

Inspiring leaders to  
improve children's lives



**National College**  
for Leadership of Schools  
and Children's Services

---

**Schools and academies**

---

# Against the tide

Challenges of leading a sustainable school

**Penny Campbell**

**Resource**

# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Challenges facing school leaders as they seek to deliver sustainability</b>	<b>6</b>
Research objective	1	Visions and outcomes	6
Methodology	1	Resistance and commitment	8
Key findings	1	Achieving shared understanding, purpose and direction	11
Recommendations	2	Overcoming barriers to progress and maintaining momentum	13
<b>Against the tide: Challenges of leading a sustainable school</b>	<b>3</b>	Leadership qualities needed to overcome the challenges	17
Introduction and background	3	Conclusion	23
Research methodology	4	Recommendations	23
Key findings	5	<b>Appendix 1: Research methodology</b>	<b>24</b>
		Research brief	24
		Methodology	24
		<b>Appendix 2: Telephone interview schedule</b>	<b>25</b>
		<b>Appendix 3: List of schools</b>	<b>28</b>

# Executive summary

## Research objective

The research aim of this project was to understand and explore the challenges faced in developing sustainable schools and the leadership qualities needed to overcome these challenges.

## Methodology

The 12 primary and 6 secondary schools represented in this report were involved in the National College's Leading Sustainable Schools project from January 2008 to January 2009<sup>1</sup>. A total of 16 telephone interviews were carried out, involving 7 headteachers, 8 senior and middle leaders, 1 business manager, and 4 class teachers. Two case studies were also conducted.

## Key findings

Key findings and issues emerging from the research that informed this report are as follows:

a) **Key challenges** facing school leaders as they seek to develop sustainable schools and embed sustainable practices are:

- articulating a clear vision with clear outcomes
- overcoming resistant attitudes and gaining commitment
- achieving a shared understanding and a shared sense of purpose and direction
- overcoming barriers to progress and maintaining momentum

b) **The concept of sustainability is a developing one and school leaders' knowledge and understanding of sustainability varies.** For almost all, it includes an environmental dimension and for many, either implicitly or, less often, explicitly, it may also include a social dimension. It rarely includes an economic dimension, other than when it is perceived as having cost-cutting potential.

c) **The willingness of school leaders and others to address the sustainability agenda varies depending upon perceptions of its relative importance and whether or not it is seen as a vehicle to deliver other initiatives or just an additional burden.**

Those who make it a priority tend to feel passionately about the issues and believe that, when embedded, sustainability can lead to improvements in student engagement, attainment and achievement. They are able to see its potential for bringing together a variety of initiatives, and work with others to manage related developments through school improvement processes.

However, workload considerations prevent some from becoming involved in sustainability initiatives, and other priorities, which many in schools believe are more important, limit the time and attention they feel able to give to sustainability once they are involved.

d) **Success in addressing and maintaining sustainability depends upon a number of inter-related factors.** These include the leadership qualities of school leaders and the ethos and circumstances of schools. Success is most likely when leaders have a personal interest and commitment, attention is paid to planning for leadership succession, and sustainability is embedded in the life, work and, most particularly, the curriculum of the school.

e) **Communities of practice<sup>2</sup> are able to facilitate the development of sustainability,** and working with others made it more likely that they would all experience success. Communities of practice were best able to work when:

- those working within them on sustainability issues, both children and adults, have time and opportunity to meet, share ideas and work together regularly
- there are clearly established and effective lines of communication
- leaders on sustainability, if they are not themselves headteachers, have the support of headteachers

f) **The involvement of pupils in decision-making and in sustainable activities can be a powerful motivating force within and across school communities.**

g) **Leaders who successfully meet challenges and overcome the difficulties of developing sustainability within a school are passionate, knowledgeable, relational, brave, far-sighted and reflective.**

<sup>1</sup> A total of 56 schools that are leading the way in developing and promoting sustainability in their school and wider community were invited to share and disseminate their expertise by leading a community of practice in their area and to reflect on the leadership, action and outcomes of this work.

<sup>2</sup> A community of practice is a group of people who share a common concern about which they are passionate, in this case sustainability. In a school context, a community of practice could involve any stakeholders or members of the community, including pupils. Members of the community come together on an ongoing basis to deepen their practical knowledge in the area of interest, to reflect upon their practice and to support change (Wenger, E, 1998, *Communities of Practice: Learning as a social system*, in *The Systems Thinker*, (9) 5, available from [www.ewenger.com/pub/pubpapers.htm](http://www.ewenger.com/pub/pubpapers.htm)).

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are made on the basis of the findings of the project to overcome the challenges of sustainability:

- Raise awareness among school leaders of the importance of addressing the sustainability agenda.
- Articulate the benefits of doing so in terms of:
  - developing the curriculum
  - increasing levels of student engagement and participation
  - its ability to deliver other policies and initiatives, through established school improvement processes
- Encourage a holistic, whole-school approach to sustainability by:
  - articulating a clear vision
  - identifying desirable and measurable outcomes
  - engaging the interest and commitment of pupils, staff and other members of schools and local communities
  - giving attention to planning for leadership succession
- Provide opportunities for school teachers and leaders to extend their knowledge and understanding of sustainability and its issues, including environmental, social and economic dimensions.
- Establish networks operating within and extending beyond schools, enabling members of schools and local communities to work together on sustainability initiatives.
- Raise the status of the sustainability agenda by including it as a focus within the curriculum.
- Encourage the development of communities of practice in order to address sustainability issues; provide time and offer support to those taking on key leadership roles within them.
- Promote the role of students in decision-making about sustainability issues, engage their involvement in sustainable activities and encourage the development of their leadership skills.
- Provide opportunities for leaders to reflect on their own leadership roles in implementing a sustainability agenda and to consider the qualities that enable them to meet and overcome barriers to progress.

# Against the tide: challenges of leading a sustainable school

## Introduction and background

This report explores the:

- challenges faced by school leaders as they seek to develop and embed sustainability within their own schools and influence the practice of colleagues in other schools
- leadership qualities needed to overcome these challenges
- challenges of being involved in conducting research on sustainability

The schools represented in this report were involved in the Leading Sustainable Schools research project from January 2008 to January 2009. This project was supported by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services and conducted by Forum for the Future and the Institute of Education.

A total of 56 schools, identified as leading the way in developing and promoting sustainability, were invited to share and disseminate their expertise by leading a community of practice in their local area during the year. Each school was awarded a small grant to work with other schools in its region to develop leadership practices that would enable schools to become more sustainable. Participating schools were expected to:

- promote the leadership of sustainability with other local schools
- build a local sustainable school leadership network or community of practice

School leaders were asked to reflect on the leadership, actions and outcomes of this work throughout the year and submit a report at the end of the year. Although schools had a high level of engagement in the project, some schools did not submit a report.

For the purposes of the project, sustainability was considered to have environmental, social and economic dimensions.

A sustainable school was described by the former Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), as one that is 'guided by the principle of care: care for oneself, care for each other and care for the environment'<sup>3</sup>. This central principle of care is not new to schools but it is the addition of the reference to care for the environment and its global citizens as a whole-school priority that moves a school from being a good school to becoming a sustainable school.

The Leading Sustainable Schools project drew on the department's sustainable schools framework, which comprises eight sustainability doorways. Each doorway 'plays a role in the major areas of school life – the curriculum, campus and community'<sup>4</sup>.

The eight doorways are:

- energy and water
- food and drink
- travel and traffic
- purchasing and waste
- buildings and grounds
- inclusion and participation
- local wellbeing
- global dimension

Following this research, several schools were involved in a further stage of research with the National College to look at how to maintain and embed sustainability within a school. This research was completed early in 2010.

<sup>3</sup> DCSF, 2008, *Sustainable schools: how national recognition schemes can support your school's progress*, Nottingham, DCSF

<sup>4</sup> DCSF, 2010, *Sustainable Schools for Pupils, Communities and the Environment: the eight doorways to sustainability* [online]. At [www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainableschools/](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainableschools/) (accessed March 2010)

## Research methodology

For this research into the challenges of sustainability, 2 case studies and 16 telephone interviews were conducted, involving 7 headteachers, 8 senior and middle leaders, 1 school business manager and 4 class teachers. Each played a key leadership role within the project. Between them, they represented 12 primary schools and 6 secondary schools. Each school is referenced in the quotations and examples used in this report. P stands for primary and S for secondary school. Further details about the research methodology can be found in Appendices 1 and 2 and about the schools in Appendix 3.

The schools in this research fell into three groups; those that:

- failed to provide the required report at the end of the project and therefore were not involved in the next phase
- provided a report, but did not wish to be involved in the next phase
- submitted a report and were involved in the next phase of the project

The numbers in each category are shown in Table 1, below.

