this?

*“ The idea of a 'thinking journey'... a drip feed of very deep learning for children, and adults ”*

*Elaine Huntington, headteacher  
at Honeybourne First School*

## School project overview

The projects which fed into the conference and stimulated a lot of the discussion were:

**Less is more? project** – exploring engagement with consumerism, quality of life and sustainable development [led by Worcestershire ESD officers];

**Thinking through making** – exploring sustainable development by using a creative arts process to make things with value and meaning [led by Creative~States, Birmingham];

**Pupil voice at the climate change summit** – enabling young people in Birmingham to talk and share ideas about the Copenhagen climate summit [led by Birmingham City Council and Centre of the Earth];

**The Growing Schools Garden** – using school gardens to explore deeper issues about how young people engage with the environment [led by OLS/Birmingham Botanical Gardens];

**Chandos Primary School** – embedding integrated work on global dimensions and sustainable development at a whole school level [led by Chandos Primary School, Birmingham];

**Think Food and Farming** – exploring, with learners in a special school, the impact of choices made in the UK on Windward Island banana growers [led by Glebe Special School, Kent and Farming and Countryside Education];

**Preparing teachers for the challenge** – considering how initial teacher educators can address sustainable development issues and the implications for pedagogy [led by the University of Worcester];

**Our Beautiful Earth** – identifying different perspectives and common issues, when using a school link with India to explore water, food and climate change [led by Rookery Primary School, Birmingham];

**Science, technology ... and joined up curriculum** – exploring how collaboration between two KS3 subjects could prepare learners to address sustainability challenges [led by Harris School, Warwickshire; Cockshut Hill Technology College, Birmingham; Tenbury High School, Worcestershire].

## How do we build learners' capacity to think critically about sustainable development issues?

This was the challenge to teachers in the West Midlands from Professor Bill Scott, Professor of Education and Director of the Centre for Research in Education and the Environment at Bath University. This challenge started us on a journey that led to nine teacher group projects and a major conference. This document draws on the projects and conference discussions, and we offer it as a stimulus to teachers and school leaders when reflecting on their own practice.

We hope that thinking about these ideas will help create a better understanding of how Education for Sustainable Development [ESD] can contribute to young people's learning, to the idea of a sustainable school, and to sustainable development more broadly.

Strong threads running through the discussions were around individual and collective thinking, and learning journeys that take on the ideas of care, risk, trust, belief and reality. We have brought these together under four headings: *taking young people seriously; giving ourselves permission ~ empowered curriculum development; making it real ~ keeping it relevant; teachers letting go.*

The challenge draws heavily on ideas explained in a paper 'Education for sustainable development: two sides and an edge' by Bill Scott and Paul Vare. This outlined two different

approaches to Education for Sustainable Development, and called these ESD 1 and ESD 2

[www.dea.org.uk/getinvolved/thinkpieces.asp](http://www.dea.org.uk/getinvolved/thinkpieces.asp)

In the early stages, we found it useful to look at the seven key concepts first suggested by the Sustainable Development Education Panel chaired by Sir Geoffrey Holland, and to ask 'are these still useful and relevant?' We very quickly decided they were! There is more information about these concepts, and the projects which contributed to the conference, above and on the next page.

The thoughts shared here are supported by materials from the conference, information about the projects and a more substantive paper by Bill Scott on

[www.tidegloballearning.net](http://www.tidegloballearning.net)

**This project was supported by a steering group**

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**ESD1**  
is about promoting facilitating  
changes in what we do

**Learning for  
sustainable  
development**

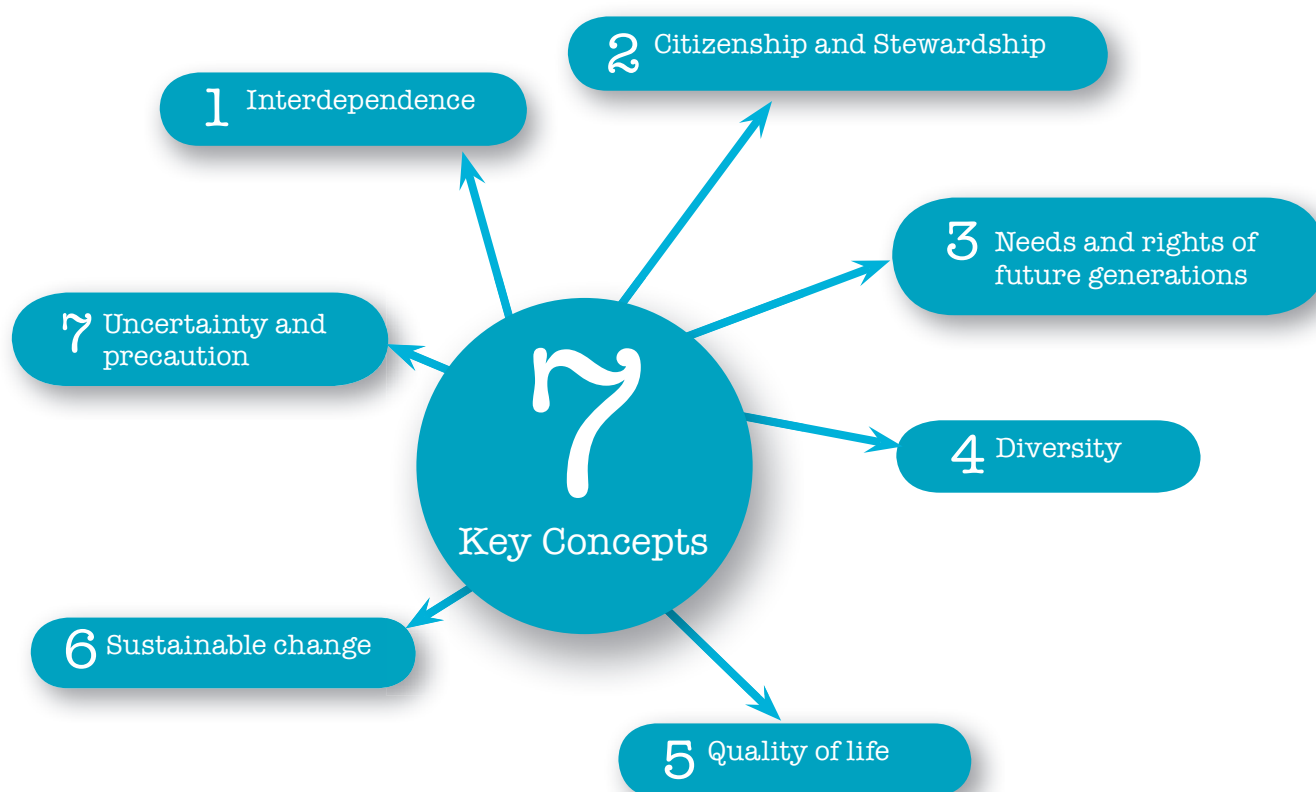


**ESD2**  
is about enabling / realising  
sustainable living

**Learning as  
sustainable  
development**

## Seven key concepts

The seven key concepts of Sustainable Development taken from the Holland Report have been valuable in supporting our thinking, and provide a useful framework for critical and creative approaches.



A copy of the full report is available on the website

The concepts complement the Sustainable Schools initiative, which uses eight doorways as a way to think about sustainability through community, curriculum and campus.

For more information on Sustainable Schools go to [www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainableschools](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainableschools)