

OUTDOOR LEARNING PROJECT GUIDANCE FEBRUARY 2025

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Section 1: Background and Rationale

Background

1. A key aim of the Curricular Guidance for Pre-School and Foundation Stage of the statutory Northern Ireland (NI) Curriculum is that children learn through well planned, challenging play that develops their interests, curiosity and creativity according to their individual age and stage of development.
2. The key principle underpinning the Foundation Stage Curriculum is that young children learn best when learning is interactive, practical and enjoyable. At this age, children must be given opportunities to be actively involved in practical, challenging play-based learning in a stimulating environment. There is an emphasis on balancing whole class, group and individual activities, to engage children in effective learning.
3. The lack of opportunity and inclination to undertake physical activity outside has been shown by numerous studies to have a negative impact on both the health and development of children. These studies do show, however, that children who do participate in outdoor play benefit in many ways and these can have both long term and short term benefits for the child.
4. The [ETI Thematic Evaluation, Pre-School and Foundation Stage: Delivering the Curriculum Outdoors \(November 2021\)](#) highlighted that there is an increasing understanding of the importance and value of outdoor play across all phases within the early years' sector to promote young children's learning and development, resilience, health and a sense of well-being. Almost all areas of the early years' curricula can be delivered successfully through outdoor learning experiences.

Benefits of Outdoor Play

5. At pre-school and primary school, the outdoor area provides young children with one of the best possible environments in which to learn. All the areas of learning

across the curriculum can be achieved outside while the children's long-term social, emotional and mental health are being enhanced.

6. The main benefits of outdoor play and learning are detailed below.

- One of the biggest benefits of outdoor play is that it can make children physically healthier. Playing outside, where there is more space, enables them to be more active. Outdoor play also supports the development of gross motor skills including walking, jumping, kicking, throwing and lifting. Gross motor skill development is crucial because it forms the basis for fine motor skill development.
- There are also well documented mental health benefits from outdoor play. One of the main recommendations for people with depression and anxiety is to take part in physical activity as it increases endorphins and reduces stress. Getting children to do physical activity can be a way to keep children mentally healthy so that these problems do not arise in the first place.
- Outdoor play also has a significant impact on learning. Many of the key learning skills set out in the NI Curriculum are developed and honed through playing outside. These include collaboration, resilience, concentration and focus.
- One of the most important things about outdoor play is that it is generally unstructured and this is ideal for letting children use their imaginations and develop their creativity. This is especially important for younger children who benefit enormously from taking part in roleplay to learn about the world in which they live.
- Outdoor play provides the opportunity for assessed risky freedom, where children can play and socialise freely and use their own imagination and initiative.

Principles of Outdoor Play

7. A number of key principles underpin the delivery of high quality outdoor play in the Early Years:

- Indoors and outdoors need to be viewed as one combined and integrated environment.
- Indoors and outdoors need to be available to the children simultaneously.
- Outdoors is an equal player to indoors and should receive planning, management, evaluation, resourcing, staffing and adult interaction on a par with indoors.
- Outdoors is both a teaching and learning environment.
- Outdoor design and layout needs careful consideration.
- The outdoor classroom offers children the opportunity to utilise effective modes of learning – play, movement and sensory experience.
- Children need versatile equipment and environments.
- Children need to be able to control, change and modify their environment.
- Staff have to be supportive toward outdoor play.

Section 2: Outline of Outdoor Learning Project

What is the Outdoor Learning Project?

1. In a statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 3 December 2024 the Education Minister, Paul Givan MLA, announced a Curriculum-led Capital Programme aimed at investing in priority areas to support, enable and enhance delivery of the Northern Ireland Curriculum ensuring that the restricted capital budget available is used to enhance and support delivery of the curriculum for as many children across Northern Ireland as possible.
2. The Minister advised that the initial area of longer-term focus for the Programme would be physical education however the Programme would be supplemented by specific priorities for investment annually. In the remainder of 2024/25, £10m has been made available to support a number of key areas of expenditure including £4m for outdoor play equipment and resources at all nursery and primary schools.
3. The objective of the Outdoor Learning Project is to support the delivery of high quality creative and innovative outdoor play and learning experiences for all children. It should be particularly noted that for high quality outdoor play to be fully implemented children need versatile equipment and environments.

Project Aim

The aim of the Outdoor Learning Project is to provide funding for outdoor learning equipment that will support the delivery of high quality creative and innovative outdoor play and learning experiences for all children in nursery, primary and special schools.

Project Objectives

4. The objectives of the project are to:

- Increase the use of creative outdoor spaces for play and learning opportunities for all children.
- Increase children's physical; mental health and wellbeing and social interaction, through high quality outdoor play and learning.
- Support pupils to increase their motivation, engagement, resilience, self-esteem and confidence, through better engagement in play.
- Support and enhance pupils' development including personal capabilities and managing risks in safe outdoor spaces.
- Build capacity within the educational workforce to make better use of the space available for creative and innovative opportunities for outdoor play and learning.

