

The full text of Jim Knight's speech¹

Given at GA Annual Conference, Guildford, 27 March 2008

I'm delighted to be here. As a geography graduate myself, I was very keen to take this opportunity to talk to you about the importance of geography in our schools.

Since my geography degree, the subject has stayed with me throughout my political career. My own constituency in Dorset is home to the stuff of legend in coastal morphology – Lulworth Cove, Durdle Door, and the unique phenomenon of Chesil Beach and the Fleet lagoon. The coast is England's first natural World Heritage site – 95 miles of coastal rock that dates back 185 million years. It's truly a walk through time, although I don't know whether it's uplifting or vaguely depressing that you age two million years for every mile you walk east.

And the beginning of my ministerial career as Under-Secretary for Rural Affairs, Landscape, and Biodiversity in DEFRA saw me draw on my geography to the full. And now I find myself still in the business of 'landscaping' – from building schools to broadening horizons for young people, making sure they have fairer prospects in life. The Children's Plan that we published just before Christmas sets out our ambition to build better, brighter futures for every young person in this country.

Geography is absolutely essential to that. Michael Palin summed it up perfectly. In support of the Geography Action Plan that we published in 2006, he said:

You can travel the seas, poles and deserts and see nothing. To really understand the world you need to get under the skin of the people and places. In other words, learn about geography. I can't imagine a subject more relevant in schools. We'd all be lost without it.

I couldn't agree more. In the current political and economic climate of globalisation, nothing could be more important than learning about other cultures, the world around us, and how other people see the world. And, as we look to shape the landscape of a **sustainable** future, it is essential that we **sustain** geography in our schools, and secure **its** future. So the theme of your Conference – Sustaining Geography – is very apt. And I think that the subject's future lies in the fact that it chimes with issues that young people today feel very strongly about.

A recent survey found that four out of five of young people wanted their future career to involve making a positive difference for the environment. Geography is the subject to teach them about the relationship between humanity and the environment. Yet, despite geography's natural potential to capture pupils' imaginations, the numbers studying the subject have been in gentle decline in recent years. So we need to reflect on what we're doing – or not doing – to engage young people.

That is why we launched the Action Plan in 2006, supported by £2 million of funding over two years, to provide a package of activity and support for the subject in both primary and secondary schools. Two years on, those measures are starting to translate into noticeable improvement:

- 1000 schools have become actively involved with Action Plan activities;
- 500 ambassadors have reached 17,500 pupils in 500 schools, inspiring them about the subject;
- we have provided new teaching resources, and free training to 300 teachers in how to use them;
- and we have developed the **Geography Teaching Today** website, which is averaging 5,000 individual visits a week – twice its original target.

Those achievements are having a significant impact in schools, and are extremely encouraging.

¹ Check against delivery

I want to thank the Geographical Association and the Royal Geographical Society, who have worked tirelessly to secure those outcomes. And I'd like to thank Rita [Gardner] and David [Lambert] for the commitment, dedication, and leadership that they have brought to the project. I also want to thank all of you here – and other geography teachers around the country – who are bringing the subject to life in classrooms up and down the country, inspiring young people, and helping them to pursue their interests and talents in geography.

But although we have made some significant achievements, there is still more to do if we are to boost the number of young people opting for geography beyond the compulsory years. And I think, as we move forward, we need to focus our efforts on two fronts:

First, we need to make geography relevant and engaging throughout the primary years and at key stage 3, so that more young people feel that they want to take their studies further. And second, we need to remove some of the barriers to teaching, such as a lack of specialist subject knowledge, training opportunities, and support for teachers with leadership and management roles.

So first, boosting take-up. As I said at the opening of my address, geography sits well with young people's interests and concerns. But only if it is engaging and relevant. If we are to sustain geography as a subject, we need to bring it into the 21st century. That means looking at **what** we teach, **how** we teach it, and even **where** we teach.

