Youth Visions of a Just Transition:
Engaging Young People in South Yorkshire to Imagine Sustainable Futures

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Challenge Statement

Young people have a long-term stake in the planning of sustainable futures and in policy responses to climate change. Youth participation fosters not only inclusion, but innovation and long-term thinking in environmental governance[1]. Young people are considered essential stakeholders in shaping resilient, future-focused policy frameworks to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals[2].

However, due to the complexities of engaging children and young people in research and policymaking, this population group is often overlooked. There remains a persistent evidence gap for effectively embedding youth participation to shape future-oriented sustainability and climate policy[3,4]. This gap is especially acute in relation to marginalised communities, where it is widely acknowledged that the poorest in society stand to be the most negatively impacted by the changing climate[5]. These groups not only bear disproportionate impacts but are also frequently left out of participatory processes, which subsequently reinforces cycles of structural inequality.

New demands are placed on existing education systems to equip young people not only with knowledge, but also the skills and practical experience to imagine and navigate uncertain futures. The Department for Education's Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy[6] and the Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim Report[7], both acknowledge that education must evolve to reflect these realities, and ambitions have been set for the UK education sector to become world-leading in sustainability and climate change by 2030. In response to these national policy ambitions, the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) has committed to forming a Youth Climate Assembly in its Corporate Plan 2025-2028[8].

Despite nationally recognised tools and guidance for schools to develop climate action plans, actual models of youth led visioning or co-produced decision making remain in their infancy. Most engagement is either consultative or extra-curricular, and not fully integrated into government strategy[9].

Research Response

Our research responds to this challenge through the design and implementation of two interactive visioning workshops. The two participating schools both have above average levels of Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility, thereby foregrounding youth voices from communities that are often socioeconomically disadvantaged and structurally marginalised in policy and decision-making processes.

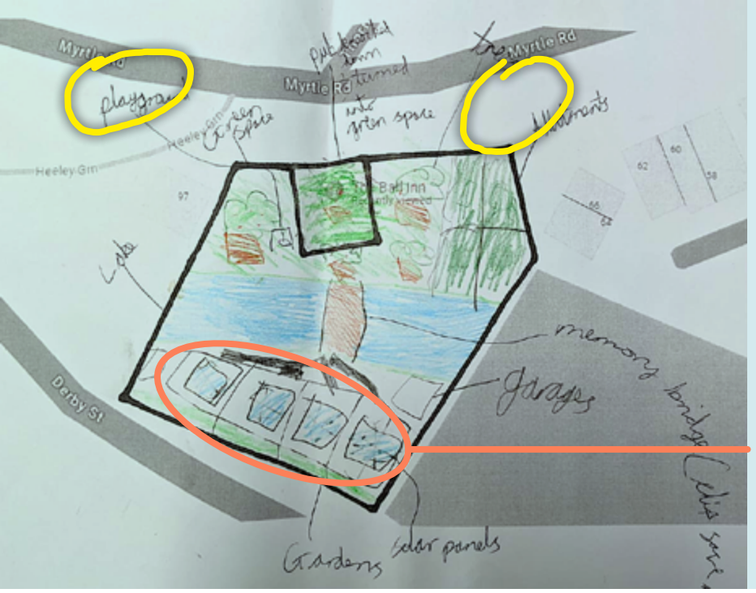
We designed a range of workshop activities, allowing children to explore their understanding and ideas about sustainable transitions in relation to homes, energy, transport, and food. We conducted one workshop with younger children aged 7-11 and another with older children aged 14-17.

We used the Philosophy for Children (P4C) model – an approach to engaging young people in complex philosophical subjects like climate change and decarbonisation, encouraging them to imagine and discuss ideas for a just and fair sustainable future. The workshops were run by facilitators with expertise in P4C and in partnership with the charity Development Education Centre South Yorkshire (DECSY).

Evidence and Outputs

Our research findings revealed a gap in sustainability knowledge for envisaging sustainable futures. Children and young people are not fully equipped with the information and language they need to navigate the challenges of their generation and to attach their future visioning to.