Section 3: Eligibility and Financial Arrangements

Capital Expenditure

1. Capital spend is significantly different to resource spend. In the context of the Outdoor Learning Project, it relates to funding that the Department invests in acquiring long-term physical assets like Outdoor Learning furniture and equipment, which are considered investments rather than day-to-day operational expenses.
2. Accounting Policy requires that, to be treated as capital, **each asset/item** (or a small number of interdependent items that make a grouped asset) **must cost at least £3,000**.
3. In addition, the Education Authority (EA) can generally only recognise capital expenditure for Controlled schools. For other settings, EA can only capitalise non-property costs incurred by those schools. This includes **moveable items of Plant & Equipment** but not Plant & Equipment that is fixed and becomes part of the school estate.

School Access and Allocations

4. This capital funding is being made available to all standalone statutory nursery, primary, and special schools across the schools' estate.
5. A minimum allocation of £3,500 will be provided to all schools in order to provide sufficient flexibility to select an item(s) over £3,000. To be treated as capital, **each asset/item** (or a small number of interdependent items that make a grouped asset) **must cost at least £3,000**.
6. Allocations are provided on a tiered basis linked to enrolment numbers as set out below. Children enrolled in statutory nursery or specialist units attached to a primary school have been included in the enrolment number for the primary school.

Pupil Enrolment*	Amount per school/setting (£)
105 or less	3,500
300 or less	4,350
600 or less	5,200
601 +	6,050

*Notes:

- *enrolment numbers are based on the most recent school census provisional data gathered in October 2024.*
- *schools approved for closure at 31 August 2025 or as soon as possible thereafter are excluded.*

7. A spreadsheet detailing all allocations has been published on the [Department's website](#).

Parameters for Expenditure

8. In order to utilise funding from this project and ensure it can be capitalised; settings are required to consider the following parameters:

a) Funding has to be expended within the current financial year. **All orders must be placed and goods received and receipted by 31 March 2025.** Schools should consider that requisitions can take longer than usual to progress to order during peak ordering periods and lead in times for delivery may vary between suppliers and on equipment type. It is the responsibility of each setting to contact the supplier to ensure orders will be delivered before 31 March 2025.

- b) **Consumables must not be purchased.** Consider the need for capital spend to invest in acquiring long-term physical assets like Outdoor Learning furniture and equipment that will endure for several years.
- c) **Minimum item spend must exceed £3,000** unless it can be clearly demonstrated that grouped items totalling £3,000 or more are interdependent (the usefulness of one item is reliant on the other) – see para 19 for more details.
- d) **Free standing or moveable furniture or equipment only** should be ordered. Funding should not be used where items require fixing, ground works or installation except in exceptional circumstances and with prior approval from Grounds Maintenance (groundsmaintenance@eani.org.uk).
- e) Schools should **order utilising the EA procurement frameworks** for outdoor learning set out below.

9. **Please be aware that expenditure that falls outside of the above parameters carries the risk that it may not be possible to classify the spend as capital and fund from this ring-fenced budget.**

EA Procurement Frameworks and Finance Codes

- 10. Details of all EA's framework can be accessed via www.procurement.eani.org.uk
- 11. Schools should order equipment via an appropriate EA procurement framework using the **EA Finance Code 8301 – Purchase of Plant & Equipment > £3,000, EA Function Code 80159 – Outdoor Learning Project.** Specific queries about the capitalisation of expenditure should be sent to eafinancecapitalteam@eani.org.uk.
- 12. The following frameworks should be considered for purchases associated with this funding provision taking into account the parameters above:

- a) EDR 24-001 Classroom resources - Lot 6 – Educational Play Equipment
- b) EDR 22-006 Outdoor Educational Play Equipment:
 - Lot 1: Fixed Outdoor Playground Equipment
 - Lot 2: Fixed Outdoor Fitness Equipment
 - Lot 3: Bespoke Outdoor Educational Structures (open to the elements)
 - Lot 4: Polytunnels, Timber Sheds & Furniture, Greenhouses, Storage Containers, & Cycle Shelters

13. Non-moveable equipment should only be purchased in exceptional circumstances and with prior approval from Grounds Maintenance as detailed in 8(d) above.

Further Guidance

14. It is recognised that schools may have already purchased much needed outdoor learning equipment during the course of the year. Relevant spend already incurred after 1 April 2024 (that would meet the parameters of this project and within the allocation from the project) that you wish to identify under this funding should be raised as a request issued to Capital Finance Team for adjustment. Any funding raised and provided to EA will remain in your LMS budget.

15. Whilst the use of the EA procurement frameworks provides schools with assurances that suppliers must adhere to pre-agreed terms and conditions, quality and health and safety standards, allowing for quicker and more efficient procurement of goods and services; schools may proceed to purchase assets which are not available within the framework. In such instances schools must comply with procurement control limits as set out in the table below.

