

Climate Leaders' Conference

- Longitudinal follow up at three- and six-months

Author: Lee Jowett

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a longitudinal evaluation of participants who attended the Climate Leaders' Conference in March 2025, drawing on follow-up surveys completed at three and six-months after the event.

The evaluation explores the extent to which conference learning translated into sustained action, changes in professional practice, and wider institutional influence over time.

Headline findings include:

- Participants demonstrated high levels of sustained engagement at both three- and six-months post-conference.
- At three-months, 100% of respondents identified at least one action taken as a result of attending the conference; most identified multiple actions.
- At six-months, many of these actions were maintained, refined, or scaled, indicating movement from initial commitment to more embedded practice.
- Primary actions were more likely to be sustained over time than secondary or aspirational actions.
- Reported impacts increasingly shifted from individual practice at three-months to institutional and strategic influence by six-months.
- Persistent barriers included time, workload, and capacity, highlighting the importance of organisational support for climate and sustainability education.



Keynote speaker presenting

Background and Rationale

In March 2025, Sheffield Institute of Education at Sheffield Hallam University hosted a free of charge one-day conference for school leaders. The conference was attended by over 120 people. Attendees came from early years settings, schools, colleges and universities as well as local and national government. Colleagues from charities and organisations that support education settings presented in workshops and hosted stalls.

The conference consisted of keynotes from Lee Jowett, Climate and Sustainability Research Fellow ‘What the research is showing about climate and sustainability education’, examples of good practice in two different primary schools in Sheffield as well as an overview of a local Trust is approaching sustainability in a IT and finally a second Trust and their thematic approach to sustainability within their secondary curriculum. All participants participated in a workshop on building a Climate Action Plan. In the afternoon participants attended two workshops from twelve on varying themes and target ages taught. Over lunch and break participants were able to visit over 30 stalls and activities. In the final plenary participants were encouraged to reflect on their day and identify actions they would undertake.

There is growing recognition that climate and sustainability education requires more than one-off professional learning events. Meaningful impact depends on opportunities for reflection, application, and institutional embedding over time.

This evaluation responds to that challenge by exploring impact at two points:

- Three-months post-conference, capturing early action and follow-through
- Six-months post-conference, exploring sustainability and depth of change

This longitudinal approach strengthens understanding of how conference participation contributes to sustained change rather than short-term enthusiasm alone.

Aims of the Evaluation

The evaluation sought to explore:

1. Whether participants sustained engagement with climate and sustainability education over time
2. What actions were taken following the conference and how these evolved
3. The extent to which actions were followed through at three and six-months
4. Barriers and enablers influencing implementation over time
5. The longer-term value of the conference for professional practice and organisational change

Methodology

This report draws on self-reported survey data collected three-months and six-months after the conference. Online follow up surveys were distributed to all those that were willing to be contacted after the conference. Participants were contacted via email, which included actions that they had identified via their previous feedback form (April 2025). Surveys were a mixture of quantitative and qualitative free-text responses and were left open for six weeks after each initial email contact. See appendix 1 for survey questions.

This study was conducted in accordance with Sheffield Hallam University's research ethics procedures and received approval from the Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee (reference number ER78418637).

Participants were asked to identify up to three actions they committed to following the conference and to rate the success of follow-up on each action (Excellent, Good, Some follow-up, Poor follow-up, or No follow-up). At three-months, a total of 21 attendees completed the survey (just over 20% of those that agreed to be contacted after the event). At six-months, a total of 18 attendees completed the survey. Due to surveys being conducted anonymously, it's not possible to confirm how many of these are repeat surveys, however it can be assumed to be a relatively high number.

While responses cannot be assumed to be fully representative of all attendees, they provide valuable insight into sustained impacts among engaged participants. These findings indicate contribution to change rather than direct causation.

Participant Profile

100% of respondents reported they were still in the same role as when they attended the conference.

This provides confidence that reported changes reflect application of conference learning, rather than changes driven by role transition.