Reasons given for not submitting a report and/or for choosing not to continue with the project were:

- loss of the project leader through retirement or promotion (key reason given)
- specific circumstances, such as an Ofsted inspection or building project
- workload
- a preoccupation with other priorities considered to be of greater and/or more immediate importance
- disappointment with what had been achieved during the first phase of the project

There were no significant differences between schools in terms of the challenges that school leaders faced, regardless of whether or not they submitted a report or continued with the project. However, there was some indication that, where project leaders had chosen not to continue involvement in the project, they did not personally have a long history of interest and activity in the field of sustainability.

**Table 1: Participation by schools in the Leading Sustainable Schools project**

	Did not submit a report at the end of the project and not involved in the next phase	Submitted a report at the end of the project, but not involved in the next phase	Submitted a report at the end of the project and involved with the next phase
Primary schools	5	2	5
Secondary schools	1	3	2

## Key findings

Key findings and issues emerging from the research that informed this report are as follows:

a) **Key challenges** facing school leaders as they seek to develop sustainable schools and embed sustainable practices are:

- articulating a clear vision with clear outcomes
- overcoming resistant attitudes and gaining commitment
- achieving shared understandings and a shared sense of purpose and direction
- overcoming barriers to progress and maintaining momentum

b) **The concept of sustainability is a developing one and school leaders' knowledge and understanding of sustainability varies.** For almost all, it includes an environmental dimension and for many, either implicitly or, less often, explicitly, it may also include a social dimension. It rarely includes an economic dimension, other than when it is perceived as having cost-cutting potential.

c) **The willingness of school leaders and others to address the sustainability agenda varies depending upon perceptions of its relative importance and whether or not it is seen as a vehicle to deliver other initiatives or just an additional burden.** Those who make it a priority tend to feel passionately about the issues and believe that, when embedded, sustainability can lead to improvements in student engagement, attainment and achievement. They are able to see its potential for bringing together a variety of initiatives, and work with others to manage related developments through school improvement processes.

However, workload considerations prevent some from becoming involved in sustainability initiatives, and other priorities, which many in schools believe are more important, limit the time and attention they feel able to give to sustainability once they are involved.

d) **Success in addressing and maintaining the sustainability agenda depends upon a number of inter-related factors.**

These include the leadership qualities of school leaders, and the ethos and circumstances of individual schools. Success is most likely where leaders have a personal interest and commitment, attention is paid to planning for leadership succession, and sustainability is embedded in the life, work and, most particularly, the curriculum of the school.

e) **Communities of practice are able to facilitate the development of sustainability;** they are best able to do so when:

- those working within them on sustainability issues, both children and adults, have time and opportunity to meet, share ideas and work together regularly
- there are clearly established and effective lines of communication
- leaders on sustainability, if they are not themselves headteachers, have the support of headteachers

f) **The involvement of pupils in decision-making and in sustainable activities can be a powerful motivating force within and across school communities.**

g) **Leaders who successfully meet challenges and overcome the difficulties are passionate, knowledgeable, relational, brave, far-sighted and reflective.**

School leaders in this research faced a number of ideological and practical challenges as they sought to establish communities of practice, engage the interest and commitment of colleagues, influence the practice of colleagues and address sustainability issues. The key challenges were:

- articulating a clear vision with clear outcomes
- overcoming resistant attitudes and gaining commitment
- achieving shared understandings and a shared sense of purpose and direction
- overcoming barriers to progress and maintaining momentum

Some of the difficulties they encountered proved insurmountable for some leaders. Most leaders, however, found ways and means of addressing the challenges they faced.

# Challenges facing school leaders as they seek to deliver sustainability

## Vision and outcomes

Given the nature of the Leading Sustainable Schools project, school leaders might have been expected to have a vision that related to the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability. In fact, they rarely expressed such comprehensive aspirations. **Where clear expectations of outcomes for the project were identified (and this was rare), they were usually environmental in nature, occasionally social and scarcely ever economic.**

School leaders might also have been expected to have had clear educational outcomes in mind. However, although several mentioned links with the curriculum, particularly in relation to environmental and social action, few discussed overarching educational outcomes relating to sustainability.

Analysis suggests that, for most of the school leaders contributing to this research, the concept of sustainability was a developing one. It was a major challenge for school leaders as they sought to articulate a vision for the project. The various elements of their developing vision, and of the implications for their work in the area of sustainability, are discussed further in the following sections.

Whilst articulating a clear vision was a challenge in itself for school leaders, there were other challenges associated with implementing the vision. Some of these related to the practical and relational difficulties leaders encountered as they sought to work with colleagues across different locations and in different circumstances. These are discussed under 'Resistance and commitment'.

## The environmental vision

**School leaders in this research articulated a vision that was predominantly concerned with the environment.**

For most, this environmental focus was founded on a long-term commitment to environmental sustainability. Activities undertaken over a sustained period often included recycling, waste disposal, energy conservation, the use of renewable energy and the development of school grounds for learning, with vegetable gardens and wildlife areas a common feature.

Often this commitment had resulted from one person's passion, but in most cases it had become embedded in the life and work of the school, with the vision formalised and shared among many.

"The school has a long history of work in the area of environmental sustainability, dating back at least 22 years, when teachers within the science and geography departments established an environmental area on what had previously been the school's farm, by planting native trees, digging a pond and starting a green committee.

The work, which grew out of people's own 'passion and commitment', and was carried out on a mainly voluntary basis, was put on a formal footing 14 years ago when the then deputy head led a review of the school's aims. Education for sustainability was put 'at the heart of the school'. An education for sustainable development (EDS) co-ordinator was appointed and time was identified for leadership, planning and curriculum activities. The result was that 'it was not so incidental. There was more rigour'."

Secondary school leader (S6)

## The social vision

**Only a small number of school leaders explicitly spoke of desired social outcomes.** These tended to be general in nature and included:

- addressing global concerns through international partnerships
- encouraging students to be involved in decision-making about sustainability and in sustainable activities
- developing students' leadership skills
- recognising and developing links with other initiatives, such as Healthy Schools<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Healthy Schools is a national programme run by the department which promotes a healthy lifestyle using a whole-school approach.

However, school leaders did express a strong desire to influence the thinking and social behaviour of individuals and groups with respect to sustainability, both within and beyond their own schools.

“We wanted to work with others to spread the message through the community.”

Primary school leader (P8)

The project provided leaders with an opportunity to offer support to others, through communities of practice, in order to influence behaviour and bring about changes in practice. This was often given as a reason for seeking involvement in the project.

**Several school leaders also saw the communities of practice as a means not only of providing support, but of receiving it too.** They were not exclusively altruistic in their social vision for the project, but were alert to likely benefits for themselves. They wanted to learn from others, to ‘steal ideas’, in order to ensure that the project would lead to good outcomes for their own schools, including:

- maintaining and developing current practice
- addressing new areas of work
- gaining recognition

Working with others made it more likely that they would all experience success. Finding and establishing effective ways of working together, within communities of practice, therefore became a desirable social outcome in itself.

“[We are] working together across the schools to achieve one another’s goals.”

Primary school leader (P6)

## The economic vision

Only two school leaders explicitly mentioned the economic benefits of addressing the eight doorways, one emphasising a ‘save money to spend money’ approach, one that by reducing the cost of energy, for example, enabled additional spending on the curriculum. In general, economic goals were implicit rather than explicit. They were usually associated with the environment, for example, energy conservation, waste disposal and recycling, where occasionally costs were greater than they might otherwise have been. There was no indication that these school leaders recognised the contribution schools might make to economic development, locally, nationally or globally.

## Sustainability and educational outcomes

A minority of school leaders spoke about the educational outcomes they hoped to see for pupils. These included the development of:

- children’s understanding of the impact their actions could have on the environment
- a sense of responsibility among pupils for themselves, others and the environment
- future leaders, who would pass on the message

Others spoke more generally about wanting to spread the message about the importance of sustainability and to help others act in ways that were more sustainable by sharing their own good practice and encouraging others to share what they were doing too. In order to achieve this, they wanted to influence both the content of the curriculum and its continuity across different phases of education.

“We hoped the project would raise the profile of sustainability in schools locally and that they would be encouraged to look at the curriculum in different ways as a result.”

Primary school leader (P9)

“I knew that our work, with respect to the environment, was not carried forward in the middle and upper schools the children went to... It was no good me flogging myself to death at the bottom of the pyramid without it being built up.”

Primary school leader (P8)

**The communities of practice were welcomed as a vehicle for influencing the content of the curriculum and developing good practice in relation to sustainability.** Children, as well as adults, were seen as playing an important part in achieving this.

