
The Future Of Play

White Paper: Reimagining Outdoor Play Provision for Schools

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1. Executive Summary

Schools are facing a moment of profound change.

Rising levels of SEND and high-needs pupils, increasing mental health challenges, growing absenteeism, declining physical activity and the effects of screen-based childhoods are placing enormous pressure on the education system. At the same time, many schools are still operating within structures, environments and assessment models designed for a very different era.

This paper argues that play and outdoor learning are no longer optional extras at the edges of education. They are becoming central to how schools support wellbeing, behaviour, learning and healthy child development.

Over the past 30–40 years, children's lives have changed dramatically. Previous generations spent large parts of their childhood outdoors, exploring independently, interacting socially and learning through movement, challenge and risk. Today, childhood is far more structured, supervised and screen-based. Opportunities for free outdoor play have reduced sharply, while concerns around safety, traffic and safeguarding have restricted children's independence.

As a result, schools have quietly become one of the last major places where children experience outdoor play, movement, social interaction and contact with nature.

This shift matters because play is deeply connected to how children develop. Modern neuroscience increasingly reinforces what many educators already recognise instinctively: movement, exploration, social interaction and managed risk are critical to cognitive, emotional and physical development. Outdoor play supports resilience, confidence, creativity, emotional regulation, problem-solving and readiness to learn.

The paper highlights growing evidence that reduced outdoor play is linked to:

- Increased anxiety and emotional pressure
- Reduced resilience and independence
- Lower physical activity levels
- Behavioural challenges and reduced concentration
- Greater disconnection from nature and community

At the same time, access to quality outdoor environments is becoming increasingly unequal. Many children, particularly in urban and disadvantaged communities, have little access to safe green space beyond school. In this context, schools have the opportunity to become powerful equalisers – providing experiences that many children may no longer access elsewhere.

The paper argues that the most successful schools are beginning to rethink play entirely. Rather than viewing it as a break from learning, they are embedding it into the wider culture and daily rhythm of the school. Outstanding outdoor environments are not necessarily the largest or most expensive. Instead, they tend to share common principles:

- Access to nature and varied landscapes
- Opportunities for challenge and managed risk
- Flexible spaces children can shape and reinterpret
- Inclusive environments supporting multiple forms of engagement
- Outdoor spaces that support learning, wellbeing and social development simultaneously

International examples – particularly from Scandinavia and European adventure playground traditions – demonstrate alternative approaches where outdoor learning, child-led exploration and risk-positive cultures are treated as fundamental parts of childhood rather than optional enrichment.



The paper also explores how schools can move beyond traditional playground thinking. Outdoor environments can support:

- Forest School and nature-based learning
- Biodiversity and sustainability education
- Outdoor classrooms and reflection spaces
- Gardening and food education
- SEND inclusion and emotional regulation
- Social development and independent learning

Importantly, this is not presented as an unrealistic or unattainable vision. Across the UK, schools and trusts are already delivering transformational outdoor environments through phased masterplans, creative funding strategies and long-term leadership.

The paper outlines a range of practical funding routes available to schools, including:

- PTA fundraising
- PE and Sport Premium funding
- SEND and inclusion funding
- Pupil Premium
- Capital funding
- Grants and community partnerships

The most successful projects are those built around a clear long-term vision, strong stakeholder alignment and phased implementation over time.

The Poringland Primary School case study demonstrates how a school can transform its outdoor environment gradually – starting small, building momentum and ultimately reshaping the culture and wellbeing of the entire school community through play-led design. Ultimately, the paper proposes a fundamental shift in thinking.

Play should no longer be treated as something schools provide if space and budgets allow. It should be viewed as core infrastructure for wellbeing, learning and healthy development – as important to the future of education as classrooms, staffing or curriculum design.

The schools best equipped for the future will be those that understand children are not designed for constant passivity, standardisation and screen-based lives. They will create environments that allow movement, challenge, creativity, social connection and outdoor learning to become part of everyday school life.

**In that future, play is no longer an addition to education.
It becomes one of its foundations.**



2. Ideas That Have Shaped Our Thinking

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF SCHOOL?

It is very clear that the purpose of school for children needs reform. The world has changed enormously since the late 1800's when schools first became compulsory for children to attend. We have seen the revolution of technology in the last 30 years and the world we all live in is vastly different, not to mention the prominence of AI and its use in pretty much everything today.

SEND CRISIS

There are a number of major issues happening in schools currently that link directly to the local community around the school. The rise of EHCPs and children with HIGH NEEDS has been huge over the last 5 years. More and more children are in mainstream schools where they and the adults caring for them are struggling. Schools are in desperate need of money to employ staff who have the right skills to support the children at school.

There are not enough spaces in specialist schools and the policy ahead appears to be that schools will need to adapt hugely to include children with extremely high needs.

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Alongside the challenge of SEND in schools there are sadly more children with mental health needs and schools are ever adapting to help these children cope in school. Sadly the NHS statistics are alarming in the UK around mental health in our young people and also very negative around health and obesity. There are more and more children simply not attending school and this is being seen in High Schools across the country. With this in mind and of course the fact that children are spending too much time in front of screens or on their phones, the importance of Active Learning and Play has never been clearer.

OFSTED AND ASSESSMENT

The assessment system as it is today, is increasingly not fit for purpose and it has not really changed much since schools began. Increasingly, children are not able to access the assessment system and there needs to be a revamp of how success is measured and the role that schools play in the development of every child.