Key Findings

Commitment to Action

In the three-month survey, participants demonstrated a high level of commitment to post-conference action: 100% (21/21) identified a primary action, 90.5% (19/21) identified a second action and 85.7% (18/21) identified a third action. This suggests the conference successfully supported participants in identifying multiple, meaningful next steps, rather than isolated or symbolic actions. Across all three actions, the majority of respondents reported Good or Excellent follow-up.

Six-months after attending the conference, participants continued to demonstrate meaningful commitment to action, with many reporting that actions initiated earlier had been maintained, adapted, or embedded within their professional contexts.

While not all actions identified at three-months were sustained at the same intensity, the six-month data indicates a clear pattern of prioritisation and consolidation, with primary actions more likely to be ongoing and secondary or aspirational actions more sensitive to capacity and organisational constraints.

Participants described a shift from initial implementation towards:

- refinement of existing actions
- integration into wider organisational processes
- increased confidence in influencing colleagues and leadership

This suggests movement from short-term follow-through to longer-term practice and institutional influence.

Sustained Actions at Six-Months

At six-months post-conference participants continued to report engagement with **at least one core action** linked to their conference experience. Many described actions that had moved beyond discrete tasks to become part of **ongoing planning, curriculum development, or strategic conversations**.

Actions most likely to be sustained were those that:

- aligned with existing priorities or inspection frameworks
- had leadership support
- were embedded within formal plans or policies

A couple of quotes that supported this included:

“Finalise climate action plan.”

“Continued to support teachers and young people to take climate action in Sheffield.”

Where actions were adapted or paused, this was typically framed as **strategic reprioritisation** rather than disengagement.

Evolution of Commitments Over Time

Comparison between three- and six-month responses suggests that commitments evolved in the following ways:

- **From planning to embedding**
Early action-planning and pilots increasingly gave way to refinement, monitoring, and integration.
- **From individual practice to collective influence**
Participants more frequently referenced departmental, organisational, or institutional contexts at six-months than at three-months.

- **From confidence-building to leadership and advocacy**

Participants described greater confidence in initiating or sustaining climate and sustainability conversations with colleagues and senior leaders.

Example quotes included:

“We feel we are making excellent progress towards a number of the actions we talked about.”

“I’ve completed all three. But the key thing from now is taking actions that will make a difference.”

“Increased the profile and importance of sustainability education within our Climate Action Plan.”

Factors Supporting Sustained Commitment

Participants identified several factors that supported ongoing action at six-months:

- Clear alignment with organisational goals or strategies
- Opportunities to share responsibility with colleagues
- Continued access to networks, resources, or peer support
- Legitimacy gained from attending a recognised professional learning event

These enabling conditions appeared to play a key role in whether early commitments were sustained over time.

Example quotes included:

“[we have] Increased the profile and importance of sustainability education within the Climate Action Plan.”

“We feel we are making excellent progress...”

Constraints on Sustained Action

Despite continued commitment, participants reported persistent constraints, including:

- Time and workload pressures
- Competing curriculum or organisational priorities
- Limited funding or capacity to scale initiatives

Example quotes included:

“Staff time and funding.”

“The main barrier is the lack of time/resources/money and getting this as a whole school effort rather than just one person leading it.”

“I can’t obtain a form for counting carbon without registering with one of the many companies offering such a form to schools.”

“As above re ICT shutdown, feel like limited knowledge in area to push for change.”

These constraints were more prominent at six-months than at three-months, reinforcing the importance of whole institution approaches to sustaining climate and sustainability education.

Overall, the six-month follow-up indicates that the conference supported participants to move beyond short-term intention towards selective, prioritised, and more deeply embedded action.

Rather than signalling a decline in commitment, the six-month data reflects a maturing of practice, where participants focused effort on actions most likely to be sustainable within their specific contexts.

