



St Mary's  
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# Educating and empowering Laudato Si' Champions in Catholic education

*A Report for the Guardians of Creation Project*



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This work was supported by the Assumption Legacy Fund

# Key findings

1

**67% of Key Stage 3 students in Catholic secondary schools surveyed have not heard of Pope Francis' encyclical letter, Laudato Si' (see Section 2.4).**

2

**While up to 86% of Key Stage 3 students surveyed reported feeling some degree of worry about climate change (13% extremely, 38% slightly, 35% somewhat), students exhibited a complex range of emotions about climate change in focus groups, including anger, frustration and confusion (see Section 2.3).**

3

**After engaging with the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit, participating students reported increased confidence in their understanding of climate change from 42% to 80% (see Section 2.1). They also conveyed a stronger conviction from 25% to 46% that their actions contributed to addressing climate change (see Section 2.2).**



It's very exciting, very practical. It looks as though the students have come up with some very good ideas, and the toolkit helps put those ideas into action, which is excellent; and that it should be Key Stage 3 is particularly important. So, they're doing a general education at that time, and this can be part of that."

***Bishop John Arnold, Diocese of Salford***

## Guardians of Creation

This report is the first of two documents issued by the Guardians of Creation Project's education team by researchers at St Mary's University, Twickenham. The report produces a generalised toolkit for facilitating student sustainability leaders in Catholic secondary schools, which is implementable at a school or diocesan level. There are accompanying teaching resources for the toolkit available alongside this formal report.

During the Guardians of Creation Project's lifetime, guidance will be issued relating to practical elements of sustainable change, like carbon accounting and environmental management within a diocese, as well as social and theological aspects of sustainability in the Catholic Church.

The Guardians of Creation Project has been developed collaboratively with the Diocese of Salford as a pilot study in England and Wales. The principal participating institutions in the Project are the Diocese of Salford, St Mary's University, Twickenham, and the Laudato Si' Research Institute at Campion Hall, University of Oxford.



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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Executive summary

The active participation of young people in addressing climate change, the ecological crisis, and its related issues is a crucial concern of Pope Francis' encyclical letter, *Laudato Si'*.<sup>1</sup> Francis emphasises how 'we are faced with an educational challenge' as more young people develop 'a new ecological sensitivity' while having 'grown up in a milieu of extreme consumerism'.<sup>2</sup> Though this call to action makes sustainability essential for the Catholic education sector, the challenge remains for how educators engage young people in *Laudato Si'*'s message and related Catholic teachings. Existing student anxieties and attitudes surrounding climate change, alongside sector-wide pressures of attainment, finance, and prioritisation can make ecological education demanding to facilitate.

This report provides schools with one toolkit for educating and empowering *Laudato Si'* Champions in Catholic settings. Following a pilot with eight secondary schools in the Diocese of Salford, the Guardians of Creation Project's education team has found that implementing this toolkit increases young people's engagement in ecological action within their schools. For instance, participating students reported increased confidence in their understanding of climate change after engaging with the toolkit from 48% to 80% (see Section 2.1). They also conveyed a stronger conviction from 31% to 46% that their actions contributed to addressing climate change (see Section 2.2). By empowering students to take a project-based and inquiry-led approach, the *Laudato Si'* Champions toolkit developed students in Key Stage 3's understanding of the Catholic Church's teachings on climate change.

The value of these findings is especially significant for schools in England. There is a growing urgency to effectively implement ecological education, particularly following the Department for Education's 2022 sustainability strategy, which envisions 'the education and children's services systems in England' becoming 'the world-leading education sector in sustainability' by 2030.<sup>3</sup> In conjunction with the impetus offered by *Laudato Si'*, the insights provided by this report offer Catholic schools the unique opportunity to foster a new generation of student sustainability leaders embedded in a Catholic ethos.

As such, this report first examines young people's attitudes towards the ecological crisis using insights from the toolkit's pilot study, contextualised within the Catholic Church's teachings. The second section then introduces the *Laudato Si'* Champions toolkit, evaluating its potential for cultivating ecologically minded citizens who actively participate in the care of creation.

## 1.2 Scope of the report

Two central research questions guided the pilot study of the Champions toolkit exploring effective methods for nurturing student sustainability leaders in the Catholic education sector. The first question asked, **what are the existing perceptions and understandings of the ecological crisis and *Laudato Si'* among young people in Catholic secondary schools?** In response, we, the Guardians of Creation Project's education team, conducted several quantitative surveys with students participating in the pilot study. In doing so, this report considers young people's existing attitudes, understandings, and engagement with ecological issues and how the Champions toolkit impacted those viewpoints (see Section 2).

Informed by these understandings, the second research question focused on **how can we best inspire and motivate young people to take environmental action in their school communities through the teachings of *Laudato Si'*?** (See Section 3.) From February 2022 to July 2022, the Guardians of Creation Project's education team ran a pilot of the *Laudato Si'* Champions toolkit with eight secondary schools in the Diocese of Salford, training 225 pupils in Key Stage 3 aged between 11 and 14. An initial literature review informed the decision to focus on this age group. With existing educational materials for primary schools, such as Clare Campbell's *Be the Change*, and for sixth forms, such as The Ecological Conversion Group's (ECG) sixth form syllabus, this pilot's focus on lower secondary education sought to bridge a gap in existing resources for Catholic-based ecological education, without imposing on GCSE or A-level year students.<sup>4</sup>

1 Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2015).

2 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, para. 202; 209.

3 Department for Education, 'Vision and aims', in *Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children's services systems (2022)* <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainability-and-climate-change-strategy>> [Accessed 25 August 2022].

4 Clare Campbell, *Be the Change: Encouraging schools to be pro-active for the environmental needs of our planet* (Essex: McCrimmons, 2020); The Ecological Conversation Group, 'Sixth Form Syllabus' (August 2018) <<https://theecg.org/resources/6-form-syllabus/>> [Accessed 25 August 2022].

Each pilot school received six hours of training for their Laudato Si' Champions cohort, delivered by a member of the Guardians of Creation Project's education team, through which students learnt about Laudato Si' and self-devised a group project to benefit the environment in their school (see Section 3.1). From twelve 30-minute sessions in a weekly eco-committee at lunchtime to three two-hour sessions in timetabled Religious Education (RE) lessons, we trialled the toolkit in various timeframes and educational settings. This process ensured that a mixture of locations, session lengths, and pre-existing student knowledge of climate change informed the pilot and tested the toolkit's flexibility to operate in different educational contexts. As such, we acknowledge that every young person, school, and diocese are unique, the position of ecological education varying between each institution and individual. We have aimed to reflect the diversity represented in the pilot study within this report's structure and emphasise the toolkit's adaptability in the accompanying teaching guidance.

As part of this pilot, we conducted 25 one-to-one interviews and 11 focus groups with the participating schools to form an expansive qualitative data set. These focus groups and interviews encompassed eight focus groups with students in each pilot school, six interviews with teachers, three focus groups with teachers, seven interviews with Senior Leadership Team (SLT) representatives, six interviews with staff at the Diocese of Salford, two interviews with national policy officers, and four interviews with third-party ecological education specialists. Full details on this report's data gathering are available in Appendix 1. These interviews and focus groups informed our evaluation of the toolkit's effectiveness and uncovered an in-depth understanding of Laudato Si' in Catholic education.

The scope of this pilot study has strengths and limitations. The number of students engaging with the Champions toolkit and the extensive qualitative data gathering offers valuable insights into operationalising ecological education in Catholic secondary schools. However, this study's exclusive engagement with secondary schools in the Diocese of Salford means the findings and materials offered have yet to be tested in other geographical areas and settings. Due to time-limiting factors, the report does not analyse the long-term impacts and effects of the toolkit, offering scope for future research areas.

