



# Edinburgh's Learning Estate Strategy

## Outdoor Brief: Early Years

This document sets out our requirements for external space in City of Edinburgh Council's Early Years settings referred to in this document as the garden. This brief should be provided to the project team at the start of a new Early Years build or external redevelopment to brief the design of the external areas in conjunction with the relevant learning estate brief.

**The provision, design and value of external learning spaces are to be considered as important in our learning estate as the interior learning spaces.**

This approach will support creative use of outdoor space and help to connect children with nature. This connection should extend to interior design, creating a mutual two-way relationship between internal and external learning landscapes, promoting positive health and wellbeing through biophilic design and free flowing indoor-outdoor spaces as seen in our recent Early Years new builds.

## 1. Accommodating Outdoor Learning as part of the Project at RIBA Stage 1

A landscape architect's input should be part of the project team on a new build at Stage 1 to influence how the garden works with the design and position of the building on the site. The garden and building should not be treated as wholly separate and landscapers, architects and interior designers need to collaborate to create the entire learning environment. Interior design remit will extend to external breakout furniture, architects must design the building with external breakout and shelter in mind.



**"We want our school grounds to be inspiring spaces that are safe and inclusive and improve wellbeing. They should provide diversity in learning experiences and play opportunities and promote social and environmental responsibility"**

*~ City of Edinburgh Council's Vision for School Grounds*

## 2. Budget and Value Engineering

A landscape budget must be established at the start of the project as a percentage of total project cost. This must include specific items deemed a priority set out in Section 8 Table 1 in this document. The expectation is that through consultation with the client and user some elements budgeted for may be removed from the plans and replaced with a tailored option but the budget for these items must be protected to allow this. The learning and play landscape will be treated with as much regard as the building; value engineering should reflect this with a balanced approach.

The landscape design will prioritise budgeting for the inclusion of all play and learning items detailed in section 8 before adding features that only serve for aesthetic purposes. Exploration of multipurpose features is encouraged and designers should look to achieve learning and play value through creative, budget friendly solutions and materials. Exploring use of recycled and reclaimed items sourced locally would benefit the design budget as long as safety of users is not compromised.

## 3. Approval and sign off

All landscape proposals must be submitted to CEC Playground Development Support Group for approval ahead of sign-off at each RIBA Design Stage and prior to submission of Planning application. Contact [Playgrounds@edinburgh.gov.uk](mailto:Playgrounds@edinburgh.gov.uk)

## 4. Building placement within the site

The building shouldn't be placed in a way that it would compromise the ability to deliver the nursery outdoor brief.

The building should not overshadow the garden in a way that makes quality space unusable/undesirable. Allotment location should be considered for best conditions.

Use of the landscape for play and learning should be celebrated through the design by keeping it in view and close to the building.

## 5. A Playful Learning Landscape

The outdoor space must include the following key components:

- ★ Spaces for outdoor learning
- ★ Spaces for play

There needs to be diversity of each of these components and all should be provided in an environment that is as safe as necessary according to RoSPA guidance and to allow a risk-benefit approach

### 5.1 The Importance of play

Creating playful spaces within Early Years outdoor space is incredibly important for developing social, cognitive and fine/gross motor skills, along with imagination and creativity. Through play, children learn about themselves, others and the world around them. They learn through experimenting, repetition, taking risks, undertaking challenges and finding out where their limits lie.

The outdoor space must provide a variety of opportunities for children to learn through play in a way that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. Everything within the space must be possible for the children to access and do themselves and should be designed from their perspective.

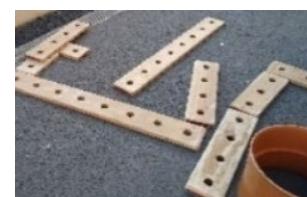
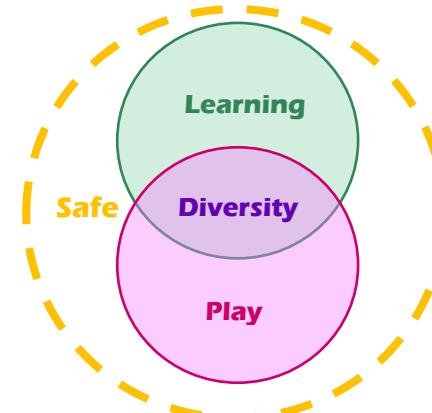
As shown in the Venn diagram the grounds should have elements of blended learning and play; features that allow “learning through play” such as loose parts, sand pits and mud kitchens.