Nature of Actions Taken

Qualitative analysis of responses shows actions clustered into several key themes:

1. Curriculum and pedagogy

- Embedding climate and sustainability into lessons or schemes of work
- Trialling place-based, action-focused approaches
- Linking climate education to existing curriculum priorities

2. Institutional and strategic action

- Developing or refining climate or sustainability action plans
- Contributing to organisational strategy or policy discussions
- Aligning with national initiatives (e.g. Let’s Go Zero)

3. Skills and knowledge development

- Carbon foot-printing and carbon literacy work
- Increased confidence in leading climate education discussions
- Sharing learning with colleagues

4. Networks and collaboration

- Ongoing contact with conference delegates or speakers
- Sharing resources and examples of practice post-conference

Barriers to Further Progress

Participants were clear about constraints on their ability to take action. The most frequently reported barriers were time and workload pressures, curriculum and accountability demands, limited funding or resources and challenges in securing leadership or organisational buy-in.

The presence of these barriers highlights the importance of institutional support and follow-up structures alongside professional learning.



Workshop activities

Discussion

With 100% of three-month respondents identifying at least one action, and many reporting continued engagement at six-months, the findings indicate a strong foundation for sustained impact among engaged participants.

Three-months after the event, participants reported clear evidence of sustained engagement, with most having implemented at least one meaningful action and many working across multiple areas of practice.

Findings suggest the conference was particularly effective in:

- Supporting practical, context-specific action planning
- Building confidence and legitimacy for climate education leadership
- Creating networks that extended beyond the event

At six-months, success is less about completing multiple actions and more about whether climate and sustainability education has begun to influence ongoing practice, planning, or decision-making. The six-month findings suggest that, for many participants, initial actions have either been embedded, strategically prioritised, or integrated into wider organisational processes.

However, the evaluation also reinforces that time, capacity, and institutional conditions remain critical factors in determining longer-term impact.

The impacts identified through this evaluation are best understood as *capacity-building and enabling impacts*, supporting participants to act with greater confidence, legitimacy, and strategic clarity. In several cases, this has translated into early structural or institutional change, while in others it has laid groundwork for longer-term transformation.

Recommendations

These findings are particularly relevant for school and trust leaders, local authorities, universities, and funders seeking evidence of how professional learning can support sustained climate and sustainability education action over time.

For future conferences

- Continue to build in structured action-planning and prioritisation
- Continue provide post-event follow-up opportunities such as eBulletins and EcoTeachMeets
- Support peer learning communities over time for example communities of practice

For institutions

- Recognise climate education as core work, not additional workload
- Provide leadership endorsement and time
- Align climate action with existing strategies and frameworks

For funders and partners

- Invest in longitudinal support and evaluation
- Enable multi-stage engagement rather than single events
- Support whole-institution change pathways

Conclusion

This longitudinal evaluation provides evidence that the Climate Leaders' Conference supported meaningful and sustained impact over at least six-months.

The findings reinforce the value of combining high-quality professional learning with follow-up, networks, and institutional support to enable climate and sustainability education to move from intention to embedded practice.



Participants listening to keynote speakers

Appendix 1 – survey at three- and six-months

1. Are you still in the same role as when you attended the conference?

Yes/No

2. If no, please can you describe the change?

3. What were your reasons for attending the conference?

Thinking about to the 1-3 actions you intended to do after the day...

4a. How successful have you been in undertaking the actions (action 1)?

Action _____

- Excellent follow up
- Good follow up
- Adequate follow up
- Poor follow up
- No follow up

4b. How successful have you been in undertaking the actions (action 2)?

Action _____

- Excellent follow up
- Good follow up
- Adequate follow up
- Poor follow up
- No follow up

4c. How successful have you been in undertaking the actions (action 3)?

Action _____

- Excellent follow up
- Good follow up
- Adequate follow up
- Poor follow up
- No follow up

4d. Comment on any additional actions (if more than 3 were mentioned) (free text)

5. Could you briefly describe how actions have gone that you have undertaken since the conference?
(free text)

6. What barriers (if any) have there been to be able to undertake your actions? (free text)
7. Are there any additional actions which you have undertaken which you hadn't considered on the day? (free text)
8. Are there any other comments you would like to share?
9. Would you like to be entered into the prize draw for a gift voucher?

Yes/No (if yes please include your email address, which will be removed before data analysis)

Thank you for your time completing the survey.