## 1.3 Rationale

Before introducing the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit, we briefly consider why ecological education is so crucial for the Catholic sector. In Laudato Si', Pope Francis states: 'A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us'.<sup>5</sup> In a chapter dedicated to the topic, Francis emphasises schools as one place for young people to develop their ecological education and spirituality. While 'young people demand change', they still need guidance 'to develop other habits' that sit outside the 'consumerism and affluence' they have grown up with, living more sustainably and in harmony with God's creation.<sup>6</sup>

Conversations on climate change repeatedly emphasise young people's education as a cornerstone for cultivating sustainable futures. For instance, Megan Tate, writing for the National Governance Association (NGA), highlighted how 'education has a critical role in preparing children and young people for a world changed by climate, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to create a sustainable future'.<sup>7</sup> However, while resources and research on ecological education frequently foreground the roles of young people and educational institutions, less attention is placed on how to facilitate young people as active agents of change within their communities. As research by James Sloam et al highlights, 'Young people and especially young women are at the vanguard of environmental activism – raising the profile of climate change on the political agenda – but are still often viewed as outside the formal political process, rather than as agents of change'.<sup>8</sup> In acknowledging the importance of young people in tackling climate change for their futures, finding ways to raise young people's voices and empower their environmental actions is a vital yet under-resourced aspect of addressing the ecological crisis.

The Church reflects this call to not only educate but empower young people as agents of change, professing 'respect for the integrity of creation' as a central principle of Catholic Social Teaching.<sup>9</sup> Laudato Si' articulates this movement from knowledge-building to action-taking, arguing 'an awareness of the gravity of today's cultural and ecological crisis must be translated into new habits'.<sup>10</sup> The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW) similarly articulate this urgent need for 'encouraging actions even in simple ways' in 'Catholic schools' within the 2022 version of *The Call of Creation*.<sup>11</sup> In seeking a response to the 'educational challenge' of fostering a new generation of ecologically engaged young people, Catholic educators are invited to facilitate learning through action and principle.

5 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, para. 202.

6 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, para. 13; 209.

7 Megan Tate, 'Engaging with Environmental Emergency', in *Governing Matters* (November 2021) 21-24 (p. 22).

8 James Sloam, Sarah Pickard, and Matt Henn, 'Young People and Environmental Activism: The Transformation of Democratic Politics', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 25:6 (2022) 683-691 (p. 685).

9 Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edn. (Huntingdon: Our Sunday Visitor, 1994; 1997), para. 2414.

10 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, para. 209.

11 Department for Social Justice, *The Call of Creation* (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, September 2022), p. 3.

The Laudato Si' Champions toolkit seeks to offer one set of resources that assists schools in nurturing these ecologically focused student leaders grounded in the Catholic Church's teachings. By educating young people about their responsibility as stewards through the toolkit, alongside the interconnected cries of the earth and the poor, students can begin articulating the significance of climate change for their local and global communities, allowing them to develop passionate investments in the issues that matter to them. The toolkit then moves towards empowering these educated young people to have the agency to act on those issues, encouraging student leadership and creating space for hope-filled community efforts. Hence, the Champions toolkit incorporated this two-sided approach of education and empowerment in its pilot study, responding to the 'educational challenge' facing Catholic educators during the present ecological crisis.

## 1.4 Literature review

While existing research on ecological education is wide-ranging, it frequently focuses on supporting climate literacy in schools rather than encouraging young people to participate in environmental actions. For example, Alina Kuthe et al.'s case study links rising climate literacy with climate-friendly behaviour in Austria.<sup>12</sup> Jenny Hallam et al.'s recent paper, advocating for 'arts-based methods' in fostering primary school students' connectivity with natural environments, reflects the body of scholarship evidencing outdoor learning spaces as supportive in developing young people's understanding of ecology.<sup>13</sup> David Rousell and Amy Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles offer an in-depth literature review on climate education, revealing how 'many of these articles approached climate change education strictly through the lens of science education'.<sup>14</sup> This focus leads to 'a distinct emphasis on scientific knowledge-based approaches to climate change education' negating the 'social, ethical, and political complexities of climate change'.<sup>15</sup> The result, Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles argue, is a need for 'participatory and creative approaches from multiple disciplines [...] which empowers children and young people to meaningfully engage with [climate change]'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, while existing scholarship has principally focused on communicating to young people what climate change and the ecological crisis are in science-based contexts, there are calls to translate this climate literacy into actions.

Eco-anxiety, as an increasingly prevalent attitude amongst young people, is a growing concern for educational researchers. Caroline Hickman et al.'s global survey in 2021 offers a notable contribution to this topic, revealing that 72% of children and young people think the earth's future is frightening, and 56% believe humanity is doomed.<sup>17</sup> Hickman et al. identify how 'current narratives risk individualising the so-called problem of climate anxiety', so 'validating the fears and pain of young people, acknowledging their rights, and placing them at the centre of policy making' offers a potential strategy for supporting young people's mental health during the climate crisis.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, Panu Pihkala notes that because 'eco-anxiety raises deep issues related to the meaning of life', 'these existential concerns may be linked with deep spiritual and religious crises', making eco-anxiety important within this report's Catholic context.<sup>19</sup> In conjunction with Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles's study, existing scholarship identifies a need for campaigners, policymakers, and educators to shift from substantive knowledge gathering to an interdisciplinary, engaging, and participatory approach within ecological education.

Furthermore, faith-based ecological education continues to be under-researched and under-resourced, especially within the Catholic sector. Although notable examples of Catholic ecological education do exist, such as CAFOD's *LiveSimply* Award and the ECG, many of the leading third-sector providers operate within a secular framework, like Eco-Schools and Ashden. Furthermore, Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator argues: 'Laudato Si' summons educators in the Catholic tradition to become creators of a new pedagogy of ecology', identifying a need for innovative approaches to growing a renewed ecological spirituality and education called for by the Church.<sup>20</sup> Since 2020, new case studies have emerged examining ecological education in Catholic settings.

12 Alina Kuthe, Annemarie Körfggen, Johann Stötter, and Lars Keller, 'Strengthening their climate change literacy: A case study addressing the weaknesses in young people's climate change awareness', *Applied Environmental Education & Communication*, 19:4 (2020) 375-388.

13 Jenny Hallam, Laurel Gallagher, and Kay Owen, 'The secret language of flowers: insights from an outdoor, arts-based intervention designed to connect primary school children to locally accessible nature', *Environmental Education Research*, 28:1 (2022) 128-145.

14 David Rousell and Amy Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 'A systematic review of climate change education: giving children and young people a 'voice' and a 'hand' in redressing climate change', *Children's Geographies*, 18:2 (2020) 191-208 (p. 196).

15 Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, p. 202.

16 Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, p. 203.

17 Caroline Hickman, et al., 'Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey', *Lancet Planet Health*, 5 (2021) 863-73 (p. 868).

18 Caroline Hickman, et al., p. 871.

19 Panu Pihkala, 'Eco-Anxiety and Pastoral Care: Theoretical Considerations and Practical Suggestions', *Religions* 13:192 (2022) 1-19 (p. 7); Also see Pihkala, 'Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Eco-Anxiety and Climate Anxiety', *Sustainability*, 20:12 (2020).

20 Agbonkhanmeghe E Orobator, 'Laudato Si': A Prophetic Message', *Journal of Catholic Education*, 24:1 (2021) 300-305 (p. 304).



For example, Rafael Robina-Ramírez et al. surveyed teachers' environmental competencies in Spanish Catholic schools.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Suhadi Cholil and Lyn Parker offer insights on environmental education from Indonesian Franciscan schools.<sup>22</sup> However, there has yet to be an empirical or substantive study conducted within England's Catholic education sector, creating a disconnect between the ecological education resources available and the Catholic character of these denominational schools. Consequently, the primary data reported in this document provides a unique insight into the ecological education field within the Catholic sector. Additionally, the Champions toolkit itself is a significant contribution to the development of a 'new pedagogy of ecology' that Orobator recognises, supporting innovative and holistic approaches to ecological education within Catholic schools.

## 2. Student perceptions of the ecological crisis

Before considering what Catholic schools can do to support young people's ecological education and spirituality with the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit, we first turn towards the research question: **What are the existing perceptions and understandings of the ecological crisis and Laudato Si' among young people in Catholic secondary schools?** In investigating this question, the Guardians of Creation Project's education team issued an online survey to Key Stage 3 (KS3) students in the toolkit's pilot schools. Alongside eight focus groups with students who engaged in the toolkit's pilot, these survey-based and spoken responses offer in-depth insights into young people's existing knowledge of, engagement with, and feelings about climate change in relation to Catholic teachings.

