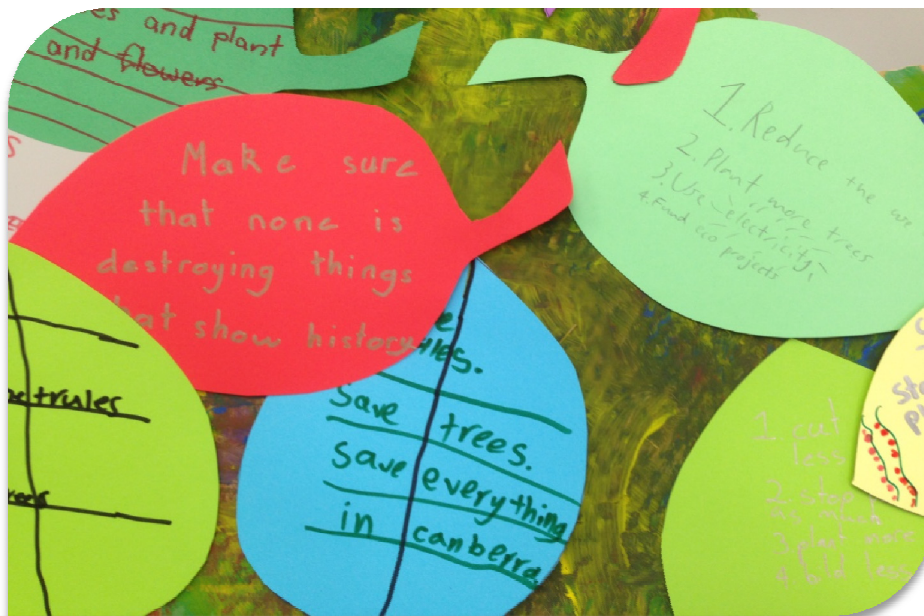


TALKING WITH CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT



Alasdair Roy
Gabrielle McKinnon
Nicole Hennessy
Julia Pitts
Toni Hassan

Office of the ACT Children & Young People Commissioner
ACT Human Rights Commission
Level 4 12 Moore Street
Canberra ACT 2601
www.ACTkids.act.gov.au
ACTkids@act.gov.au

ACT Children & Young People Commissioner © 2015
First Edition ISBN: 978-0-9942498-1-4

PART I: INTRODUCTION

This consultation was conducted by the ACT Children & Young People Commissioner (CYPC) and staff, together with a staff member of the ACT Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability & the Environment (OCSE). The consultation was developed in partnership with the OCSE as a way of engaging with children and young people about the environment and sustainability, understanding how they conceptualise environmental issues and seeking their views to contribute to the work of the OCSE.

ROLE OF THE CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE COMMISSIONER

The CYPC is an independent statutory office created under the *ACT Human Rights Commission Act 2005*. The current Commissioner is Alasdair Roy. He is assisted by two advisers.

The CYPC has a number of roles, including:

- Consulting with children and young people.¹
- Providing advice to government and community agencies about how to improve services for children and young people.
- Resolving complaints and concerns about services for children and young people.

In undertaking the above functions, the CYPC is committed to the right of children and young people to participate in decisions and actions that affect them.

Children and young people live in our communities. They go to school, they use public transport, they shop, they make friends, and they play. And, like adults, children and young people have the right to have a say about what happens in their communities. Despite this, children and young people are frequently excluded from discussions about issues that affect them.

The participation of children and young people is not simply the concern of domestic or international law, or the aspirational views of some adults. Children and young people, themselves, are very much aware that they are excluded from mainstream decision making, and that their voice and views are frequently invisible or ignored.

In a 2012 survey undertaken by the CYPC about what is the worst thing about being a young person in Australia, almost a quarter of young people wrote about *not being listened to or taken seriously by adults*.

ROLE OF THE COMMISSIONER FOR SUSTAINABILITY & THE ENVIRONMENT

The Commissioner for Sustainability & the Environment is an independent statutory position established by the *Commissioner for Sustainability & the Environment Act 1993* (CSE Act). The current Commissioner is Anne Lyons Wright. She is assisted by a small team. At the time of the consultation the Commissioner was Robert Neil.

The Commissioner undertakes the following functions and activities:

- Investigating complaints about the management of the environment by the Territory or a territory authority; and issues relating to ecologically sustainable development in the ACT.
- Conducting investigations as directed by the Minister.