Value	Process
Up to £4,999	A minimum of 2 quotations are obtained by the requisitioner to demonstrate value for money has been achieved

£5,000 to £29,999	<p>1. A minimum of 2 tenders are invited by EA Procurement via eTendersNI. The process is restricted to selected tenderers only.</p> <p>2. Via an external, compliant framework agreement.</p>
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16. Where frameworks are not being used, schools should ensure that all items comply with relevant health safety and quality standards etc. and have relevance to learning (for example another school has recommended as impactful).

17. The ETI thematic evaluation noted that storage space was limited in a majority of primary schools and noted that improved storage will prolong the life of outdoor learning resources and enhance the children's learning and their ability to access resources independently and to take increased responsibility to care for and put away resources and equipment when finished.

18. Some examples of useful purchases within the framework that exceed the minimum threshold are as follows:

- Moveable mini climbing wall, bridge, trim trail
- Rainbow pyramid den
- Double water tables

The above are for illustrative purposes and schools must contact suppliers regarding availability and delivery times.

19. Interdependent items with a collective cost that exceeds the £3,000 capital threshold might include items required to create a new or revised outdoor learning space/area.

Section 4: Monitoring, Reporting and Evaluation

Intended outcomes and evaluation

1. It will be for settings to identify their own intended outcomes and associated success criteria and to monitor and evaluate the impact of the project using internal assessment systems, including the use of teacher recording and observation to monitor use of the new equipment.
2. Fundamentally, it is for settings to decide how to best utilise project funding within the aims and objectives of the project in order to maximise positive outcomes for their pupils. There is no prescriptive or suggested ideal model for what the project delivery should look like or specific parameters for settings to follow, such as an exclusive focus on particular groups of pupils, year groups, or particular Areas of Learning.
3. Settings are encouraged to explore creative and innovative approaches to outdoor learning, in deciding how to utilise the funding to address pupil needs. Settings know their pupils best and have autonomy and flexibility to use their professional judgement to decide upon relevant priorities and which pupils and year groups will be the focus of the project. This will be based on each setting's unique circumstances and assessment of particular needs.
4. Whilst it is anticipated that the project may reveal improvements in such things as building pupil confidence, increasing levels of motivation and engagement, enhancing pupil attitudes to learning, encouraging school creativity and innovation as well as assessing individual pupil progress in learning, this will be determined at setting level.
5. **Schools will be required to return complete an online evaluation survey which will issue in March for completion no later than end of June 2025.**
The evaluation will capture key information in respect of how the resources are being used and the increase in the quality and/or quantity of outdoor play as a result.

Section 5: Useful Resources

Staff from the Department's Sponsor Team are also available to assist with questions in relation to the project. School Improvement Team can be contacted via email at: DEsit@education-ni.gov.uk

A range of resources are available to assist settings implement outdoor learning and play. Links to these are listed below.

- The EA has curated two resources that may be of support to schools when they are considering developing their outdoor learning areas intended to provoke thought around how outdoor areas are being used and the impactful use of the funding. There is a **featured module on the Supporting Learning Featured Module on Outdoor Learning**, hosted by Pam Lowry, with six videos highlighting the journey, the activities and the benefits of outdoor learning. Although these are focused references to Foundation Stage, this module is relevant to all those in a primary school setting. There are a further 16 short narrated clips highlighting learning activities that children participate in within the provision at Killylea Primary School.

<https://www.supporting-learning.com/featured-modules/Outdoor-Learning>

- There is a package of resources and webinars from lots of practitioners in how they have facilitated outdoor learning in their school.

Let's go Outside: [TPL Thursdays Let's Go Outside! - 1](#)

- In 2022, **CCEA** published a curricular resource providing advice and guidance around "[Learning Outdoors in Pre-School and Foundation Stage](#)".
- The ETI thematic evaluation published in November 2021 reports on the extent to which the delivery of the curriculum through outdoor learning is effective across early years and the foundation stage. It highlights some of the successes and also the challenges reported by staff and reflects the range of external support that is available.

ETI Report - Pre-school and foundation stage: delivering the curriculum outdoors

- **PlayBoard NI August 2020 Advice for Schools on Prioritising Play and taking Learning Outdoors**
[Taking Outdoor Play Seriously \(TOPS\)](#)
- **Eco-Schools NI Outdoor Learning Guidance**
- **Learning through Landscapes (LtL)**
LtL are a leading UK-based charity dedicated to enhancing outdoor learning and play for children. Their website contains a range of [free resources](#) providing outdoor lesson ideas for every age and subject area.
- **Outdoor Classroom Day**
[Outdoor Classroom Day](#) is a global movement to inspire and celebrate outdoor play and learning, at home and at school.
- **Teach Outdoors- online training**
- **The Conservation Volunteers**
- **The Early Years Training Hub- Developing High Quality Outdoor Play Provision**
- **The Education People- Strategic Improvement Visit- Outdoor Provision**