This analysis suggests that the visionary focus of these school leaders was on the environmental and, to a lesser extent, the social aspects of sustainability. They were less able to articulate a vision that related to economic sustainability. **Yet the vision for sustainability needs to be not just environmental, but also social and economic, with clearly identified educational outcomes.**

“We wanted to establish a community of practice that was more than just its core members, that would help schools to realise that economic benefits can come from addressing the eight doorways, through disseminating good ideas, and that this would have a wider ripple effect on schools, parents and the wider community.”

Primary school leader (P10)

“We wanted the children to lead, to push it forward and make decisions about how the money was spent.”

Primary school leader (P6)

## Sustainability as a developing concept

Birney and Reed<sup>6</sup>, reporting on the Leading Sustainable Schools project, suggest that the school leaders involved in the research were seeking ‘to achieve what has not been done before, leading in the absence of a blueprint and... seeking to create the future they wish to see for the next generation’ (Birney & Reed, 2009:13). The evidence from this research confirms this assessment, suggesting that the concept of sustainability is itself a developing one. Indeed, those involved in the project were contributing both to its development and to the understanding of the concept among their colleagues and pupils. They are, in effect, exploring largely uncharted seas.

In this context, having a vision that was both comprehensive and specific enough to provide a clear sense of purpose for all those involved, with clearly expressed outcomes as well, was a great deal to expect, even from schools identified for their good practice in relation to sustainability. However, having such a vision, ie one that is passionate, clearly articulated and shared by others, is possibly the key to successfully defining the direction in which schools and their communities of practice will go and the actions they will need to take to achieve greater sustainability. This research suggests that the success of the project, in terms of achieving desired outcomes, may have been adversely affected where such a vision was lacking.

**To ensure a sense of purpose and direction, school leaders need to be able to articulate a vision that will help those involved not only to decide what they want to do, but to know why they want to do it and how they want to do it. The specific nature of this vision needs to be set within a broader ethical framework**, one that reflects a set of beliefs about the school’s responsibilities and the educational purpose of the initiative. With respect to sustainability, this is likely to relate to the ways in which:

- the school operates as an organisation
- individuals and groups within the school conduct themselves and their business
- the school seeks to educate its pupils and influence others to make a difference and bring about change

Clarity of vision will enable schools and communities of practice to evaluate how successful they are being in addressing the sustainability agenda, even where objectives are least easily measured.

## Resistance and commitment

Gaining the commitment of colleagues to the project was one of the earliest challenges school leaders faced.

In most cases, invitations were sent to a large number of schools identified as possible partners, either because they already formed part of an existing group (eg, a cluster, pyramid or learning community), or because they had already expressed an interest in the work of the leading school in the area of sustainability. Some did not respond to this invitation, even when school leaders were persistent in contacting them. Others expressed an initial interest, sometimes attending the first meeting, but then declined to become involved.

In some cases, this was due to a lack of interest, although this was not always the case. Rather, it seems that schools and school leaders had cogent reasons for not engaging in the project, or for feeling hesitant about doing so. These fall into three categories:

- insufficient capacity
- competing priorities
- differing perceptions

<sup>6</sup> Birney, A & Reed, J, 2009, *Sustainability and renewal: findings from the Leading Sustainable Schools research project*, Nottingham, National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services

## Insufficient capacity

“There’s plenty to do. We don’t need any more work.”

Primary school leader (P11)

It seems that reluctance to become involved in the Leading Sustainable Schools project was frequently due to a sense that the school did not have the capacity to address the sustainability agenda and could not fulfil the expectations held in relation to the project. **Staff members were conscious of overload and competing demands on the curriculum.** Even those who were initially enthusiastic about the opportunity presented to them, and eager to become involved, were concerned about the time and energy the project would demand.

“People ask themselves, ‘Is this going to give me more work?’ It probably works against their willingness to be involved.”

Secondary school leader (S4)

“Headteachers are often worn down by the demands they face.”

Primary school leader (P9)

“People ask, ‘What does this involve? Does it mean a lot of work? Another agenda? Something else we’ve got to do?’ Or they say, ‘Everything is working well. We’ve ticked every box.’”

Primary school leader (P6)

“It was difficult initially; there were people who expressed an interest, but who were worried about the time and extra work needed.”

Primary school leader (P5)

## Competing priorities

Sustainability, as a focus for attention, was also competing with other priorities, usually regarded as either more important or more immediate. Staff members were often preoccupied with areas of work for which they felt or knew themselves to be held accountable, such as standards of achievement by their pupils.

“Some schools had had a tough time with Ofsted and just wanted to focus on standards in English and maths.”

Primary school leader (P9)

“It’s easy to get focused on SATs results, particularly in an affluent area like ours, because that’s what we’re being judged by... This means that the immediate reaction... is, ‘We haven’t got time’... It’s easy to give mixed messages. One minute I’m saying, ‘How many level fives will we get?’ You’ve got to be brave to do a week on the school grounds when the reaction is to do with overload.”

Primary school leader (P12)

Critically, those in schools did not believe that sustainability was given importance by **those to whom they held themselves accountable.**

“Schools don’t make it a priority because it’s not an area of accountability for the government and Ofsted.”

Primary school leader (P8)

“Ofsted say we’re great. Why should we do more if it’s not something we’ve got to do?”

Primary school leader (P6)

Even where schools were confident of the quality of their work, as judged by Ofsted, they were likely to have identified other priorities for development in their school improvement plans.

“Outstanding schools will already have mapped out their development points because they are forward thinking, so if it’s something new they may not be able to fit it in.”

Primary school leader (P6)

There were other persistent, sometimes unexpected, demands that claimed the attention of those within schools, such as new buildings, an imminent Ofsted inspection or local initiatives.

“The timing of the project was right for some, but not for all, in terms of each school’s priorities and preoccupations.”

Primary school leader (P16)

Against this background it was difficult for some in schools to see the importance of addressing the sustainability agenda.

### Differing perceptions

Perceptions of sustainability among staff varied. In many cases it was seen as a new and different agenda and an additional burden.

“They thought it was another initiative and in their view, they were busy enough fire-fighting in their own schools already, without taking on anything new.”

Primary school leader (P14)

Schools were, however, often already addressing sustainability issues through the curriculum, and sometimes in other areas of school life as well without realising it. **The challenge for project leaders was to help them to recognise this, so that they felt able to engage in the project without the necessity of an inordinate amount of extra work.**

“People said, ‘We don’t do sustainability in primary schools’. The fact is they do lots of environmental work, but they don’t recognise it as sustainability... so sustainability is seen as another agenda, something that will come and go... People saw the doorways as a huge thing. It seems massive at the start.”

Secondary school leader (S5)

“Sustainability is such a big issue, multi-faceted, that it is being covered in most subject areas in most year groups; the challenge is to recognise that and make it explicit.”

Secondary school leader (S7)

“If people are encouraged to see sustainability as something that pervades everything and is about real life, then the benefits of developing a sustainable approach will become more obvious and it will no longer be perceived as demanding additional time and energy; if people recognise

that, through what they already do, practical things like toilets, reducing the use of water, the curriculum, projects, creativity, they are already addressing the sustainability agenda they will be able to see that improving their practice in those areas is not a major thing.”

Primary school leader (P9)

However, it was not just perceptions of sustainability as a new initiative that made it difficult for project leaders to gain the commitment of their colleagues to this new area of work. They **were also hampered by an often limited understanding of the term ‘sustainability’ among their colleagues.** In general, sustainability was taken to refer to environmental issues and particularly to saving energy. The holistic approach promoted by the eight doorways was unfamiliar to most people.

“People have a limited understanding of sustainability, seeing it as energy saving etc, rather than to do with lifestyle and problem-solving.”

Primary school leader (P8)

“Schools that expressed an interest saw it as to do with school grounds. They were already quite proactive in that area and they were looking for financial support. They were not aware of the all-encompassing, holistic nature of the eight doorways... and it was quite hard to engage their commitment to that.”

Primary school leader (P11)

A consequence of these limited understandings was that **some staff did not recognise the importance of achieving greater sustainability.**

“We sometimes expect well-educated teachers to see the sustainability agenda as credible, but their response... is sometimes flippant: ‘It’s a load of twaddle’, and there are members of the teaching community who don’t want to address the issues.”

Primary school leader (P8)

In addition, some staff members saw sustainability as a collection of discrete issues that had to be added to the existing curriculum. This posed a potential threat to the amount of time available to address priority areas.

“It’s hard to take time from the curriculum, because there’s still literacy and numeracy to cover and people find it difficult to recognise that sustainability can be covered within those areas.”

Primary school leader (P6)

**Not all staff members were able to see the potential value of sustainability in enabling them to, for example, raise standards by addressing sustainability issues in the curriculum, or support other areas of the school’s work.**

“We can argue that it’s possible to achieve high standards through addressing sustainability issues, and we believe that... you have to convince staff that they can do it as a vehicle that will raise standards.”

