

## Climate Change Education in Worcestershire Schools

How one local authority in England slowly built an award-winning sustainability program.

By Rupert Brakspear

Worcestershire is an English county with a population of around 560,000, where a mix of urban and rural, towns, villages, farms, woods, meadows and patches of heath lie on the south-western edge of Birmingham, one of our major conurbations. Cut through by a major motorway and the rivers Severn and Avon, the mountains of Wales can be seen from the hills in the west of the county. Like many other regions, the county has seen major job losses in some areas, such as the closure of the Rover car company, and yet is also identified as having strengths around the development of new technology. Since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the County Council has developed a community leadership role to meet the challenges of sustainable development and more recently climate change. This has been extended to work with the 246 schools that it supports.

The County Council was recently awarded Beacon Status for its work on climate change in 2008-9<sup>1</sup>, a significant part of which was the work going on in schools. Receiving the award necessitated a subsequent sharing of our practices with local education authorities throughout the country. In Worcestershire, there is now a commitment to both look at mitigating the effects of climate change (through reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions associated with both county council operations and the county as a whole), and adapting to the impacts of climate change that are with us now and as they develop in the future. Increased frequency and intensity of flooding has become one major issue in the county over the past ten years.

### Background

At the outset it must be emphasised that the progress described here is based on over fifteen years of commitment. There has been considerable ebb and flow of successes and significant challenges over this period and this continues to be the case today. We have found that in taking small steps to begin with, we have ultimately built a connected, strategic and robust support structure. This has generated momentum and critical mass to the point where it is increasingly the schools themselves that are sharing their enthusiasm for this agenda with each other. It is their enthusiasm that is largely responsible for the successes I outline below.

In the late 1990's, the County Council was one of the first of the 150 local authorities in England - each linked to a local education authority - to employ an *Education for Sustainable Development Officer*. Over the past 6 years, the work of this officer as part of a small dedicated team of three within the council, has become increasingly focused around a *Learning for Sustainability (LFS) Strategy*<sup>2</sup> which is linked to the County Climate Change Strategy, Biodiversity Action Plan and other key documents. The strategy was developed with partners on a LFS Forum that meets regularly and represents those involved in supporting schools in becoming more sustainable. Partners on the Forum come from within the County Council, the 6 District Councils and from voluntary organisations such as the local Wildlife Trust.

The Strategy's aims, targets and objectives focus on:

- embedding sustainability as part of a whole school organisation approach
- curriculum development
- building confidence through active participation and involvement and the development of the learner's voice
- key processes: reviewing, action planning, monitoring & evaluating, sharing etc.
- placing schools, nurseries, youth clubs, colleges and the University at the heart of the developing sustainable communities
- outdoor learning

Climate change is a key theme within the LfS strategy. In this article, I will illustrate how we have developed the above major strands with climate change as a core strand over the past 5 years. Whilst the scope of the strategy is broad, the bulk of the work undertaken by the Learning for Sustainability team is with schools, and this bias is also reflected in the case studies below.

It is important to emphasise two underlying priorities for us:

- our focus on outdoor learning, particularly in highlighting opportunities for children and young people to explore the places they live and the ecology and principle habitats that surround them. Many on the Forum believe that without rich and diverse learning experiences and close contact with the natural world, it is harder for children to develop the sense of excitement, urgency and care that underlies much of our sustainability work in schools. Much of this work is led through our flagship environmental learning facility ~ Bishops Wood Centre ([www.bishopswoodcentre.org.uk](http://www.bishopswoodcentre.org.uk)).
- there is a need to work towards building a balance in learning for sustainability, around:
  - a. critical thinking, building knowledge and understanding, recognising and exploring thoughts, ideas and feelings and
  - b. the opportunities to be creative and active in response! There are plenty of programmes and educational approaches that emphasise either the critical thinking or the practical approaches, but we have always emphasised a coordinated, joined up approach.

### **Whole school approaches and developing learner's voices**

In the 1990's the County Council decided to support schools in their work to become Eco Schools, following the international, UN Environment Programme endorsed award scheme<sup>3</sup>. The scheme has many strengths, primarily in placing groups of children and young people as active agents for change, working with other key stakeholders through a well established 7 step programme that links to the key processes highlighted above (see [www.eco-schools.org.uk](http://www.eco-schools.org.uk)).