¹ A 'child' is any person up to the age of 12 years, and a 'young person' is any person over 12 years but not yet 18. These terms are used throughout this report so as to recognise and respect the differences between the two groups.

- Conducting on the Commissioner's own initiative, investigations into actions of an agency where those actions would have a substantial impact on the environment of the ACT.
- Delivering State of Environment Reports.

In carrying out his role the Commissioner for Sustainability & the Environment must take in to account the objects of the CSE Act, including to:

- Ensure regular and consistent reporting on matters relating to the condition and management of the environment in the Territory.
- Ensure regular reporting on progress towards ecologically sustainable development by the Territory and Territory authorities.
- Encourage decision making that facilitates ecologically sustainable development.
- Enhance knowledge and understanding of issues relating to ecologically sustainable development and the environment.
- Encourage sound environmental practices and procedures to be adopted by the Territory and Territory authorities as a basis for ecologically sustainable development.

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE & THE ENVIRONMENT

Just like adults, children and young people live in, interact with and think about their environment on a daily basis. Despite this, children and young people traditionally have little say in the decisions being made by adults about the environment and on a local, national, and international level.

The 'state of the environment' is a topic of significant community and political debate, and it is important for children and young people to be able to have their say, and to have their views taken into account.

CONSULTATION SUMMARY

Through this consultation, we sought to understand the perspective of children and young people on environmental issues, including how they conceptualise the environment, and to gauge whether students were concerned or anxious about environmental issues. The consultation also aimed to find out how children and young people conceptualised solutions to environmental problems, and whether they were aware of things that could be done local and broader levels to address environmental issues.

In addition, children and young people were given the opportunity to provide their views directly to the Commissioner for Sustainability & the Environment about what they would like him to do to better protect the environment in the ACT.

More than 80 students aged 9-10 were engaged as part of the consultation.

In summary, the students demonstrated a broad and, overall, sophisticated understanding of the environment, including aspects of the natural and built environments, ecosystems, and the place of people, culture and history within the environment. Overall, the students were aware of environmental concerns such as pollution, loss of natural habitats and biodiversity, but did not express anxiety or distress about the environment, and did not show a particular awareness of, or focus on, climate change. The students had lots of ideas about protecting the environment, including strategies they could implement themselves at home and at school. They provided a range of thoughts and messages for the Commissioner to consider in carrying out his functions in protecting the environment in the ACT.

PART II: TALKING WITH CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

In 2015, the CYPC approached Ngunnawal Primary School to seek their assistance for the CYPC to conduct a consultation with school students about the environment. Ngunnawal Primary School is a government school in Ngunnawal ACT, with students from preschool to year 6. This is the first consultation that the CYPC has conducted at Ngunnawal Primary School, and welcomed the opportunity to engage with this school.

In developing the consultation plan, the CYPC had useful discussions with Ngunnawal school teachers and staff, to refine the scope and methodology of the consultation, and to identify appropriate groups of students who might participate. It was agreed that year 4 would be targeted for the consultation with all four classes in that year group being involved. Prior to the consultation, the CYPC provided a proposal to the school which was accepted.

THE CONSULTATION

The consultation was facilitated by the Children & Young People Commissioner, his Senior Adviser Gabrielle McKinnon, intern Nicole Hennessy and Julia Pitts, Senior Manager with the OCSE. It took place over two days on 17 and 19 March 2014 at Ngunnawal Primary School.

A total of 81 students participated in the consultation, ranging in age from 9-10 years old, in four classes, with roughly even numbers of girls and boys. The classroom teachers remained in the room for all sessions. They did not participate in the discussions but were available to provide support for students if needed.

Written comments and notes from activities were collected and photographs were taken (with participants and their parent's consent).

The consultations with the four classes followed the same pattern; the introductory session on one day and the substantive consultation later in the same week.

INTRODUCTORY SESSION

The first session (45 minutes) was intended to explain the purpose of the consultation, and to allow participants and facilitators to get to know each other.

The session began with some fun icebreakers games to learn more about participants and their interests. Facilitators and participants stood together in a circle and took turns throwing a ball of wool to each other while they shared their name and something they liked, creating a connected web between them which was then unwound as the facilitators tried to remember their names and interests. As well as having fun, and learning about each other, the game helped to establish the dynamic of the children as the experts about each other and their world, with the facilitators listening to and learning from the children.