Active Learning and Play have never been more important for the future generations ahead. Schools need to adapt and reshape their purpose and what skills and traits children need for the future. Schools will not just be for rote learning but will be ever more important in shaping the health and wellbeing of children. Play and teaching children to be active has never been more important. The aim of this white paper, is to explore this area thoroughly.

3. The State Of Play Today



HOW CHILDHOOD HAS CHANGED

For previous generations, outdoor play was simply part of everyday life. Children spent hours outside with little supervision, exploring streets, parks, woodland and informal spaces close to home. Play was physical, social and imaginative. It involved freedom, risk, negotiation and independence.

Over the past 30–40 years, that has changed dramatically.

Children now spend far less time outdoors and far more time in structured, supervised or screen-based activities. Concerns around traffic, safeguarding and safety have reduced children's freedom to roam, while digital entertainment increasingly competes for their attention.

A 2022 survey from the Financial Times highlighted the scale of that shift: around 80% of people aged 55–64 said they regularly played outside unsupervised as children, compared with only around 25% of children today.



As outdoor freedom has declined, schools have quietly become one of the main places where children experience play, movement and social interaction.



FROM NATURAL PLAY TO CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENTS

Historically, children played in environments full of variety and challenge – trees, grass, mud, slopes, water and uneven terrain. Those spaces constantly changed and invited creativity.

Modern playgrounds are often safer and more durable, but they can also become over-controlled and overly standardised. Fixed equipment and hard surfaces sometimes limit imagination, reduce challenge and narrow the ways children can interact with space.

At the same time, attitudes towards risk have shifted. Childhood once naturally involved climbing, balancing and testing limits. Increasingly, play spaces are designed to eliminate risk altogether rather than manage it sensibly.

Yet learning to assess risk is a vital part of development. Confidence, resilience and judgement are built through experience, not avoidance.

THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

The effects of reduced outdoor play are increasingly visible within schools and society more broadly.

Children today face higher levels of anxiety, reduced physical activity and growing emotional pressures. Time outdoors once acted as a natural outlet – allowing children to move, socialise, decompress and reset. Without those opportunities, schools increasingly see the consequences through behaviour issues, lower resilience and reduced concentration.

Research also points to changing patterns in childhood health. Injuries linked to outdoor exploration have reduced significantly, while problems associated with sedentary lifestyles, repetitive screen use and mental health challenges have increased.

At the same time, play itself has become compressed. What was once woven throughout childhood is now confined to break-times and short allocated sessions during the school day.

SCHOOLS CARRYING GREATER RESPONSIBILITY

For many children, school is now the primary – and sometimes only – place where they experience outdoor play, contact with nature and active social interaction.

This creates both a challenge and a major opportunity.

Many school sites were never designed to fulfil this role. Outdoor space is often limited, heavily surfaced and under pressure to serve multiple functions. Funding constraints, safeguarding concerns and academic pressures can all make investment in play feel secondary.

Yet schools also have the opportunity to reshape childhood experiences for an entire generation.

Well-designed outdoor environments can support wellbeing, behaviour, creativity, independence and learning – often far beyond what is possible indoors alone.

INEQUALITY IN ACCESS TO PLAY

Access to quality outdoor space is increasingly unequal.

Children in affluent or rural areas are far more likely to experience nature, green space and independent outdoor play, while many children in urban or disadvantaged communities have little access to safe or stimulating outdoor environments.

This creates what is effectively a postcode lottery of play.

For many children, school grounds may represent their only reliable access to nature, movement and free play. That places schools in a unique position to act as equalisers – providing opportunities that may not exist beyond the school gates.

WHY PLAY MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

Play is not separate from learning and development. It is one of the ways children learn how to think, socialise, regulate emotions and understand the world around them.

Modern neuroscience increasingly supports this. Children's brains develop through movement, challenge, sensory experience and social interaction. Climbing, balancing, imaginative play and managed risk all help build the foundations for emotional resilience, problem-solving and learning readiness.

Outdoor play also supports:

- Physical health and coordination
- Emotional wellbeing
- Attention and focus
- Social confidence
- Creativity and independence

In a generation facing growing mental health pressures, reduced independence and constant digital stimulation, these experiences matter more than ever.

The most effective schools are beginning to recognise that play is not an optional extra or a reward at the edge of education. It is part of the foundation that successful learning and healthy development depend upon.

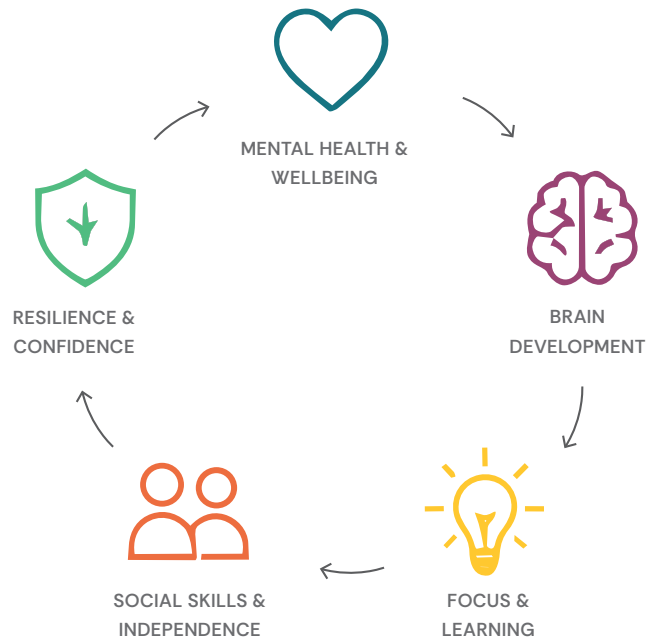
4. Why Play Matters More Than Ever

PLAY AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Play is one of the primary ways children develop cognitively, socially and emotionally.

