Essex County Council

School grounds:

Developing nature-filled outdoor spaces for all

A whole-school approach to supporting inclusion, health and wellbeing, enhancing biodiversity, and reducing operational risk.

Resource guide for Essex school leaders | December 2025 – Version 1 (Secondary)

In partnership with:

National Education Nature Park

AsHE Association of Secondary Headteachers in Essex

Contents

Forewords

I am delighted to see children and young people at the heart of this guide designed to support the whole school community, with particular attention paid to those with special education and wider inclusion needs. The link between supporting young people's engagement with nature, their wellbeing and future careers, is clear. We also look forward to working with schools and partners to close the growing 'green skills' gap we face here in Essex and enable the sustainable growth of our local economy - maximising future opportunities open to them.

Cllr Tony Ball,
Education Excellence, Lifelong Learning and Employability

I am delighted to see this guide promoting interventions in school grounds that can help reduce flood risk and support water supply, an increasing concern for Essex. If not addressed now, predicted flooding will disrupt the operation of schools and transport networks as our climate changes, and so, the education of young people. We look forward to working with school leaders and partners to develop green infrastructure and nature-filled spaces that will not only reduce risk but also maximise beneficial outcomes to Essex schools and local communities.

Cllr Tom Cunningham,
Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Sustainable Transport

Our new Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Essex provides a vision for the county to more than double the natural green space across the county and in doing so, improve the lives of all who live here. I am greatly encouraged to see this guide explore how young people can be supported, through the development of school grounds, to improve biodiversity, engage in active citizenship and connect with national and local plans and strategies. We look forward to working with schools to help young people understand the importance of nature, green infrastructure, and our wider adaptation and resilience work to reduce the vulnerability of families and communities most affected by change.

Cllr Peter Schwier,
Environment, Waste Reduction and Recycling

We all know that getting out into green space is good for us. This guide recognises that nature-filled school grounds can help enhance young people's mental health, reduce air pollution and minimise future risks. Additionally, where capacity allows, development of school grounds can enable food growing and deepen a connection to healthy eating and nutrition goals. We look forward to continuing our work with schools as partners in supporting the health and wellbeing of our younger Essex residents.

Cllr John Spence,
Children's Services, Adult Social Care, Public Health and Integration

Introduction

This guide is for Essex school leaders exploring opportunities to **develop their school grounds into nature-filled spaces**. Evidence increasingly shows that **well-designed interventions** deliver learning opportunities, bring strong social returns[1], and reduce operational risks[2], positively impacting:

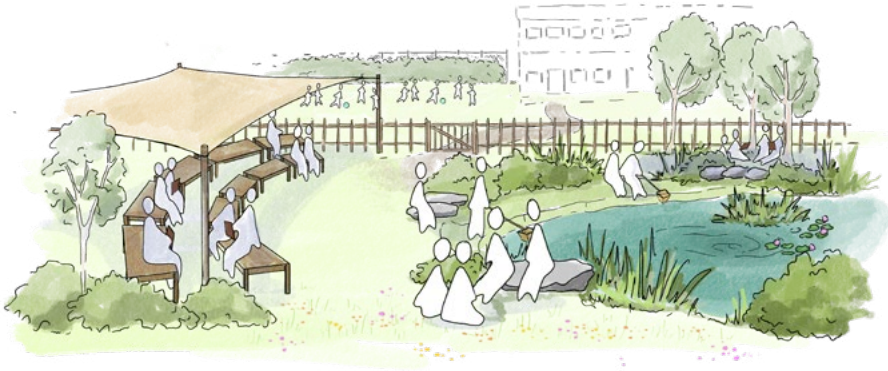
- **Wellbeing and mental health** by enabling greater student engagement with nature.
- **Physical health** by activating outdoor areas, reducing air pollution and connecting students to food origins.
- **Protection of the school estate** by strengthening climate adaptation and resilience measures.

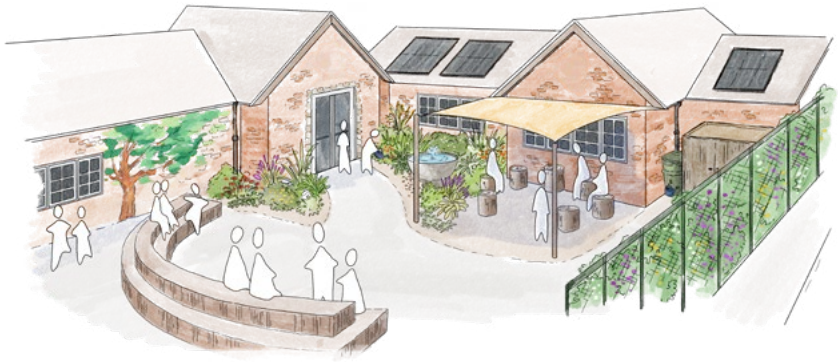
The guide is structured in three sections:

Section 1. Intervention benefits
A brief overview linking the benefits of interventions to wider **leadership priorities**, particularly **inclusion, wellbeing and personal development**.