### 5.2 Loose Parts Play

Loose parts play is a learning through play activity that will be led by the nursery. The nursery will provide the loose parts over time, so no loose parts need providing by the project team.

Loose parts play involves collecting of natural “found objects” such as leaves, pinecones etc. or use provided materials allowing children to exercise their imaginations, to look for possibilities, solve problems, to invent their own games.

Designers must provide the right environment for use of loose parts; open spaces which can be grassed or hard surface. A store to keep loose parts in that is easily accessed from these area(s). This should be easy for the children to access the items and assist in tidying up.

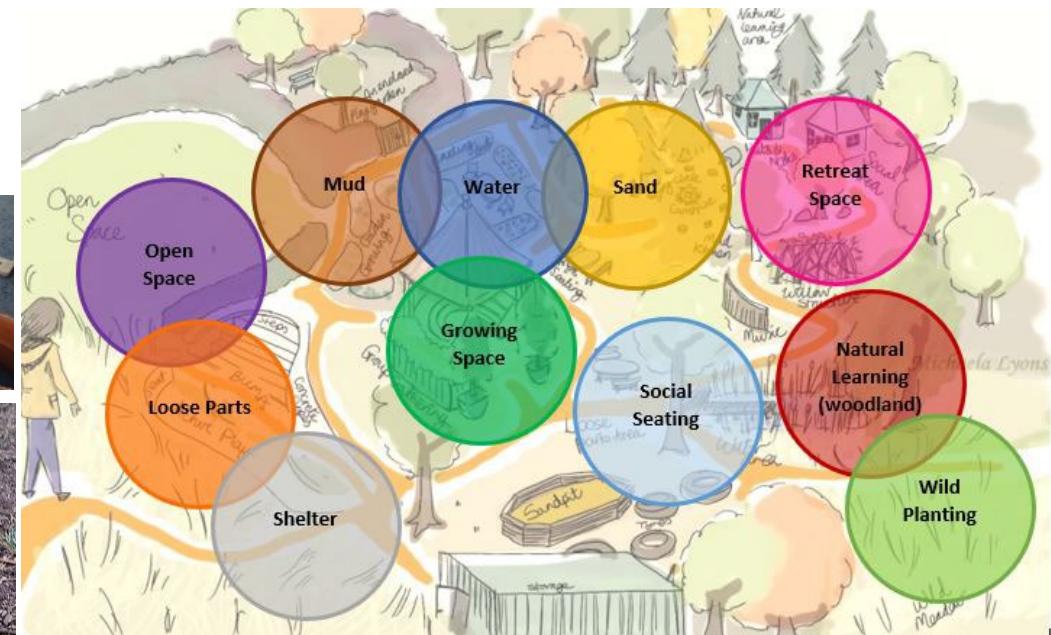


## 6. Activity Zones Adjacency Diagram

The garden should be a rich free play environment to improve social skills, brain development, creativity and support emotional resilience, physical development, confidence and learning. It should provide a safe, diverse and stimulating environment that enhances and supports child led learning and play experiences that create possibility, are non-prescriptive, stimulate/require imagination and can be used in multiple ways.

The activity zones below were developed to indicate priority space types within the gardens that allow the variety of activities we want to provide in our settings; quiet spaces for sitting and talking with friends, retreat spaces away from others that can still be supervised, space for active and loose parts play, growing space, natural space where nature can thrive with potential for imagination and den building, shelter and spaces for experiential play with mud, water and sand. The garden should be zoned to offer distinct learning and play areas with transitions to complement the experience moving between spaces.

Landscape architects must show the client team and users how they have planned the external spaces to include all of the below Activity Zones and how they connect with the building and link with each other.



## 8. Our School Grounds Kit of Parts

We have developed a “kit of parts” which shows our priority elements to include in the landscape design.