Movement, exploration and social interaction strengthen neural connections and help children build essential life skills. Outdoor environments are particularly valuable because they combine physical movement with unpredictability, challenge and sensory richness.

Children are not designed to remain sedentary for long periods. They learn through doing – through experimentation, movement and interaction with the world around them.



RISK, RESILIENCE AND CONFIDENCE

Managed risk is a critical part of healthy childhood development.

When children climb, balance, move at speed or test boundaries, they are constantly assessing situations, adapting and learning from outcomes. These experiences build resilience, confidence and decision-making skills.

Removing all challenge from play environments may reduce minor accidents, but it can also reduce opportunities for children to develop independence and risk awareness.

The goal should not be to eliminate risk entirely, but to distinguish between genuine hazards and healthy challenge.

MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Schools are increasingly dealing with rising levels of anxiety, emotional stress and behavioural challenges among children.

Historically, outdoor play acted as a natural coping mechanism. Through active and imaginative play, children processed emotions, released stress and developed friendships organically.

As those opportunities have reduced, schools are increasingly required to manage the consequences through formal interventions and support systems.

High-quality play environments can help address some of those underlying pressures by creating everyday opportunities for movement, social connection, freedom and emotional regulation.



BEHAVIOUR, FOCUS AND LEARNING

Behaviour and attainment are closely connected to children's everyday experiences. Children who lack opportunities to move, socialise and explore often struggle more with attention, emotional regulation and classroom behaviour. In many cases, what is described as poor behaviour may reflect unmet developmental needs.

Outdoor play helps children return to lessons calmer, more focused and more ready to engage with learning.

It also develops wider skills that underpin long-term success:

- Problem-solving
- Creativity
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Adaptability

Play is not a distraction from learning. In many ways, it creates the conditions that make learning possible.

5. What Great Play Looks Like In UK Schools

Outstanding play environments are not defined by size, budget or the amount of equipment installed. The most successful schools simply make better use of the space they have.

Great environments tend to share several common characteristics:

- Variety and choice
- Access to nature
- Opportunities for challenge
- Flexible and adaptable spaces
- Environments children can shape themselves

The best schools create spaces where children can move between active play, quiet areas, social interaction and imaginative exploration naturally throughout the day.



“The most successful play environments are not equipment-led, they are experience-led”



ADVENTURE, CREATIVITY AND INCLUSION

Children rarely use spaces exactly as adults intend. They reinterpret, adapt and invent their own ways of playing.

Successful environments allow for this flexibility rather than trying to control it.

Adventure comes less from complex equipment and more from opportunity – height, movement, loose materials, varied terrain and freedom to explore.

Inclusive environments also work best when they avoid separating children unnecessarily. Spaces that offer multiple ways to engage naturally encourage shared play and participation.

INTEGRATING PLAY INTO SCHOOL CULTURE

In the strongest schools, play is not treated as a bolt-on activity. It becomes part of the culture of the school itself.

Outdoor spaces support:

- Learning
- Social interaction
- Reflection
- Movement
- Creativity

The environment begins to reinforce the values the school wants to promote – trust, independence, confidence and collaboration.

6. Learning From Europe, Scandinavia & Beyond

Scandinavian countries treat outdoor play and outdoor learning very differently from much of the UK.

In many schools across Denmark, Sweden and Norway, outdoor time is viewed as essential rather than optional. Children spend significant portions of the day outside in all seasons, engaging with nature as a normal part of education.

These approaches prioritise:

- Movement and exploration
- Nature-based learning
- Independence and responsibility
- Managed risk
- Child-led play

The emphasis is often less on manufactured equipment and more on natural environments that constantly change and evolve.



ADVENTURE PLAYGROUNDS AND RISK-POSITIVE CULTURES

Across Europe, adventure playground traditions have long embraced the idea that children benefit from shaping and adapting their own environments.

Loose materials, open-ended spaces and managed risk allow children to experiment, build, collaborate and take ownership of play.

Risk-positive cultures recognise that children naturally seek challenge. Rather than eliminating risk completely, they focus on helping children understand and manage it safely.

This approach builds resilience, judgement and confidence far more effectively than highly controlled environments.

7. Designing For Play: Principles That Work

The most successful play environments are not equipment-led. They are experience-led.

Natural elements such as planting, water, topography, sand and trees tend to create richer and more adaptable play experiences than highly standardised equipment alone.

Great environments:

- Change over time
- Allow multiple forms of play
- Encourage imagination
- Support challenge and progression
- Give children ownership of space

DESIGNING FOR RESILIENCE AND INDEPENDENCE

Play environments should allow children to experiment, adapt and occasionally fail safely.

