

From grey to green: A blueprint for a better playground

**Happy
By Nature**

A daily dose of nature for every child



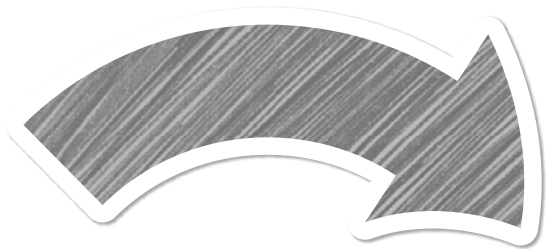
**Learning
through
Landscapes**

Planning your grey to green!

Every school's grounds are different, so are your pupils and so are your needs. Therefore the ideas for creating nature-rich spaces will be different for each school. This toolkit will support schools with the planning process and considerations when turning your playgrounds from grey to green!

It is a good idea to follow a simple process when planning changes to your grounds or how they are used. Throughout this process involve your pupils as much as you can, digging deep into their needs, wants and ideas. Here we go through the process in a bit more detail.





Where are we now?

Some of the things you want to find out at this stage include:

Use of your grounds: Who plays what, where and when?

- Start by observing how children use the space.
- Which spaces are used, which are avoided?
- Are all children equally included in play?
- Map this on a plan of your site.

Design of your grounds: What does the space offer now?

- Are there places to be wild and calm, to imagine and retreat?
- Is the space rich in texture, scent, shade, and seasonal change?
- Where does nature flourish, and where could it return?
- Take 'before' photos too to look back on later.

Management: Who cares for the space and how?

- Who looks after the space?
- What are the maintenance issues?
- Are there opportunities to align play, curriculum, and nature connection?



How to involve your pupils in this stage

Sensory walks:

- Invite children to walk slowly through the space, focusing on one sense at a time.
- What can they hear, touch, smell, see?
- This is especially valuable for children with sensory sensitivities.
- You may find hidden quiet corners that are currently underused.

Emotional geography:

- Ask children to colour-code maps of the playground to reflect how different places make them feel—safe, bored, free, left out.
- Use questions such as: “Where do you feel most free?”
“Where do you see nature?”
“What feels unfair?”

Weather mapping:

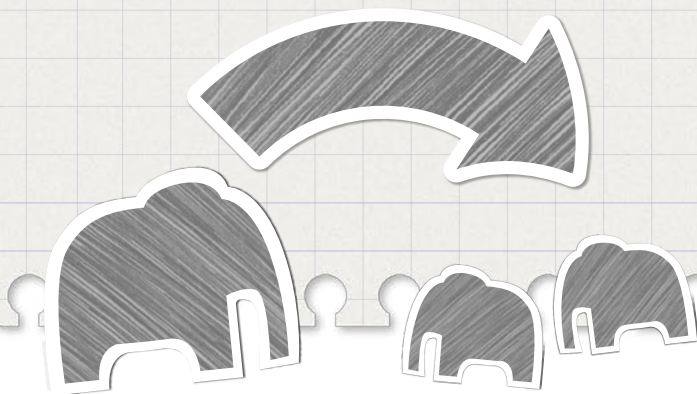
- Track sun, shade, wind, and shelter across the day and seasons.
- This helps identify microclimates and suggests new opportunities.

Discover how your grounds are affected by our changing climate:

- What surface materials are in your school grounds? Are they natural or man-made?
- Go out on a sunny day and find out how hot different surfaces get. What might that mean as the climate gets hotter?
- Do your grounds flood when it rains? Where does the water go to?

Undertaking habitat and biodiversity surveys:

- Discover what nature already lives in your grounds.
- Make sure you don't lose one valuable habitat to create a different one.



Where do we want to be?

At this stage we want schools to develop a shared language and visual sense of the changes they want to make. This vision can guide decisions, support funding bids, and maintain energy and focus over time.

The aim is to understand what everyone wants to be able to do in their grounds, the experiences you want the pupils to have, and what they want, rather than creating a list of things to have.



How to involve your pupils in this stage

Develop a vision statement for your project:

Ideally you will have a vision statement for your whole site in which the project is incorporated, so that you look at your site, and its use as a whole. Make sure your pupils are able to be part of that process.

Start by brainstorming meaningful words and phrases before constructing a few statements which feed into the final vision statement. Then use some of the ideas below to refine your statement.

Future news reports:

Children write or perform imaginary news stories set five years from now—"This week, pupils spotted frogs in the new pond!" or "Our wild play meadow won an award."

Inclusivity and wildlife:

Encourage pupils to consider how the space can meet a range of needs, both human and ecological.

This might include quiet zones, firm and accessible paths, shaded seating areas, and planting schemes that support pollinators and local wildlife.

Discuss and prioritise key issues you want to address, for example:

We don't have much nature in our grounds now so we would like more.

We have issues at playtime as there is not much to do, we would like to see more nature-based play.



How can we get there?

With a shared vision now in place, it's time to turn dreams into practical, achievable ideas. This stage is about bridging the imaginative energy of the visioning process with the real-world steps needed to bring those ideas to life. Crucially, this doesn't mean rushing into big builds or expensive changes. It means asking: What can we do right now? What can we test, prototype, or experiment with together?

This phase should be collaborative. Children bring unique insights and creativity, often noticing practical needs or barriers that adults miss.