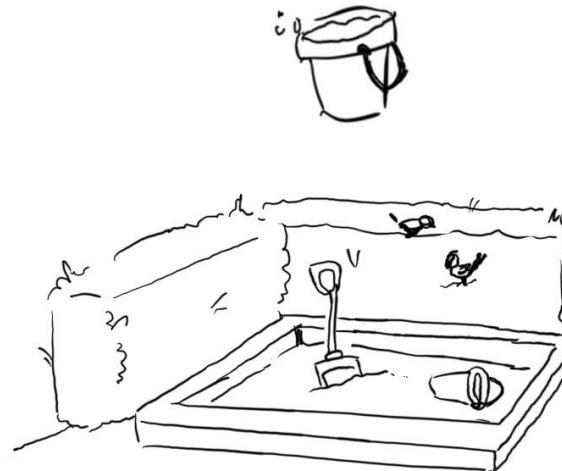
### Mounds



### Woodland



### Water



### 8.3 Woodland

A woodland should be planted if none already exists on site or in the local area. A variety of native trees of different maturity should be included to create at least a partially usable space within the first few years of use. Story circle seating should be included here: A small gathering space where children can bond and connect with nature by observing patterns, sequences and developing an understanding of relationships, interdependency and cause and effect.

### 8.4 Shelter

Canopies for outdoor breakout directly from the building should be included. These require seating and should protect against the wind and rain. Huts or sheltered group gathering spaces could also provide shelter further from the canopy particularly if the garden is affected by prevailing wind.

### Allotment & Orchard



### Shelter



### Sand

### 8.1 Mounds

These create a more interesting and playful landscape and can be used for play and learning. Large or multiple mounds are recommended to spread the footfall as these are often popular high impact features. Stepped mounds can create informal social areas

### 8.2 Allotment & Orchard

Sunny and sheltered space, with raised beds, fruit trees / beds with trellis fencing could enclose the space or create an entrance to the space, composting, storage for tools and water supply (including water butts) required. Should be protected from noisier areas. Planters should have space around them for the children to access. There should be growing beds, edible bushes (berries) and a fruit orchard. This space needs a shed and water source.

### 8.6 Sand

Sandpits should be located beside a water source for water and sand play, they should be designed to shelter the sand from dispersing out of the pit using timber framing and planting such as dense hedging and grass. Part of the edging should offer informal seating.

Sandpits should be located as far from building entrances as possible to avoid tracking sand into the building and should have a cover for when not in use.

### 8.5 Water

Water is a key element of Early Years play and should be usable with the mud kitchen and sand pit. Outdoor taps should be able to attach a hose. Features that allow gathering, splashing/jumping in puddles and touching running water are important.



### Social spaces



### Retreat spaces



### Wild gardens



### Pergola



### Mud Kitchen

## 8.9 Mud Kitchen

A mud kitchen area should be provided beside a water source. The area needs to be large enough for the play not to impact other areas of the garden; there needs to be a lot of mud in the space for digging without the need to find mud from elsewhere. Areas that get less light or naturally have water run off/drainage gathering at a point are a good location for a mud kitchen. A toddler height unit with a sink and cupboard/hooks to store pots, pans and utensils should be provided.

## 8.10 Wild Gardens

Biodiverse spaces that are planted to attract wildlife and support learning, easily accessible to study birdboxes, bug hotels, hedgehog homes etc. with trees, shrubs, long grasses and wildflowers with informal pathways to create an enriched space with seasonal interest and multi-sensory elements.

A place where the fairies live.

## 8.7 Social Spaces

A variety of social spaces should be provided for different group sizes. There should be a few seating areas within the garden and consideration of seating in parent collection areas should be made.

## 8.8 Pergola

Adding a pergola creates a flexible space that can be used for gathering, performing, creating dens, active play and introducing risk. The structure must be designed to bear weight so the use of hammocks, climbing and traversing are possible.

Pergolas should incorporate some shelter from the elements.

They should be designed to allow growing of climbing plants up and over the frame.

They require multiple heavy duty eyelet hooks for attaching carabiners; must be strong and weight bearing as will be used to attach hammocks, ropes, tarpaulin etc with the expectation that children will swing and climb on them. Hooks should be located on the top of vertical posts and underside of horizontal beams.

## 8.11 Retreat Spaces

Nooks and hideaway spaces should be created to allow children to take a moment to be on their own, willow dens and little huts are a good solution and can also be used for imaginative play.

## 9. Features and Equipment

The following list of items has been compiled based on briefing and delivery of multiple outdoor spaces. Each item will differ for each project as the character of the site and the user's preferences are taken into account. How these items are interpreted are down to the designer and may change through consultation, however they should be accounted for initially within the budget and site planning.