Resilience develops through repeated experiences of challenge and persistence, not through constant adult direction.

Children also develop confidence when they are trusted to make decisions about how they use space, who they interact with and how far they push themselves.

INCLUSIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Inclusive environments are not simply about compliance. They are about creating spaces where all children can participate naturally together.

This means designing for:

- Multiple ways to engage
- Varied sensory experiences
- Choice and flexibility
- Independence and dignity

The best inclusive spaces feel shared rather than segregated.

8. Beyond Playgrounds: Outdoor Learning & Enrichment

Outdoor environments should support far more than break-times. Increasingly, schools are recognising the value of treating the entire site as a learning landscape.

FOREST SCHOOLS AND NATURE IMMERSION

Forest School approaches show the value of regular and sustained time outdoors. Rather than occasional activities, children benefit most from repeated immersion in natural environments over time.

Outdoor learning can support:

- Science and observation
- Language and storytelling
- Creativity and problem-solving
- Independence and teamwork

The key is consistency. Outdoor learning works best when it becomes part of the rhythm of school life rather than an occasional enrichment activity.



GARDENS, BIODIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

School gardens, planting schemes and biodiversity projects help children connect directly with living systems and environmental processes.

These spaces support:

- Responsibility and ownership
- Sustainability awareness
- Food education
- Climate understanding
- Cross-curricular learning

They also help children develop a stronger connection to the natural world at a time when many are increasingly disconnected from it.

QUIET SPACES AND REFLECTION

Not every outdoor environment needs to be energetic.

Quiet, sheltered spaces are equally important – particularly for children who need opportunities to regulate emotions, step away from overstimulation or spend time in calmer social settings.

A balanced outdoor environment should support both activity and reflection.



9. The Impact of Outdoor Play on Wellbeing & Learning

Outdoor play has a direct influence on children's physical health, emotional wellbeing, confidence and learning readiness.

Well-designed environments encourage sustained movement naturally through climbing, balancing, running and exploration rather than through instruction alone.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Outdoor play supports:

- Strength and coordination
- Emotional regulation
- Stress reduction
- Physical confidence
- Long-term healthy habits

At the same time, natural outdoor environments help children reset emotionally and recover from cognitive fatigue.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND INDEPENDENCE

Play provides one of the most important contexts for developing:

- Communication
- Cooperation
- Conflict resolution
- Confidence
- Decision-making

Outdoor spaces allow children greater freedom to shape their own experiences, solve problems independently and develop social understanding through real interaction.

CREATIVITY, FOCUS AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

Open-ended environments encourage imagination and creativity because they allow children to interpret, adapt and invent.

Outdoor settings also support attention restoration, helping children return to lessons more focused and engaged.

Ultimately, outdoor play is not simply about recreation. It supports many of the core skills and experiences children need in order to thrive – socially, emotionally, physically and academically.

10. Funding The Future of Play

HOW CAN SCHOOLS CREATE PLAY AND CREATIVE OUTSIDE SPACES

As this paper outlines we are in a time of change with increasing SEND pupils with high needs in schools and a need to create spaces for children inside but also outside. There are many examples across the UK of Trusts and Schools who find innovative ways to fund play and learning spaces outside and that have the ambition and understanding that this is crucial for the future.

It is essential that schools are creative and find different ways to raise the money needed to make significant things happen in their outside spaces. Using different avenues to find money is often the best way and so here are some different places schools can use to help them.



PTA &
FUNDRAISING



PUPIL
PREMIUM



P.E & SPORT
FUNDING



SEND &
INCLUSION



CAPITAL &
GRANTS

PTA – FUNDRAISING

The most successful schools and trusts have a strong PTA as the start point of making something special happen like a large play area or an outside classroom. Best practice will see the Heads of School work closely with the PTA Chair so that there is a combined vision and funding to strengthen the chances of success. PTAs can do extraordinary things to raise money. When a PTA has a Chair with a strong background in fundraising and a strong team they can raise around £25,000 a year. There are examples of PTAs who can raise more and of course less but they are the driving forces in making play and learning spaces happen currently.

PUPIL PREMIUM FUNDING

All schools receive a good amount of money to help children from lower income families. The ambition with this funding is for schools to find innovative ways of bridging the gap as there is clear evidence that they struggle more emotionally and academically. The funding will often help support the costs of TAs to support children at school but some schools use some of the money for projects such as a new library, a minibus to take the children to events, or something else. It would be a great use of some of the funding to to create spaces of play for children at school. There could be extra opportunities for the Pupil Premium children during a school day to access this and it will help them develop socially and emotionally leading to greater progress at school. Taking some of the money from this place has been done successfully to make many things happen at school and what better time to do this.



P.E. AND SPORTS FUNDING

Since 2013 the Government has invested into schools the P.E. and Sports Fund. Every school receives a good amount of money with rules around what it should be used for. The best practice sees schools evidencing a variety of things that have been done to increase children being active and taking part in P.E. activities. There is no doubt that creating spaces for play would enhance physical activity and also if built well will last for the next 30 years. Schools need to be brave to justify their thinking in all things physical activity and there is a huge opportunity here for schools to use some of this funding to create spaces for children to play and socialise in for the benefit of their physical health and their mental health.