1 Percy-Smith, B., & Burns, D. (2013). Exploring the role of children and young people as agents of change in sustainable community development. Local Environment, 18(3), 323–339.
2 Borojević, T., Petrović, N., Radaković, J. A., Glomazić, H., Radojičić, M., Milenković, N., Maletič, D., & Maletič, M. (2023). Youth participation for sustainable value creation: The role and prioritization of SDGs. Sustainability, 15(23), 16456.
3 Davies, A. R., & Hügel, S. (2021). Just adapt: Engaging disadvantaged young people in planning for climate adaptation. Politics and Governance, 9(2), 100–111.
4 PPercy-Smith, B., & Burns, D. (2013). Exploring the role of children and young people as agents of change in sustainable community development. Local Environment, 18(3), 323–339.
5 Davies, A. R., & Hügel, S. (2021). Just adapt: Engaging disadvantaged young people in planning for climate adaptation. Politics and Governance, 9(2), 100–111.
6 Department for Education (2022). Sustainability and climate change: A strategy for the education and children's services systems. GOV.UK.
7 Department for Education (2025). Curriculum and Assessment Review: Interim report [Independent report].
8 South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority. (2025) Corporate plan 2025–2028.
9 Parsons, M., Godden, N. J., Henrique, K. P., Tschakert, P., Gonda, N., Atkins, E., Steen, K., & Crease, R. P. (2025) Participatory approaches to climate adaptation, resilience, and mitigation: A systematic review.



In thieir designs, all groups included individual house plots with both private and shared gardens, and used the land available to maximise the number of families living in the space. Many included energy or food production as well as recreation space.

Every group created housing units that were equal sizes to promote fairness and reduce conflict between neighbours

Green and Blue spaces were popular design elements

The young people could identify how jobs might change in planning and construction. For example, using eco-friendly materials. When asked to imagine what jobs they would like and dislike, they valued creative roles:

"If you are a plumber you are going into people's home and dealing with dirty pipes. Architects and painters get to create something"

Specifically, our findings reveal that children and young people consistently demonstrate high levels of environmental awareness, with fairness and equality and safety and protection emerging as strong shared values in young people's imagined sustainable futures. Health and well-being are considered a priority, and they imagine a world where communal benefits are shared, and privacy is protected.

However, across all age groups, there was a lack of clarity about how their social values could translate impactfully into real-world future roles or careers, with some misconceptions emerging about what certain jobs involve. Few students had the scaffolding or practical insights to anchor their creative ideas to. They responded positively to the lesson stimuli (interactive activities), demonstrating value in feeling reliably informed and engaged.

The P4C approach supported meaningful dialogue, enabling students to change their minds and reach consensus. Overall, the workshops reveal a deep appetite for climate learning that is practical, empowering, creative, and relatable to their own lives and futures.

What does this mean for the region?

Our research immersed school pupils in climate futures thinking using a child-led pedagogical model (P4C). It provides pilot evidence for schools and trusts to activate SYMCA's commitment to giving young people a chance to shape a just climate transition.

This pilot project made it abundantly clear that improving environmental education is fundamental for the current generation of children and all future generations to follow.

We found out that there is a critical gap between the development of young people's pro-environmental values and the educational structure needed to support and activate meaningful action (aka the value-action gap).

Based on our research findings, we propose the following recommendations for regional policymakers and education leaders:

- **Practical school-based action:** there is scope for regional innovation through actors who already operate in the regional educational environment, embedding climate futures thinking through, for example: school enrichment activities, partnerships with local climate initiatives, youth-led demonstrations and other whole school approaches.
- **Enrichment activity planning:** prioritise practical action-based learning tied to real-world sustainability scenarios and challenges.
- **Careers advice:** increase information on green career pathways and skills development.
- **Embedding the youth voice into regional climate strategies:** through the use of age-appropriate, guided learning approaches and aligning outputs with national DfE sustainability commitments.
- **Co-production workshops and initiatives:** running co-production activities with the youth sector could be prioritised to encourage system-level change. Developmentally, children possess an openness that sees possibility rather than limitation, a quality that can be celebrated and actively harnessed, as demonstrated through pedagogical models such as P4C.
- **Scaling up across South Yorkshire:** the pilot workshop model used in this research could be rolled out across South Yorkshire.