### Early Years

Sheltered breakout space from classroom (canopies see 10.1)

Dense hedge boundaries with fencing support (see 17)

Grass turfed areas

Mounds (see 8.1)

Wild meadow planting in areas across site (see 8.10)

Sensory planting around retreat and quiet social areas (see 15)

Trees varying maturity creating woodland (see 8.3)

Bamboo poles to create sense of woodland while trees grow (image Page 9)

Open tarmac courtyard

Line markings on tarmac

Pathways for exploring and cycling

Sandpit (see 8.6)

Waterplay equipment (see 8.5)

Mud kitchen (see 8.9)

Hut

Pergola built for tying on and bearing weight (see 8.8)

Loose parts store (see 5.2)

Willow tunnel/shelters (see 8.11)

Sensory installation (see 15)

Story seating circle (see 8.3)

Outdoor taps (located by allotment and sand) able to attach a hose

Astroturf option as alternative to grass in high use areas

Toddler/Pre-school height raised beds (see 8.2)

Shed (see 8.2)

Orchard trees (see 8.2)

Wet weather gear drying area (see 10.2)

Storage for wet weather gear (see 10.2)

Outdoor power point



Table 1

## 10. Free Flowing Learning Environments

Early Years playrooms should be designed to have immediate access to their garden to create a free flow learning environment where a child can choose to be inside or outside and move between the two independently.

### 10.1 Canopies

A 3m deep overhead canopy must be provided at the exit from playroom to garden. This is effectively a breakout from the playroom and should be furnished with chairs, tables, whiteboards and storage as shown in these images of Frogston Primary School Nursery. These breakout spaces must be designed to be flexible and reflect the learning requirements of staff and children highlighted in consultation.

The design of the canopy must create a usable sheltered space protected from wind and rain.



### 10.2 Drying Space

Where possible an area should be provided in the building for storing outdoor clothing/boots that works as a drying room. Integrating a solution into the cloakroom ideally located close to the door to the outdoor breakout will allow children to put on outerwear before leaving the playroom.

Outside under the canopy of the breakout space should have boot changing benches, a welly rack and a nearby external tap for cleaning boots.



## 11. Key Considerations

Each nursery playroom requires its own separate garden. Where two or more nursery classes are adjacent, they will be treated as individual clusters. The gardens for each cluster will have all of the same elements though the location and design may differ due to the characteristics of the site. Landscape Architects will endeavour to provide the same experiences and quality of outdoor provision in both nursery gardens.

Where possible all nursery gardens should be south facing. They must include a toilet accessible from each garden

Each garden will have eight registered places for three to four-year-olds at 9.3 sqm per child.

### 12. Look and Feel

The gardens should be informal playful landscapes that are robust and offer variety for the children. The grounds will be used by a lot of children who should feel a sense of belonging and comfort. The landscape and features should appear as natural as possible to encourage a love of nature and should be designed to have a variety of spaces with transitions between them.

Fixed equipment should offer a variety of experiences of unstructured play; no fixed slides/climbing walls. Children should be able to create their own experiences using the landform or fixed structures such as pergola/seating with loose parts and big, open-ended resources to engage in and manage, risky, challenging and adventurous play.

Informal seating on grass banks, boulders, logs, steps, decking and walls will also create opportunities for children to create their own seating arrangements and could be used with loose parts and open-ended resources.

## 13. Consultation

Meaningful consultation with staff and CEC colleagues is required early in the design phase. Landscape Architects should present an initial plan that includes all learning and play zones and the kit of parts detailed in this brief for consultation with the client and users. It is important to understand how the staff want to use the space and what barriers they feel discourage them and look to resolve these in the design.

It is important to understand how the children want to use their outdoor space, as the children at nursery are very young; discuss with staff how they feel the children can contribute to the consultation. Guidance from City of Edinburgh Early Years Management Team will support the consultation in understanding the needs of children.

Landscape architects must show the client and users how they have interpreted user input into the design. Multiple workshops with staff must be planned into the project, at least one per RIBA design stage 1-3 ahead of each sign off.