After the icebreaker game, the facilitators gave an overview of the issues to be explored. The facilitators explained that participation in the consultation was completely voluntary. The facilitators emphasised that this was not a test of knowledge, and that there were no right or wrong answers. It was noted that their teacher was available to talk to them or assist if they had any concerns or worries about the consultation.

The facilitators then worked with participants as they each created an artwork of planet Earth using a shaving cream marbling technique, which was fun and messy, and allowed lots of opportunities for interaction and casual discussion with students about how they viewed their world. The facilitators explained to the participants that they would be using these artworks in an activity as part of the main consultation session later that week.

CONSULTATION SESSION

The consultation session (1 hour with each group) focused on understanding of what the word ‘environment’ means to children, the ideas they have for helping to protect the environment and any messages they have for the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment.

BRAINSTORM: WHAT IS ‘THE ENVIRONMENT’ & HOW WELL ARE WE PROTECTING IT?

Facilitators firstly asked the participants as a group what the word ‘environment’ means to them. Participants brainstormed and called out answers. One facilitator took the role of scribe and recorded ideas on the whiteboard. Participants appeared to enjoy and be engaged in this process, and came up with many answers to these questions, building on the ideas of other participants until they were satisfied that all aspects of the environment had been identified.

The facilitators then asked the participants if they think that adults are doing well, or not so well, at protecting the environment. Participants were invited to share their views on this with the group and were asked to ‘vote’ with either a thumbs-up, thumbs-down or identify that they were not sure or felt that adults were doing some things well and some things not so well.

PLANET ACTIVITY: IDEAS FOR PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

When all the ideas had been recorded in the group brainstorm activity, facilitators invited participants to move to their desks for an activity involving the planets that they made in the initial introductory session. Facilitators provided the children with their own marbled planet Earth, black paper and metallic pens and textas.

Participants were invited to stick their planet onto the paper and then use the pens to write their ideas for helping to protect the environment. Facilitators circulated and chatted to participants about their ideas as they worked.

The participants were very enthusiastic about this activity and it provided the opportunity for facilitators to speak with them about what they see as important in protecting the environment.

Once all participants had completed this activity they were invited to stand in front of the rest of the group if they wished, to read their responses. Many students in each class volunteered to speak and share their ideas.

MESSAGE TO THE COMMISSIONER FOR SUSTAINABILITY & THE ENVIRONMENT

In the final activity the facilitators provided participants with colourful leaf shapes and textas. The facilitators reminded participants of the Commissioner’s role. The facilitators explained that the Commissioner is interested in hearing about what they think could be done in the ACT to protect the environment and asked participants to write a message to him on their leaf. Once participants had done this they were invited to stick their leaf on to a cardboard tree.



WRAP UP

The facilitators thanked the students for their participation in the consultation and noted that they would be creating a report, and would come back and talk to the students about it when finalised.

Participants were also given a small gift, which had been approved by the school, to thank them for their time and contribution.

PART III: THE VIEWS OF CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

All four groups of children actively participated in the consultation and appeared to be excited to have adults come to talk with them about their views. Participants were insightful and passionate about the environment and provided many suggestions for helping to protect the environment.

WHAT THE WORD 'ENVIRONMENT' MEANS

In the group brainstorm activity, the participants identified a range of components of the environment, with many of the same themes emerging in each group. The facilitators did not prompt these discussions, allowing participants to come up with their own ideas and to build on each other's ideas.

ANIMALS

Participants from all four groups identified animals as being a major part of the environment. Animals were the first concept to be explored in all groups, and the children came up with a wide range of different animals. Participants also recognised human beings as part of the environment. Words used by the children included:

"Animals"
"Birds"
"Fish"
"Insects"
"Pets"
"Tassie devils"
"Frogs"
"Bugs"
"Elephants"
"Endangered animals"
"Kookaburras"
"Polar bears"
"Sharks"
"Biodiversity"
"People"
"Us - we are all part of the environment"
"Teachers".

PLANTS/VEGETATION

All groups of children spoke about plants and vegetation as being part of the environment:

"Plants"
"Trees"
"Flowers"
"Grass"
"Bushes"
"Fruit on trees".

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The participants identified that there are different components of the environment, with the natural environment being one such component. All groups of participants spoke of the natural environment, ranging from the local area to the broader solar system and universe. Words used by the participants included:

"Natural environment"
"Habitats"
"Rainforests"
"Ice glacier"
"Ocean"
"Rivers"
"Bushlands"
"Rocks"
"Dirt"
"Oil"
"Mountains"
"Jungles"
"Sun"
"Solar system"
"Planets"
"Universe"
"Everyone and everything"
"Nature".