Section 2. Ideas and inspiration
A range of **six practical scenarios** to inspire and stimulate ideas. These include a pocket forest, nature area, food growing space and opportunities to turn 'grey to green'.

Section 3. Steps to implementation
An overview of **advice, funding, and support** to enable steps towards implementation.





Section 1

Intervention benefits and leadership priorities

> … we now have the unhappiest children in Europe, with one in five suffering from a mental health problem, as well as growing levels of obesity among children in England. We also have … rising numbers of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
>
> **Raising the nation Play Commission**[5]

> There is a wealth of evidence showing that children who spend time outside connecting with nature experience better mental and physical health and improved wellbeing … school attendance, behaviours, academic achievement, and social skills like teamwork.
>
> **Natural England**[3]

> Air pollution poses a significant threat to children's health, particularly with so many UK schools situated near busy roads … nature-based infrastructure … (is) addressing this growing concern, providing protection for not only pupils and staff but also local biodiversity.
>
> **University of Surrey**[6]

> With the mental health of today's teenagers regularly making the headlines, it is interesting that our research showed the age group least connected to nature was 15-16-year-olds.
>
> **University of Essex**[4]

Improving wellbeing and mental health

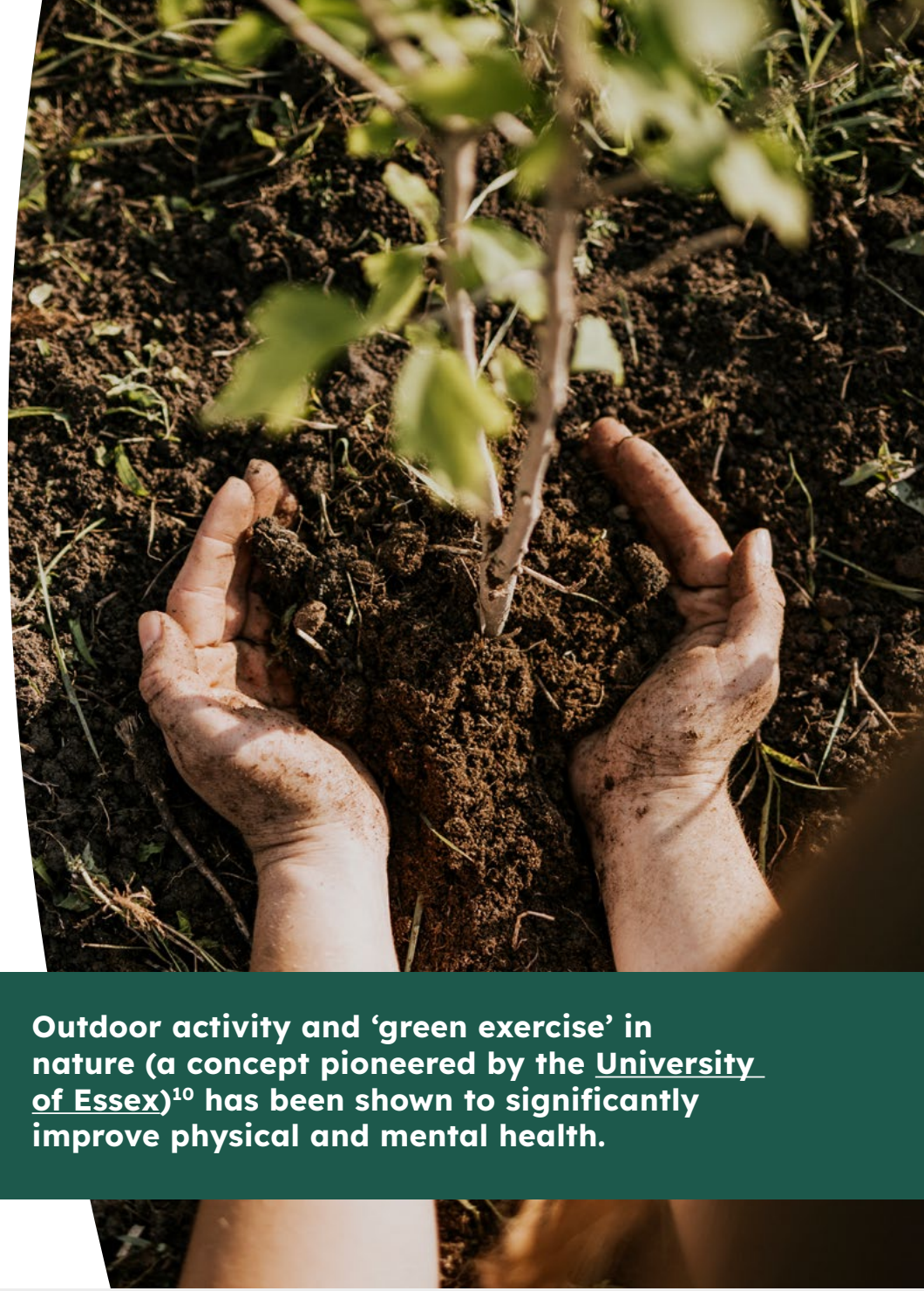
In recent years, there have been **renewed calls**[7] for public health and wider policy to **ensure equitable access to nature** for children close to home, where they learn and live.

