Written Evidence Submitted by Learning Through Landscapes [CBE 042]

Learning through Landscapes (LtL) is the UK's national school grounds charity so our response to this call for evidence will focus around these spaces that are key to children's daily experience of the world around them. They are particularly important spaces in urban areas where they are a safe space that children and young people feel are their own.

The consultation on children's experience of their built environment is exceptionally important because the state of childhood is in crisis in the United Kingdom in part because of the lack of access to open spaces and changes in cultural circumstances.

There is no doubt that the context within which young people are currently developing is limiting child development, suppressing health of both mind and body. In particular constraining creativity, imagination, risk taking, social development and the pursuit of instinctive behavioural growth built in as part of the Natural Capital of a newly born child. The implication of these limiting factors on child development are having a profound impact on attitudes to learning and the social context experienced by everyone. Perhaps most worrying is the impact on the economy from the inevitable impact on the NHS to the constraining of problem solving and innovation so critical to the future of this country.

Children and young people's experience of school grounds

For most children and young people school grounds are the places they have access to every day, with 20% of their time in school spent outdoors. Despite our best endeavours many school grounds remain sterile, poorly laid out and poorly used. Transforming school grounds to be multi-functional would have a profound impact on children – improving attitudes to learning, improvements to both physical and mental health. They are places where they make friends for life, places to let their imagination run wild, places to take risks, and places to connect with the natural world.

But despite the importance of these spaces at present new schools in England no longer have to have school grounds so more children and young people are having even less access to these spaces. However, school grounds are something parents, schools and, most importantly, children and young people value highly.

Family behavioural changes also constrain young people from accessing open spaces making schoolgrounds even more vital spaces. These include:-

- Stranger danger.
- Urban layouts that fail to meet the needs of young people.
- Both parents working so no outside supervision.
- Seduction by social media absorbing child's time and taking the attention of adults.
- Distance to travel to spaces both designed and not designed that meet young people's needs.
- Playground design that assumes child's needs - but fails.
- Air quality is so poor parents are restricting access to the outdoors.
- Environments designed to cater for the car and not young people.

Many urban schools are increasingly impacted by overheating and water management, be that flood or drought. The Department for Education acknowledges this in its Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy and schools are being encouraged to create Climate Action Plans to see how they can address the issues that impact them.

As these spaces get hotter this increases the impact of pollution which is already a major problem in many cities. These changes have a direct impact on the children and young people who spend as much as the equivalent of one day a week, sometimes more, in their school grounds.

The Heat Island Effect impacts urban schools more than any other and this will increase as climate change develops. Where schools and their surroundings have predominantly hard, man-made surfacing, their grounds will get hotter and stay hotter for longer. This will not only impact pupils outside it will also increase the temperatures inside buildings – the hotter it is outside, the hotter the inside spaces also become. With many schools having asphalt right up to the buildings, with few trees or other areas of shade, their pupils will spend more time in spaces that are overheating which will not only impact their health but also their learning.

Equity of access to school grounds.

"If you're under 30, living in a city in the UK, and especially if you're in an ethnic minority group, you're likely to be considered less connected to nature or an "infrequent nature user" in academic research. This characterisation has consequences – if you fit this description, your voice is heard much less in debates about nature, conservation and wildlife than your wealthier or, if you're a person of colour, white peers. But throughout my own research, I've found that children in cities tend to value nature more than others realise." Dr Jo Birch

Access to state school grounds does not directly depend on income, race or gender although the quality of those grounds can be affected by the areas in which they are located, which, in turn can be affected by one or more of these factors. However, access to outside spaces at school or early years setting is affected by age.

The 'Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage' in England requires access to an outdoor play area for children every day, or if not outdoor activities must be taken outside (unless unsafe weather or other issues cause this to be impossible). For many this means using their own outdoor spaces using 'free-flow' between indoors and out allowing children to spend time outside whenever, and for however long, they want. However, in some settings this is not possible and children spend long periods inside not gaining from the benefits these outside spaces provide. For those settings without their own outdoor space local, walk-to spaces become extremely important.