Primary school leader (P12)

“There were difficulties in branding the project and I’m not sure that everyone understood that the initiatives were part of this big picture with [the National College]. Headteachers and others might have attached more significance to the project had they realised this, and might have used it to reflect on their work and to support applications for additional funding, through the British Council for example. The potential for doing so wasn’t fully recognised.”

Secondary school leader (S6)

School leaders also met resistance from colleagues who perceived sustainability as a political issue and who objected to the language employed and the approach taken by those promoting it.

“Most heads of department agreed that sustainability should be a whole-school policy..., but some felt the language surrounding the eight doorways is naïve, emotive, wrong and very left wing.”

Secondary school leader (S4)

For some school leaders, achieving the necessary shift of perception among their colleagues was the biggest challenge facing them.

## Achieving shared understanding, purpose and direction

School leaders taking part in this research found that participants in the project understood the terms ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable school’ in different ways and this affected how they perceived its purpose.

Many participants pursued activities to do with the development of school grounds and their use in the curriculum or with energy saving and recycling. This reflected the predominantly environmental vision of sustainability discussed earlier. This narrow interpretation of sustainability presented a challenge to project leaders, who themselves were quite likely to have thought in environmental terms in the past, but whose own understandings were developing significantly with reference to the more comprehensive interpretation represented through the eight doorways.

As a result of these developments in their own thinking, **project leaders sought to introduce a more holistic and ethical approach, both within their own schools and within their communities of practice. However, they did not find it easy to establish a shared sense of purpose in either respect.**

“Schools often came to it from an economic need, wanting to save money, rather than from a desire to be more sustainable in order to have a global impact... I’m not sure we did overcome the tendency for others to think in terms of saving money and balancing budgets rather than wanting to become more sustainable in order to have a global impact.”

Primary school leader (P10)

The narrow understandings that school leaders encountered among their colleagues sometimes influenced decision-making in ways that ran counter to the principle of sustainability that they were seeking to establish. This sometimes hindered their attempts to engage everyone in the school community in sustainable activities rather than just a committed few.

“It can be difficult to get others on board in terms of making choices based on sustainability rather than cost, in the canteen for example.”

Secondary school leader (S7)

“There is not yet a whole-school approach to sustainability in the community of practice schools, but leaders in those schools are consistently trying to develop it into a whole-school approach and not just eco-warriors or the school council.”

Primary school leader (P6)

One of the inhibiting factors in achieving shared understandings and a shared sense of purpose was a **lack of the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills among the individuals involved**. This included some of the project leaders, whose own knowledge and understanding developed as the project progressed. This sometimes meant that leaders were not always sure who to engage or what to do, necessarily relying on others, who may not have shared their own interest or commitment.

“I hadn’t been aware of how long and how difficult [it would be] to tout it around different agencies before someone would say, ‘We’re interested’. It took nearly a year to get funding... When the funding was available, another setback was getting the necessary planning permission... It seemed to take forever to get people on site to do things and a term slipped past.”

Secondary school leader (S6)

Although school leaders sometimes had to rely on others to provide the necessary detailed knowledge for the project’s success, they nevertheless played a key role in bringing things together, making things happen and ensuring that the enterprise appeared manageable to colleagues.

“It’s the headteacher’s role to bring everything together in a meaningful whole and make it manageable.”

Primary school leader (P16)

“I did the donkey work, setting up site visits, writing up minutes, writing bids, but... I had to rely on the people in the science department to know what was wanted.”

Secondary school leader (S6)

However, in doing so, they were **sometimes hindered by the amount of time it took to develop the teamwork necessary, both for developing that shared sense of purpose and achieving the outcomes they so much wanted to see.**

Practical constraints were one reason, and the fact that schools were coming from different starting positions was another.

“Everyone teaches and it’s hard to find the time to get together... Some were further down the line than us; others hadn’t done much.”

Primary school leader (P6)

Consequently, the results of their endeavours sometimes lacked commonality and coherence.

“Our approach looks disjointed and disorganised, with different projects led by different people, but the ethos is the key, backing people and encouraging the involvement of students.”

Secondary school leader (S7)

There was one other factor that worked against the development of shared understandings and a shared sense of purpose and that was self-interest.

“They couldn’t see what they could get out of it for their own school... They wanted something for themselves and to know how their school would benefit. It was really hard to motivate them because they wanted something and it wasn’t working.”

Primary school leader (P11)

Whatever the other factors working against them, it was **difficult for school leaders to work together to develop shared understandings and a shared sense of purpose** without also having agreed a shared vision. Indeed, a lack of vision and purpose put the project at risk.

“We didn’t have a shared vision in the end for what we were trying to do, so other people didn’t take it as seriously... There was a lack of purpose and the project just petered out naturally.”

Primary school leader (P10)

## Overcoming barriers to progress and maintaining momentum

Having engaged the interest and commitment of colleagues in developing sustainability within their schools, and in most, though not all cases, having established a community of practice, school leaders encountered barriers to progress with the project. Some of these barriers reflected reasons already given for not becoming involved in the project at the start, while others were specific to the management of the project. They included problems of:

- capacity
- attitudes
- circumstances
- communication
- leadership succession

Each is discussed in greater detail below.

### Capacity

As we have seen, it was not unusual for school leaders to have reservations about the capacity of their schools as organisations to address the sustainability agenda or to fulfil the expectations held of them in relation to the project. Some had accepted the invitation to take part despite these reservations, and had anticipated difficulties relating to workload and time. Even so, several regretted the fact that a variety of demands left them without the time to give the project the attention they felt it needed.

Partly because of their own workloads, several headteachers, within both the leading schools and the schools that made up the communities of practice, passed on responsibility for leading the project to other senior leaders, middle leaders or class teachers. However, two particular challenges resulted from this approach.

First, **some of those to whom responsibility was delegated felt that they lacked the necessary expertise to provide leadership**. Unlike their colleagues elsewhere, their involvement had not arisen from personal interest and enthusiasm. As we saw earlier, this made it less likely that schools would provide a report at the end of the project or continue with the project into the second phase.

Second, particularly where they had full-time teaching commitments, those with delegated responsibility for the project found it difficult to find time ‘to devote to the work’, and ‘to give it proper thought’. The demands of important and immediate issues tended to divert their attention.

“It was hard for some deputy heads to give the work the time and attention it needed, since some were class teachers.”

Primary school leader (P11)

Money could help to buy time, but finding funds to support the development of sustainable approaches also took time.

“It’s difficult to raise awareness of the breadth of the issues until funding is available... You need time, you need money to create time, but finding money and fundraising in itself take time.”

Primary school leader (P8)

The main reason for welcoming the small grant, provided to support the project, was because it allowed school leaders to buy time.

However, having the money to buy time did not solve all difficulties. It did not, for example, always solve the problem of competing priorities. As one assistant head said, the funding could be used to provide supply cover for her class, but ‘taking people out of class has a knock-on effect’. Her particular concern was the attention she needed to give to Key Stage 2 SATs, and in this she was not alone. The same preoccupation with standards of achievement that prevented some schools from taking part in the project at all operated here too.

“On a day-to-day basis, people were unable to give it their attention because the emphasis within the local authority was on the importance of raising standards. Literacy and numeracy standards are hammered home continually.”

Primary school leader (P11)

The demands on those within the lead school were considerable at all stages of the project, particularly in the early days. Project leaders had to exert themselves to ensure that things happened and continued to happen.

“Keeping the plates spinning is time-consuming... you have to put yourself out as a teacher to get the ball rolling.”

Primary school leader (P8)

"[It's hard] keeping the momentum going, because people have busy lives."

Primary school leader (P14)

"Initially, sustainability had high dependence on the small number of adult leaders for guidance and direction."

Secondary school leader (S4)

This sometimes meant that other things were neglected.

"My work as head of biology suffered. There are only so many hours in a day."

Secondary school leader (S9)

### Attitudes

School leaders encountered a range of different attitudes among their colleagues, both within their own schools and across the community of practice, as they sought to gain commitment to developing sustainability and progressing with the project. They were conscious that **in order to implement and maintain the momentum of the project, they needed to identify the 'right people' in each school**, ie those who were interested, even passionate, about their involvement and who could see the potential of the project. They were aware that, just as they had themselves to be prepared to put time and effort into the project, they were asking for a similar level of commitment from others too. This was not always comfortable for them.

"The thing that concerned me most was that I was asking a huge amount of commitment from others. It is one thing to give up my own time, but it's more difficult to ask it of others. I don't enjoy that... There's not a nutcase like me in every school."

Primary school leader (P8)

"I was asking people to take on a lot of extra work. They were willing, but I couldn't then be critical when they delivered according to their priorities and timescale rather than mine."

Secondary school leader (S6)

Very often they did find people willing to work with them. Sometimes, indeed, the enthusiasm outstripped their own capacity to respond, but they also experienced resistance, lack of support, dependency and apathy, as illustrated in the following vignettes.