A **strong body of research**[8] has demonstrated access to nature reduces levels of depression, anxiety, and fatigue, levels of stress, and of hyperactivity and inattention, with clear learning for **education inclusion and wellbeing strategies**.

Moreover, a recent **national survey by Natural England**[9] showed children and young people themselves emphatically **self-report the benefits of spending time in nature** and illustrated the **importance of providing access to nature in our school grounds**:

- Nearly all surveyed **agreed with the statement 'being in nature makes me very happy'** (91%).
- Where nature around their school **had increased** over the last year, the vast majority said that **the increase in nature made them enjoy school more** (81%).
- Importantly, children **with a disability** were more likely to spend '**most** of their time in nature' **at school**, than those with no disability.

This guide sets out ideas for the creation of nature-filled spaces in school grounds that support wellbeing and emotional regulation for the whole school community. The enhancing of sensory elements can bring additional benefits for all, especially students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).



Outdoor activity and 'green exercise' in nature (a concept pioneered by the University of Essex)[10] has been shown to significantly improve physical and mental health.

Improving physical health

The need to consider how outdoor space can encourage more physical activity is clear.

In Essex, by Year 6, **one in three children are overweight or obese**[11]. Significantly, **over half of all children and young people**[12] do not take part in the recommended 60 minutes of activity a day, and 25% of young people report zero positive attitudes towards physical activity and sport.

The design of the places and spaces in which we live, work and play can have a significant impact on how physically active we are …

Sport England's Active Design Checklist[13]

Engaging students with food growing on site brings multiple benefits.

A **ten-year study of teenage diets by the University of Cambridge**[14] found that two-thirds of their calories came from ultra-processed foods (UPFs), and that more disadvantaged groups consume more of these foods. Food growing projects activate new spaces and can connect students to learning about food origins, nutrition and healthy food choices.

Nature-based solutions to improving air quality are underutilised.

Dramatic improvements in air quality can be achieved through relatively simple, nature-based solutions. **A recent pioneering study**[15] showed how a simple 'green screen and living gate' in front of a primary school reduced harmful particle pollution in the playground by almost one-third.

This guide identifies ways to activate outdoor spaces in schools to encourage inclusive, engaging movement and physical activity - especially for those less involved in traditional sport. The benefits from food growing on site are explored, and examples of simple green screens, such as hedges and fence climbers, included throughout.

Strengthening climate adaptation and resilience across the school estate

The Department for Education is modelling the impact of **climate-related disruptions to learning**[16], namely:

- overheating
- flooding, and
- water scarcity.

Essex is one of the driest places in the country. **Although a water stressed area, the county also has areas at very high flood risk**[17] from the sea, rivers, and rainfall. **The latest Environment Agency data**[18] shows 150,000 properties in Essex (roughly 1 in 4) to be at risk of surface water flooding alone; that number will go up as climate risk increases.

The Department for Education's **sustainability and climate change strategy**[19] requires that 'all new school buildings delivered by DfE will be net zero in operation. They will be designed for a 2°C rise in average global temperatures and **future-proofed** for a 4°C rise, to adapt to the risks of climate change, including increased flooding and higher indoor temperatures'.

The challenge now is to **ensure that existing schools** are also able to adapt and build their resilience, **to minimise risks to learning and wellbeing**, now and into the future.

Futureproofing Essex schools through the introduction of climate adaptation and resilience measures, includes the integration of **green infrastructure and sustainable drainage** (often referred to as **SuDS**) into school grounds.

This guide highlights **practical measures**, including tree planting, sustainable drainage, and shade solutions (e.g. green walls), that can be taken by schools, and outlines **where to get advice, funding, and support**.