The following subsections detail young people's recorded responses from the toolkit's pilot study. The survey was issued to three distinct student populations. The first, labelled 'General KS3 population', received 677 responses from any Key Stage 3 students in the pilot's participating schools who did not engage with the toolkit but volunteered to complete the questions. The second, labelled 'Participating students before toolkit', includes responses from students before they engaged with the toolkit's pilot, receiving 168 voluntary responses out of the 225 total students who completed the Laudato Si' Champions sessions. Of these students, 78 were members of their school's ecology club, and their responses reflect this pre-existing interest and knowledge base about climate change. Consequently, this population exhibited higher levels of ecological engagement and were more likely to volunteer as participants than the General KS3 population. For this reason, we examine their results separately. Lastly, the 'After toolkit comparative' survey collates 50 responses from participating students following the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit, illustrating the intervention's impact on young people's knowledge and perceptions of the ecological crisis.<sup>23</sup> We present findings from this survey in conjunction with the insights provided by the student focus groups, representing the diverse and complex range of opinions collected in the toolkit's pilot study.

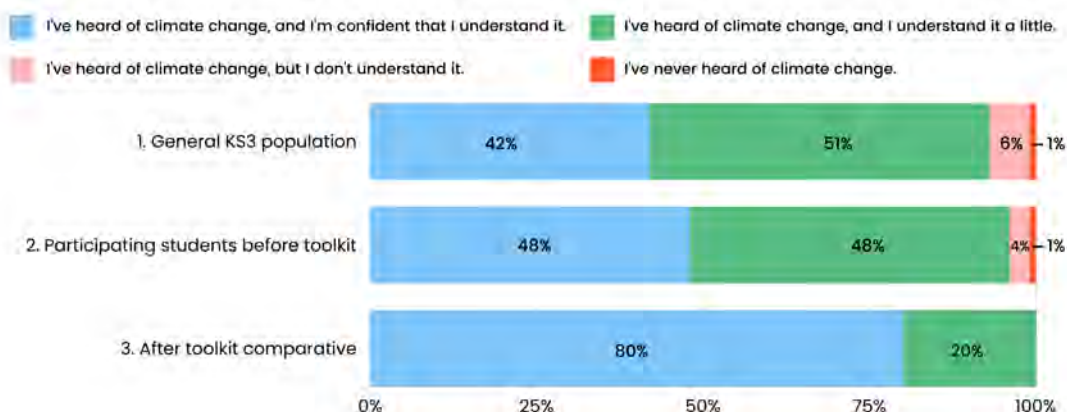
### 2.1 Existing knowledge of climate change

In response to the question, 'how much do you know about climate change?', students responded on a four-point scale from 'I've never heard of climate change' to 'I've heard of climate change, and I'm confident that I understand it' (see Fig. 1). In the general KS3 population, most students responded that they had heard of climate change and understood it a little (51%) or were confident in their understanding (42%). A small percentage of students had not heard of climate change (1%) or felt they did not understand it (6%). For students participating in the toolkit's pilot study, a slightly higher percentage of students felt confident in their understanding (48%). However, after engaging in the toolkit, the percentage of students who felt confident in their understanding of climate change increased (80%), demonstrating the resource's educational impact.

21 Rafael Robina-Ramírez, et al., 'The Challenge of Greening Religious Schools by Improving the Environmental Competencies of Teachers', *Frontiers in Psychology* 11:520 (2020) 1-12.

22 Suhadi Cholil and Lyn Parker, 'Environmental education and eco-theology: Insights from Franciscan schools in Indonesia', *Environmental Education Research*, 27:12 (2021) 1759-1782.

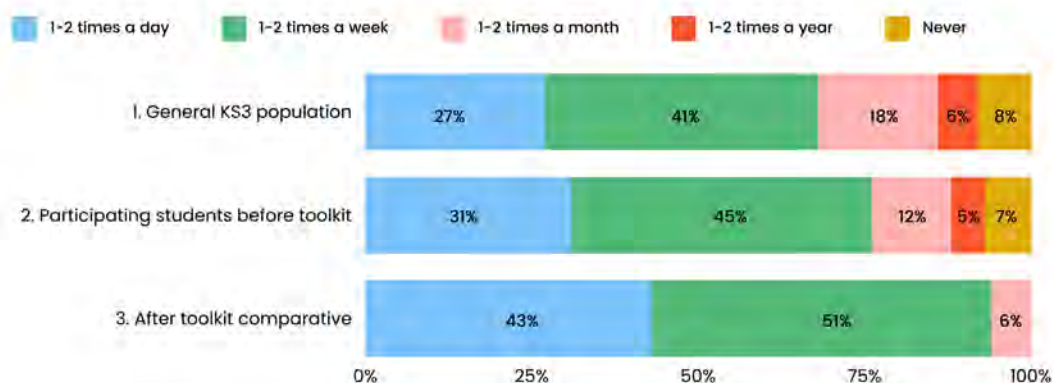
23 For further details on participants, see Appendix 1.

**Fig. 1. How much do you know about climate change?**

## 2.2 Participation in ecological action

To further understand young people's awareness of climate change, we asked participants about their engagement with ecological actions and how they perceived the impact of those actions. When asked, 'how often do you take actions to help the environment?', the majority of students in the general KS3 population answered 1-2 times a week (41%) or 1-2 times a day (27%) (see Fig. 2). However, there remained a significant percentage of students who took actions less frequently, including 1-2 times a month (18%), 1-2 times a year (6%), and never (8%). Comparatively, after engaging with the toolkit, the frequency of students' ecological action increased overall to 1-2 times a day (43%), 1-2 times a week (51%), or 1-2 times a month (6%).

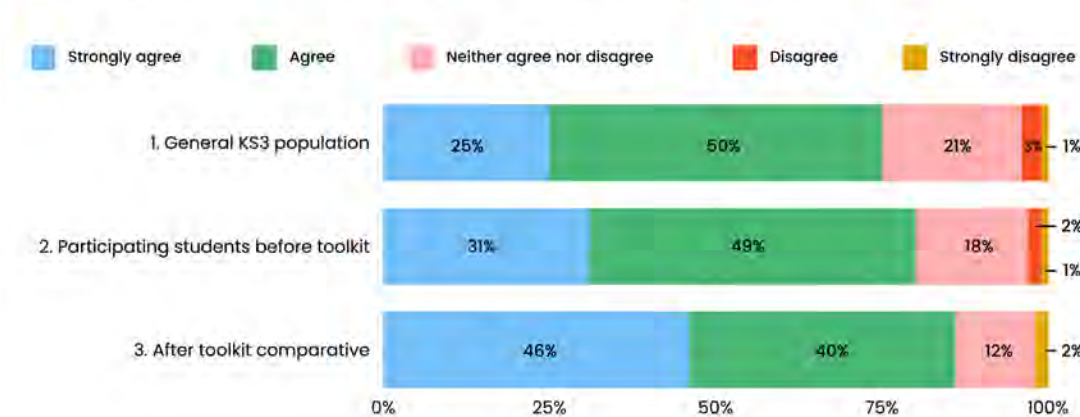
Additionally, we asked young people to respond to the statement 'my actions can help prevent climate change' on a five-point Likert scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' (see Fig. 3). Among the general KS3 population, 25% strongly agreed, 50% agreed, 21% neither agreed nor disagreed, 3% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed. The percentage of students who strongly agreed was higher amongst those participating in the toolkit at 31%, reflecting some respondents existing engagement in ecological activities at their school. However, the number of students who strongly agreed that their actions could help prevent climate change increased to 46% after engaging in the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit. These responses demonstrate the toolkit's capacity to affirm young people's contributions to sustainability in educational settings.

