Climate resilience in West Sussex

Adapting and building resilience to climate change in the local area

By Louise Downey, Sustainability Team Leader

Adapting education settings to the changing climate and building resilience is essential for the health, safety and wellbeing of children and young people, as well as staff, and to avoid detrimental effects on educational outcomes. We know that West Sussex will continue to be impacted by changes to the climate, with hotter, drier summers, warmer, wetter winters and more frequent and intense weather extremes. The Met Office provides accurate and useful information on the impacts of climate change.

In the summer, this means increased exposure to high temperatures, and the associated risks in schools of overheating classrooms. Excess heat can make learning difficult and trigger health issues. Prolonged hot, dry conditions can lead to water shortages and increase the risk of wildfires. These hot, dry conditions are increasingly likely to be followed by periods of intense rainfall, which can result in flash flooding as the ground is too hard and dry for the water to be absorbed quickly enough.

Warmer, wetter winters make flooding more likely, frequent and severe. Our coastal towns and cities are particularly at risk from the changing climate, due to the combination of geology, river flooding, coastal erosion and sea level rise, which make these areas especially susceptible to flooding. Flooding can have a major impact on schools. In the summer of 2007, flooding in England resulted in widespread school closures that amounted to 400,000 lost pupil school days, at an estimated economic cost of £12m. More frequent and intense weather extremes, including storms and high winds, can cause damage to buildings and school grounds and make travel treacherous.

A key element of an effective climate action plan is understanding the climate adaptation requirements for your school and site and identifying actions you can take to improve climate resilience. The Met Office Local Authority Climate Explorer can provide estimates of future climate-related disruptions in your area (for example, an increase in the number of summer days above 25°C), and the free resources on Sustainability Support for Schools can help settings with adaptation and resilience planning.

UK Climate Risk have produced a free climate change adaptation factsheet for children, explaining in simple language what can be done to help places, people, and nature be ready for climate change. The Council and the University of Brighton have developed a Climate Vulnerability Index (CVI) tool to highlight population characteristics, which may influence a community's susceptibility to climate impacts and ability to adapt and react in emergency situations. The CVI also identifies key environmental data on future climate conditions, including increased temperatures, air quality, flood risk, and land cover.

Has your school been affected by flooding, overheating, extreme weather or other climate change impacts in recent years? Is your school taking or considering any action to adapt your site and operations to improve your climate resilience? Please share your experiences with the West Sussex County Council Sustainability Team via email at sustainability@westsussex.gov.uk to help us build up an understanding of how the changing climate is affecting schools across the County and the actions that schools are taking.