### Resistance

"The first teacher identified to take the lead role within the local high school didn't like the eco-structures. It was six months before a new person was appointed to the role."

Primary school leader (P8)

### Lack of support

"In one case, a younger member of staff found that her headteacher was less flexible than headteachers in the other schools and less prepared to put other priorities to one side temporarily in order to support the project."

Primary school leader (P7)

"In another school, the headteacher in post at the start of the project 'took the mickey' and considered the eco-school agenda to be 'a waste of time'."

Primary school leader (P8)

"In the partner primary school, the headteacher was 'keen', but did not give the lead teacher any free time."

Primary school leader (P10)

### Dependency

"A headteacher in one of the lead schools felt that there was still 'a dependency on the part of schools within the community of practice' and that 'the life of the project wasn't long enough to enable the community of practice to reach maturity'."

Primary school leader (P14)

## Apathy

“One project leader found that the people she worked with in the community of practice school encountered some of the same attitudes among their colleagues that she had initially faced herself, an attitude that was expressed as, ‘It’s okay for them,’ without any sense that there was a need to be involved themselves.”

Primary school leader (P7)

“Another project leader said of the students in her school that there was general apathy about things eco and that it was considered ‘a geeky thing to do’. As a teacher from another school said to me, ‘It’s not sexy. Until we make it sexy, they won’t be interested... Small groups of young people are involved, but when it comes to the mundane, translating the bigger concern into daily actions, it doesn’t happen’.”

Secondary school leader (S8)

Sometimes project leaders found that people paid lip service to the concept of sustainability, but failed to act. Even where the commitment was greatest, there were ‘different enthusiasm rates... peaks and troughs’. Disappointments, such as not getting an expected package from a partner school in Gambia or receiving new guidelines that meant a Snack Shack could no longer stock healthy options such as baked crisps, affected the motivation and enthusiasm of staff and pupils alike.

## Circumstances

Circumstances affected the way people felt about the project and their energy and enthusiasm, and could also impede the progress of work directly because of practical constraints.

In some cases, this was because attention was diverted from the project, as in the case of Ofsted inspections or building projects. Often, in situations such as these, ‘sustainability work got put on the back burner’ and schools ‘left the project for a short time and then returned’. Occasionally, circumstances were so demanding that schools left the project entirely. Even where there was a high degree of commitment among headteachers within an established local learning community or cluster of schools, events could overtake them.

“The cluster was also involved in establishing a children’s centre and that took up a lot of time and attention, particularly in problem-solving.”

Primary school leader (P9)

“Other business often outweighed the importance of sustainable schools on the agenda.”

Primary school leader (P16)

The following school was not alone in experiencing a direct impact from a building contract.

“There was a practical difficulty, because the contractors building the new classroom needed the school’s garden area to store their equipment. This meant that the planned raised beds could not be established within the timeframe of the project.”

Primary school leader (P5)

**Schools also experienced financial constraints.** They discovered hidden costs in some proposed projects, such as recycling and waste disposal, which prevented them from pursuing new options in those areas.

“There are big cost implications... for big projects, such as reducing carbon footprints by replacing windows or installing taps to reduce water consumption, and there are costs related even for small projects, like growing herbs and plants.”

Secondary school leader (S4)

Not infrequently, **school leaders were dependent upon others for the success of the project. This sometimes meant that progress was delayed or activities could not be pursued at all**, as the following example illustrates.

“Pupils and staff were eager to develop a pond in the school grounds. As part of the planning for their project, they visited another school to see the pond and wildlife area there and to discuss how these were used within the curriculum. Then they discovered that the area proposed for development also had a community use, with open access and no secure fencing. They were dependent on the governors and parish councillors to make the necessary decisions about fencing. Some of the children involved in planning the project who had attended meetings of the governing body and parish council to present their case had moved on to secondary school before the project was completed.”

Primary school leader (P6)

Whilst many of these sets of circumstances were particular to individual schools, they very often had an impact on the community of practice as a whole, adversely affecting the progress of shared ventures and the building of trusting relationships.

“We are only just developing trusting relationships, which are crucial if schools are to move forward together, because people need the humility to say they don’t know what a sustainable school is or they don’t understand something.”

Primary school leader (P14)

## Communication

Several school leaders identified difficulties with communication as a factor that hindered the progress of the project.

“We were always repeating ourselves... We were never able to get in touch with people... There were times when we felt things were moving much more slowly than we would have liked.”

Primary school leader (P5)

“It was difficult to co-ordinate the network. You couldn’t just pop in... chasing people... administrative things... checking that people had remembered what they had promised to do... I tried to establish a Yahoo! group, but people weren’t comfortable using it.”

Secondary school leader (S5)

School leaders felt that it was important to the success of the project that staff and pupils got together where possible. **This face-to-face contact was highly valued as a means of developing a community of practice.** As far as staff members were concerned, it seems that this was, explicitly at least, partly to share ideas and partly to make plans. Implicitly, however, and perhaps unrecognised by most, it seems it was to establish and maintain relationships. However, in some cases distance and the ‘pressures schools were under’, made it difficult to arrange meetings.

“We didn’t meet as often as we would have liked.”

Primary school leader (P5)

## Leadership succession

A key factor affecting the progress, success and continuation of the project was leadership succession. **In at least 39 per cent of the schools initially contacted for this research, the original leaders of the project had left.** In most cases, this was the reason why no end-of-project report was forthcoming. In at least 54 per cent of the schools that did not apply to be part of the continuing project, the leader of the project had left.

Respondents also identified the loss of leaders within the community of practice schools as a factor affecting the success of the project. In almost all cases, **no plans were in place to ensure the continuation of the project if the person leading it was no longer available to do so.**

“If one person leaves it can fall flat if it’s not embedded... At the point at which a person leaves or is ill or away on a field trip it can become obvious that no one else knows the detail.”

Secondary school leader (S7)

“When the key person within any school moved on the project faltered, because developments in sustainability had not had time to become embedded in the school’s practice. For at least two of the schools where this is the case, involvement in the project is unlikely to continue.”

Primary school leader (P7)

Whilst leaders were usually lost to the project through retirement or promotion to posts elsewhere, some loss was due to the perceived lack of importance of sustainability when compared with other areas of work.

“In two schools, the leading teachers were enticed away from the sustainability agenda by offers of more mainstream lines of promotion such as Leading in Learning. It is regrettable that sustainability does not have the same kudos.”

Secondary school leader (S9)

## Leadership qualities needed to overcome the challenges

The leaders who took part in this research admitted that they did not always manage to overcome the challenges they faced. Whether or not they succeeded in doing so, they certainly learned more, as a result of their involvement in the project, about how they might fulfil their leadership roles more effectively. Their reflections on the ways in which they acted as leaders provide insights, not just into the challenges they faced, but also into what they did, or what they thought they could have done, to enable those challenges to be overcome.

Both the positive and negative aspects of their stories throw into relief the qualities that leaders need if they are to overcome the challenges they face, both when working in their own schools and with colleagues in partner schools. Their involvement in the Leading Sustainable Schools project was necessarily to do with environmental, social and economic sustainability. **However, the personal and professional qualities they needed were generic to the role of leader within their own schools, and to working with colleagues in some type of confederation – in this case a community of practice – and working with members of local or global communities.** These qualities were not specific to the sustainability agenda.

Respondents to this research rarely spoke directly about their own leadership qualities or about the qualities they thought desirable or necessary in a leader. Rather, the qualities that are identified, explored and illustrated below are drawn from their descriptions of what they did, what they did not do and what they thought they might or ought to have done, in order to overcome the challenges they faced.

What emerges from the research is that leaders who successfully face challenges and overcome difficulties are passionate, knowledgeable, relational, brave, far-sighted and reflective. Each of these qualities is explored here.

## Passionate leaders

Most of the schools in this study had a long history of involvement in environmental activities, such as the development of school grounds for learning or the use of renewable energy. Several had been involved in social activities, such as international partnerships, over a number of years. In almost every case, these developments had their origins in the work of a single individual, who had a personal, passionate interest in the subject.

*“The school had been ‘very heavily involved in environmental work’ for a long time, with a longstanding member of staff leading developments over a 15-year period that were ‘ground breaking’ within the county.”*

Primary school leader (P5)

*“She had developed international links within the school, because she ‘loves to travel’ herself and ‘can’t think of anything more important than making children more aware’, especially as the school serves a largely white community and there were ‘minimal opportunities for the children to meet children from other cultures’. She believes it is ‘important for people to communicate’.”*

Primary school leader (P11)

Many of these individuals saw the opportunity to reinterpret and extend their activities under the umbrella of sustainability and to engage the interest and commitment of others. They were eager to do so.