By July 2010, 65 of the county's 246 schools had been awarded the coveted Eco Schools Green Flag Award, the program's highest award, making Worcestershire the county with the highest percentage of schools with Green Flags in England. The award, re-assessed every two years is a key indicator in our strategy, demonstrating evidence of progress towards schools embedding approaches to sustainability around a number, but not all of the key elements we prioritise in the strategy. (Some elements require different indicators.) Of particular significance is the role that Eco Schools can play in developing

learner's voices and developing the practical roles children and young people play in making a difference to the way in which the school runs (reducing energy use, creating vegetable plots and conservation areas, minimising waste etc.). A further 30% of schools are approaching Green Flag status having already achieved their Silver Award.

However, we identified early on the very real danger that Eco Schools teams could be marginalized and sustainability could become peripheral within schools. As a response the LfS team worked closely with WWF UK, to pilot *Pathways*<sup>4</sup> training for whole school staff teams, with the aim of placing sustainability as part of whole school development thinking and planning. This work subsequently linked well with the work highlighted through the Labour Government's Department for Children Schools and Families *Sustainable Schools Framework*<sup>5</sup>. Alongside this strategic training and development work, the team dovetailed the continued support for Eco Schools with curriculum development and practical projects. These reflected our sense of urgency that schools be encouraged to include a focus on energy and climate change - which were not particularly popular topics 4-5 years ago - with an emphasis on exploring both the local and global contexts, and the practical responses to the challenges and issues identified.

To support schools, a range of training courses for teachers have been developed and run in individual schools and at Bishops Wood Centre. Networking meetings are held across the county's 6 districts to encourage a sharing of practice. Annual conferences for teachers and senior leadership teams have highlighted challenges and opportunities, and children and young people have been supported through visits to school, training, conferences and festivals. To keep everyone up to date with what is current, a regular newsletter and website ([www.worcestershire.gov.uk/learningforsustainability](http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/learningforsustainability)) have been developed.

### **Case Study: Switch it Off and the Energy Award Project (2007-8)**

In 2006, Worcestershire County Council decided to work with two other local authorities on a Switch it Off project, to encourage people across businesses, organisations and households to switch off lights and appliances. The intention was to see what a difference we can all make by heightening our awareness and rigour in the use of electricity<sup>6</sup> (Our impact was to be measured over a two hour period on a chosen Friday evening.) Schools were invited to participate over a fortnight of activity, with an Undercover Week of "detective" work for Eco Schools teams, to precede a Switch Off week. From the outset, this was pitched as a launch for a longer, more sustained focus on energy reduction that was linked to Eco Schools work.

To extend this project, the County Council created in 2008-9 a specific Energy Award<sup>7</sup> for schools that could demonstrate links to their curriculum and long term savings, comparing a 6 month period with the same period from the previous year. The Energy Award project enabled a small number of schools to demonstrate that a 10-20% savings in electricity use can be made through learner led action alone<sup>7</sup>. The project and the broader Switch it Off focus has been very successful in establishing a widespread culture of paying closer attention to energy as the colder, darker winter months set in. This is linked to a wide range of curriculum work, such as data collection, evaluation and dissemination, (maths and ICT), along with work in science, geography and literacy. It is worth noting that Worcestershire *Display Energy Certificates* (required by European legislation) based on formal investigation and reporting by external assessors, record that on average schools in the county score a C (out of an A to G rating system),

a significant level or two above the national average. This no doubt reflects some of the major systems that our Property Services teams have put in place, but it also reflects the growing interest and culture of energy saving in schools.

Last year a Climate Change Poetry and Letter Writing project was linked to the Switch it Off campaign in the lead up to the Copenhagen Climate Change summit. This gave teachers the opportunity to raise the issues with children, helping them both confront some of their thoughts and feelings and to express these creatively through the medium of poetry. (See a powerful example written by Hannah Robinson, a 12 year old at a Pershore Middle School in a nearby sidebar). This then led to a series of more formal letters to elected representatives so that the feelings and ideas were channelled appropriately. The power of many of the poems<sup>8</sup> and letters demonstrated to decision makers how incredibly important many children feel immediate, proactive thinking, policy and action on climate change is.