Next Steps

Building on the success of this pilot, there is clear potential for the model to be scaled and adapted across regions, by embedding well facilitated, child-led spaces within broader sustainability and education policy design for just transitions. Sustaining momentum and embedding practices beyond individual pilots involves:

- **Regional connectedness:** bringing together regional actors, including schools, multi-academy trusts, local authorities, youth sector organisations and SYMCA to explore mechanisms for systematically integrating climate strategies and school-level Climate Action Plans.
- **Building and sustaining momentum:** embedding the youth voice into visioning for a sustainable future - moving regional climate planning beyond tokenistic consultation and into sustained active participation.
- **Co-production:** support schools in co-producing their climate strategies with their young stakeholders – remember that futures thinking is a developmental necessity for children and young people.
- **Further research:** produce further empirical insights into what mechanisms can work regionally to include the youth voice in meaningful translation of values to action; or explore longitudinally the impact of child agency in sustainability transitions.
- **Interdisciplinary research collaborations:** sociology (futures thinking), psychology (developmental and cognitive), geography (urban and regional), environmental (science and policy), brought together to maximise impact.
- **Continuity:** secure funding to repeat or extend workshops, embedding P4C methods into teacher CPD or to co-design toolkits for schools.

By continuing to explore through an interdisciplinary lens, research can illuminate the power of curious young minds, to shape a shared and just vision for a sustainable South Yorkshire.

What Young People Imagined for a Sustainable Future

Themes emerging from primary and secondary school workshops

Safe, Protective and Future Ready Spaces

Children prioritised feeling safe and protected, and their building designs incorporated practical solutions for future climate resilience.

"In Pakistan there are lots of floods, so if you have a flat roof you can go to it when there's a flood!"

"In Nigeria, there are flat roofs and when it is hot my grandmother sleeps on the roof."

Some children didn't realise roofs could be flat and worried about falling off. This led to a funny discussion about how not to fall off your roof! New ideas and concepts were shared.

Fairness and Equality

When designing space use, strong values were expressed around fairness and equality.

When presenting their designs for the old pub site, one group said they want their homes to look and feel the same with red brick of equal sizes:

"We don't want new houses to stand out"

The group explained that this is to promote fairness and reduce conflict and jealousy between neighbours, they are concerned about getting burgled and it's important to them that the houses look and feel like a normal house, not a futuristic eco house.

Mixed-Use Community Benefits and Protected Privacy

Young people imagine a world that balances shared communal benefits, healthy lifestyle and protects privacy.

Recurring features in the children's designs include:

- **Green and blue spaces (gardens, allotments for healthy food, eco-ponds)**
- **Renewable energy generation (solar panels and wind turbines)**
- **Private homes alongside shared gardens (blending individual plots and communal areas)**
- **Relaxation and wellbeing spaces (chairs, TVs and books - the most common rooftop suggestion)**

Spaces were framed as multi-purpose, fun and productive, reflecting an intuitive sense of fairness while ensuring personal space, and demonstrating a clear level of eco-literacy.