**Fig. 2. How often do you take actions that help the environment?**





**Fig. 3. My actions can help prevent climate change.**

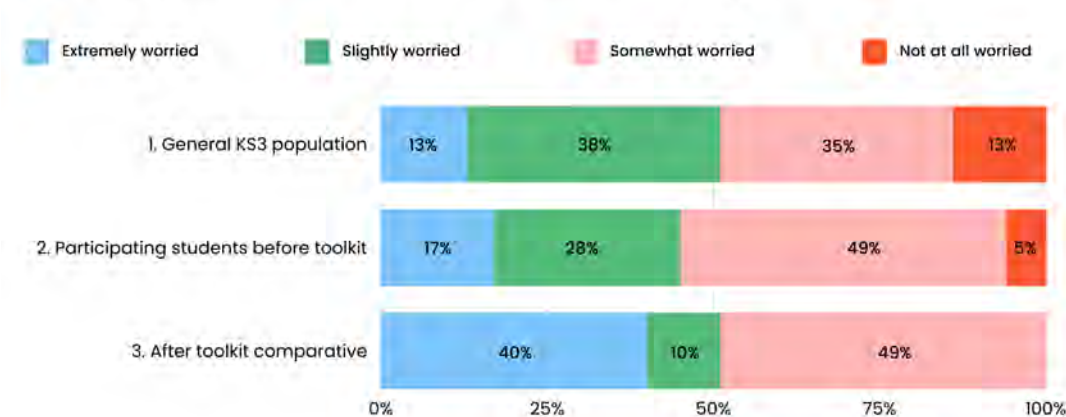


## 2.3 Emotional responses

Given the increasing prevalence of eco-anxiety in the twenty-first-century socio-political climate, this pilot study asked students about their emotional responses toward climate change in student focus groups and the survey. In answer to the question, 'Do you feel worried about climate change?', the majority of responding students indicated some degree of worry (see Fig. 4). In the general KS3 population, 13% felt extremely worried, 38% felt slightly worried, 35% felt somewhat worried, and 13% felt not at all worried. Meanwhile, for the participating students who answered the survey before engaging with the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit, 17% felt extremely worried, 28% felt slightly worried, 49% felt somewhat worried, and 5% felt not at all worried.

Interestingly, the students who repeated the survey after engaging with the toolkit reported a higher percentage of extreme worry at 40%. In comparison, 10% felt slightly worried, and 49% felt somewhat worried. At first glance, this increase indicates that students' eco-anxiety rises as they engage further with ecological education. However, if viewed in conjunction with their similarly increased knowledge of climate change (see Fig. 1) and the perceived value of their ecological actions (see Fig. 3), the students' increased worry mirrors their increased motivation to urgent action. Wider educational scholarship, such as Hickman et al.'s study, refers to this as a 'practical anxiety', where that anxious emotional response 'can cause us to search for more information about the situation and find potential solutions'.<sup>24</sup> While the data offered by the students in this present survey implies a similar correlation, the construct validity of this question means that the results are not exhaustive. Further research with young people is required to consider the relationship between ecological education, motivations to action, and emotional responses.

**Fig. 4. Do you feel worried about climate change?**



## Student responses in focus: How do you feel about climate change?

The responses from the student focus groups in the pilot study's participating schools deepen our understanding of young people's emotional responses towards climate change, showcasing a complex emotional range that encompasses a wide range of feelings beyond worry or anxiety.



**'I feel really disappointed that people have let it get this far.'** (Student S1.C, Year 7, 25:20)

**'I feel quite frustrated that people... most people know what's going on with the environment, but they still don't bother to actually help it.'** (Student S1.B, Year 7, 25:44)

**'It really quite shocking, the shape the world is in.'** (Student S4.B, Year 9, 27:11)

**'It's worrying. Because since it's our future, when people do things that are bad, [...] it's worrying because it's like, what will happen?'** (Student S4.A, Year 7, 27:25)

**'Anger, because like, no one's doing anything to change it when they should be.'** (Student S4.E, Year 9, 28:21)

**'For me, it makes me feel that we're like, you know, those games, those movies where we're the last people on earth. It makes me feel like that.'** (Student S6.D, Year 9, 13:28)

**'Quite stressed because all this responsibility is on our shoulders, we try and fix like the past generation's mistakes.'** (Student S6.B, Year 9, 13:42)

**'I feel kind of scared though because when I'm older and if we haven't sorted this... it's just not going to be a world you want to live in if we don't fix things.'** (Student S7.A, Year 8, 02:02)

**'It makes you feel confused by why people are still causing it, like littering and still using fossil fuel?'**  
(Student S8.E, Year 7, 02:32)



The responses recorded here illustrate the wide range of emotions that the young people expressed on climate change. While many of their emotions reflect the worry and concern associated with climate anxiety, it is interesting to consider how these emotional responses relate to their motivations to act. For instance, Student S4.B, who described climate change as 'shocking', also recounted how they 'joined eco-club because I want to help the environment and see the issue in a bigger picture' (00:26). Similarly, Student S4.A, who found climate change 'worrying', articulated how they 'really care about animals' so 'joined eco-club' because they didn't 'want to see animals go extinct' (01:05). Many of the students who had an eco-club in their school similarly articulated this movement from an emotional response to a motivation to participate. As such, this emotional consideration does not negate the importance of ecological education but rather emphasises the importance of providing outlets for young people to enact change and foster what one diocesan leader described as 'climate hope' where 'pupils can actually see that they're making a difference' (Diocesan leader D2, 29:15).

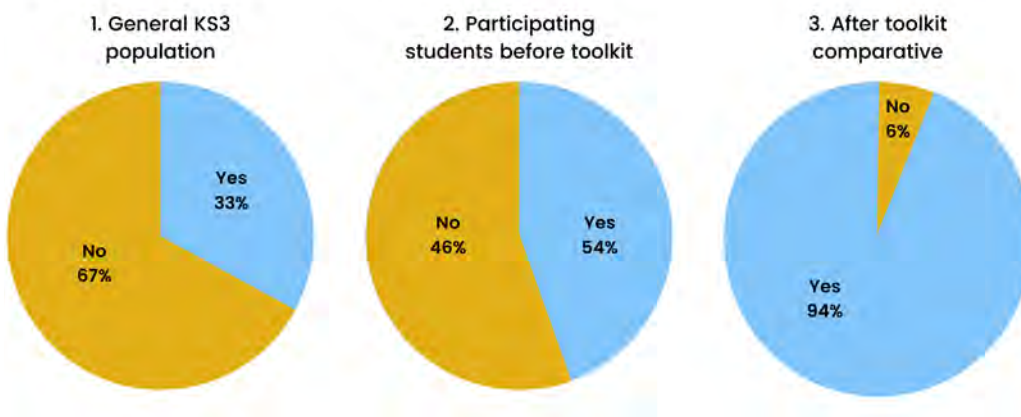


## 2.4 Connecting ecology and religion

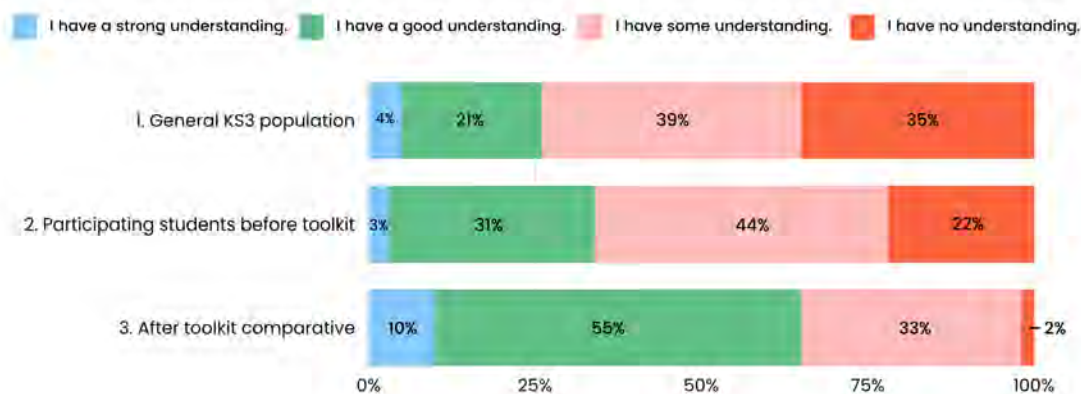
Young people demonstrated a disconnect between their engagement in ecological issues and the teachings of the Catholic Church within the pilot study's survey. In response to the question 'have you heard of *Laudato Si'*?', 67% of respondents in the general KS3 population answered 'no' (see Fig. 5). Similarly, 46% of participating students had not heard of *Laudato Si'* before they engaged with the Champions toolkit. After engaging with the toolkit, only 6% of students had not heard of *Laudato Si'*.

