

Report



**Sustainable**  
Development Commission

**Report on consultative workshops  
by John Huckle**

# **A UK indicator of education for sustainable development**

**March 2006**

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## **Report on consultative workshops by John Huckle, March 2006**

The purpose of these workshops was to consult members of the education community on their preferred approach to the indicator announced in the UK strategy for sustainable development, *Securing the Future* (March, 2005). Prior to the workshops participants received a copy of John Huckle's consultative paper which set out six possible approaches.

The workshops, each lasting two and a half hours, were held at the DfES on February 24<sup>th</sup> 2006. They were facilitated by Ann Finlayson who used a sequence of activities agreed in advance by Jake Reynolds, John Huckle and herself. In each workshop, participants signalled their expectations; suggested what they could offer to the discussion; expressed their own preferences by means of a card ranking exercise; discussed one of their preferred approaches in a small group; evaluated their preferred approaches using criteria suggested in the consultative paper; and suggested next steps in the process of recommending an indicator to Defra/DfES.

### **Participants**

#### **Workshop 1**

Andy Johnston, Forum for the Future; Ben Balin, Tide; Ben Hren, WWF-UK; Chris Hirst, Brill Primary School; Connie Wessels, Girlguiding UK; Janice Lawson, DfES; John Westaway, QCA; June Thomas, Stow College; Kate Perkins, Defra; Leszek Iwaskow, Ofsted; Maggie Rodgers, Goldsmiths College; Martin Crabbe, Glebe School Bromley; Morag Watson, WWF-Scotland; Paul Vare, Learning South West; Sally Inman, London South Bank

University; Sarah Taylor, DfES; Steve Leman, DfES; Steve McElroy, St Francis of Assisi Academy Liverpool.

#### **Workshop 2**

Barry Grieg, Scottish Executive; Bronwen Jones, Defra; Carl Thurston, Eco-Schools; Chris Gayford, Reading University; Chris Southwood, Groundwork UK; Craig Johnson, Y&H ESD Forum; Gill Hickman, Ringwood School; John Rhymer, Worcestershire CC; Liz Wallace, Interboard ESD Group NI; Michael Bonnett, Cambridge University; Mike Tones, Durham CC; Stephen Sterling, Plymouth University; Wendy Miller, GEES Subject Centre, Higher Education Academy; Cathryn Gathercole, East Midlands Network for Global Perspectives in Schools.

Written comments were received from David Lambert, Geographical Association, and Bill Scott, University of Bath, who were invited but unable to attend.

### **Expectations**

Participants expected to:

- Clarify what was meant by an(the) indicator and understand the principles on which it might be based
- Clarify whether a single indicator, complex indicator, or group of indicators was being sought
- Clarify whether the indicator would express the average or dispersion around the average
- Clarify who the indicator would be for and the assumptions that people are making in looking for indicators

- Be assured that the indicator would be a significant development and not merely 'bolt-on'
- Be assured that the indicator would link with other initiatives (work) in schools and with pupil experience
- Be assured that the indicator would be manageable, meaningful, and related to other frameworks for evaluating educational institutions
- Be assured that a variety of stakeholders such as teachers and pupils would be consulted and that ESD would be thoroughly integrated into the culture of the schools (not an add-on)
- Be assured the DfES is taking ESD seriously and would support it with time, money and curriculum development
- Play a part in devising a dynamic indicator that would stimulate good practice in ESD
- Shape the indicator towards qualitative rather than quantitative outcomes
- Shape the indicator so that the measurement process becomes an opportunity for further learning
- Shape the indicator so that it exemplifies the values that ESD seeks to promote
- Shape the indicator so that it opens up rather than closes down ESD practice

## Participants' experience

Participants had experience of ESD at different levels of education. Individuals suggested that they could assess what was likely to work in practice; that they could relate the proposed indicator to other initiatives such as healthy schools; that they had experience of developing their own indicators; that they could draw on developments in the regions and nations of the UK; that they had specialist expertise developed in such settings as the Higher Education Academy or WWF-Scotland; that they had experience of reaching disadvantaged groups and communities with ESD; and that they could link ESD with the wider agenda of school effectiveness and improvement.

## Participants' preferences

Records of the workshops show the first, second and third preferences, from amongst the six suggested approaches, of most of the thirty participants as revealed by a card ranking exercise. When aggregated these show that 29 first choice preferences and 40 second/third choice preferences were recorded.

There was overwhelming support for the action research approach and some support for the sustainable schools approach. There was a clear suspicion, or outright rejection, of any approach that sought to test prescribed knowledge, skills and values.

### Participants' preferences

	Sustainability literacy	Sustainable schools	Citizenship survey	Action research	Frame of mind	Dilemma
First choice	1	6	2	13	4	3
Second or third choice	4	10	10	10	2	4

## **Small group discussion of suggested approaches**

Individuals opted to discuss one of their preferred approaches in a small group. Having read about the approach in the consultative paper, they were asked to further consider its advantages and disadvantages. Key points emerging from the group discussions in the two workshops are listed below.