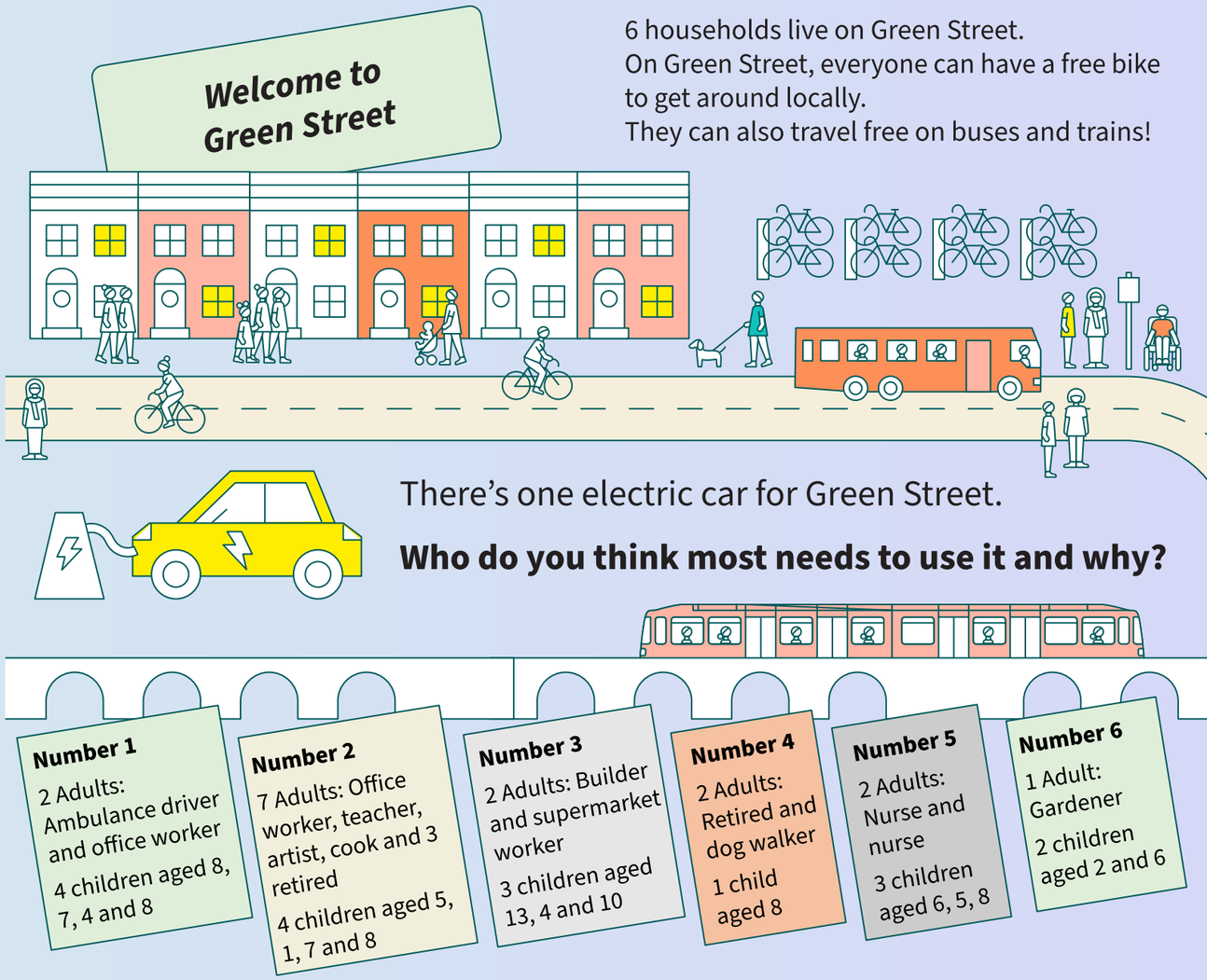
Collaborative Problem Solving and Consensus Building

Discussions demonstrated strong skills in collective decision-making and practical problem solving, negotiating design choices thoughtfully:

Recurring features in the children's designs include:

- Checking for consensus: ***"so, do we all agree?"*** and questioning decisions ***"I think we should retrofit that"*** - ***"Why, what have you got against rebuild?".***
- Debating the role of private and communal gardens, linking spaces to wellbeing: ***"it's a mindful thing to have your own space".***
- Assessing materials and sustainability, proposing practical, recyclable solutions: ***"How do we keep costs down?"*** - ***"we could buy our curtains off eBay".***

Example Exercise - Who needs the car?



6 households live on Green Street.
On Green Street, everyone can have a free bike to get around locally.
They can also travel free on buses and trains!

There's one electric car for Green Street.

Who do you think most needs to use it and why?

Number 1
2 Adults: Ambulance driver and office worker
4 children aged 8, 7, 4 and 8

Number 2
7 Adults: Office worker, teacher, artist, cook and 3 retired
4 children aged 5, 1, 7 and 8

Number 3
2 Adults: Builder and supermarket worker
3 children aged 13, 4 and 10

Number 4
2 Adults: Retired and dog walker
1 child aged 8

Number 5
2 Adults: Nurse and nurse
3 children aged 6, 5, 8

Number 6
1 Adult: Gardener
2 children aged 2 and 6

What we heard:

I think number 2. They are a big family and would take a lot of space. Also there are a lot of old people there who need support.

6 because she is a single mum and needs it for her kids

No one because they can all use the busses and trains for free

2 because they have a big family and one is disabled

1 Because one of the adults is an ambulance driver.

5 because the hospital worker for example could use the car for an emergency (a surgery or something) and the other people could use the busses, bikes and trains

4 because the 3 cannot drive since they're old or are a kid. They can't take busses or trains because it'll take forever to get to their destination

I think number 1 needs the car because one of them is an ambulance worker and if there's an emergency she needs to get there straightaway

4 because the old people can not walk very well so a car could help them get to places quicker.

2 or 6 because 2 is a big family with many children and 6 is a single mother with young children

4 because they can't walk fast and they are very old but the other people can go on buses, ride trains and ride on free bikes and the old people need to take their child and drop them off at school

6 because they don't have a high paying job

4 needs it because middle aged people can ride a bike