

The Stockport Schools Climate Assembly

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council
Monday 27 February 2023

Summary

The Stockport Schools Climate Assembly facilitated by Stockport Council is a space for young people to learn about, propose, debate and vote on climate action ideas. The project sets out to give a platform to young people's voices while ensuring we as a council listen and take responsibility to act on what they tell us. In June 2022, young people proposed and voted to make eco-friendly period products more affordable and accessible in schools. As a direct result, we are now offering training and grants to make that happen.

Councillor Mark Hunter, Leader of Stockport Council, says: "Credit goes to our young people for the fantastic debate and for all their well-thought-out ideas. We've heard a clear mandate for action from young people and we're committed to making sure that action follows. This is the beginning rather than the end of this initiative."

Councillor Mark Roberts, Cabinet Member for Climate and Environment, says: "Listening to these young people has been truly, truly inspirational. I hope to see some of them sat in council chambers, as elected representatives, in the coming years! They have demonstrated how capable they are."

Ace and Blair, pupils at Reddish Vale High School, say: "We really valued the opportunity we were given to use our voice to stand up to the growing stigma that surrounds period products, and promote a healthy, sustainable way of dealing with it. This is the one planet we have, and this is our opportunity to save it."

The people leading the work on delivering the climate assembly are:

- Councillor Mark Roberts, Cabinet Member for Climate and Environment, Stockport Council
- Nick Leslie, Head of Climate Action Now, Stockport Council

Group shot of Stockport pupils in the town hall

The problem

Stockport declared a climate emergency in 2019 with cross-party agreement. We have a cross-party 'Climate Action Now' steering group with representation from all 5 political groups that make up the chamber.

Climate Action Now (CAN) is Stockport Council's strategy and work programme to tackle climate change and enhance the natural environment. To achieve this, our ambition is for Stockport to be carbon neutral by 2038 and for the council to be operationally net zero by 2030. Within our CAN strategy, our 'climate-friendly borough' strand sets out that we will:

- work with local people to take action
- put children and young people at the heart of our approach

CAN is embedded within our 'One Stockport Borough Plan'.

To meet our 2038 target, which includes all greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) in the borough, we must find ways to engage, partner, and collaborate on climate actions. Key to this is that we listen to our residents and work on actions that are important to them.

Stockport has a population of just over 295,000 people. 19% are under 15. There are 85 primary schools, 14 high schools, 9 special educational needs and disability (SEND) schools, and 4 colleges within the borough. Stockport has both urban and rural areas and is the eighth most socioeconomically polarised borough in the UK.

The solution

The Stockport Schools Climate Assembly project seeks to give a platform to young people's voices. It sets out that we as a council will take responsibility to act on what they tell us and deliver what is important to them.

Origins

In November 2021, we held our first-ever borough-wide climate summit. Over a hundred young people joined that event and told us what they thought about climate change. We heard overwhelmingly that they are concerned, worried, and angry, and want to see climate action happening locally and nationally. Young people told us that they learn about climate change in school, but not about how to tackle it.

After the summit, Mellor Primary School's headteacher and a local councillor approached the council with an idea for a youth climate debate. They had been inspired by a Greater Manchester event they'd been part of pre-pandemic and wanted to collaborate on a more local project.

From this, the 'Stockport Schools Climate Assembly' was developed by a project steering group. The group comprised the headteacher, local councillors, a youth participation officer, and the council's CAN team. At this point, the team was made up of the head of CAN, a project manager, and a senior officer.

The project offers a space for young people to learn about, propose, debate, and vote on climate action ideas. It sets out to engage young people with climate change and local democracy.

Aims

In establishing the climate assembly, the aim was for young people to:

- learn more about high-impact climate action, GHG emissions, and carbon footprints
- develop their involvement in directing local climate action and local democracy
- create a space for their voices to be heard

It was further hoped that through engaging young people, teachers, parents, carers, councillors, and local organisations would also be reached.

First year

In 2022, the project's inaugural year, young people took part in climate-action lessons with lesson packs and attended online sessions. Both formats were created and run by the CAN team. The children then came up with ideas for how they as pupils, their schools, and the council can tackle climate change.

This resulted in 70 climate-action ideas for council. The steering group whittled these down to 5 high-impact and actionable ideas around renewable energy, active travel, behaviour-change posters, home insulation, and period products.

In June, 45 students from 23 schools came to Stockport Town Hall to debate the 5 ideas in council chambers. A few weeks before the event, the CAN team shared a 'democracy in action' lesson and a debate prep pack. Both of these we created to inform the pupils about how local democracy works. We also worked closely with schools to prepare for the big debate.

Stockport's mayor opened the town hall event and handed over to Stockport Youth Council members. They led a lively and informative debate in front of the council's corporate and political leadership.