In many urban areas the outside space at an early years setting can be very small and the premises requirements for space do not require a specific area of outdoor space per pupil: 'outdoor provision is not required to meet space standards…as long as children's needs can be met.' Sometimes these spaces are nature-rich but many have mainly hard surfacing including asphalt, concrete, rubber-crumb safety surfacing or plastic grass. Many settings add plants and other natural features to these spaces to ensure their children do have contact with nature every day.

In some urban areas there are outdoor kindergartens and settings with 'forest school' provision, meaning that children may have greater access to the outdoors, often in areas with trees, shrubs and other natural feature. However, that provision can vary and these more natural spaces are sometimes used in specific ways or for limited periods of time, reducing the free flow opportunities. Outdoor kindergartens are often expensive to attend and therefore limiting their accessibility to all children.

In most primary schools children still have good access to outdoor spaces, for play and for learning. However, in urban areas the quality of that space can vary enormously. Whilst some schools, particularly towards the suburban areas of towns and cities, have large fields others, where space is restricted, have much smaller sites with often very limited access to natural features.

Time in these outside spaces is becoming shorter adding to the reduced access to outside spaces for many urban communities. Research by University College London (UCL) in 2019 found that primary

children had 45mins less breaktime a week than children of the same age in 1995 and in secondary schools access has been reduced even more with the same study finding that pupils between the ages of 11 and 16 had lost 65mins over the same period.

Whilst secondary school grounds tend to be larger their use is more limited. Sport predominates and fewer lessons across other subjects are taken outside, meaning children are getting less access to the outdoors and natural environment as they get older.

State schools and private schools often provide very different outdoor environments to their pupils within urban areas. Whilst some have smaller grounds than in suburban and rural settings public schools tend to have extensive grounds with large areas of playing fields and often with significant tree cover and other designed and maintained spaces. This means that those children and young people who come from generally higher-income families, i.e. those who can afford to attend private schools, gain greater access to bigger and more nature-rich spaces throughout the school day.

Access to school grounds is generally only during the term time and then only on weekdays. There is great opportunity for these spaces to become community spaces at weekends and during the school holidays and we can learn from places like Wales who have been trialling the use of school grounds for community play and Paris where they aim to invite the local community to use their newly developed and planned cool spaces within all their schools' grounds.

Children and young people from wealthier backgrounds generally have access to larger gardens at home and extensive grounds at school. However, even for these children available adult time can restrict children's access to open spaces outside of school time.

The planning system

The planning system is severely constrained by more complexity in demands, pressure on Local Authority budgets with meeting housing numbers as the top priority. The Planning system fails to involve Landscape Architects' skills in design, construction and enforcement. However even more distant are the design skills required to meet the complex and ever-changing needs of developing children in the external environment. There is some good practice in involving young people in setting standards of design but these are the exception not the rule of the planning service. There is much to learn from the Child Friendly Cities Initiative.

Best practice examples of school grounds in the UK and overseas

In Paris, where climate change is already being recognised and addressed across the city, a project aims to transform every school grounds in the city into a climate oasis.

This transformation is significant in many ways:

- The 70ha of surface area of these sites is mainly asphalt and impermeable, thus contributing to the heat island effect across the city.
- These spaces are typically closed at weekends and the project aims to make these spaces open to the public as part of the project.
- The renovations will incorporate nature features, with more vegetation, better rainwater management, both key problems in urban school grounds in England.
- The spaces will not only provide community spaces out of school hours but will enhance the experience of the children and young people in those schools.

- Children will have nature-rich spaces in which to play, to learn and to engage with nature, cooler spaces with shade and shelter and spaces that are good for mental health and wellbeing.

There are similar programmes happing in several cities across Europe including Barcelona, Rotterdam and Brussels who are all part of the Cool Schools programme. With accompanying research into their benefits for biodiversity, pupils and community there will be many lessons that can be applied to urban schools in the UK.