BUILT ENVIRONMENT

All groups of participants identified aspects of the built environment and many noted the distinction between natural and man-made environment during the group discussion. Words used by participants included:

"Man-made environment"
"Buildings"
"Schools"
"Houses"
"Gardens"
"Parks"
"Playgrounds"
"Roads"
"Rubbish, litter".

CULTURAL & HISTORICAL

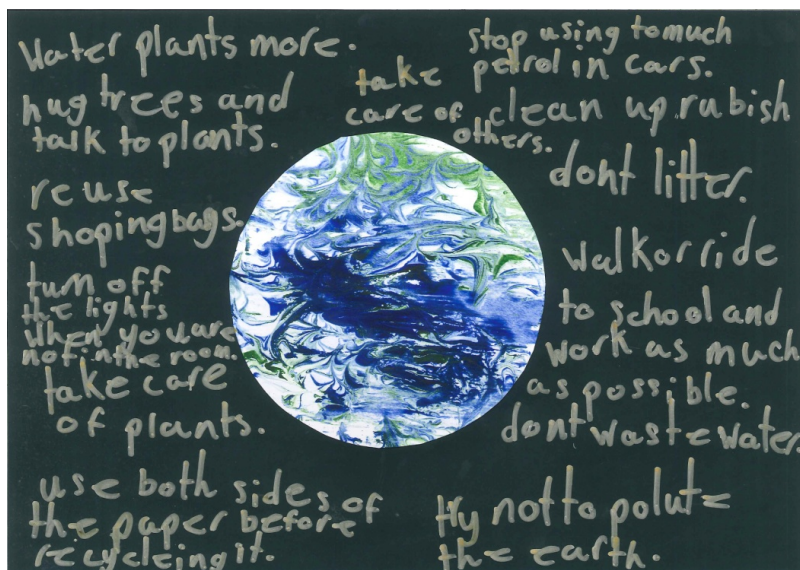
A small number of participants identified cultural and historical aspects of the environment as being important:

"History"
"Ancient buildings and history"
"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands".

HOW WELL ARE WE PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT?

Following this brainstorm activity the groups were asked if they think adults are doing well, or not so well, at helping to protect the environment. There were a range of answers given, and a number of participants expressed concerns, particularly about the destruction of animal habitats, and species becoming endangered. However, a majority of participants indicated that they thought adults were doing well or 'ok' at protecting the environment. Participants did not express specific concerns about climate change.

WHAT WE CAN DO TO PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT?



In the planet activity, participants identified a range of strategies and ideas for helping to protect the environment, and some consistent themes emerged from the groups of participants.

These are set out below. We have used the words written by participants but have corrected spelling to assist understanding.

REDUCE POLLUTION

All groups identified reducing pollution as a priority to help better protect the environment. Participants provided a range of strategies for minimising pollution. Responses included:

"Don't litter"

"Clean up!"

"Keep Australia clean"

"Put rubbish in the bin"

"Don't dump anything in the water"

"Decrease pollution"

"Do the three R's - reduce, reuse and recycle"

"Recycle, it's vital"

"Stop putting things down the drain"

"Keep waters clean"

"Keep the school clean"

"Don't put trash in the lake"

"Stop poisoning seas"

"Tube to suck up all the garbage, litter, pollution and oil!"

"No radiation"

Instead of sending dirty fumes into the atmosphere, clean them first".

SAVING ENERGY & REDUCING CARBON FOOTPRINT

Participants identified a range of ideas for saving energy and reducing use of non renewable fuels:



"Stop using so much petrol"
"Never waste too much energy"
"Drive electric cars"
"People start walking places"
"Use bikes or walk or scooter"
"Turn off the lights when you are not in the room"
"Walk or ride to school and work as much as possible"
"Stop using greenhouse gases"
"Try to have solar panels on top of schools"
"Use wind energy"
"Use less oil in cars, use gas or other fuels".