- As ideas take shape, resourcefulness becomes key. What materials are already available?
- What could be made from scraps or reused items?
- Annotating or layering ideas onto your zone plan keeps things grounded and flexible.



© Abbie Traylor-Smith / WWF-UK

Trialling changes temporarily:

- Using pop-up structures, loose parts, or seasonal planting-allows for testing and reflection before committing to permanent changes.
- How will you embed sustainability?
- Think ahead about ongoing care. Will your new plantings survive summer holidays?
- Who will water, weed, and steward spaces long-term?

How to involve your pupils in this stage

Mini-mockups:

- Create small-scale models (using clay, cardboard, or recycled materials) that show different proposed changes.
- Use them to spark discussion.

Reviewing how the grounds are maintained, including:

- Having conversations with your school's grounds maintenance staff.

1:1 Scale prototyping:

- Use ropes, cones, bamboo sticks, tarps, crates, and natural materials to block out potential changes in real space.
- Pupils can test out movement, flow, and comfort in the "draft" version of the space.



Working with a designer

At this stage, (or before if possible to guide the process) you could involve a landscape architect or other design professional. Be sure they have good experience and understanding of school grounds use, design and management issues. When well-briefed, a professional can help translate pupils' ideas into practical, sustainable designs that remain true to the original vision. If feasible, consider involving them earlier in the process—during the idea generation and zone planning phases—so they can support creative thinking from the outset and help shape emerging concepts in real time.

It's essential that any professional involved understands schools and the inclusive and ecological values at the heart of the project, as well as the specific aspirations shared by the children and wider school community.

A clear, thoughtful design brief is key. This should include your co-created vision statement and zone plan, helping to communicate the thinking and priorities behind the project. While the professional may bring new

suggestions—such as alternative zoning layouts or technical improvements—their work should always reflect and respond to the school's vision and values.

Involving pupils in the briefing process adds depth and meaning to their experience. It not only ensures their ideas continue to shape the outcome but also offers a powerful insight into the job of a designer using creative thinking in real-world solutions. A landscape architect will offer guidance on planning issues, materials, accessibility, safety, long-term maintenance, and environmental impact while helping to design a space that feels rooted in the imagination and needs of its users.



© Abbie Traylor-Smith / WWF-UK

Making the changes

Now comes the exciting part: turning ideas into action. This is when the energy of the visioning and planning process becomes visible in the world. But instead of viewing this as a construction project, think of it as a shared act of stewardship. This is community-building in motion.

Tasks will include:

- Briefing contractors
- Getting quotes
- Phasing the work
- Timetabling the work



© Suzie Hubbard / WWF-UK

How to involve your pupils in this stage

Create an action plan. You might include columns for:

- Task (what needs to be done?)
- Who (who is responsible?)
- Budget (what resources or costs are involved?)
- Target dates (when should it happen?)
- Notes (what else do we need to remember?)

Whole-school work days:

- These are celebratory and purposeful.

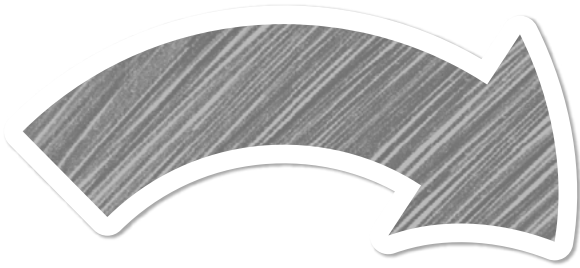
- Older children can take on leadership roles (e.g. helping younger groups, managing tools, leading a tour).

Mini crews:

- Assign rotating “garden guardians,” “wildlife watchers,” or “painting squads” to manage bite-size tasks across a week or term. Think about how the whole school, parents and wider community can support.

Celebrate your success!





Where are we now?

This final stage is about learning to appreciate what has changed—and to notice what still needs care before you move through the stages for the next changes as part of your project.

How to involve your pupils in this stage

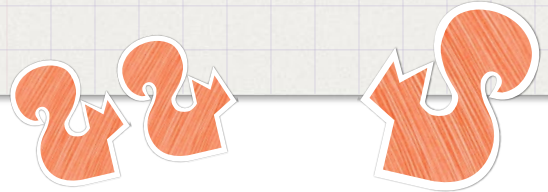
Then-and-now mapping:

- Return to the maps made during the first audit.
- Children annotate them with what's changed—new paths, favourite plants, improved access, new gathering spots.

Photo journaling:

- Use “before and after” photos to prompt reflection.
- Children write captions or voice notes about what feels different now.

What does the ecosystem and play environment need next?



How to plan your nature-based changes – top tips

Follow these four steps to help you and your pupils plan changes to your grounds:



Where are we now?

- Explore what works well and what needs to change



Where do we want to be?

- What nature-based play experiences would you like to have?



How can we get there?

- Identify the solutions that work for your grounds and your pupils



Making the changes

- Involve the school and wider community in making your changes



Where are we now?

- Don't forget to review what you have done and celebrate the changes



For a future where people and nature thrive | wwf.org.uk

© 1986 panda symbol and ® "WWF" Registered Trademark of WWF. WWF-UK registered charity (1081247) and in Scotland (SC039593). A company limited by guarantee (4016725)