**(Sidebar)**

**Unknown**

By Hannah Robinson (12 years old)

Pene Lafale  
A name  
From the other side of the world  
You don't know me  
I don't know you  
But because of YOU  
I will have to leave this place I call  
Home  
Another land  
Unknown  
I have no concept of your  
Electricity  
Clean water from this thing you call a  
Tap  
Sprays to make you smell nice  
Rooms to make your food cold  
Cars that make you lazy and  
Fat  
Choked  
The waters  
Are  
Rising  
The boat is  
Coming  
Goodbye

**(end of sidebar)**

## Curriculum Development

Under our LfS Strategy, every academic year brings a specific Curriculum Development project that schools can sign up for. In 2005-6, the *Worcestershire Parish Mapping Project*<sup>9</sup> enabled four schools to explore the local fields, woods and nature reserves in order to better connect people, place and wildlife. Funded through an Arts Council grant, the project placed artists with each of the schools, working with the children and local families towards the creation of "parish maps" in a variety of forms. The children made connections to climate change in ways that teachers hadn't expected, as they noted the observations of older community members of the special places that had been destroyed, and species that had vanished or become uncommon.

### Case Study: *Less is More?* Project (2007-8)

We became increasingly aware that the current economic growth model is at variance with future sustainability and the need to rapidly reduce emissions of carbon dioxide<sup>10</sup>. As a result we developed a *Less is More?* project<sup>11</sup> which brought together over twenty teachers from primary and secondary schools to support children's thinking about consumerism, quality of life and sustainable development. The project was also linked to a major challenge from the University of Bath's William Scott<sup>12</sup> about how we enable learners to engage critically with sustainability issues<sup>13</sup>.

Out of *Less is More?* came projects, such as:

- **Change Week:** a week long, off timetable programme linking two first schools (4-8 year olds), a middle school (8-13 year olds) and a high school (13-18) to explore the concept of change from a variety of perspectives. Climate change was a major underlying theme. The idea for the project came from the inspired work of Sara Date, the Eco Schools coordinator at Meadows First School, and was coupled with that of Katrice Horsley, a story teller. Katrice worked with the youngest children to develop a story they then shared with older children who made shadow puppets and performed the story to the whole school community. The story they developed was a tale of environmental degradation followed by collective awakening.

In addition, there was a very broad programme of week-long, linked activities in all 4 schools, such as:

- Research projects
- Arts projects
- Drama in education linked to probable/possible future thinking<sup>14</sup>
- Letter writing (a letter was received back from Downing Street!)
- Vegetable and wildlife gardening

The impact on both children and teachers was huge. For many teachers who had been sceptical of the power of this theme to engage learners, it transformed their thinking. In one school this led to sustainability becoming a regular feature of their planning and delivery through a new "creative curriculum".

- **The King and the Draughty Castle:** Another school, Honeybourne First School, worked from a piece of drama in education based on a story about a king and a draughty castle<sup>11</sup>. The story acted as the launch for a week long Design and Technology project, to explore the ideas of energy conservation in school and at

home that developed into a whole term's work. The project led to so much heightened awareness around sustainability in the school that the Head teacher Elaine Huntington noted *"children were driving the agenda, raising the ideas about what they wanted to know and finding out what they could do..... To start with, children are shocked when teachers don't have the answers to these things, but after a while they have found it invigorating when they have to find the answers for themselves."*

We know that despite the range and depth of the work we currently support, we are just scratching the surface. Much of our strategic work remains on track with increasing numbers of schools involved and receiving awards. Ever increasing numbers of children and young people are actively responding to the challenge of climate change through their Eco Schools work, through their curriculum, through work on their school campuses and increasingly with their local community. Indeed some schools in the county already link their work on sustainability with schools and communities from Africa and other continents, establishing partnerships around common themes raised through learning for sustainability. To give a sense of numbers of children involved, most Eco Schools Committees (or Action Teams) are made up of about 10 children. With 65 Green Flag, 62 Bronze and 72 Silver Award Schools, we now have around 2000 children and young people acting in a leadership role around these themes. Many thousands more actively participate through curriculum and related projects.

However, when we look around us, we still see the same issues and challenges we all face in a society based on free market capitalism and ever increasing consumption. Our work is clearly only part of a much bigger picture. The need remains for joined up thinking and working across government, business and the wider community. We can see that our work and similar work across the country and beyond, can and does support change within schools and the local community. It can help to create an ever growing surge of young adults who take these issues seriously, either through their future work, day to day choices or political interest and allegiance. It could also have the potential to create the critical mass that is necessary to effect the huge changes that our society needs to consider - and soon.

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#### **References:**

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2. See [www.worcestershire.gov.uk/learningforsustainability](http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/learningforsustainability)
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