PROTECT PLANTS AND ANIMALS

Participants in each group identified protecting plants and animals and their habitats as a central strategy for protecting the environment. The participants identified a range of ways which we can do this, including:

"Don't cut down trees"
"Don't kill animals"
"We need to make a fair amount of trees for animals and us"
"Let's plant more trees when we chop some down"
"Planting trees to help the world"
"Help animals that are coming extinct"
"Trees and plants make oxygen"
"Recycling paper so we can use it again instead of cutting down trees"
"Give plants sun, water and happiness"
"Water plants more"
"Make habitats for animals"
"Build nests for birds"
"Making sure animals have food to eat and somewhere to live (like a habitat)"
"Protect animals in the ocean and don't trap them"
"Stop killing animals because you're scared of them"
"Protect all animals, even pests"
"Don't step on ants"
"Don't kill animals, help them"
"Don't kill bees"
"Start saving sharks"
"Help Tasmanian devils"
"Make animals have more babies"
"Keep animals safe for the environment"
"Make sure you don't step on good things, so you save lots of things in Canberra".

PREVENTING FIRES

Participants also showed a strong concern about the effect of bushfires on the environment, and many identified steps for preventing fires:

"No smoking"
"No fires"
"Keep the fires away"
"Don't have bbqs because it can set fire to dry grass and start a fire"
"Start doing more things about fires"
"Don't smoke around trees".



SAVING WATER

Participants also identified the importance of conserving water:

"Don't waste water by leaving the tap on"
"Save water"
"Don't waste water"
"Try to save the water by not polluting the water"
"Don't use so much water".

PROTECT PEOPLE & CULTURES

A small number of participants highlighted the importance of helping people and protecting cultural aspects of the environment. Strategies which were identified to do this were:

"Take care of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands"
"Take care of ourselves and others"
"Help people in Canberra"
"Everyone needs a life"
"Save people by helping them"
"Help people have shelter food and drinks"
"Be good and nice to other people".

HEALTHY BEHAVIOURS

Interestingly, a number of participants in different groups identified healthy behaviours which they believed may help to protect the environment. Increasing fitness and reducing the use of drugs was an answer which occurred many times across the groups. Participants saw links between healthy activity; being active outdoors being related to appreciating and protecting the environment. Some also connected responsible behaviour (avoiding drugs/smoking and alcohol) with looking after the environment. Responses included:

"Be fit"
"Be active"
"Be healthy and strong"

"Get fit at the gym"
"Get healthy food"
"Stop watching tv and start cleaning up"
"Don't smoke"
"Play outside more"
"Stop using drugs"
"Stop selling drugs"
"Don't get drunk".

LISTEN TO CHILDREN

Some participants noted the importance of children having a voice on environmental issues:

"Please listen to us kids, we have brains. Adults let's work together to help our environment"
"Listen to kids because they have rights"
"Stand up for ourselves"
"Share your ideas with people".



MESSAGE TO THE COMMISSIONER FOR SUSTAINABILITY & THE ENVIRONMENT

The final activity involved the children writing a personal message to the Commissioner. They told the Commissioner what he could do to better protect local environments in Canberra. Some participants reframed the activity to be a message about what they would do if they were the Commissioner for a day. Responses were varied but with similar themes to the planet activity.

Messages written by participants to Commissioner Robert (Bob) Neil² included:

"Hi Bob, listen to kids and adults so they might give you ideas"

"Hi Bob, I think you can make the environment better"



² Following this consultation, the Commissioner for Sustainability & the Environment has changed, and is now Anne Lyons Wright.

"If I was boss of the environment I would help animals that are nearly extinct"

"Make sure that no one is destroying things that show history"

"Don't waste water"

"Don't cut down trees"

"Plant more plants and trees and grass and help nature more with things. Thank you"

"Help animals and eggs hatch so they don't become extinct"

"Don't cut down trees. Help endangered species of animals. Don't litter"

"Stop using too much petrol in your car"

"Bob don't cut down as much trees down"

"Plant plants. Care for animals"

"Make sure that you help the trees"

"Bob look after plants, animals and living things"

"To Bob, plant more plants, more houses to live, more cities!!"

"Hey Bob listen to kids more"

"Dear Bob, you can try to protect animals and the ocean and the plants and air"

"Dear Bob if anyone is doing the wrong things can you tell them off and fix the problem? Thank you for your work"

"You should get a bigger team. Stop people chopping down a lot of trees"

"Hi Bob please make sure that the environment is safe. Please make sure you take care"

"Hi Bob I think we should look after electricity and nature"

"Dear Bob, do something about adults smoking because if you put it out in a car and chuck it out it could cause a fire!"