After proposing and debating their climate action ideas, each pupil voted on which idea they supported the most. The council's election team had prepared official ballot boxes and papers, and the vote was counted and verified. This was to give the young people an insight into democratic voting. The young people voted to 'make eco-friendly, biodegradable, or reusable period products more affordable and accessible in schools' their priority. Pupils Ace and Blair from Reddish Vale High School had proposed the idea.

After the debate, the CAN team worked with teachers, pupils, education and public health colleagues at the council, and school nurses to develop a response. This has led to the creation of a grant scheme and training to supply eco-friendly period products in Stockport schools. The training was accessed 129 times between November 2022 and January 2023. The vote outcome also led to the introduction of eco-friendly period products in bathrooms in the civic estate.

Following the successful debates, it was decided the project would become an annual feature in our CAN engagement programme. Schools that took part, councillors, and council officers supported this decision.

Rationale for online sessions

Initially we thought it would help to lighten the load on teachers. They also told us they preferred online sessions so pupils could meet children from other schools and feel part of a collaborative project.

But we also ran them online so that multiple schools could easily attend and because of our lack of capacity. By delivering online we could support multiple schools effectively.

Timeline

The idea that formed the basis of this project came from discussions between a councillor and a primary school headteacher. The headteacher's school had participated in a Greater Manchester climate summit in November 2019.

Delayed due to the pandemic, the idea came to the CAN team in 2021 following our first public CAN summit. Planning started in November 2021. Project delivery started the following February and ran until June 2022.

When planning the project, we decided we wanted to deliver within the current academic year. And we needed to avoid the pre-election period so that councillors could fully engage with the project.

Timeline for schools' involvement

February to March: Schools accessed a climate-action lesson pack that explores types of actions that greatly impact climate change. Each school agreed on a list of 3 ideas to submit.

April: 5 motions were selected by the project steering group.

April to May: Participating schools accessed the council's 'democracy in action' lesson pack to deliver mock debates in class and to prepare for the debate.

June: Participating schools took part in a half-day debate in the council chambers at Stockport Town Hall. At the end of the debate, the young people voted on what idea they thought should win.

July: The winning idea was presented by young people at a full council meeting.

Summer 2022 to present: Development of the eco period products offer continued during summer and autumn 2022. Since January 2023 we have been offering the grant to schools.

Revisions for future years

In evaluating the project, we have decided to bring the timeline forward in future years so that it starts in November. The youth debates will be held in March before the pre-election period, and the presentation to full council will happen in July after elections.

This is to ensure that the project:

- continues to get councillors' full engagement
- complements the academic year more and does not clash with exam times for older students

For more details on the timeline, see the section on lessons learned.

Stakeholders

The project was developed and delivered by officers in the council's CAN team. The steering group, responsible for shaping the project and providing an overview, consisted of:

- a councillor and a primary school headteacher who together initiated the project
- Portfolio Lead for Climate Change & Environment and the CAN Members Group
- council officers in the CAN team
- a council officer leading on youth participation, who is part of children's services at the council in the safeguarding and learning team

Eco-friendly period product offer

Developing the eco-friendly period products offer involved several teams at the council such as colleagues from education and public health. There was significant input gathered through meetings and consultation with teachers, school nurses, and pupils, too.

Wider council involvement

The CAN team received support from all levels of the council for the project, including colleagues volunteering time to support the debate events. When the headteacher and Liberal Democrat councillor brought forward the idea, the council had a Labour administration that supported the project and helped establish it. In May 2022 the council became a Liberal Democrat administration that continued to support a cross-party approach to this project. Councillors from all parties were invited to attend the debate event and 6 in total attended. The invite could not be extended to all councillors as the chambers were at full capacity with the young people and teachers.

Promoting the project

We aimed to reach young people from every area of the borough for the schools climate assembly. In promoting the project we:

- contacted every school in the borough
- spoke at headteachers' consortiums
- shared it through the personal, social, health, and economic (PSHE) network
- shared it to education colleagues
- shared it to voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise sector (VCFSE) colleagues
- contacted schools who'd previously received CAN community funding
- promoted it on Facebook to target wards with low engagement

Councillors also promoted it to schools in their wards.

We had good uptake from across the borough with at least one school or college in 19 out of our 21 wards.

The biggest factor in schools taking part was if a teacher was passionate about this subject.

Schools' involvement

The project was designed to be flexible for schools. They decided whether to run the project with a single class, their whole school, or with an eco group such as an eco council. Some schools ran the project with a single class but then held whole-school assemblies where the pupils shared the learning.

For each set of lessons – climate action and democracy in action – some schools fitted them into class time within a single lesson. Others ran them with their eco councils as an extracurricular activity. Most teachers connected the project to the personal, social, health, and economic (PSHE) curriculum.

Schools then selected which pupils would represent them at the town hall debate. Some schools ran a mock election to select pupils to attend the debate.