### ***Sustainability literacy***

The approach is broad in scope and possible to apply across primary, secondary and tertiary stages. Definition and approaches fairly open – allows for a variety of ‘correct’ answers. Suggests a canon of knowledge, but could be skills based. Does it correlate with other literacies? Is that what we are trying to measure?

### ***Sustainable schools***

Consistent with the expected DfES sustainable schools framework and appropriate for all schools. Indicator would evolve as sustainable schools develop. The approach is applicable in some coherent form across all stages of education.

### ***Citizenship survey***

Value in seeing ESD as part of PSHE and citizenship education, an established space in the curriculum and policy makers/schools know what it is. The approach prompts clarification of values and teaching of key political knowledge relating to SD. Links ESD to action learning and agendas for change (empowerment). People wary of questionnaires but could measure willingness to take action.

There was however concern that the citizenship curriculum is currently overloaded and teachers would not be able to undertake this additional task.

### ***Action research***

Encourages a whole school/cross-curricular approach that links with other initiatives (eg. healthy schools, Every Child Matters) Is supported and encouraged by sustainable schools self-assessment (S3) and Ofsted inspection / moderation. Welcome emphasis on process and much scope for progression. Indicator should focus on the school rather than the individual learner. Allows school to set agenda, reach into the community, and allows learners to experience conflict resolution and sustainability in action. The approach is transferable to the non-formal sector. Measuring this approach could be complex.

### ***Frame of mind***

Value in the aspiration, getting at what learners think and feel. Encourages holism and ethical systems thinking leading to review of whole curriculum. In this respect it is qualitatively different from other approaches. Could demonstrate that action learning does bring about real change in attitudes, values and behaviour. Does the methodology match the aspiration? Consider interviews or focus groups. Has a counter-cultural flavour.

### ***Dilemma***

Goes beyond knowledge into skills and values.

## Participants' scores of preferred approaches

Approach	Number of participants scoring approach	Mean score
Sustainability literacy	3	15
Sustainable schools	8	19
Citizenship survey	6	16
Action research	19	17
Frame of mind	4	18
Dilemma	6	15

### Evaluation and scoring of approaches using suggested and other criteria

Participants were asked to score their (ideally two) most preferred approaches on the eight criteria listed on page 14 of the consultative paper (maximum possible score 24).

Other criteria suggested were:

- Good fit – does the indicator fit well with what schools are currently doing?
- Agency – does the indicator encourage learners to take action for sustainable development?

### The qualities of a desirable indicator

During the workshops, views were expressed that suggested a desirable indicator should:

- Be manageable, meaningful and related to other evaluations taking place
- Free up rather than close down practice
- Reflect the values ESD seeks to promote
- Enable learning
- Reflect institutional learning rather than individuals' learning
- Be dynamic and stimulate continuing school and staff development
- Be free of bias including 'green washing'

- Be partly authored by teachers and pupils
- Be adequately supported with time and money
- Be applicable across sectors

It is not possible to assess the level of support for each of these indicator characteristics, but it is clear that the majority of participants had considerable reservations about any indicator that could be seen to prescribe and test content (knowledge, skills and values). There is a danger of reducing ESD to 'learned correct responses' and the sample tests / surveys in the consultative paper were seen by one person to be 'almost ridiculous in their complexity'. Another reminded participants that schools do not work in isolation and it is impossible to isolate the impact of formal learning from other influences such as the media or the internet.

### Other approaches

Among the other approaches suggested are those based on focus group discussions with pupils; school development plans; students' personal development profiles, and school self assessment using S3, the sustainable school self assessment tool being developed by the DfES. John Westaway subsequently contacted Jake Reynolds with a proposal for an approach based on dilemmas or decision-making exercises, and also expressed a strong

interest in the school self assessment route.

## **Ways forward**

Participants felt that the discussion and debate during the day had been valuable and should be continued in some way. There was value in trialling / piloting approaches, perhaps with established networks of schools and teachers. SDC and DfES should continue to draw on related initiatives such as UNECE's indicator proposals, ENSI's quality criteria for ESD in schools, and ESD guidance published in Northern Ireland.

## **Recommendations**

*Securing the Future* proposed an indicator of the impact of formal learning on knowledge and awareness of sustainable development. In the consultative paper it was recommended that this be reworded to reflect the first objective of DfES action plan for sustainable development. It would then become an indicator of the extent to which learners had developed the skills, knowledge and values base to be active citizens in creating a more sustainable society.

The majority of workshop participants thought that such skills, knowledge and values could not and should not be prescribed, taught and assessed (largely due to the problematic or discursive nature of sustainable development). They expressed a strong preference for approaches (action research and sustainable schools) that emphasise process over content, learning over teaching, and allow relevant skills, knowledge and values to arise when learning about sustainable development in specific contexts.

Participants also sought to shift the focus of the indicator from learners to educational institutions. There was much interest in and support for S3, the self assessment instrument being developed by the DfES for sustainable schools, and an ESD indicator might be the percentage of schools rating themselves good or outstanding. Ofsted will be training inspectors in the use of S3 and it might moderate schools' self assessments. Similar instruments are available (or can be developed) for institutions of further and higher education.

However, a shift from content to process, and from learners to educational institutions does not resolve the issue of what knowledge, skills and values learners might reasonably be expected to acquire as a result of ESD.