SEND FUNDING – INCLUSION

Schools are looking to find innovative ways to make their schools inclusive and this is very much something of high significance across the UK. There will be extra Government funding to help schools with SEND and no doubt there will be many ways this money could be spent. Schools should prioritise the space they have and use and this is the key to inclusion ahead. If there are outside spaces with play and learning opportunities this will help the children throughout the day and in many cases where they are not able to be in the main school building. Schools are still working out the best way to meet the needs of the children they increasingly manage at school and the most forward thinking schools maximise the use of their outside space to ensure that children have fun and safe places to go to and use throughout the school day.

CAPITAL FUNDING

All schools have a capital fund and this money is to help them develop their building or the IT equipment they have at their school. There is a grey area perhaps around play structurally but if the build was an outside class space for example this is a great way to use capital funding to build spaces outside that enable children to be outside. There is an argument that structures built for play and learning would justify that use of the capital fund to fund this would be a great use of this money. It may also be as mentioned earlier that schools take a small amount from this funding pot and add it to other funding it helps make something substantial happen.

CREATIVE FUNDING

There are many inspiring examples of Trusts and Schools who think out of the box to create funds. Corporate fundraisers, large Trusts with high ambitions of wellbeing, and leaders with vision can make extraordinary things happen. Play is a huge motivating theme as it should be and there are lots of innovators and investors who love to be a part of something that enhances the wellbeing of children.

SUMMARY

The secret to making and funding something is to have a clear and ambitious vision. A strong and competent leader will then bring together all the major stakeholder of the school or Trust and then set about reaching the target needed to make something happen. Combining different sources for the funding as set out above is a powerful and successful way to generate a strong amount of money that then enables something very special to be built in a school. It is happening already and it can be done.

11. Delivering a play transformation strategy



BUILDING STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT

To create something wonderful and fun for children at a school requires careful planning and for all of the key stakeholders to be aligned in the vision.

The Head of the school usually must inspire the key stakeholders and bring them all together. This vision must be shared with the Governors, the SLT, the PTA, the staff and the parents to succeed. All great school projects require a leader who can unite everyone around this common cause. This is the most important aspect of making something special happen.

Having all round play and learning spaces will allow the children to be active, take sensible risks, use the imaginative and creative parts of their brain, and ultimately thrive, long after they have moved on to the next phase of their education.

There must be a clear strategy shared and this takes time and determination. Once the dream and vision is there, then it becomes easier to work as a school to make something happen, as without this togetherness the project will fail.

PHASED IMPLEMENTATION AND BUDGETING

Once the stakeholders are all in place, the financial planning must be discussed and agreed. As mentioned in the previous section there are different places the money can come from and the best projects start with a school with a strong fund raising team. Clearly the budget of what can be afforded will vary hugely and so this will dictate what can and can't be done.

Schools usually will speak to three or more companies to find the right design and build for what they need at their school. These conversations will also shape the budget needed to make something happen at the school. The Head must be clear about the budget as this is essential. Along with this, a realistic timeframe is needed for when the ideal build should happen.

Some of the best play builds are phased in stages as often this is the most practical way to build play in a school. A design can have two or three phases and often doing it this way motivates the key stakeholders, the children and the families as to what can be done. It also begins to show the impact of the play and begins to build momentum. It's this that motivates a school to continue to raise money in creative ways.

PLANNING APPROVAL AND COMPLIANCES

It is always very exciting as the plan to build a play area at a school gathers momentum and it is essential that planning approval is considered and thought about at an early stage. As a rule of thumb, if it is close to a road or border, it will probably need some sort of approval.

The best play structures can be high and so checking the rules and regulations early on would be a great move strategically. There are published guidelines about fall heights and what surfaces are acceptable and SAFE to put underneath. Any of the suppliers you speak to should know these rules for safety, so if they say they don't apply, look elsewhere. Without the correct sign off, you will invalidate your insurance if something does go wrong.

Normally, planning is very straightforward but of course it all depends on the site and size and height of the structure and proximity to borders and roads. The local Authority professionals who are normally very helpful and able to advise, which is a very good idea early on.

Most companies work very closely with Health and Safety requirements and ROSPA is a recognised safety check operator who are used across the UK. It would be a good idea to make sure the company designing the build has a good knowledge and experience of this and will make the process much smoother and safer. There also should be a well thought out maintenance plan as this will be essential to keeping the play for as long as possible, as well as being signed off for safety each year for insurance purposes. Factoring these aspects in early makes for the most successful builds.

MEASURING IMPACT AND DEMONSTRATING VALUE

When a magical and bespoke play area is built, seeing the impact it has on the whole school is immediate and easy – but hard to measure. Schools often have to deal with multiple issues outside during break times and lunch times when children can quickly become bored. Incidents are frequent meaning children often return to their lessons with unresolved issues.

The impact of play is enormous. Children learn to socialise and have fun together, they are stimulated by the environment and they are active. The impact of play means that children are in the right frame of mind to learn and that they feel good about themselves and others. It is easy for all the key adults to see the impact of play on children at school. If you were to

compare a school with no play and nothing to do against a school with interesting places to play, and explore the impact would be obvious and clear.

Children and adults learn best when they feel good and they are happy and healthy. The best way to create that culture is outside and the more play and learning spaces available the better. There is no real simple monetary value you can place on wellbeing, but it is very clear that the most forward thinking schools have the most inspiring outside spaces. These schools have a long term plan and vision. They understand that the children will not only feel better, they will learn better.