The project has been showcased at our annual CAN summit and has received praise from councillors and senior leadership. Most importantly, we received fantastic feedback from schools who took part:

One teacher said: “I just wanted to say thank you and how much of not just a pleasure but an honour it is to keep being a part of this amazing event! The students had an amazing time and thoroughly enjoyed being part of something so relevant and important, especially something they feel so passionately about.”

Another said: “It was so well organised and such a fantastic opportunity for pupils across Stockport. We feel genuinely privileged to be a part of youth democracy and we can't wait for the next one!”

A Stockport pupil voting for the idea she wanted to prioritise for climate action

Impact

The project succeeded in creating a space where young people's voices would be heard and where they could influence climate action in Stockport. The outcome of the vote was taken seriously by the council and has been acted on. It was set as a priority that the council administration deliver on the ask of local young people. It was important that it was not just a lip service exercise.

The environmental impact is clear: a reduction in single-use period products used and discarded in schools across Stockport. We hope that this behaviour change continues into the future of the young people's lives.

Secondary benefits include:

- reducing period poverty among young people by making these products more readily available in educational settings
- fighting period stigma and shame by providing training to combat this

As of January 2023, 20 schools have applied for the grant to supply eco-friendly products, impacting thousands of children and young people across Stockport. 6 are high schools, 13 are primary schools, and one is a SEND school. All schools that applied have been awarded the grant.

Based on averages, we've potentially reached about 3,000 young people. A simple switch from single-use plastic to biodegradable or reusable period products would avoid 33 million pieces of period waste over that group's lifetime.

Though the environmental benefit is clear, the carbon saving is more difficult to calculate as it depends on which eco product a person chooses. For example, one school has purchased period pants for 20 young women which equates to a 530 kg carbon saving.

Local Climate Engagement programme

Stockport Council is also part of the programme '[Local Climate Engagement \(LCE\)](#)' – run by UK100, Involve, Democratic Society, Shared Future, and Climate Outreach. As part of the 'coaching group', Stockport received training, mentoring, and attended peer learning sessions with other local authorities to share best practice. The learning from the LCE programme is shaping how we plan future engagement for the schools climate assembly.

Greater Manchester Green Summit

We showcased the schools climate assembly project at our stall at the Greater Manchester Green Summit in October and shared resources from the project with neighbouring local authorities and voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise (VCFSE) organisations in the region. We have also showcased the project at the Greater Manchester Combined Authority leaders' meeting.

Lessons learned

There are lessons learned on the resource packs, timeline, and replicating the project in other local authorities.

Resource packs helped engage schools

In evaluating the project, key successes were the engagement from schools and support from teachers. They used the resources that the CAN team created to deliver and extend the project within their settings. For example, one school held a mock election to decide which pupils would represent the school at the debate. Their students created campaigns and manifestos. Another school held a whole school assembly to discuss their climate action ideas. In another, the members of the student eco council were the ones who delivered the climate action lesson to their peers.

Changing the timeline to suit schools

We identified that the timeline of the project needed to shift. Originally, the parts of the project involving school participation ran from January to June. Post-project feedback from school staff told us that June is a busy time for schools due to exams. They found it hard to accommodate the town hall debates. For 2023, we have changed the timeline so that school participation fits in with the autumn and spring terms.

The annual project timeline is now:

- project promotion in September and October
- climate action lessons and ideas submission in November and early December
- steering group ideas selection in mid December
- democracy in action lessons and debate prep in January and February
- town hall debates in March
- presenting the winning idea at full council in July

Replicating the project in other local authorities

This project can be replicated in almost any local authority setting and can easily be adapted based on budget and purpose. The most significant consideration is to ensure the local authority can act upon the ideas chosen for debate, should the young people vote in favour.

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The climate assembly project was funded through the CAN engagement budget as part of our core delivery. Apart from team resource, costs were minimal. The town hall debate cost about £1,000, which included room hire, refreshments, and hiring a local vegan bakery to supply treats on the day.

The project development and setup were resource intensive. But we are now running the project for the second year using the project plan, templates, and resources that we set up in year one. This has significantly reduced the resource needed to run the project.

The eco-friendly period product grants are being funded through the CAN climate-friendly borough strand. It seeks to enable local, community-rooted climate action across our borough. Resource and budget for responding to the youth vote are identified as core delivery and factored into the council's annual CAN delivery.

There will be a continued CAN community grant programme – which schools can apply to in future years – to support delivery of eco-friendly period products. The CAN community grants are open to applications from schools, community groups, and organisations across the borough for climate action projects.

Next steps

Following the success of the 2022 climate assembly, we plan to run this project annually. This year, 45 schools and colleges have registered to take part. This represents 40% of our schools and colleges.

So far this year the CAN team have delivered climate action lessons to 320 students from primary to college age. 20 schools used the packs to deliver the lesson themselves. So far, we have received 130 climate action ideas that our young people would like the council to take. 5 of these ideas will be debated in the town hall in March 2023.

Links, contacts, and credits

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