"Hi Bob can you please grow more plants and stop people from putting trash in lakes? Thank you"

"Keep the world safe. Don't kill the animals please"

"I think that Bob is a very good man"

"Bob is really helpful"



"Hi Bob I think you should help the people recycle"

"Hi Bob, don't kill animals and make sure you give the animals food"

"Hi Bob, minimise the fish or animals caught anywhere"

"Bob please make an indoor swimming pool. From your favourite child in the world"

"Hi, Bob can you please encourage the people of Canberra to protect the land. Thanks"



"If I was Commissioner I would tell people to stop cutting down so much trees. I would take lots of good care of the Earth heaps"

"1. Reduce the use of cars. 2. Plant more trees. 3. Use electricity. 4. Fund eco projects"

"If I was a commissioner I would tell people to not cut down trees, let your pets free, don't throw rubbish everywhere, don't kill animals, save the Earth!"

"If I was a commissioner I would save the trees and plant more trees and flowers"

"To protect every living thing".

PART IV: WHAT CAN WE DRAW FROM THE CONSULTATION?

This consultation provided useful and interesting insights into the way that children in Canberra aged 9-10 understand the environment, and the ideas they have for protecting the environment on a local and global level. The students participated in the consultation with enthusiasm and energy and seemed excited to have adults asking for and listening to their opinion about these issues.

In the brainstorming activity the participants identified a wide range of aspects of the environment. While many responses focused on identifying particular animals and plants, the range of responses show that children of this age understand the broad scope of the term and the categories it encompasses. Responses also referred to built and natural environments, habitats and local and global environments as well as outer space and the solar systems. Participants also made connections between the environment and culture and history, which was an insight not anticipated by the facilitators.

Participants identified a range of concerns about the environment, particularly relating to loss of biodiversity and animal habitats, however they did not express specific concern about climate change. While much discussion of environmental issues in the media has focused on climate change, it may be that children of this age have a greater capacity to understand and be concerned about threats to animals, rather than more abstract concepts about the long term impact of global warming.

Participants did not express significant anxiety about environmental issues, and appeared to feel empowered to do things themselves at a local level to protect the environment. They generally expressed the view that adults were doing a good or 'ok' job of protecting the environment. It is possible that in saying this, the participants were being generous to the facilitators (as adults, including a staff member from the OCSE), and avoiding being critical of them. It would be interesting to consider whether the same answer would be given if the consultation had been facilitated by peers. However, overall participants demonstrated a positive attitude to solving environmental problems.

During the planet activities participants articulated a range of strategies and ideas for helping to protect the environment. Some of these strategies are things that they could do themselves (for example ride a bike or scooter or walk to school rather than drive, watering plants, and using paper on both sides before recycling). Other strategies relied on adults to implement them (for example not cutting down trees, driving electric cars, and saving animal habitats).

As outlined above the strategies identified included ideas for reducing environmental pollution, preventing bushfires, reducing water use and reducing use of energy and non-renewable fuels. Participants also focused on protecting animals and their habitats, and protecting and helping people. Some participants talked about preserving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands, recognising the importance of cultural attachments to the land.

Participants also drew links between protecting the environment and healthy behaviours such as getting fit and active, and avoiding drugs and alcohol, suggesting that children of this age see protecting the environment as part of a more holistic approach to lifestyle and behaviour.

The messages to the Commissioner included a range of concrete suggestions and some more light-hearted responses. A number of these messages emphasised the importance of listening to children, indicating their interest in being consulted and having a voice on decisions that affect them.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

This consultation confirms the value of speaking with children about the issues that affect them. The responses highlight that children have a range of views, thoughts and concerns regarding the environment and they are willing to share these views with adults if they take the time to listen to them.

While adults might have concerns about speaking with children and young people about threats to the environment, it is clear that these children welcomed the opportunity to have their say, were positive about the future and had many ideas to contribute. Engaging children positively in protecting the environment is likely to have long term benefits and prepare them to take responsibility for the environment as adults.

The level of engagement and insight demonstrated by these groups of students indicates that children can make an important contribution to the work of the OCSE, and other agencies making decisions affecting the environment, and that they should be part of decision making processes that will shape the environment they grow up in.

While this consultation focused on the views of children age 9-10, it is likely that the children and young people of different ages will have different conceptualisations of environmental issues, and their interests and understanding of these issues will evolve over time. It would be useful to conduct similar consultations with students in later primary school and high school to understand how these perceptions change, and how they might best be engaged in decision making.

The CYPC would like to thank Ngunnawal Primary School, particularly the wonderful students who shared their time, thoughts and enthusiasm with us, and who were a pleasure to spend time with. We look forward to visiting the school again to share the results of the consultation with them.