START SMALL THINK LONG-TERM

All plans take time and there are many schools who are in the early stages of a masterplan to create the ideal outside space for children. There is a Trust in Leeds who have a masterplan for the 40 schools in their Trust that in the future all of the schools will have outside spaces that have everything a school could and perhaps *should* have. They have even invested in a play strategy to begin the process of designing how this dream can happen. They do however fully understand that it will take time.

A phased approach is the best way for a school to go. If the plan is clear, matches the vision of the school and develops in sensible steps, then it will carry on past the current Head and beyond. That is what makes a great vision, something that carries on and this includes the curriculum, behaviour management and much more too. The culture of the school is built over a long period of time as it is in any line of work.



Some of the best projects started small and built from those literal foundations. Schools need to gain confidence from a project that they can make something special happen. Once they see this can be done and the impact of it, this builds trust and confidence. It also helps the fundraisers see what can be done.

Case Study – Rackheath Primary School

Rackheath Primary School sits in the heart of a Norfolk village steeped in remarkable history. The former Rackheath Airfield, used by the United States Army Air Forces' 467th Bombardment Group, known affectionately as the 'Rackheath Aggies', once stretched across the very land the school now calls home. That heritage runs deep in the community, and it became the heartbeat of something very exciting indeed.

A PLAYGROUND WITH A STORY TO TELL

The school's outdoor space needed investment, but more than that, it needed imagination. The vision wasn't simply to build a playground, it was to create something that would connect children to the extraordinary history beneath their feet, spark curiosity, and give them a space that genuinely excited them every single day.

The school community, led by a passionate PTA known as the Friends of Rackheath School, threw themselves into fundraising. Parents, staff, governors and local supporters rallied together, driven by the belief that children deserve more than a tarmac square and a few benches.

THE BUNKER

When CAP.CO was brought in to design the centrepiece of this project, the brief was clear: it had to mean something. Inspired by the iconic WWII Anderson shelter and the legacy of the Rackheath Airfield, 'The Bunker' was born.

This is no ordinary piece of play equipment. It is a control tower, a command post, and an adventure all rolled into one. A 1.8m high deck is set into a sculpted rubber berm, accessed by bridges that lead children up to the peak for adventurous entry. A clamber wall and internal ladder offer physical challenge and coordination, whilst monkey bars running beneath the structure demand upper-body strength and determination. A secret crawl tunnel provides the perfect escape route for covert missions, and a 1.8m high slide delivers the reward at the end of the climb.

The design is rich in roleplay opportunity, children can command, alert, and coordinate from the elevated platform, looking out across the playground as the Rackheath Aggies once looked out across the skies of Norfolk.

A companion structure, 'The Command Centre', is coming soon, an outdoor classroom sheltered beneath an Anderson shelter-inspired roof, with lookout panels, a blackboard, tables for creativity, and its own secret crawl tunnel passage. It will give children a space not just to play, but to think, create, and imagine.

THE IMPACT

When a playground is rooted in real stories and real history, something different happens. Children don't just use it, they inhabit it. They arrive on Monday morning ready to get back out

there. Staff find outdoor time easier to manage, richer in purpose, and more joyful for everyone.

At Rackheath, the community fundraised for this, believed in it, and made it happen together. That sense of ownership matters enormously. This playground belongs to the children, and the children know it.

The Bunker is now open, and for the children of Rackheath Primary School, the adventure is just beginning.



SO WHAT DID THE SCHOOL THINK?

The best person to ask is Chris Ashman, Headteacher at Rackheath Primary School.

“We know the benefit of exercise, of movement, of being creative, using their imagination and all those kind of things I know will feed into their learning and their curriculum and their mental health and their physical health. It might be one of a deciding factor in some of our children really being keen to come to school.”

“We’ve had the bunker in place since October half term this year, so about two or three months and the children absolutely love it. and it’s an amazing addition to our school and what we can offer in our curriculum. We wanted to create something new but the main thing was really about giving the children a wonderful experience. We really wanted them to have an opportunity to use something really, really special which they’ve now got.”

12. The Future School Landscape

PLAY AS INFRASTRUCTURE FOR WELLBEING AND ATTAINMENT

For too long, play has been positioned at the edges of education – something that happens between lessons, around the timetable, outside the core purpose of school.

That model no longer holds.



“The question is no longer whether schools prioritise play. It is whether they can succeed without it”



If schools are to respond to the realities of modern childhood – rising pressure, changing lifestyles, less free time, more structured in almost every aspect of life – play must be redefined. Not as provision, but as core infrastructure.

As essential to the functioning of a school as classrooms, staffing or curriculum.

FROM ADD-ON TO FOUNDATION

Wellbeing and attainment are not separate outcomes. They are built on the same foundations: regulation that is fit for purpose, engagement, teamwork, socialisation, confidence and connection.

Play supports these conditions every day, at scale, across every child.

Principle: Treat play as a core system that underpins learning, not a supplementary activity.

When embedded into the fabric of the school environment, play:

- Prepares children to learn, not just gives them a break from learning
- Supports consistent emotional regulation across the day
- Enables movement, interaction and exploration as part of normal school life
- Designing schools that work for children, not against them

Children are not designed for long periods of passivity, uniform environments or constant direction.

Schools that recognise this – and design accordingly – create conditions where children can thrive without constant intervention.

