

Liverpool Schools in One World

How can school councils – students elected to represent the views of all pupils – get involved in global issues?

Liverpool World Centre (LWC) works with school councillors to increase their awareness and understanding of global interdependence and of the difference that they as individuals can make, for example by supporting and promoting fair trade, and looking beyond that to the implications of ethical consumerism.

What did LWC want to achieve?

The project aimed to promote the practice of non-tokenistic pupil voice in schools, to encourage schools to view school councils as more than just an ‘add-on’ to school life and ethos, and to raise young people’s awareness of their roles as local and global citizens. By supporting school councillors to lead their own fair trade projects and ultimately to win ‘Fairtrade School’ status, it also aimed to empower pupils to share their learning and knowledge with their peers and to take specific action on fair trade in their schools.

How did they set about doing this?

Liverpool achieved Fairtrade City status in March 2004, and a number of schools expressed an interest in integrating fair trade into their curriculum, ethos and activities. LWC developed a good working relationship with Liverpool City Council in promoting the project in the borough’s schools, with funding from DFID, Liverpool Schools Parliament and Christian Aid.

LWC delivered presentations to young members of the Liverpool Schools Parliament and the parliamentarians voted to support the project using funds from their annual budget. School councillors interested in getting involved were asked to invite Anne-Marie Smith from LWC to their next school council meeting. This gave them a proactive role, and the clear message that the leadership for this project in their school lay firmly in their hands.

LWC ran sessions with school councils using pictures and fair trade products to tell the story of the people behind the products. Key facts about fair trade were outlined, and notions of our power as consumers and our roles as local and global citizens explored. A central aim of all sessions was to equip pupils with the knowledge and confidence to raise awareness and to educate others in their schools, and to support them to develop an action plan for getting fair trade ‘embedded’ in their school community.

Workshops were also run for teachers about the role of pupil voice in the process of embedding a global dimension in school curricula. Teacher scepticism, for example, unwillingness to use only fair trade tea and coffee in the staffroom, was encountered in some schools but school councillors thought up different ways to counter this, equipping themselves with the knowledge to be able to persuade staff about the advantages of fair trade.

A pupil steering group was set up at the beginning of the project, meeting once a term. In 2007 they renamed themselves the 'global conscious young people's group' and designed and planned sessions on fair trade and climate change which they delivered to teachers and their peers at an event in July 2007.

How well did they achieve their aims?

Sessions have been run with 44 school councils, and another 20+ schools have developed fair trade in their schools following attendance at a LWC event, or via case studies from other fair trade schools in Liverpool. The majority of these were primary schools. Secondary schools have been harder to involve, with rigid timetables leaving a lack of creative space and staff being less receptive to the notion of participatory pupil voice. Whilst the project worked with all year groups, the most proactive pupils have been in years 5 and 6 in primary schools, and years 7 and 8 in secondary schools. The pupil leadership approach was seen as radical by some schools, but most responded positively as it meant that all the work did not fall to one committed teacher.

The impact of the project went beyond the classroom, as pupils took the message home. It also raised the profile of Liverpool as a Fairtrade City, with the activities in schools making a reality of that status. The project has been recognised as an innovative model of good practice and has been used to develop a fair trade school network in Cumbria. LWC were invited onto the Fairtrade Foundation's schools advisory board and helped develop the national scheme.

What do they plan to do next?

The project came to an end in March 2008 and the exit strategy focused on setting up clusters of flagship fair trade schools in Liverpool and offering peer mentoring training to school councillors. Schools that are new to fair trade can call upon a 'flagship' fair trade school in their area and receive guidance, knowledge and tips from school councillors.



“Wow, I had never thought of that obvious link between pupils' voice and fair trade and social justice issues.”

Leader of Cumbria Fair Trade network.

“It's all about not ripping off the farmers isn't it?”

Year 5 pupil, explaining fair trade



Reflections:

- School councils, when given space and run effectively, give pupils a voice and can be a good way for them to realise how they can make a difference, both as individuals and through joint action.
- As in this case, work around fair trade needs to be accompanied by broader education on global citizenship to support questioning and deepen understanding. This avoids the simplistic approaches to global trade inequalities which can result from a purely campaigning approach.
- Pupil leadership can be a valuable way of promoting a whole school approach to issues.



“ I feel that the project has taken on a life of its own over three years, illustrated in the way that our work with school councils has been a catalyst for wider global citizenship work in schools. ”

Anne-Marie Smith, project coordinator, LWC

“ We are bored of talking about school uniforms and the litter bins. ”

School Council member

More information:

- Liverpool World Centre website: www.liverpoolworldcentre.org.
- *Global Conscious Citizens – a Handbook for School Councillors* can be downloaded from LWC website.
- Fair Trade Schools project website: www.communitiesandfairtrade.org.

