



Planning for change

The way you design, use and manage your school grounds can help you meet your aims for all aspects of your school – whether it's establishing better links with the curriculum, developing improved social spaces, creating new garden areas or just enhancing the overall feel of the site. Initially, the prospect of re-thinking your outdoor space may feel overwhelming. But with a good understanding of a few basic principles, the process can be easily organised into four clear stages designed to help you develop your grounds – not only to benefit your school today, but for many years to come.

There are a number of ways to approach your school grounds project. Some schools look at their whole school site and create a long-term development plan to be implemented in stages. Others use their available funds to make small improvements across the whole site. A third approach is to concentrate on just one area in order to make a big impact – this may well inspire further efforts.

Whichever approach you choose, it is worth knowing that the most successful school grounds development projects are those that embrace three main principles.

Firstly, your project should aim to be **sustainable** – you'll want changes to remain successful in the long term. Secondly, it should be **holistic** – involving the whole school site, the whole school community, and the whole curriculum. And thirdly, it should be **participative** – a project in which pupils work alongside adults throughout.

There are different ways to build in pupil participation. Setting up a special steering group, for example, or making use of an existing school council or eco group are good approaches. Participation

also benefits citizenship initiatives. However, these strategies may also limit wider staff and subject department involvement. Embedding your school grounds project into the curriculum can be more challenging to plan, but this approach can support developments within particular curriculum subjects and their associated teaching and learning practices. There can also be greater potential for staff involvement within the project.

This Groundnotes is aimed at all those involved with improving the design, use and management of school grounds, including students, teachers, heads, governors, parents and school grounds professionals. It particularly focuses on physical changes to the school grounds, whether these are whole-site development plans or improvements to small, defined areas. And it sets out a structured process of change that will help you to ensure that whatever the scale of your project, you make the right changes to your school grounds.



Stage 1 Where are we now?

Even if you only plan to improve one area of your grounds – for now, at least – it is important to start by gaining a thorough understanding of the whole site. This is crucial for future developments and can help avoid costly mistakes.

Having a thorough understanding of your site will depend on gathering together key information. And taking a structured, formal approach to information gathering will enable all members of the school community to get involved in the project. It will also give you valuable insights into how the grounds are used by everyone, and provide the essential building blocks you need to make decisions on layout, location of features and site management.

You could gather the information you need gradually, perhaps through lessons or after-school clubs. Alternatively, you may want to work over a concentrated, short period to maintain momentum and keep interest levels high. Either way, involving as many individuals or groups as possible by making sure everyone is aware of how important the task is will encourage participation. And this will not only make the task easier, but also avoid the responsibility being shouldered by one or two people.

Key questions you should ask during information gathering include:

- What existing features need to be taken into account? As well as doing a survey of your site, you will need to collect information on any legal, technical, and

financial or policy issues that may affect the changes you wish to make. For example, you may need to confirm who owns the land, whether there are any restrictions on its use, and who is responsible for the maintenance.

- How do we use the grounds? What activities take place in the grounds before school, during break and lunchtimes and after school? How do different groups use the grounds and how do different groups influence each other? How are the grounds managed?
- How do we feel about the grounds? By asking people to think about the physical aspects of the grounds and how they use the grounds you will start to encourage thoughts about how they feel about the grounds. What kind of emotional response do people have, both positive and negative? You might be surprised as to how different users feel about your grounds.

School grounds are never finished

The school grounds at **The Coombes Infant School** in Berkshire are inspirational. The secret of their success is never thinking their grounds are finished. Each year the school community works on new, bigger, better ideas, sometimes sacrificing previous projects in order to improve on the grounds as a whole. Each new intake of children has the opportunity to bring



Sustainable

It can take a lot of time, effort and money to improve school grounds and you will want them to remain successful in the long term. Throughout your project, keep thinking about how you will use and care for the grounds in the years to come, and how much it will cost. Try to use locally sourced materials, native plants and take care to minimise the effect of your work on sensitive environments.

By the end of this stage you should have a good knowledge of the existing layout and features of your school grounds; how the grounds are maintained and whether they are in good condition; how the grounds are used and viewed by the whole school community; any technical and legal constraints that exist.

Stage 2 Where do we want to be?

From the information you have gathered you should be able to identify the gaps in your current provision and develop first a brief, and then a vision for your school grounds.

Students, for example, may want to play more sport, have places to socialise, enjoy a peaceful garden area, feel more proud of their school. Younger students may want their own space where they feel

their own thoughts to the development process, with the grounds reflecting the school's current priorities and the children's current play needs.



safe. Teachers may want to make more use of the grounds for teaching. The premises manager may want to address issues of littering or vandalism.

It is inevitable that people will have many and varied needs and wants but once you start collecting the information priorities will start to emerge.

Developing a brief

Interpreting the information and feedback you have gathered on the site as it is now will help you develop a brief. To avoid simply creating a wish list of features, it's worth asking 'what do we want to do in the grounds?' And 'how would we like to use the grounds?' Questions like these will prompt a physical and emotional response, while also identifying the different needs your school grounds should meet, and setting out what you want your project to achieve. These aims, which will form your brief, might include:

- enhancing teaching and learning through creating new facilities and inspirational learning environments
- improving how students and staff feel about their daily workplace
- creating learning opportunities for students throughout the process of change
- making the school site more welcoming for visitors and the local community.