The term 'green infrastructure' refers to green and blue spaces which can provide nature-based solutions to reduce climate risks (flooding, overheating, water scarcity).

Links to wider school leadership priorities

The next section of the guide sets out six **intervention scenarios** built to deliver on the three outcome areas already highlighted and school leadership priorities around:

- **inclusion**
- **personal development and wellbeing, and**
- **curriculum delivery.**

The potential for nature-filled spaces to support **inclusion** objectives, in particular, **emotional regulation and sensory needs** is considered throughout.

The areas below, selected directly from the **'personal development and wellbeing'** section of the 2025 Ofsted Framework's **School Inspection Toolkit**[20] are flagged at this point, as importantly, the scenarios highlight opportunities for students to:

- **behave as responsible, active citizens.**
- **cooperate consistently well with others.**
- gain the confidence, resilience and knowledge needed to **keep themselves mentally healthy.**
- show **enjoyment and fascination** in learning about … **the world around them.**
- develop understanding of how to **keep physically healthy, eat healthily and maintain an active lifestyle** - including via **enrichment activities and opportunities to be active** during the school day.

Moreover, the scenarios provide opportunity for **inclusive provision**, whereby students in targeted groups can:

- benefit from **high-quality personal development opportunities**, and
- participate in **interesting and relevant extra-curricular activities.**

Notably, development of school grounds can also support students to:

- better understand relevant **trends in local and national employment**.

Around the UK, and particularly in Essex, there is growing concern about the **'green skills gap'**. Effective development and use of school grounds, provides opportunity to connect students, via the curriculum, enrichment, and careers, to this **employment growth area**[21].

Polling by ISEP showed that 56% of British adults have never heard of the term 'green job', while 64% also demonstrated a similar lack of awareness of the term 'green skills'.

Institute of Sustainability and Environmental Professionals[22]

Finally, these scenarios demonstrate opportunities for extensive **curriculum links** to be made to geography and science, from KS3 to KS5 (including fieldwork), as well as art, and design and technology. Support for the teaching of a wider range of subjects outdoors, including English and maths, is rapidly growing. The spaces created can further support **any subject or pastoral session** as a setting for discussion, debate, and performance.

How is the Department for Education encouraging student access to nature?

The **Department for Education's climate change strategy**[23] (updated 2023) started to address some of the issues raised in this guide, noting the potential that school grounds hold for **learning opportunities, practical activities and clubs which bring 'learning to life', as well as aiding delivery of pastoral objectives**. The strategy recognises:

- The physical and mental health benefits of time spent in nature.
- The potential for targeted support to improve engagement and attainment, including for students with SEND.
- The need to support young people's sense of agency, to help allay climate anxiety.

Schools have been encouraged to think of their grounds as part of a vast, virtual **National Education Nature Park**[24] and to take action to improve biodiversity, by **empowering students** to make a positive difference. Launched in October 2023, the National Education Nature Park provides free resources to schools including digital tools, training, and classroom activities; nationally, one in four schools have engaged (see **Section 3 STAGE 1.3**).

Funding has also been allocated in the form of a non-competitive grant to over 2000 settings nationally (including c.53 schools in Essex) to support action within school grounds. Eligible schools[25] **have been made aware.**

Government policy in this area is rapidly evolving

The **Government response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review**[26] (November 2025), recognises the value of extra-curricular participation and its association with higher educational achievement and positive outcomes in adulthood. Of most relevance to this guide is a commitment to set out a **new core enrichment offer that every school and college should aim to provide for all children**.

Five new enrichment benchmark categories have been set out - access to civic engagement; arts and culture; **nature, outdoor and adventure**; sport and physical activities; and developing wider life skills. Enrichment benchmarks will be taken into account by **Ofsted** when it updates its **inspection toolkits** next year.

The 'nature, outdoor and adventure' enrichment category, includes 'time outdoors, climate education and sustainability projects, and gardening…'

The review also makes a commitment to **enhancing the climate education content in the national curriculum**: 'Equipping children and young people to thrive in a rapidly changing world … means enabling them to understand and meet the global challenge that climate change presents'.

Finally, of note is the Government's new **Environmental Improvement Plan**[27] (December 2025), which outlines the Department for Education's new commitment to 'evaluate the health and wellbeing benefits … of increased green infrastructure in new school buildings, including biophilic pilot schools'. More detail is expected in 2026.

Section 2

Ideas and inspiration

In this section, **six intervention scenarios** are set out to **support reflection and discussion around the 'art of the possible'**. Each scenario contains ideas for developing nature-rich, activated, climate-resilient spaces, that can be scaled-up or down, and mixed and matched, according to interest.