Additionally, student responses to the question 'do you know about the Catholic Church's teaching on climate change?' indicate a more widespread detachment between ecology and Catholicism, extending beyond *Laudato Si'* as a recent document (see Fig. 6). Among the general KS3 population, students identified as having a strong understanding (4%), a good understanding (21%), some understanding (39%) and no understanding (35%). The degree of knowledge was slightly higher amongst participating students, with the majority answering that they had some understanding (44%). After engaging with the toolkit, a higher percentage of students identified as having a good (55%) or strong (10%) understanding, with fewer respondents feeling that they had some (33%) or no (2%) understanding. Accordingly, the survey data demonstrates that using the *Laudato Si'* Champions toolkit increases the connectivity between Catholicism and the ecological crisis.

**Fig. 5. Have you heard of Laudato Si'?**



**Fig. 6. Do you know about the Catholic Church's teaching on climate change?**



## Student responses in focus: Are religious and spiritual beliefs important in addressing climate change?

During the focus groups, we invited students to consider whether they thought religious and spiritual beliefs were important in addressing climate change. While some students viewed religious beliefs as just one of many potential motivators to act sustainably, students who openly identified as religious expressed the importance of caring for creation as part of their faith.



**'I think it does, but then it doesn't. Because there's not as many people that are, like, religious as there used to be. For the people who are, then it probably is important, but for the people who just aren't that bothered anymore, then they probably don't care about it.'** (Student S2.C, Year 7, 06:49)

**'I'm a Catholic. So I do want to just basically live out what God has told us to do and care for his world, as stewardship, for his world that he gave to us. And it does motivate me to a certain point, but it isn't only religion that's making, that's motivating me to do something about climate change. It's other stuff as well.'** (Student S4.D, Year 8, 32:53)

**'I think that although there are many quotes in the Bible that talk about this kind of thing, it's not really amplified throughout the Church, like, especially when you go to Mass, and you often have a focus for the week, whether it be like the disciples in this chapter or something. Not a lot of it really talks about what God wanted us to fulfil as stewards of the earth, which is why Pope Francis's letter was so important because it addressed matters that weren't really being addressed.'** (Student S6.E, Year 9, 05:56)

**While the survey data from the extended KS3 population indicates a widespread disconnect between religious beliefs and addressing the present ecological crisis, responses from student focus groups demonstrate the importance of connecting ecology and religion as a central motivator for the care of creation. Accordingly, these student responses highlight that the significance of spiritual and religious beliefs appears to be a significant yet under-utilised aspect of ecological education in Catholic secondary schools.**



## 2.5 Responsibility to care for creation

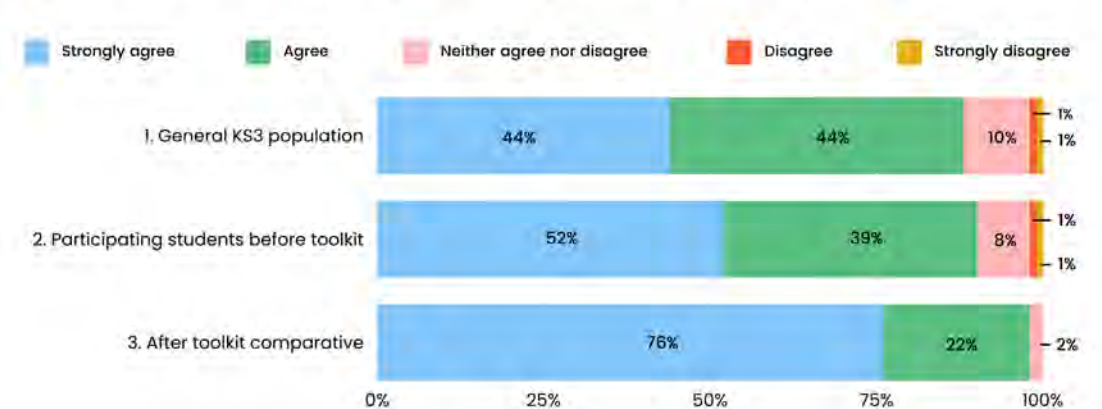
Care of creation is a central principle of Catholic Social Teaching because, as the *Caritas In Action* syllabus states, 'it is in caring for creation that we show our love and respect for its creator'.<sup>25</sup> For students participating in this study's surveys, we framed this topic as a sense of communal responsibility, asking students to what extent they agreed with the statement 'we all share a responsibility to care for our planet' (see Fig. 7). Among the general KS3 population, 44% strongly agreed, 44% agreed, 10% neither agreed nor disagreed, 1% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed.

For the students participating in the toolkit's pilot, the proportion of respondents who strongly agreed with the statement rose to 52%. After they engaged with the toolkit, the proportion of students who strongly agreed that we all share a responsibility to care for our planet increased to 76%. These responses show that while this group of young people felt a shared responsibility to care for creation, their engagement with the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit strengthened their level of agreement.

<sup>25</sup> Caritas Diocese of Salford, *Caritas In Action: Education and Formation in the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edn (Hampshire: Redemptorist Publications, 2021), p. 3.



**Fig. 7. 'We all share a responsibility to care for our planet.'**



## Student responses in focus: Do we all share a responsibility to care for our planet and home?

While some students in the pilot study's focus groups agreed that everyone shares a responsibility to care for our common home, others expressed a view that the distribution of this responsibility differed from group to group. As such, the young people represented in these focus groups understood the degree of shared responsibility as dependent on age, political influence, and global citizenship, among other factors.<sup>26</sup>

“

'I think we're too young. [...] Like, don't leave it, put the pressure on us to do everything. Because we're only 12.'  
(Student S2.A, Year 7, 02:35)

'So, sort of agree/disagree? Because we do have our governments, which are like in control of everything, we don't... like we are a democracy. But we don't have freedom to do everything. So, we can't really help in every way possible.'  
(Student S2.C, Year 7, 01:56)

'It's like the butterfly effect where one small action could lead to many things. So, when one person does something that might be bad for the environment, it could lead to more serious consequences around the world. So, it can't be blamed on one action, but it also is a group kind of problem. We all need to take responsibility.'  
(Student S4.C, Year 8, 25:58)

'We all live here. So, we should all do something to help, it's like paying rent on a house.'  
(Student S8.E, Year 7, 35:03)

”

<sup>26</sup> Also see Jonathan Josefsson and John Wall, 'Empowered inclusion: theorizing global justice for children and youth', *Globalizations*, 17:6 (2020) 1043–1060.

