A whirlwind tour of issues relating to sustainable schools

The figures

- Primary schools each spend an average £6,300 a year on energy. For secondary schools the figure is much higher, between £39,000 and £55,000. It has been estimated that the 'extended schools' programme may increase energy costs by up to 50% as a result of increased opening hours.
- The UK's schools, colleges and universities produce nearly 5 ½ million tonnes of carbon dioxide a year, 2% of the UK's carbon emissions. Schools also contribute to the production of methane (an even more powerful greenhouse gas) through the organic waste they send to landfill, for example from school lunches and fruit.
- The average primary pupil uses 7 cubic metres of water a year. The figure for secondary pupils is higher – around 11 cubic metres.
- www.walktoschool.org.uk estimates that cars taking 11 to 15 year olds to school emit 187,422 tonnes of carbon dioxide a year. If just 1 in 20 of these children walked or cycled instead, this would reduce the level by nearly 10,000 tonnes a year.

The issues

- There are nearly 28,000 schools in the UK containing more than 8 million pupils and more than ¾ million staff so the potential for using these to raise awareness of sustainable resource use is huge.
- Schools provide an ideal venue for learning about sustainable development in practice. Measures put in place at school can encourage students and their families to take action at home.
- Many schools are currently being rebuilt or refurbished under the 'Building Schools for the Future' programme. This provides an outstanding opportunity for schools to be made more sustainable.
- The purchasing power of schools is huge. According to a survey conducted by the British Educational Technology Suppliers Association, state schools in England spent nearly £1.2 billion on furniture, teaching equipment, stationery and ICT in the 2003/4 school year.
- Many of the measures required to make schools more sustainable require some investment of money. However, in addition to the environmental benefits, the higher initial costs will be more than recouped in the long run.

The politics

- Teaching about sustainable development has been statutory in science, geography, citizenship, design & technology since 1999.
- 2005 saw the publication of 'Securing the Future', the UK Government's sustainable development strategy, the objective of which was to enable all people to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life without compromising that of future generations.
- The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) launched a Sustainable Development Action Plan for Education and Skills in 2003, followed by publication of a consultation paper on Sustainable Schools in May 2006.
- Green taxes may be in the news but they are not new! Landfill Tax and the Climate Change Levy, both designed to discourage wasteful behaviour, apply just as much to schools as they do to other businesses.
- The Building Research Establishment has set criteria against which the sustainability of schools and other buildings can be judged. All new schools are now required to achieve a 'very good' rating. However some people argue that they should be expected to achieve the higher 'excellent' rating.

Action at school

- Work by Waste Watch has shown that schools can relatively easily cut their waste by 40%. In exceptional cases, cuts of as much as 80% have been made.
- Check the energy efficiency of your school. Turn off lights and computer monitors when not in use and turn down thermostats. An increasing number of schools are producing some of their own energy using wind turbines, solar cells and wood fuelled boilers.
- Remember, the lowest price does not necessarily mean the lowest cost in the long term. For example, a low energy lightbulb might cost more to start with but its lifetime cost will be much lower than using a succession of standard bulbs.
- Reduce water usage. DfES estimates that with careful water management, most schools could more than halve their water use. In a school of 600 pupils this would save around £5,000 a year.
- Improve your school grounds for both people and wildlife by planting trees, leaving areas of grass unmown and creating seating areas.
- Where possible, back up practical actions with curriculum based activities and lessons.

Action at home

- Make sure that your school communicates its good work in becoming more sustainable to parents and the wider community.
- Set homework assignments in which children investigate and take action on their waste and energy and water usage at home.
- Discourage parents from driving their children to school, for example by starting a 'walking bus' scheme. Don't forget that you need to set an example!
- Hold workshops for children and parents on how to make packed lunches healthier and with less packaging.