Principle: Align the environment with how children naturally develop and learn.

This means:

- Spaces that allow movement to flow throughout the day
- Environments that offer choice, challenge and variation
- Outdoor access that is frequent, easy and expected
- A system-level shift that is built around indoor and outdoor teaching

Repositioning play as infrastructure is not a small adjustment – it is a shift in how schools are conceived, designed and operated.

It means major changes in:

- Masterplanning and overall site layout
- Daily routines and timetabling – including start and finish times
- Investment priorities and funding decisions
- The role of outdoor spaces within education
- Uniform requirements to include better outdoor gear

Principle: Build play into the system, not around it.

A NEW BASELINE

The question is no longer whether schools prioritise play.

It is whether, going forward, they will be able to succeed in their brief to deliver happy balanced children into adulthood, where every child really does matter, without ensuring play is central to the curriculum.

In the future school landscape, play should **not** be something schools provide when space and time allow. It needs to become part of the core infrastructure that enables children to be healthy, to be engaged and to be able to achieve academic goals too.

It changes play from being an addition to being central to the overall planning of a school day, the school buildings and grounds and the overall role of teaching staff.



13. About CAP.CO

CREATING ADVENTUROUS PLACES

CAP.CO is a specialist in the design and delivery of outdoor environments that support play, wellbeing and learning.

Working with schools, trusts and communities across the UK and Europe, the focus is simple: to create spaces that children use fully, confidently and creatively on every school day.

EXPERTISE IN PLAY, WELLBEING AND OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS

CAP.CO brings together practical experience, design thinking and a deep understanding of how children actually use space.

This includes:

- Translating educational and wellbeing goals into physical environments
- Designing for real behaviour, not just visual appeal
- Balancing challenge, safety and long-term usability
- Supporting schools across a wide range of contexts – from compact urban sites to larger rural settings

The approach is grounded in what works in practice, not just in theory.



DELIVERING TRANSFORMATIONAL SPACES FOR LEARNING AND COMMUNITY

CAP.CO works as a partner throughout the process – from early thinking and masterplanning through to design, delivery and long-term development.

Projects are shaped around each school's vision, constraints and community, with a focus on creating environments that:

- Support everyday play and movement
- Extend opportunities for outdoor learning
- Bring together pupils, staff and families
- Evolve over time as needs change

The aim is not simply to install playgrounds, but to help schools rethink how their outdoor spaces contribute to the wider life of the school.



A PARTNER IN CHANGE

CAP.CO acts as a specialist and enabler – helping schools turn ambition into reality.

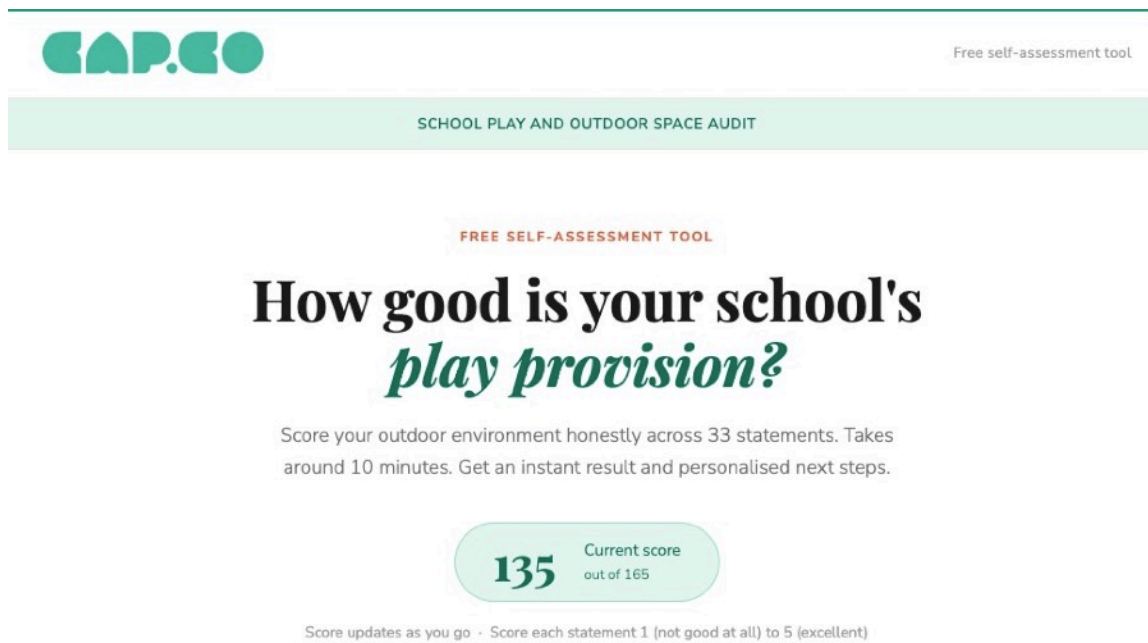
By combining clear thinking, practical delivery and a collaborative approach, the goal is to support lasting change: environments that improve children's experience of school, every day, for years to come.

Appendix 1 - Self-Audit: How Good Is Your School's Play Provision?

Play provision self-audit tool (with expert commentary from Pete Dean former Head of Poringland School)

You can complete this online to get instant feedback, just head over to

www.audit.wearecapco.com



This self-audit is designed to help schools assess the quality, usability and potential of their outdoor play environment.