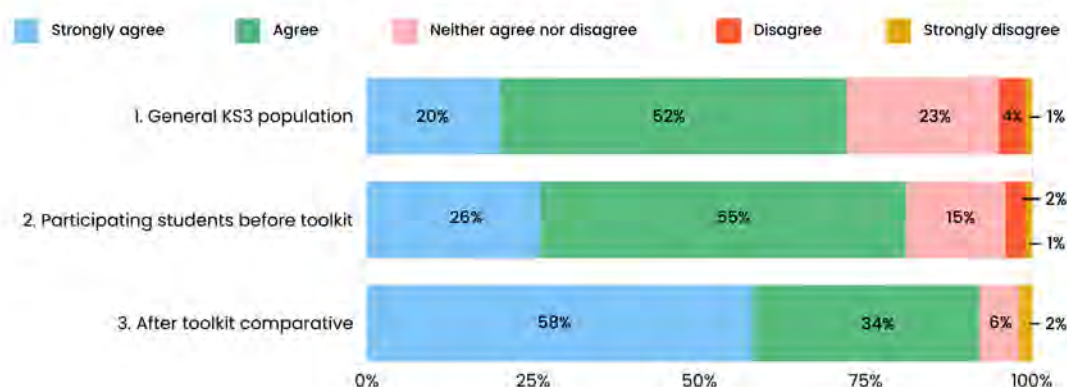


## 2.6 Understanding of integral ecology

The preferential option for the poor is a longstanding concern in the Catholic Church. Numerous papal encyclicals have emphasised its importance, such as Pope John Paul II, who stated 'the Church feels called to take her stand beside the poor' in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, *Laudato Si'* advocates for 'the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor' to be consolidated in the Church's response to the ecological crisis as part of an 'integral ecology'.<sup>28</sup> Secular contexts also emphasise the connectivity between social and environmental justice, such as the United Nation's first Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to 'end poverty in all its forms everywhere' as the paving stone to addressing climate change.<sup>29</sup>

We investigated students' understanding of interconnectedness in ecology by asking them to respond to the statement, 'everything is connected, so my actions impact other people and environments' (see Fig. 8). The majority of students in the general KS3 population surveyed agreed with the statement (52%), while the remaining respondents strongly agreed (20%), neither agreed nor disagreed (23%), disagreed (4%), or strongly disagreed (1%). Students participating in the toolkit's pilot study more frequently responded with strongly agree (26%) and agree (55%). However, a significantly higher proportion of students (58%) strongly agreed that everything is connected after engaging with the toolkit. These responses indicate that young people can recognise how their actions have effects beyond their immediate selves.

**Fig. 8. 'Everything is connected, so my actions impact other people and environments.'**



Furthermore, we asked young people to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'the poorest people suffer the effects of climate change the most' (see Fig. 9). In the general KS3 population, 17% strongly agreed, 39% agreed, 36% neither agreed nor disagreed, 5% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed. The students participating in the toolkit's pilot reflected this distribution of responses (17% strongly agreed, 38% agreed, 36% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 10% disagreed). After engaging with the toolkit, the distribution of student responses indicates an overall stronger agreement with the statement, answering 38% strongly agree, 38% agree, and 24% neither agree nor disagree. This increase shows a stronger connection between social injustices and climate change amongst young people after engaging in the *Laudato Si'* Champions toolkit.

27 Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 20 December 1987, <[https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html)>, para. 39.

28 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, para. 49; 62.

29 United Nations (UN), *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development A/RES/70/1* (2015) <<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>> [Accessed 14 September 2022], para. 1.5.

# 3. The Laudato Si' Champions toolkit

Having developed an understanding of existing student perceptions of climate change and Catholic teachings, we move to explore the research question: **How can we best inspire and motivate young people to take environmental action in their school communities through the teachings of Laudato Si'?** Laudato Si' Champions is a toolkit for cultivating ecologically-aware student leaders. It takes its founding principles from the Catholic Church's teachings on the care of creation, with a particular emphasis on the Church's contemporary teachings in Laudato Si'. Through active engagement in a project and an inquiry-based learning approach, the toolkit seeks to captivate those young people who have become anxious, disillusioned, or apathetic towards environmental issues alongside students with an existing ecological awareness. In doing so, it aims to grow young people's engagement into a life-long dedication to care for one another and our shared home. With Laudato Si's teachings at its core, the toolkit helps form an ethical framework for cultivating young people's ecological virtues that connects the Catholic Church's intellectual traditions to environmental action. All teaching materials related to the toolkit are freely available via the Guardians of Creation Project's webpage with accompanying teaching guidance.

The Guardians of Creation Project's education team created the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit to address the gaps in understanding and engagement identified through this report's literature review in Section 1.4. As demonstrated alongside the examination of existing student perceptions on climate change in Section 2, this toolkit's pilot study recorded an increase in students' ecological education and spirituality following their engagement with Laudato Si' Champions. Now, this report examines the toolkit's approach in detail, examining the different methods of facilitating it observed in the pilot schools and encompassing participant feedback on their experiences with the toolkit.

## 3.1 Outline of the sessions

The toolkit comprises six sessions that take students on a journey from ecological education to empowerment, with an adaptable structure that enables schools to incorporate the toolkit into their available time and space. Through these sessions, young people have a space to learn about climate change, Catholic teachings on stewardship and integral ecology, and reflect on their ecological commitment. The aim is for students to develop the agency and autonomy to take action in their school by devising a project, encouraging student leadership and teamwork by allowing the Champions to put their knowledge into action and discover the hope found through a community effort. As such, the toolkit's flexible structure enables schools to work with their newly trained Laudato Si' Champions in various ways, such as developing a new ecology committee or enriching a year group's curriculum learning.<sup>30</sup> The sessions outlined in the toolkit are as follows:

**Session 1: How do we see our relationship with the earth?** invites students to consider what is happening to our planet, using poetry and scientific research creatively to give students a foundational understanding of the ecological crisis. This session also introduces Laudato Si', exploring the difference between stewardship and dominion as students reflect on how their actions impact creation.

**Session 2: How do we impact the earth and its people?** allows students to explore integral ecology, reflecting on the collective impact of individual choices alongside the connections between social justice and climate change. In doing so, this session enables the 'process of education that promotes the value of love for one's neighbour' as Pope Francis articulates in *Fratelli Tutti*.<sup>31</sup> To conclude this session, students develop personal mission statements to consider how they can help build a just, sustainable future.

**Session 3: How do we act with love towards our common home?** transitions from the knowledge-building aspect of the toolkit to the empowerment section of the students' project-based learning. Students have the opportunity to consider the theological and cardinal virtues through an ecological lens, reflecting on which virtues are meaningful to them and how developing these virtues can aid their journey toward the sustainable future they envisioned in their mission statements. In groups of between three and five, the students begin planning their projects, inspired by Laudato Si'.

<sup>30</sup> For further details, see Laudato Si' Champions Teaching Guidance.

<sup>31</sup> Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship*, 3 October 2020, <[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)>, para. 151.

**Session 4: How can we make a difference?** focuses on the student-led projects as they begin to take shape, aided by guided activities from the toolkit to provide students with a planning framework in their groups. Students can recap *Laudato Si'*'s essential teachings in a starter activity, watching the short CAFOD animation about the encyclical, and reflect on their project work through a personal prayer or poem.<sup>32</sup>

**Session 5: How can we keep making a difference?** similarly centres on developing student-led projects, with a view to planning the reflective presentation in Session 6. In considering future pathways to ecological action, activities invite students to imagine how *Laudato Si'* could transform their school's community and how religion connects to climate change.

**Session 6: How do we live as *Laudato Si'* Champions?** concludes the toolkit's resources in a celebratory way. The newly trained Champions give 5-minute presentations about their motivations for their projects, reflecting on their achievements and inviting them to consider the long-term development of their projects beyond the toolkit's six sessions. In doing so, students can reflect on what *Laudato Si'* means to them and how they will live ecologically in the future.

As the outline of the six sessions demonstrates, the toolkit moves through a see-judge-act methodology, a process designed to develop critical reflection and responses informed by Catholic social thought. Students see the impacts of climate change and the Catholic Church's teachings on integral ecology, judge their actions and beliefs in response to these teachings and act within their school community to implement these lessons. This structure is a vital aspect of the toolkit. Principally, it mirrors the process of *Laudato Si'* itself, which theologian, Fr Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam, has highlighted gives the encyclical 'a sort of "three-dimensional" view' in being 'concerned with 'acting', after having seen and judged the profound crisis of our common home'.<sup>33</sup> Equally, educational scholar, Erin M. Brigham highlights how the see-judge-act methodology 'emerged in a Catholic context', embedding Catholic Social Teaching into its learning process.<sup>34</sup> The Champions toolkit has similarly utilised this methodology, enabling teachers to integrate these resources into their existing practices while simultaneously mirroring the structure of *Laudato Si'*'s in students' learning journeys.