A few leaders had taken on formal responsibility for sustainability without having had more than a passing interest in it in the past. In some cases, information they gained as a result shocked them into enthusiasm.

“They attended a conference on green schools and the eight doorways which ‘opened our eyes’ to the importance of addressing environmental issues, because of the ‘staggering statistics’ that were presented. They knew then that they wanted to address these issues within the school and began to do so.”

Primary school leader (P6)

Passionate leaders were highly committed and very hard working. Examples of their activities included:

- promoting the sustainability agenda
- imparting a vision and achieving a shared sense of purpose
- establishing clear goals
- gaining the support of headteachers and external organisations
- providing an example of good practice in their classrooms and across their own schools
- organising and hosting meetings, setting agendas, planning activities and inviting visiting speakers
- offering practical support and providing resources and training
- communicating with others and sharing information
- creating opportunities for people to share and observe good practice and discuss ideas for future development
- encouraging people – adults and children, professionals and volunteers – to work together
- organising events, from themed weeks to conferences
- managing timescales
- influencing decision-making about sustainable issues
- celebrating achievements and progress

Alert as they were to the pressures their colleagues were under, these leaders often put themselves out to ensure the continued engagement of schools within their community of practice.

“She made things ‘as simple as possible’, so that ‘it didn’t feel like another thing to do’ for the other schools, for which it was not an identified priority for improvement. She offered to host the eco-parliament meetings, including setting the agenda and planning the activities, in order to take the pressure off the other schools, who only needed to make arrangements to get the children there.

Sometimes she ‘had to rein the enthusiasm back in’, so that other schools ‘didn’t feel too pressurised’, because sometimes the children ‘got excited’ and the other schools needed her to say, ‘Well, it’s the half-term before Christmas, so maybe we should wait until January’.”

Primary school leader (P5)

In all of this, passionate leaders were determined, persevering and tenacious.

“We kept pushing... It took more than one email to get the three schools involved... The lure of the money to share helped.”

Primary school leader (P6)

“You have to be persistent, but not forceful. It requires effort. You’ve got to follow it through and find the time to do that.”

Primary school leader (P10)

“Not everything is successful... you have to accept that... sweep aside the little problems, ask parents or someone’s granddad to get involved.”

Primary school leader (P11)

They knew from their own experience that progress was incremental and that it took time, as the following example suggests.

“It took her ‘a while to get staff on board’. Her colleagues tended to see it as ‘a bit of a hobby horse’ on her part. As time went on, however, staff saw the impact that developments were having on the school and the children and realised that it ‘really is making a difference’. It has taken three or four years for staff to recognise that developments are having an impact and that children now see themselves as ‘global citizens’, responsible not just for their ‘own space’, but realising that the small changes they make have a wider impact locally, nationally and internationally.”

Primary school leader (P7)

## Knowledgeable leaders

Their personal interest in and passion for this area of work meant that most leaders were very knowledgeable, particularly about environmental issues. Some had relevant educational backgrounds, for example in archaeology, conservation, geography or biology. Most, however, particularly those in primary schools, had acquired their knowledge incrementally, as they pursued sustainable objectives, for example in learning about photovoltaic panels, wind turbines and ground heat pumps as they researched renewable energy sources for their schools.

Most were eager to increase their knowledge and went to some lengths to do so. One, for example, had just completed an MA in sustainable developments in education. Another, becoming aware of the importance of sustainability through the National College's Certificate of School Business Management (CSBM) programme, subsequently attended a university course on sustainability. A third took advantage of an opportunity to visit Australia on an international leadership learning programme to see how sustainable schools were led, how sustainability was promoted and what challenges leaders had encountered in seeking to promote sustainability.

Some recognised their own limitations and were prepared to seek information and advice from others. This was particularly the case if they had been asked to take on responsibility for sustainability as part of a senior leadership role, without having much, if any, previous experience in this area. However, the evidence suggests that it was members of this group, more than any of the others, who were more likely to have their attention diverted from the project by competing demands and priorities, perhaps because their responsibility was not founded on personal interest.

## Relational leaders

Leaders who overcame challenges placed a **high priority on establishing trusting relationships as a foundation for their work**. They recognised that this took a long time, longer, indeed, than the project allowed, particularly where communities of practice were formed from scratch.

*"The life of the project was not long enough to enable the community of practice to reach maturity. We are only just developing trusting relationships, which are crucial if schools are to move forward together... People need the humility to say they don't know what a sustainable school is or they don't understand something... Trust develops through discussions, face-to-face meetings, children sharing ideas, a continuous process of action..."*

*Some meetings involved quite childlike activities... Relationships are vulnerable, but they can be protected by going through developing stages and challenging stages together... People aren't used to laying their cards on the table and talking about nitty-gritty issues, but it'll come."*

*Primary school leader (P14)*

**Establishing trusting relationships was easiest when leaders could use an existing network.** In the following example, a teacher in her second year of teaching spoke not only about how the project benefited as a result, but also what she herself learned from a colleague about the ways in which networks operated.

*"A network of schools was already in place because the school is a language college. She was able to work with the person co-ordinating the modern foreign language (MFL) network, to promote sustainability and involve schools in the Leading Sustainable Schools project. 'It was important to have a face they recognised and the MFL network gave an accelerated start to the project, because there was a trusted face [and] established relationships were important'. The MFL co-ordinator, who had been running the network for 10 years, told her that 'it takes time to engage people, and staff come and go, so it takes time to establish and re-establish initiatives'."*

*Secondary school leader (S5)*

Relational leaders also, critically, **recognised the power of involving children in promoting sustainability and shaping the sustainability agenda in their schools**. The project was often closely linked by those leading it to a commitment within their schools to allowing children's voices to be heard. School councils, eco-committees and local eco-parliaments were frequently the formal vehicles for achieving this. However, informally, children had, perhaps, an even greater influence on what happened with respect to sustainability because of the nature of their relationships with adults. The research data was rich with examples of the children's interests, and of how peer power motivated teachers, parents and family members. The leaders of the project were unapologetic about exploiting this factor in order to promote the sustainability agenda in their own schools and across the schools that formed the communities of practice.

“The children were so fascinated – the juggernaut has taken off. The children took it on. It made the teachers realise they could either join in or let it fall. Because the children were desperate to move forward, the staff needed to be supportive of that... Once the children are involved you can’t forget that you’ve got chickens to feed or that you’ve started a wildlife garden. The children are nagging you to take it further... There are lots of things that the children can do that don’t demand the time of adults, such as making outside learning spaces more appealing, ensuring that the grounds are safe, having the play equipment they need... The children worked together... 24 children met every 6 weeks to talk about their sustainability projects and explore the doorways. They did learning walks around one another’s schools and answered the questions, ‘What do you see that is the same? What do you see that is different?’... There was a strong pupil voice across the community of practice. People were listening to children, to what they have to say and what they know... It’s to do with listening to each other’s voices.”

Primary school leader (P14)

Pupil voice, was, of all the motivating factors identified by school leaders the one they considered most powerful and actively fostered.

Given this, it is not surprising that **leaders invested heavily in relationships**, giving freely of their time to do so. **They were honest and open themselves, receptive to ideas and appreciative of what others had to offer.** They understood the pressures others were under and did what they could to alleviate these. They were quick to recognise good practice, and fostered opportunities for people to get together and share ideas. They were swift to offer support, encouragement and advice, and quick to accept it too. They managed, but did not seek to control others. They were extraordinarily patient, hopeful and optimistic, and prepared to take small steps as long as these were in the right direction.

“At each meeting, people shared ideas. They were small ideas, but really good ideas.”

Secondary school leader (S5)

“Taking them on in small steps was the key.”

Primary school leader (P13)

“Start small, but achieve great things.”

Primary school leader (P8)

As a consequence of their relational behaviours, leaders were able to have a significant influence on:

- whether or not schools became or remained involved in the project
- levels of knowledge, interest and commitment evident among their colleagues
- ways in which those involved in the project worked together
- specific and practical outcomes of the project

### Brave leaders

It took courage to overcome some of the challenges that leaders faced during the project. They had to be prepared to take risks. On the whole, however, they accepted this as an intrinsic and inevitable part of their leadership role, and although they were sometimes cautious, they were also aware of the opportunities that risk-taking could bring. They could even be relaxed about it.

“Risk-taking is part and parcel of system leadership.”

Primary school leader (P16)

“Taking risks. Not everything has to be thought through. Go with the flow.”