Developing a vision plan

This needn't be a detailed plan of each and every change – especially as it may continue to develop over time. It should, however, attempt to define the shape and sizes of the different spaces, identify existing or potential uses, users and possible improvements, and indicate major features, for example large areas of planting, main routes through and access points. It is often at this stage that schools turn to professional designers to help them develop their plans.

By the end of this stage you should have a vision plan that shows what you would like to achieve; how you would like your grounds to function; and how you would like to be able to use them.

Holistic

The most successful school grounds projects are those which look at the whole school site, the whole school community, and the whole curriculum – ie its formal, informal and hidden dimensions. This doesn't mean doing everything at once, but taking such a broad view can help justify why scarce resources should be devoted to the grounds.



Stage 3 How to get there

Once you have identified your first area for development you'll need to explore it in more detail before you start work.

Check that you are taking the best approach to getting what you want. There may be other solutions, including changes to the management and maintenance of the site; specialist training for supervisory staff; improving teaching resources; or renovating or repairing existing features. Changes that can be made without major physical upheaval or large funding implications can often bring rich rewards and impact on your grounds in the early stages of your project.

Consult the school community. Lots of features in school grounds, like a pond or a garden, can be planned with the help of students, parents and teachers, producing results that are both imaginative and realistic.

Consider involving a design professional in working with your students to develop and design specific areas or features. Landscape architects, garden designers, artists and playground designers can work with your school to generate bespoke solutions to meet your needs.

Include in the detailed design

Pupils as surveyors and designers



Millbrook Community School, Southampton, surveyed student opinion about the site in a number of ways. Some students, for example, went round the site with disposable cameras and took photos of areas they felt needed to be improved. These were then collated as a leaflet, along with some of their comments, and used to report back to other members of the school community. Inspirational pictures were displayed in the dining hall, and students were given three sticky dots to vote for the ones they liked. The information gathered was then used by a group of students to write a vision plan listing how they thought the grounds should change. Finally, small picture cards of the preferred options were used with a large site plan to create a zoning plan.

information about cost, space requirements, materials and where to get them and how to build/create the feature, and who might help.

Plan for how you'll care for the feature in the long term. Unless maintenance is addressed the success of your changes will be short-lived. So it is vital to ask:

- What are the long-term cost maintenance implications – where will the money come from?
- Who will maintain the feature(s)? How will they find the time and who will help them?
- How often will tasks need to be done? What resources will be needed?
- Can management and maintenance be built into your curriculum planning?

By the end of this stage you should have detailed plans for the immediate changes you hope to make. You should also have considered the maintenance implications.

Stage 4 Making it happen

Armed with evidence from your information gathering activities, detailed designs and a management plan, it's time to start building!

Consider different options for the work. Students, parents or other volunteers may be able to help – a skills audit will help identify the resources available to you, and ensure you are making judicious use of paid professionals.

Some of the work won't be suitable for the active involvement of children, but it's important that they are kept informed perhaps by watching and recording work in progress, or inviting a contractor to come and talk about the project to an assembly. Keep a photographic record of work in progress – this is also useful if you have contractors on site in case you are unhappy with an aspect of their work.

The work doesn't stop once you've constructed your improvements. You now need to:

Celebrate by telling the media; organising a launch event; recognising the achievements of the students involved; showing your gratitude to everyone who helped with your project.

Maintain your new grounds – make sure that your project will continue to be successful in the long-term.

Use the new facilities – do staff need training to help them make the most of the outdoor environment?

Evaluate how well you have met your objectives, and reflect on what you have learnt.



Parental participation

Ravenstone Primary School in Wandsworth transformed their playground through the work of their very active playground development committee, with committed parents and governors taking a leading role in supporting their children.

Groups of parents worked on different elements of the playground projects. Some helped fundraise – for example a Bollywood night, led by the Asian parents, was an alcohol-free evening of food, films and henna painting! The school made the

most of a parent who was a journalist on a national paper – she wrote articles for the paper charting the history of the project, and another parent captured the work on film and produced a DVD.

The wider parent body was kept updated via a regular playground newsletter *Re:play*; and the minutes of meetings were placed on the four dedicated notice boards around the school. Information about the project was also included in the head teacher's newsletter and circulated to parents via the children's book bags.

Ask . . . where are we now? It is unlikely that your grounds are now perfect, and they certainly won't stay perfect for ever. School grounds improvements should be a continuous cycle to ensure that they will suit the needs of future generations of students too.

By the end of this stage you should have improved your grounds, and be ready to think about future projects.

Participative

The most successful school grounds projects are those in which pupils work alongside adults throughout. The project will benefit from the pupils' knowledge and experience of the grounds, and will be more sustainable where pupils feel a sense of ownership. The pupils will benefit



from increased confidence and self-esteem as a result of learning new skills, working with others and seeing their suggestions acted upon and actively supported by adults.

Further information

Don't forget, as Schoolgrounds-UK members, you can contact the Learning through Landscapes advice line for individual advice and support at all stages of your project.

Available from the publications area of our website:

- **WORKOUT** LTL's secondary school grounds toolkit, which looks in detail at the whole school grounds development process, complete with ready-to-use activities.
- *Creating a Space to Grow* provides lots of ideas for developing outdoor learning environments for the early years.

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To find out more about membership call 01962 845811 or visit www.ltl.org.uk