In Cananda Evergreen have created a climate ready school grounds pilot, whilst further projects are being carried out by landscape architects in both north and south America.

The Learning Through Landscapes Trust has 30 years of experience of involving children and young people in the design, use and management of school grounds. Evaluation of our work with schools shows the impact on children and young people as well as the schools staff who teach and support them. Below are quotes and evidence from just some of the pupils and staff we have worked with that show the value of outdoor learning and play specifically in school grounds.

"We went from week one where we were afraid of getting dirty, to now quite relishing rolling in the mud. So many children had never even touched a worm before, let alone put it in their hands. And it was quite amazing to see." —School Senior Leader

"I have loved being outside and finding out about biodiversity. To be honest I thought it would be really boring but it really wasn't!" —Child

"It's not just a playground now it's a live living space where there are plants and animals to discover and to promote and to foster. I think that's been a really positive change from where we lived." Senior school leader

The Muddy Hands Report 2017, also presented evidence on outdoor learning and play in school grounds.

Key findings included:

- Getting outdoors **connects us to the places we live** and the environments we will want to protect.
- Getting outdoors results in **better learning outcomes**, across the board.
- The benefits of outdoor learning and play last **beyond early education**.
- Outdoor learning and play create **healthier, more active children**.
- Time spent outdoors **boosts mental health**.

Learning through Landscapes is currently part of the delivery team for the National Education Nature Park (commissioned by the DfE) building on our experience of engaging children and young people with nature whilst also developing their knowledge and skills in order to be able to make a difference. This project's evaluation includes:

- Children and young people's physical and mental wellbeing and access to nature
- Children and young people reporting pro-environmental behaviours
- Disadvantaged groups increasingly accessing nature and developing their skills and knowledge
- Increase of biodiversity on the educational estate

Below are further examples of LtL's relevant recent projects:

- My School, My Planet – see pilot project evaluation at the bottom of the page. This project focuses on areas of greatest need which often includes urban areas
- Nural Nations and Polli:Gen – the latter being based in the City of Leicester
- Outdoor Classroom Day – which engages 12million children with their outdoor environment globally
- Our own Climate Ready School Grounds guidance for designers and schools developed in partnership with Architecture and Design Scotland

We are currently working with landscape architects, climate scientists and educators, ecologists and horticulturalists to see how we can improve the quality of school grounds and how they are used for learning and play, particularly in respect to climate change. This major new project aims to improve climate education but also enable school staff to provide first-hand experiences of creating nature-based solutions to our changing climate in school grounds. This will not only provide children and young people with practical skills and knowledge but will also improve the quality of their grounds for all pupils in their schools now and those in the future.

However, funding for this work is limited. The environment of young people are seen by departments outside of education as being the responsibility of formal education and by education as being the responsibility of the Department of Environment. There is also an issue with grant providers not wishing to fund projects within schools, as they can see any work in schools should be funded by the government. So schools miss out from both directions.

In conclusion:

- As schools are the one place the vast majority of children have access to on a regular basis it is vital that these are valued, well designed, well used and well maintained.
- We believe that this means all new schools should have grounds, and, wherever possible, these should meet the area guidelines outlined in Building Bulletin 85 and other DfE publications.
- These grounds should be of high quality, whatever scale of their grounds and whatever their original design, enabling children to learn and play outside everyday in nature-rich environments. This also brings benefits to their mental health and wellbeing as well as that of their teachers.
- Outdoor learning, play and connection with nature should be available and accessible for every child and young person in every school with natural world should be at the heart of all school grounds
- School grounds should be designed for the future, taking climate change into account, and made to last.

School grounds matter, they matter to children and young people and they matter for their futures. These spaces have a significant impact on the pupils that spend much of their schooldays in them and they need to be better. They also have potential helping to raise attainment, improve mental health and wellbeing of pupils and staff, address and help teaching about climate change, increasing biodiversity and host the local community out of hours.

January 2024