Secondary school leader (S4)

### Far-sighted leaders

Leaders who were good at meeting challenges and overcoming difficulties were far-sighted in two senses. First, **they were a little like sailors: vigilant, alert, observant, with a weather eye sweeping the horizon, taking in as much information as possible in order to ride the storm and take advantage of the wind.**

In this guise, they:

- recognised possible links with other initiatives in place at the time, as varied as:
  - Healthy Schools
  - modern foreign languages
  - Every Child Matters

- extended services
  - Food for Life
  - eco-schools
  - pupil voice
- looked for new opportunities and were alert to unexpected opportunities, being prepared to use whatever was available to take things forward, including, for example:
- an ICT initiative for gifted and talented pupils that provided the means for pupils in community of practice schools to communicate with one another electronically
  - a visit by Al Gore, who told the children they should say, ‘We’re only small, but we can change the world’
  - the TDA School Improvement Toolkit, adapted for the purpose, and used to inform a ‘high-powered conversation between Year 1 to Year 6 pupils about child leadership and sustainability, later fed back to the headteachers’
- learned from what they observed, and were prepared to go in new and unexpected directions to promote understanding, as the following example illustrates.

“A member of the landbase and environmental group at the high school recounted how pupils had used garden forks to puncture some of the pumpkins grown by the school and commented, ‘They don’t appreciate the miracle of life yet’. This ‘triggered an awareness of the need to do work on this with all the children... Children need to know there is something worth valuing, and gain a deep sense of mystery and awe at the miracle of it all’. This casual, incidental conversation led to a new emphasis on spirituality and to workshops for the extended community of practice.”

Secondary school leader (S6)

- looked for people and organisations that would support their work, including:
- colleagues in their own schools and in community of practice schools
  - people within wider school communities, eg parents, grandparents, family friends, governors
  - local community members, organisations and businesses, eg local artists, story-tellers, a gardening club, architects, water companies, a Co-op and the London Climate Change Agency

- national and international organisations and charities, eg, the Eden Project, British Council, ENCAMS (now Keep Britain Tidy) and UNICEF

- used existing links, such as those with a health and education business partnership or London Challenge

Far-sighted leaders managed this information and related activities mainly through school improvement processes. They recognised, in the Leading Sustainable Schools project, a means of drawing together, under a single banner, a variety of activities in which staff, children and sometimes family and community members, were already engaged, even though these might not previously have been recognised as being relevant to the sustainability agenda.

“I realised there were pockets of things going on that were to do with the eight doorways and that we could unite other initiatives under the banner of sustainability... Hugging trees and eco-ways of working was familiar. We just didn’t know it had a name... We didn’t realise we were doing sustainable schools work. It was nice to have a name for what we were doing.”

Primary school leader (P14)

**Secondly, far-sighted leaders were a bit like seers: looking to the future, anticipating what was to come and using their experience, knowledge and good judgement to make wise decisions.** In this respect, they had long-term aims. They wanted to influence the ways in which people lived their lives in order to achieve greater sustainability and address, in particular, the environmental threats that they believe the world faces. In order to do that, **they wanted to see the sustainability agenda embedded in the life and work of the school.**

At least some of their attention, therefore, was given to:

- creating, promoting and maintaining an ethos within the school which would enable the sustainability agenda to become a continuing focus for attention and development

“I’m not so worried that it’s not absolutely perfect yet, because it will keep developing in the future. You never stop working through those doorways. It’s a whole-school ethos and that’s the most important thing.”

Primary school leader (P16)

- putting in place organisational structures, systems and procedures to ensure that sustainability was visited and revisited

“Having structures in the school that allow people to take on ideas and run with them... a clear staffing structure, with responsibility, budgets etc... co-ordinators trusted to make the necessary spending decisions... The headteacher can't push it all the time... You need an ethos that is founded on distributed leadership... otherwise things would become stale and static... The project was most successful in schools that had strategies that ensured that it would be revisited every year... That was the crucial part, because it meant that, if one person left, someone would be asking, 'What is happening with the garden? Is the gardening club happening? Is it in the curriculum?'... You need passion, but you also need down-to-earth, boring organisation, because when the passionate person is gone, it's gone.”

Primary school leader (P12)

- ensuring that sustainable issues were addressed in the curriculum and through extra-curricular activities

“One school within the community of practice had three things in place, which, together with having a single person (a teaching assistant) taking on a key leadership role, 'made their programme very successful', ensured that their gardens 'thrived' and that 'lots of children were involved'. These three things were: a well-attended gardening club, planned curriculum opportunities within science topics, and a 'learning for life academy', where the formal curriculum was dropped and children opted for a choice of activities, which always included a gardening option.”

Primary school leader (P12)

“The key is to get it into the classroom and the curriculum... If it was part of the core curriculum it would be given a greater priority.”

Secondary school leader (S4)

- ensuring that sustainable developments did not rely on a single person, by encouraging staff to share responsibility and planning for leadership succession

“She wanted to work closely with the teacher who had been leading on environmental issues to ensure that developments would continue after his planned retirement. 'I wanted us to be sustainable with our sustainability'. She prepared for the retirement of this key member of staff by encouraging other members of staff to 'take on more of a role' and by 'squeezing all the knowledge out of her' before she left.”

Primary school leader (P5)

- establishing and maintaining enduring partnerships that would enable those trusting relationships referred to earlier to develop, and having clear expectations of all those involved in order to ensure that understanding grows and commitments are fulfilled

“We're much harder with the next group of schools. They must give back as much as they get... We're happy to lead on it, but people must put back into the big emotional pot. They have to put back, replenish, to draw out... We... start with a much tighter structure. This is what you're buying into. This is the small thing that we'll do. This is how we'll write it up.”

Primary school leader (P14)

### Reflective leaders

Finally, leaders who were in a good position to meet challenges and overcome difficulties were thoughtful, reflective people. They took time to think about how the project was progressing, and about their own leadership styles and effectiveness. They were able to accept that some of the challenges they faced were not resolved, or not fully resolved. They knew why this was so. They used school improvement review processes to help them evaluate their work. They listened to and took account of the views of others when making decisions, and they were willing and able to change their plans in response to circumstances.

## Conclusion

Much that was good resulted from involvement in the Leading Sustainable Schools project for each of the schools represented in this research. Even where a report was not submitted, usually because the key person had left the school, all schools involved had a valuable level of engagement with the project. Most are continuing to address the sustainability agenda, whether or not they have continued their involvement with the project. However, all participants in the research were conscious that the challenges they faced had sometimes operated as barriers to progress, preventing them from achieving all that they had hoped. As one said, 'It was good, but I like it to be very good'. They felt a sense of disappointment, and in some cases this was a reason for not pursuing involvement in the project further.

There were three main, related reasons that respondents identified as responsible for a lack of progress:

- perceived low status of sustainability, which meant it was unable to compete for attention with other priorities for which schools are held accountable, or for which people within them feel accountable
- heavy workloads that many school leaders and their colleagues were carrying
- lack of time to give the project the attention it needed

In addition, the research suggests that progress was also hindered by:

- lack of understanding among school leaders and others within schools of the nature and concept of sustainability and the ways in which it can be embedded within the curriculum to raise standards
- lack of organisational structures and practices that promote sustainability, including:
  - established networks, operating within and extending beyond schools, enabling members of school and local communities to work together on sustainability initiatives
  - clarity about roles and responsibilities
  - clear lines of communication, both within schools and extending beyond them
  - planning for leadership succession
- failure to realise that sustainability is itself a developing concept, and that developments associated with it demand attention over a long period if they are to become embedded in the life and work of a school and its local community

In order to overcome the barriers, leaders needed to be passionate about the cause, knowledgeable about the field, brave enough to take risks and highly committed to a relational and collaborative approach that will bring about change and development.

They had to be sailors and seers, collectors and purveyors of information, using all that they knew and all they could discover to make wise decisions and to make progress against the tide.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are made on the basis of the findings of this report:

- Raise awareness among school leaders of the importance of addressing the sustainability agenda.
- Articulate the benefits of doing so in terms of, for example:
  - developing the curriculum
  - increasing levels of student engagement and participation
  - its ability to deliver other policies and initiatives, through established school improvement processes
- Encourage a holistic, whole-school approach to sustainability by:
  - articulating a clear vision
  - identifying desirable and measurable outcomes
  - engaging the interest and commitment of pupils, staff and other members of school and local communities
  - giving attention to planning for leadership succession
- Provide opportunities for school teachers and leaders to extend their knowledge and understanding of sustainability and its issues, including environmental, social and economic dimensions.
- Raise the status of the sustainability agenda by including it as a focus within the curriculum.
- Encourage the development of communities of practice in order to address sustainability issues, and provide time and offer support to those taking on key leadership roles within them.
- Promote the role of students in decision-making about sustainability issues, engage their involvement in sustainable activities and encourage the development of their leadership skills.
- Provide opportunities for leaders to reflect on their own leadership roles in implementing a sustainability agenda and consider the qualities that enable them to meet and overcome barriers to progress.