### 13.1 Test Space

With the move to using the outdoors as a learning environment daily, the staff transition period for use of these new spaces should be supported where possible by creating a test space and allowing at least a six-month period for staff to trial the learning space and get comfortable with using it. CPD should be in place over the entire project to support the staff with the changes in pedagogy and giving them access to more outdoor learning resources for taking this forward in their curriculum.

## 14. Soft landscaping design & Maintenance

Our aim is to create a biodiverse natural and informal landscape that encourages nature to thrive akin to that of a small nature reserve. Within this landscape learning, socialising and playing will be encouraged and it should promote a strong sense of community pride. Opportunities to observe seasonal changes should be provided through planting schemes with links to biodiversity, science and sustainability. All planting must be non-toxic and safe for children.

The school estate doesn't have budget for extensive maintenance of school grounds. Designers must create spaces that still work and look good when left to go wild and natural. Flat areas of lawn will be mown but hills and mounds will not. A two year maintenance schedule will be carried out by the contractor before the Council takes responsibility for maintenance. Designs should aim to achieve a [Building with Nature Accreditation](#)

## 15. Inclusion: Meeting the Needs of All

The Early Years gardens will be designed to be used by a variety of children and staff, all activity zones should be accessible by wheelchair and consideration of how to make each area inclusive is encouraged.

As listed in Table 1, we should be including sensory and inclusive features in the landscape, for example: sensory paths, sensory planting for visual, scent, texture, noise and taste around quiet retreat spaces such as willow dens.

## 16. Digitally Enabled

Gardens should be digitally enabled for teaching to occur outdoors with ease; where possible should be able to connect to the WIFI.

## 17. Security and boundaries

Early Years settings should be secure at the perimeter to create a safe space for children. A defensive hedge would be a preferable natural boundary than a 1.8m metal fence and should be used where possible see section 12 of [Secured by Design New Schools Guidance](#). Temporary secure fencing while the hedge matures will be required.

Within the garden inferred and soft informal boundaries should be used where required such as dense hedging with fence support, planters, screening plants. Landscape plans should demonstrate how planting of trees and shrubs, boundary treatments, planters with trellis and willow tunnels can be used to create distinct areas and appropriate transitions. Willow tunnels can be used to provide transition between zones.

Where there are two or more nursery gardens adjacent to each other, these should be separated with a low-level informal boundary to prevent children accessing the other garden independently. A gate between the two spaces for staff use for maintenance access etc. should be included. Fire escape routes should be considered for children who are outdoors in an emergency situation.



## 18. Accessibility/Surface coverage

There should be accessible paths that would allow reasonable universal access to most of the areas of the garden this should take into consideration users of some sort of disability (mobility, visual, auditory etc)

External lighting should take into consideration the safety of access but also the natural environment conditions (not too little but not too much)

The use of Impervious surfaces should be restricted to absolutely necessary areas (to reduce runoff and demand of suds)

## 19. Active Travel

Access to the site for users should primarily be from an active travel route.

Designs should ensure that building users have the opportunity and are motivated to travel by environmentally friendly means. The City of Edinburgh Council Active Travel and Road Safety teams should be part of consultation on plans.



## 20. Different strategic areas/vehicles

Parking allocation for nursery users should take guidance from [Planning](#) but should not impede the ability to deliver the landscape brief for learning and play. Access to the site by delivery and service vehicles and Facilities management maintenance vehicles should be planned into the landscape design in a way that can be managed to ensure safe access for all users of the grounds. Good wayfinding and road marking would help. Emergency vehicle access needs to be planned in for less frequent requirement. Potential to use grasscrete where possible to maintain hard standing but keep natural appearance.

Bicycle shelter allocation should take guidance from [Planning](#) the January 2020 Design Guidance recommends 1 bike space per 9 students. Safe routes for bicycles and pedestrians must be provided throughout the site with crossings over roads limited where possible.

## Further reading

This briefing should be read in conjunction with:

Edinburgh Learning Estate Strategy

[School Grounds Guidance](#)

[Future Schools Website Outdoor spaces](#)

[Future Schools Website: Creating your space](#)

[Edinburgh Design Guidance Jan 2020](#)

[Secured by Design New Schools Guidance](#)

[My World Outdoors: Care Inspectorate](#)

[Space to Grow: Scottish Futures Trust, Care Inspectorate and Scottish Government](#)

[Out to Play: Inspiring Scotland, Care Inspectorate, Scottish Government](#)