This audit will help the Senior Leadership Team to celebrate the strengths there are in the outside environment and identify the key areas that should be placed in the School Development Plan ahead.

Making the most of the outside space will help hugely at your school and will help the children spend as much time as possible every day outside learning, playing or both. The audit will help shape a plan ahead for the leadership team and hopefully you will be able to develop an outside environment that will inspire the adults and the children and maximise the potential you have at your school.

Score each bullet pointed statement:

- 1 = Not in place
- 2 = Limited / inconsistent
- 3 = Adequate
- 4 = Strong
- 5 = Excellent / fully embedded

1. SITE AND LANDSCAPE

Natural Environment

- Access to woodland, trees or natural habitat
- Presence of planting, biodiversity or natural features
- Opportunities for children to interact with nature (not just observe it)

Score: /15

Pete's Commentary:

"If your outdoor space is mostly tarmac, you're making life harder than it needs to be. Children are drawn to nature – it does half the work for you. Even small pockets of planting or a few well-placed trees can completely change how a space is used. Start small if you need to, but start."

Surface Variety

- Balance of grass, hard surfaces and all-weather areas
- Surfaces support a range of play types
- Surfaces remain usable in different weather conditions

Score: /15

Pete's Commentary:

"Too many schools are either all grass (mud in winter) or all hard surface (limited play). The best spaces have a mix. If parts of your site are out of action for months of the year, that's not a weather problem – that's a design problem."

Safety Surfacing and Impact Zones

- Appropriate safety surfacing in key areas
- Impact zones are well planned and maintained
- Safety enables challenge rather than restricts it

Score: /15

Pete's Commentary:

"Safety surfacing shouldn't mean 'no challenge'. If everything feels flat and over-controlled, children will either disengage or use it in ways you didn't expect. Good design allows challenge to exist safely – it doesn't remove it altogether."

Topography and Usability

- Flat areas for games and group activity
- Variation in levels (slopes, mounds, features)
- Space is fully usable (no dead zones)

Score: /15

Pete's Commentary:

"Flat playgrounds are easy – but they're also boring. Slight changes in level create endless play value. Also, walk your site: where do children not go? That's usually where opportunity is being missed."

Drainage and Year-Round Use

- Site drains effectively
- Outdoor spaces usable throughout the year
- Weather does not significantly limit play

Score: /15

Pete's Commentary:

"If you hear 'we can't use that in winter' regularly, something needs fixing. The best schools design for January, not just July. Year-round usability is one of the biggest differences between average and great spaces."

Section Total: /75

2. SPACE AND GROWTH POTENTIAL

Capacity and Expansion

- Space available for future development
- Ability to phase improvements
- Site is not fully fixed

Score: /15

Pete's Commentary:

"Even tight sites have potential. I've seen incredible transformations in the smallest urban schools. The key is thinking in phases – not trying to do everything at once."

Flexibility of Space

- Areas can be used in different ways
- Spaces adapt to age groups and activities
- Layout allows change over time

Score: /15

Pete's Commentary:

"If a space only does just one thing, it will get old quickly. The best environments are re-used, reinterpreted and constantly evolving. Children should be able to surprise you with how they use it."

Multi-Use Opportunities

- Supports play and learning
- Used beyond breaktimes
- Encourages different types of engagement

Score: /15

Pete's Commentary:

"Your outdoor space should be working all day, not just at lunch. If it's empty outside lesson time, that's a missed opportunity. The schools doing this well treat the whole site as part of the classroom."

Section Total: /45

3. SAFETY, BOUNDARIES AND PLANNING

Boundaries and Safeguarding

- Secure and appropriate boundaries
- No major safeguarding risks
- Boundaries don't overly restrict use

Score: /15

Pete's Commentary:

"Boundaries are essential – but they shouldn't dominate the experience. You can create safe spaces without making them feel enclosed or limiting."

Planning and Constraints

- Awareness of planning considerations
- Site allows for future development
- Constraints are understood

Score: /15

Pete's Commentary:

"Planning can feel like a barrier, but it's usually manageable if you think ahead. The mistake is leaving it too late. The best projects consider constraints early and design around them."

Visibility and Supervision

- Clear sightlines
- Spaces can be supervised effectively
- Layout supports independence

Score: /15

Pete's Commentary:

"You don't need to see every child every second – but you do need confidence in the space. Good design allows children some independence while still giving staff oversight where it matters."

Section Total: /45

Overall Scoring

Site and Landscape: /75
Space and Growth: /45
Safety and Planning: /45
Total Score: /165

4. SCORE INTERPRETATION

130–165 | Strong Provision

"Keep going – you're ahead of most. Focus now on depth, variety and long-term evolution."

90–129 | Developing Provision

"You've got a base to work from. A few well-planned changes could make a big difference quickly."

50–89 | Limited Provision

"Children are likely not getting the experience they need. This is where a clear plan can have real impact."

Below 50 | Significant Opportunity

"This is a chance to rethink things properly. Start with a clear vision – small steps can lead to big change."

Final Reflection (Pete's View)

- *"If you stood in your playground at break-time, would you want to be a child there?"*
- *"Where is the energy – and where is it missing?"*
- *"What are children actually doing, not what you think they're doing?"*
- *"What's one change you could make this year that would genuinely improve play?"*