## 3.2 From education to empowerment

In considering how a 'new pedagogy of ecology' might operate, the theologian, Orobator, continues to question the outcomes of Catholic education in its present form: 'How many students leave our educational establishments converted and transformed as stewards of environmental integrity? [...] How many of our educational institutions teach not only in words but more especially and intentionally in practice the critical significance of environmental responsibility?'.<sup>35</sup> This movement from the 'words' to 'practice' of stewardship is vital for Catholics, in keeping with the call for 'decisive action, here and now' iterated by *Laudato Si'*.<sup>36</sup> The Catholic education tradition, in which 'prudent education teaches virtues' as the Catechism articulates, deeply embeds this progression from education in principle to education in practice.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, considering how a 'new pedagogy of ecology' might work in practice, the *Laudato Si'* Champions toolkit sought to allow students to not only hear the words of the Gospel and listen to the teachings of *Laudato Si'* but to live those lessons in their daily lives as they cultivated ecological virtues.

When developing the *Laudato Si'* Champions toolkit, we considered existing educational pedagogies that would facilitate this movement from a knowledge-based understanding of environmental responsibility in stewardship to practice-based learning that offered space for the flourishing of ecological virtues. In surveying existing ecological education materials, *The Harmony Project's* primary school syllabus offered an inspirational perspective in adopting an 'enquiry-based approach to learning' to create 'an extremely powerful and empowering way for students to learn'.<sup>38</sup> Further investigation into the impacts of this question-led learning approach highlighted the benefits of this pedagogy for an ecological education context. Educational researchers, Samuel Kai Wah Chu et al. describe the 'range of inquiry-based pedagogical approaches that more fully leverage learner agency and motivational capacity'.<sup>39</sup>

32 CAFOD, *Laudato Si'* animation | CAFOD, online video recording, YouTube, 18 September 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3Lz7dmn1eM>> [Accessed 3 January 2021].

33 Fr Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam, *The Ten Green Commandments of Laudato Si'* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2019), p. 10-11.

34 Erin M. Brigham, See, Judge, Act: *Catholic Social Teaching and Service Learning* (Winona: Anselm Academic, 2018), p. 22.

35 Orobator, 'Laudato Si': A Prophetic Message', p. 304.

36 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, para. 161.

37 Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edn. (Huntingdon: Our Sunday Visitor, 1994; 1997), para. 1784.

38 Richard Dune, *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at and Learning About our World – A Teachers' Guide*, 2nd edn (The Harmony Project, 2020), p. 23.

39 Samuel Kai Wah Chu, Rebecca B. Reynolds, Nicole J. Tavares, Michele Notari, and Celina Wing Yi Lee, 'Introduction', in *21st Century Skills Development Through Inquiry-Based Learning: From Theory to Practice* (Singapore: Springer, 2017), p. 4.

For instance, an 'inquiry-based learning' is 'a learner-centered approach focusing on questioning, critical thinking and problem solving'.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, 'project-based learning' encompasses 'group activity that is carried out over a specified period, resulting in an output'.<sup>41</sup> As a result, the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit combined the two pedagogical approaches of inquiry-based and project-based learning to facilitate young people's movement from education to empowerment, allowing students to become active participants in their school's sustainability journey.

### 3.3 An interdisciplinary approach

A further aspect of the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit is its interdisciplinary approach that has its centre in RE as a subject. The CBCEW's 2022 version of *The Call of Creation* document states: 'education that focuses solely on the elements of science and technology cannot offer a framework of moral values that is necessary to guide the many decisions we each make in our daily lives'.<sup>42</sup> Here, *The Call of Creation* highlights the longstanding association of ecological education with science-based subjects, criticising these subjects' limited capacity to offer 'a framework of moral values' for young people. However, multiple publications have emphasised RE's ability to enable the questioning and development of such moral frameworks. For instance, a recent subject review from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) foregrounded the 'intellectually challenging and personally enriching' subject matter in RE curricula which helps students 'make sense of their own place in [the] world'.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the CBCEW states:

**Religious education is never simply one subject among many but the foundation of the entire educational process. The beliefs and values studied in Catholic religious education inspire and draw together every aspect of the life of a Catholic school.**<sup>44</sup>

The capacity of RE to be 'one subject among many' can make it challenging to define. Yet, this statement showcases RE's importance as a foundational aspect of Catholic education that fosters whole-school vision in tandem with each student's individual development. For the Laudato Si' Champion's toolkit, RE became the central subject for developing ecological education specific to Catholic schools, acting as a locus point for interconnectivity within school life.

Considering the importance of RE as this locus point for ecological education, we piloted the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit within timetabled RE lessons in four of the eight participating schools. Meanwhile, the remaining four schools piloted the toolkit in existing extra-curricular ecology clubs. With the toolkit's focus on *Laudato Si'*, stewardship, and prayerful reflection, the educational setting of an RE classroom seemed a natural fit for the teaching materials. However, the toolkit's interdisciplinary aspects quickly became apparent when students began developing their projects. Students frequently recruited the help of their teachers from design and technology or geography to lend their expertise. Some projects required meetings with the school's senior leaders or site staff, such as kitchen managers or caretakers. The enquiries students made as part of their projects began to permeate across multiple areas of the school in new and unpredictable ways. Educational researcher, Clive Erricker, foregrounds RE's interdisciplinary capacity, stating 'religious studies as an academic subject draws on a number of different disciplines' while simultaneously 'RE can combine with other disciplines (for example art, science, history, etc.) to create more effective student development'.<sup>45</sup> Hence, this aspect of the toolkit became an unpredicted strength of this study's intervention, uncovering the potential for RE to act as a connector between different parts of school life and a catalyst towards whole-school sustainable changes, alongside supporting individual students' ecological education.

### 3.4 Impact of the toolkit

Following the pilot study for the Laudato Si' Champion's toolkit in eight schools, this report evaluates the impact of utilising this toolkit in participating Catholic secondary schools. The survey's findings presented in Section 2 repeatedly demonstrate the toolkit's impact on young people's ecological education and spirituality. For instance, the percentage of students feeling confident in their knowledge of climate change increased from 48% to 80% (see Fig. 1). After engaging with the toolkit, 94% of participating students had heard of Laudato Si' and 55% identified as having a good understanding of the Catholic Church's teachings on climate change (see Figs. 5 and 6).

40 Samuel Kai Wah Chu et al., *21st Century Skills Development Through Inquiry-Based Learning*, p. 7.

41 Samuel Kai Wah Chu et al., *21st Century Skills Development Through Inquiry-Based Learning*, p. 7.

42 Department for Social Justice, *The Call of Creation* (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, September 2022), p. 21.

43 Ofsted, Research review series: religious education, 12 May 2021 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-religious-education/research-review-series-religious-education#print-or-save-to-pdf>> [Accessed 5 January 2021].

44 Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *Religious Education in Catholic Schools* (London: Catholic Media Office, 2000), para. 4.

45 Clive Erricker, *Religious Education: A conceptual and interdisciplinary approach for secondary level* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) p. xii.

Furthermore, qualitative responses from participating students and the teachers facilitating the toolkit echoed this favourable feedback. For example, one teacher noted their surprise at students 'asking them [their peers] questions about how to travel to school, which we've not asked them to do', identifying how their students' wanted 'to take responsibility. [...] I think it's important that we support them in that and allow them to flourish' (Teacher T1.A, 09:20). For another teacher, the skillsets fostered by this independent project-based learning were a valuable aspect of the toolkit:

“

*This idea of a structured project that comes out of them, they've identified the problem, and then they work towards solving it. That kind of agency is invaluable, far beyond the environmental action that comes out of it for them personally, for their confidence, for their skills, for their employability.*

Teacher T7.A, 18:15

”

For teachers facilitating the toolkit's pilot, the benefits of the education to empowerment pedagogies went beyond the student's ecological education. The project management skillsets developed young people's independent thinking and sense of responsibility, supporting students' holistic education beyond their time in school.

