

# Clay Futures School Engagement



The Eden Project is an environmental education charity and a regeneration project. They have developed a range of approaches for engaging the public with the issues and opportunities that a sustainable future presents.

## Location

Five schools in the Cornish claylands and the Clay Futures Fêtes

## Aim



Ensure children were consulted on future developments in the clay area in Cornwall



Off to the ClayFuture Fête  
Photo by Sam Morgan Moore

When plans were being formulated for the Clay Futures community consultation project, it was decided to run a project specifically for primary school children. What would the issues look like from a child's perspective? What did they like about the places where they lived, and what would they like to add or change? And how, within the constraints of time and budget, could we best enable them to explore and present their ideas?

## Preparatory activities

The school engagement events were delivered as two-day workshops. Before these commenced, an invitation was sent out to head-teachers. Once the schools were booked in a member of the ClayFutures team went into school with a facilitator/artist to explain and plan the project with the school.

Other preparatory activities included taking photographs of the local area and any obvious landmarks, obtaining a giant satellite map of the village and surrounding area from the local planning department and ensuring there were sufficient materials and resources for the creative activities.

From the outset, the project took a positive approach to change, presenting it as a participatory process. Issues that result from the impact of climate change, such as the need to find new ways to generate energy or build houses were presented as positive choices. Children were encouraged to use their imaginations but their expectations were managed in such a way that made it clear that while their ideas would be used to help make plans, the chances of getting the ski-slope they'd designed next to their house were low. This had the benefit of allowing free rein to their hopes while helping to show that the kind of activity for example, sports facilities, play areas, cinemas were high on their list of priorities. In other words, we encouraged children to think about what they'd like to be able to do and what they would need to make that possible, not what they'd like to have.



## Engagement techniques

There were two levels of participation as not all activities could be undertaken by a whole class or school, for example it would be impractical to make a film with the whole school, but we made sure that everyone got to participate in some way. A small group of between ten and fifteen pupils were selected for the first day of activities, while the whole year group, or school (depending on the size) got to participate in certain activities on the second day.

### Day One: The Past and the Present

Children need to know why they are doing something and how long it will take. To ensure everyone felt involved and no-one felt out of their depth, the team introduced themselves and the project to the group that had been selected. They began by explaining that there were big changes coming to the clay area and that there could be new places to live, work and play. A small group of around 10-15 pupils were selected to take the role of Time Travellers so they could explore the past, present and future of their village. They were told that they would participate in a range of activities including a filmed walk.



Each school helped put together a loose route that fitted with timings, this also ensured the walk met with Health & Safety requirements. Before they arrived, the children had a quick chat about making the elders welcome, what they'd like to ask them and starting to wonder what might have changed in their lifetimes. In particular, the children were shown how to ask open-ended questions like 'Where did you play?', 'What games did you play?' This was followed by brainstorming in pairs and questions were jotted down for practice interviews which helped us identify the natural interviewers and spot the children who might need more encouragement.

The elders had received a Clay Futures newsletter and were briefed beforehand, so they were all aware of the purpose of the walk. The walk was led by a member of staff – again, a health and safety requirement – and took around two hours. We stopped at key locations chosen by the children or the elders and recorded short interviews for the film. The film was then edited to be shown at the school and then at the main three-day ClayFutures event.

## Mapping

After returning for lunch, a large photographic map was provided and the children were encouraged to find their houses, their routes to school etc. They were then asked to personalise the map by adding flags (post-it notes on cocktail sticks) with comments from the walk and earlier sessions such as: 'My den is here'; 'Good place to ride bikes'; 'this is where the bakery used to be, now it's a house'.

## Assembly

After half an hour of preparation, an assembly was given at the end of the first day or the beginning of the second to bring the rest of the school up-to-speed. The children gave examples of their favourite places, some act out the activities that they'll be able to do in their dream future village. The rest of the school were then asked to help by filling in a message for the message tree and producing a postcard from the future.



The shape of things to come?

Photo by Eden Project

## Day Two: The Future

The second day would begin with a recap of the first day (the activities were not necessarily delivered on consecutive days) and the film would be shown to the whole school if it was ready. The next step was to stimulate the original group of 10-15 students with pictures of various kinds of play spaces, eco-houses, transport, energy sources, community gardens and briefly talk about the need for change in such a way as to keep it positive. The children were told that there could be new houses, play spaces and jobs in the area and asked what they should be like.

After a brainstorming session children were then asked to get together in small groups to design their model on a large piece of paper before they began construction. Every model had to have a sign explaining what it represented and why it was chosen. Generally, this activity took up most of the remainder of the second day.



Your world tomorrow?

Photo by Eden Project

Each day ended with a celebration to mark the children's achievement. The groups introduced their model to the rest of the class, received positive feedback and applause. Photographs were taken of the children with their models and copies sent to the school so that they all had something to keep. The models, postcards and the wishing tree were then displayed at the parish's ClayFutures Fête providing another incentive for parents to attend.





This is the Future




Photo by Sam Morgan Moore



Answers on a postcard...

Photo by Sam Morgan Moore

## Techniques

-  Provide a structure and purpose to two days of activities, using time-travel (past, present, future) as a unifying theme.
-  Use an interdisciplinary team. The team comprised of at least one ClayFutures team member with teaching experience, an artist/facilitator with experience of working with children, and a film-maker.
-  The Walk – this provided the means to create an intergenerational view of the villages, showing the extent of changes that can occur to a place within a single lifetime.



△ Film-making – the film enabled the whole school to share the experience of the walk and the information gathered from the elders. This in turn provided a draw for both young and old to attend the main event. Remember: if you're filming children then it is essential you get written permission first, so make sure you have this in place before you start.

□ Message Tree – this was put up in the school and everyone invited to write on luggage labels and tie them onto the tree – answering the questions: 'What's it like to live here?' and 'How could it be better?'

△ Postcards from the Future – the whole school was asked to imagine they were already in their dream future parish, and then to write a postcard back to themselves in the present, describing what it was like, and illustrating the front. Blank A4 Clay Futures postcards were provided for this and teachers given a tips sheet so they could run the activity back in their classes – the postcards were collected later and displayed at the main event.

□ Come to the Community Fête! – All the children's work – the film, their models, postcards and the message tree were displayed at the Community Fête a week or two later. School newsletters were used to invite all of the children and their families to a special screening of their film, and a copy of the DVD was given to the school to keep.



# Key concepts



- Voice – the main aim was to give children a voice and find out what was important to them, how they used their surroundings, and the changes they'd like to see to the area in the future.
- △ Inspire but don't lead. Start the conversations and show some of the possibilities – but the issues, themes, places to film and models to make need to come from the children themselves. It's essential they feel ownership of the project.
- Work in an open-ended way. Although it required some planning, the content of each walk and film was largely spontaneous. In the same spirit, a wide range of materials was provided for the model making, so that children could use their imaginations to the full.
- △ Take an intergenerational approach. Involve the community elders and work across generations to help make the past of the place come alive.
- Ensure everyone participates in some way, not the same way. Don't try and deliver a labour intensive activity like filming or touring an area with the entire school. The results will lack focus and will take up too much time. Use a range of techniques so that everyone gets to take part and have their say.