# Appendix 1: Research methodology

## Research brief

The Against the Tide research project was commissioned by the research and policy group of the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services. The project objective was to understand and explore:

- challenges faced by leaders of the Leading Sustainable Schools research project in delivering sustainability
- leadership qualities needed to overcome these challenges

Key research questions were as follows:

- 1 Did schools have a clear vision of what they wanted to achieve in terms of sustainability? How was this expressed? How did they seek to achieve that vision?
- 2 What challenges, including obstacles and setbacks, did schools encounter in seeking to become more sustainable? Which sustainability issues (environmental, social or economic) did they find most difficult to address and why?
- 3 What factors (including contextual, financial and human resource factors) affected the success or otherwise of the project?
- 4 What challenges did schools face when working with their community of practice, particularly in respect of involving others in agreeing and addressing a sustainability agenda?
- 5 Did schools experience any difficulties in monitoring and evaluating the success of their approaches to developing more sustainable approaches? If so, what were these?
- 6 What leadership skills were needed in order to address the challenges faced by schools and communities of practice in achieving greater sustainability? What leadership skills were developed as a consequence of facing and addressing these challenges?
- 7 What other factors enabled difficulties to be addressed and overcome? What further support might have enabled difficulties to have been addressed and overcome?

## Methodology

The timescale for the research was September to December 2009.

A total of 56 schools were involved in the Leading Sustainable Schools research project during 2008/09. Of these, 13 failed to submit an end-of-project report. Of the remaining 43 schools, 24 are involved in Leading Sustainable Schools research activities during 2009/10.

It is possible that the schools that did not submit a report or chose not to engage in further Leading Sustainable Schools research opportunities may have encountered the greatest challenges in their delivery of sustainability during the original research project. For this reason, interviews for the project were sought with those who had led the project in these 32 schools. Of those schools who did not submit a report, half the people who were leading the sustainability project had left the school.

Telephone interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes, or face-to-face interviews, lasting approximately 2 hours, were conducted with 17 members of staff representing 15 schools. Three members of staff representing three more schools completed questionnaires. All were staff members who had either led or joint led the Leading Sustainable Schools project in each school and its community of practice, or who had taken over responsibility for sustainability within the school, having been involved with the project. They included headteachers, senior and middle leaders, including school business managers, and class teachers (see Appendix 3). In two cases, interviewees had left the school where they had held responsibility for the project, for reasons of retirement or promotion.

The project was informed by Birney, A & Reed, J, 2009, *Sustainability and renewal: findings from the Leading Sustainable Schools research project*, Nottingham, National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services.

# Appendix 2: Telephone interview schedule

## National College research and policy group

### Leading Sustainable Schools: research activities 2009/10

#### Strand 3: Against the tide

##### Telephone interview schedule

Date:

Research objective: to understand and explore the challenges faced in delivering sustainability and the leadership qualities needed to overcome these challenges

School/organisation:.....	Contact name: .....	
Role:.....	Tel:.....	Email:.....

Research question	Section 1: Introduction
-------------------	-------------------------

1, 6	1. Why did your school become involved in the Leading Sustainable Schools project?
------	--

---

1	2. How did you come to have a leadership role in relation to the project? Were others involved in leading the project?
---	--

---

1, 3	3. Schools were selected for the project because of their existing experience and good practice. What characterised the good practice in terms of sustainability at your school?
------	--

---

1, 6	4. How did you plan to build on that good practice?
------	---

---

1, 6	5. What did you hope to achieve?
------	----------------------------------

---

**Research question**    **Section 2: Challenges**

**2, 3**                      6. What difficulties, if any, did you encounter as you sought to establish more sustainable approaches within the school? What did you see as the main challenge in bringing about the sustainability agenda?

---

**3, 4**                      7. Who was involved in your community of practice? How easy or otherwise did you find it to engage the interest and commitment of those within your community of practice? Who shared your vision?

---

**3, 4, 6**                      8. How did you and others work together to achieve greater sustainability across the community of practice? Did this give rise to any challenges?

---

**2, 3, 4**                      9. What difficulties, if any, did you encounter as you sought to work with your community of practice? What was the key challenge in working with your community of practice?

---

**Research question**    **Section 3: Facing the challenges and overcoming the difficulties**

**6, 7**                      10. How did you (as an individual, as an organisation, as a community of practice) seek to overcome the difficulties and challenges you faced?

---

**5**                          11. How successful were you in doing so? How do you know?

---

---

**3, 6, 7**

12. What enabled you to overcome those difficulties and challenges and achieve success?

---

---

**3, 5, 6**

13. What, if any, difficulties did you fail to overcome or were not fully resolved?  
Can you suggest why that might have been?

---

---

**7**

14. What might have helped to resolve those difficulties? What one thing might you have done differently?

---

---

**Research question**

**Section 4: Recognising success**

---

**5, 6**

15. What positive outcomes have resulted from your involvement in the project?  
How do you know you have been successful?

---

---

**5, 6**

16. What have you learned from the process you have been through so far, and from your successes and failures? In what ways have you developed as a leader as a result of facing the challenges of the project?

---

---

17. Any further comments?

---

---

## Appendix 3: List of schools contacted

Code	Description	Interviews	Provided a report at the end of the project	Involved with next phase of project	Current position of project leader
<b><i>Nursery Schools</i></b>					
<b>N1</b>	Local Authority Nursery School, 3-5 years	No	No	No	Unknown
<b><i>Primary Schools</i></b>					
<b>P1</b>	Voluntary Controlled Primary School, 4-11 years	No	No	No	Unknown
<b>P2</b>	Community Primary School, 3-7 years	No	No	No	Left school
<b>P3</b>	Community Primary School, 4-11 years	No	No	No	Retired
<b>P4</b>	Voluntary Controlled Primary School, 7-11 years	No	Yes	No	Left school
<b>P5</b>	Community Primary School, 4-11 years	Headteacher	No	No	Retired
<b>P6</b>	Voluntary Aided Primary School, 4-11 years	Deputy headteacher, class teacher	No	No	In post
<b>P7</b>	Community Primary School, 3-11 years	Deputy headteacher	No	No	In post
<b>P8</b>	Community Primary School, 4-9 years	Class teacher	No	No	In post
<b>P9</b>	Community Primary School, 3-11 years	Headteacher	No	No	In post
<b>P10</b>	Voluntary Controlled Primary School, 4-11 years	Class teacher	Yes	No	Left school
<b>P11</b>	Voluntary Controlled Primary School, 3-11 years	Deputy headteacher	Yes	No	In post
<b>P12</b>	Community Primary School, 5-11 years	Headteacher	Yes	Yes	In post
<b>P13</b>	Voluntary Controlled Primary School, 5-11 years	Headteacher	Yes	Yes	In post
<b>P14</b>	Community Primary School, 3-9 years	Headteacher	Yes	Yes	In post

Code	Description	Interviews	Provided a report at the end of the project	Involved with next phase of project	Current position of project leader
<i>Primary Schools continued</i>					
P15	Voluntary Aided Primary School, 3-11 years	Headteacher	Yes	Yes	In post
P16	Community Primary School, 4-11 years	Headteacher	Yes	Yes	In post
<i>Secondary Schools</i>					
S1	Foundation Secondary School, 11-18 years	No	No	No	Left school
S2	Community Secondary School, 11-16 years	No	No	No	Left school
S3	Foundation Secondary School, 11-16 years	No	No	No	Left school
S4	Middle deemed secondary Foundation School, 9-13 years	School business manager, assistant headteacher	No	No	In post
S5	Community Secondary School, 11-18 years	Subject teacher	Yes	No	Left school
S6	Community Secondary School, 11-16 years	Deputy headteacher	Yes	No	In post
S7	Foundation Secondary School, 11-18 years	Deputy headteacher	Yes	No	Retired
S8	Foundation Secondary (Selective Girls' Grammar) School, 11-18 years	Deputy headteacher	Yes	Yes	In post
S9	Foundation Secondary School, 11-18 years sustainability co-ordinator	Head of biology and	Yes	Yes	In post

The National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services is committed to excellence and dedicated to inclusiveness. We exist to develop and inspire great leaders of schools, early years settings and children's services. We share the same ambition – to make a positive difference to the lives of children and young people.

Membership of the National College gives access to unrivalled development and networking opportunities, professional support and leadership resources.

©2010 National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services – All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced without prior permission from the National College. To reuse this material, please contact the Marketing and Communications Team at the National College or email [publications@nationalcollege.org.uk](mailto:publications@nationalcollege.org.uk).

Triumph Road,  
Nottingham NG8 1DH  
T 0845 609 0009  
F 0115 872 2001  
E [enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk)  
[www.nationalcollege.org.uk](http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk)

**We care about the environment**

We seek ways to minimise our negative environmental impact. We use well-managed resources wherever possible, which is why this publication is printed on environmentally friendly paper. To find out more visit: [www.nationalcollege.org.uk/aboutus](http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/aboutus).