### Student responses in focus: What do you think of Laudato Si' Champions?

“

*'I really liked in the lesson is that like, we started with a prayer, like because everyone could like reflect on, maybe last week and what is going to happen that lesson.'* (Student S1.E, Year 7, 05:19)

*'It feels like a collaborative journey. And it's like, there's no one really telling you there's a limit on what you can do. It's just your imagination, what you can come up with.'* (Student S1.F, Year 7, 06:27)

*'I used to think climate change wasn't really a big deal. [...] Now, I know it's a big deal.'* (Student S5.C, Year 8, 10:17)

*'I think the project I did with [the group], it gave me a lot of hope, because our school is doing a lot to help the environment, stuff that we just didn't think about, but they do it. So, it's nice and a bit reassuring. We were kind of looking more for the negatives, but it came out really positive. So that was really good to see that.'* (Student S6.D, Year 9, 15:23)

”



### 3.5 Locating Laudato Si' Champions

The question of where to place the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit in school life received a different answer in every school. In focus groups, students expressed a preference for hosting Laudato Si' Champions 'in the RE lesson, because then you'll get a lot more people taking part' and because the toolkit linked to 'the whole idea of it being God's planet' (Student S5.B, Year 8, 00:46; 01:21). Young people who had engaged with the toolkit in their school's ecology clubs also expressed this preference, arguing 'if more people see, more people like understand what we have to do to save the world' (Student S7.B, Year 8, 28:15). However, teachers identified multiple subjects which could facilitate the toolkit's materials, including RE, geography, science, citizenship, and Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE), as well as form time and extra-curricular clubs. The scope for the Champions toolkit extended into which year group was most appropriate to locate the learning materials. For example, one teacher argued for Year 7 as an 'establishing' year in secondary school in which their sense of stewardship 'will grow with them and they can take it forwards' (Teacher T7.B, 30:43). Simultaneously, they acknowledged 'if they're in Year 8 or Year 9, there's more ability to engage' with Laudato Si's more complex issues (Teacher T7.B, 30:43).

In acknowledging the versatile potential for the Champions toolkit to find its home in various aspects of school life, we have incorporated a section about the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach into the toolkit's teaching guidance. At the same time, the toolkit's cross-discipline capabilities advocate for collaborative approaches to ecological education that encompass whole-school action, echoing Pope Francis' call for 'interdisciplinary research capable of shedding new light on the problem'.<sup>46</sup> This addition aims to emphasise the in-built flexibility of the toolkit to operate in tandem with each school's unique contexts.

### 3.6 Making Laudato Si' accessible

The challenge of making Catholic teachings on ecology accessible was a recurring theme among teachers and students participating in the pilot. As one third-party specialist in ecological education surmised, 'Of all of the encyclicals, *Laudato Si'* is the easiest to access, but it's still not accessible' (Third-party specialist O4, 07:59). The linguistic complexity of papal encyclicals and documents like the Catechism became barriers to learning in multiple instances. For instance, one student described the extracts from *Laudato Si'* as 'very long' and 'confusing' (Student S2.A, Year 7, 17:55). Similarly, one teacher expressed how 'all the encyclicals that the Pope writes are written at a very high level that I think people who study A-level theology would struggle to understand [...] that's our job as teachers, to make religion accessible' (Teacher T1.A, 21:34). As a result, we have signposted which activities are optional for groups who want to delve further into the topic matter. We have also added extra summary slides and a glossary of key terms to the toolkit, unpacking some of *Laudato Si'*'s complex teachings in age-appropriate ways.

## 4. Conclusion

In summary, this report has explored how the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit offers an effective resource for inspiring and motivating young people to take ecologically conscious action in their school communities. Informed by students' existing perceptions of, and engagement with, the ecological crisis, the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit advocates for a student-led approach through inquiry-based learning pedagogies and group project work, cultivating young people's agency and ownership of the local community's ecological challenges. In focusing on student action at an internal school level, the Champions toolkit requires further support from teachers and diocesan-level organisers to make young people's ecological education part of their local and regional faith community's ecological spirituality. Yet, for school leaders and Catholic educators seeking to develop student leaders in sustainability, the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit provides a pathway to further action.

46 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, para. 135.

# Appendix 1: Note on participants

Members of the Guardians of Creation Project's education team collected the data presented in this report from the eight secondary schools that voluntarily participated in the Laudato Si' Champions toolkit's pilot study in the Diocese of Salford. For the student focus groups quoted in this document, 44 young people in groups of between four and seven took part in eight focus groups, encompassing one group per participating school. For the survey data, we repeated the same 22 questions with different student populations in the participating schools (see *Table 1*). The survey was completed on a voluntary basis and was circulated electronically in most cases, with paper copies available for schools that required them.

**Table 1**

Survey name	Number of respondents	Number of respondents year group and age		
		Year 7 (age 11-12)	Year 8 (age 12-13)	Year 9 (age 13-14)
1. General KS3 population	677	306 (45%)	205 (30%)	116 (25%)
2. Participating students before training	147	60 (36%)	89 (53%)	19 (11%)
4. After training comparative	50	12 (24%)	31 (62%)	7 (14%)

**Table 2**

Group of participants	Data collection method	Number of interviews/ focus groups	Total number of participants
KS3 students in pilot schools	Focus groups	8	44
Teachers in pilot schools	Interviews	6	6
	Focus groups	3	14
Senior Leadership Team (SLT) representatives in pilot schools	Interviews	7	7
Staff at the Diocese of Salford	Interviews	6	6
National policy officers from the Catholic Church in England and Wales	Interviews	2	2
Third-party ecological education specialists	Interviews	4	4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>83</b>

## Ethical considerations

The study was approved by St Mary's University Ethics Sub-committee. Full and informed consent was given from each pilot school's headteacher, alongside all pupils participating in the project's sessions and their parents or guardians. The consent forms included notice that participants' data would be stored securely and lawfully according to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). All data items were anonymised before interpretation and analysis using a letter-number substitution system to protect participants' privacy. References to individual interviews or focus groups and their transcript's timestamp are given in parentheses after quotations, such as (T3.A, 24:53).

# Appendix 2: Glossary of terms

**Care of creation.** A theme of Catholic Social Teaching, drawing on the seventh commandment to respect the integrity of God's creation. It encompasses a sense of responsible stewardship, caring for the earth and the people living on our shared planet. This report uses care of creation and care for creation interchangeably unless otherwise stated.<sup>47</sup>

**Climate literacy.** An individual's knowledge-based understanding of the earth's climate systems and their societal influence. It is also known as climate science literacy.<sup>48</sup>

**Ecological crisis.** A condition of human-induced ecological disorder that may destroy the earth's ecosystems and significantly damage human life for multiple generations. It encompasses global warming, loss of biodiversity, and social factors such as loss of human life.<sup>49</sup>

**Ecological education.** The process of developing an ecological understanding or literacy. More expansive than climate literacy, ecological education involves understanding core ecological principles with ecological practices informed by human-environment interactions. This study distinguishes ecological education from environmental education to include human and natural ecosystems.<sup>50</sup>

**Ecological spirituality.** The intersection of ecological actions with religious and spiritual beliefs. In a Catholic context, ecological spirituality refers to ways of acting, thinking, and feeling about creation that draws on the Gospel's teachings to create moral practices of protecting our common home.<sup>51</sup>

**Ecological virtue.** The application of virtue ethics to answer ecological questions. Pope Francis references the importance of cultivating appropriate ecological virtues to act selflessly to protect our common home. However, *Laudato Si'* does not explicitly mention any specific virtues to habituate.<sup>52</sup>

**Ecology.** The interrelationship between all living and non-living things encompassing humans, society, plants, animals, environments, and more. Ecology recognises that everything is connected and interdependent. This report uses integral ecology and ecology interchangeably unless otherwise stated.<sup>53</sup>

**Encyclical.** A papal letter that is circulated to all bishops in the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>54</sup>

**Ethos.** In the context of Catholic education, the character and way of life at a school reflect the Catholic Church's moral teachings. A school's ethos is represented in the lives of pupils, teachers, and facilities within its community.<sup>55</sup>

**Sustainability.** The maintenance of balance with the earth's ecosystems by communities, in solidarity with the needs of future generations.<sup>56</sup>

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Educating and empowering Laudato Si' Champions in Catholic education

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