The current review of the primary curriculum will be looking at all subjects – including geography – to make sure that pupils are introduced to subjects at the right time, and have a broad and balanced learning experience. But from September this year, the new geography curriculum at key stage 3 will give teachers more freedom to teach topical issues, from globalisation to global warming; tourism to the 2012 Olympics. For pupils taking their studies further, we are currently piloting an updated geography GCSE which reflects the changes to geographical issues, theories, and new technologies. Understanding, for example, how consumer choices in the West have an impact on people in South East Asia; or closer to home, getting to grips with some of the issues around affordable housing. We have looked closely at the results of that pilot, and it has influenced the new geography GCSE criteria.

But traditional learning needs to be combined with wider learning opportunities – so that young people can apply the skills and knowledge they've gained and see them in action. It's difficult to expand pupils' knowledge of the world from within the four walls of a classroom. Fieldwork gives young people the opportunity to explore the world around them, investigate for themselves, and put their learning into practice. That is the aim of our Learning Outside the Classroom manifesto which is an important part of learning right across the curriculum. But I think it has particular relevance for geography. As part of the first phase of the Action Plan, we have developed a virtual fieldwork and local learning centre to help teachers make the most of geography in their local areas with expert advice and planning for fieldwork.

Other developments, such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning Programme for example, are also helping young people to gain a richer understanding of the subject. One school in Plymouth, for example, gave students a presentation on the flooding in Bangladesh in the late '90s. As well as detailing the geographical phenomena of a monsoon, students were made aware of its humanitarian effects, and encouraged to empathise with a situation on the other side of the world, by writing about their reactions and responses.

It goes without saying that teaching pupils beyond the mere facts enriches their learning and understanding, but also teaches broader skills valuable in employment and life. But all enrichment opportunities act as a **guide** through the subject, helping young people to discover geography for themselves, following their own interests and seeing where the trail leads. That interactive and personalised approach to learning is the key to engaging young people who might otherwise be switched off by classroom learning.

The second area I mentioned is to continue to provide teachers with as much support as we can. I am certain that the reason I continued to study geography right through to university is because of the teachers I had at school. They were inspiring, interested, and passionate about their subject, and they managed to instil that in me.

To boost the numbers studying our subject we need to make sure that teachers have the skills and resources they need to pass on their passion to pupils. We have to support teachers to be the very best that they can be – to fulfil their **own** potential, so that pupils can fulfil theirs.

Geography Teaching Today has drawn many resources together in one easily accessible place – experiences of others who have faced similar challenges, tools for professional development, and interesting resource modules for teaching topics.

In addition to the 300 teachers we have trained to use the new resources, 600 primary and secondary teachers have attended training for potential and existing subject leaders, to try and strengthen the base of managers and leaders in schools. And for those teachers whose first subject is **not** geography, there is an area on the website for non-specialist teachers, with online tutorials on subjects such as climate change that will help them quickly get up to speed, with interesting and innovative lessons.

And we are recognising excellence. 188 schools have been awarded the Geography Quality Mark, and 100 teachers have been awarded Chartered Geographer Teacher status – the new professional accreditation to mark ongoing professional development. So we've made some progress, but there's still some way to go if we're going to achieve a real seismic shift in geography teaching in our schools.

I'm convinced that the Action Plan in 2006 set us on the right track.

So I'm pleased to announce today that the funding for the Action Plan is set to continue for a further three years.

And I can also announce that, following their success in the first phase, the Geographical Association and the Royal Geographical Society have won the contract to implement the second phase of the Action Plan. I feel confident that they are the right partners for the job, under the excellent leadership of David and Rita.

Our reforms are important. But the best routes into any subject are the infectious passion and enthusiasm of its teachers, inspiring professionals, and other role models, who have achieved remarkable things. Like Nick Middleton from Channel 4's *Going to Extremes*, who's travelled to over 50 countries. Or Ben Saunders – the youngest person by 10 years to reach the North Pole alone. For geographers, the sky's the limit.

Such is our potential. If young people want real experiences, they should study our subject. There will always be a place for it in the curriculum, and I will certainly do my best to make sure that as many young people get those opportunities as possible.

Thank you for your hard work in schools, thank you for giving young people such exciting opportunities, and together we will put geography on the map.