Flexible design and use of spaces **throughout the school day** has been considered. Their potential use for **whole class** teaching or pastoral work, for **small groups**, and for one-to-one **mentoring and coregulation** support has been flagged. **Simple shelters** are incorporated so that spaces can be more reliably used during timetabled lessons, for break and lunchtimes, and by clubs.

Some additional detail, including an outline of indicative costs and maintenance considerations, can be found in the **School Grounds FAQ Helpsheet** in Section 3 STAGE 2.

Whether embarking on a first, small-scale initiative, or planning a transformative project to benefit the whole school community, it is hoped there is something of interest here for all.

Skills for learning and employability

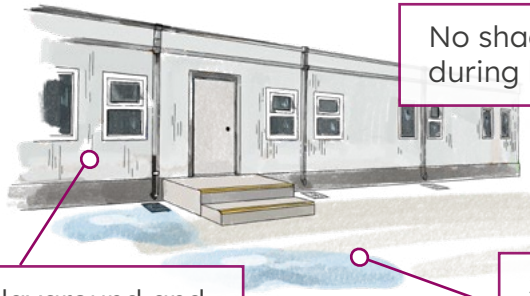
Numerous studies demonstrate that experiences in nature … develop leadership, communication, problem solving and critical thinking skills.

High Quality Outdoor Learning – A guide for All, IOL[28]

Scenario 1: **Greening and activating the playground**

Overheating tarmac playgrounds are an increasing challenge, impacting student wellbeing and ability to self-regulate and concentrate on return to class. Turning 'grey to green' and providing shade in a nature-filled space, brings about multiple benefits.

Before



No shade for students during break/lunchtime

Tarmac playground and classroom overheat during summer months

Surface water results in wet feet and corridors

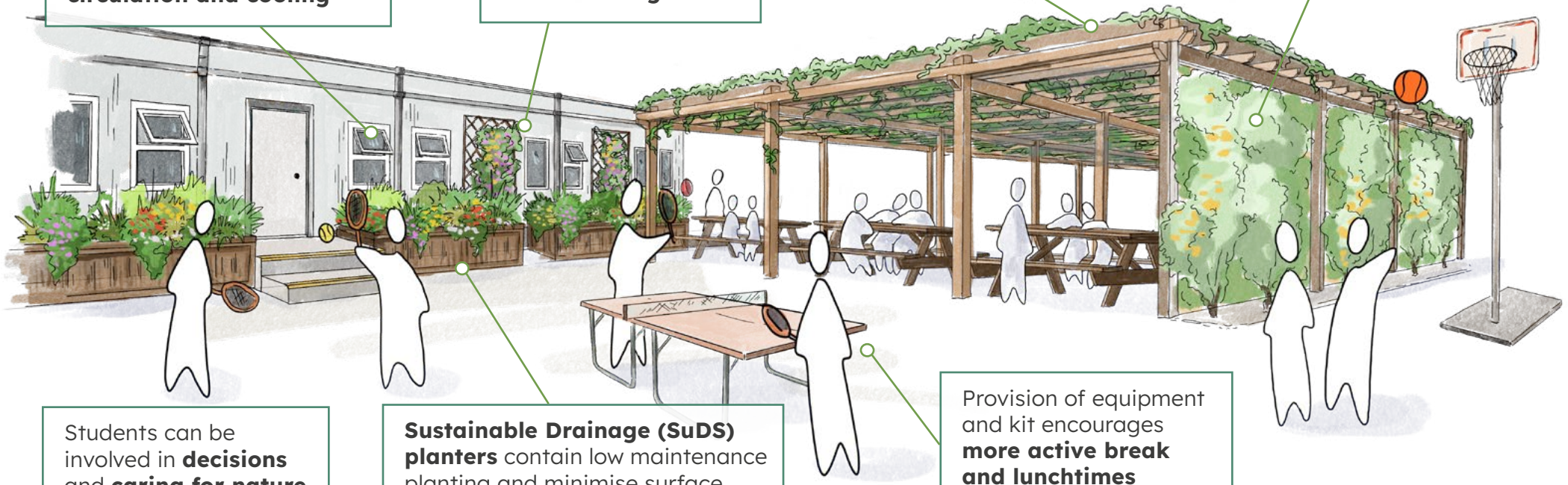
After

Positioning of the planters may enable windows to open further, supporting **air circulation and cooling**

Sensory planting enhances both **nature and wellbeing**

Shade from the pergola green wall and roof **keeps students cooler**

Planting choice can attract **pollinators** and help **nature restoration**



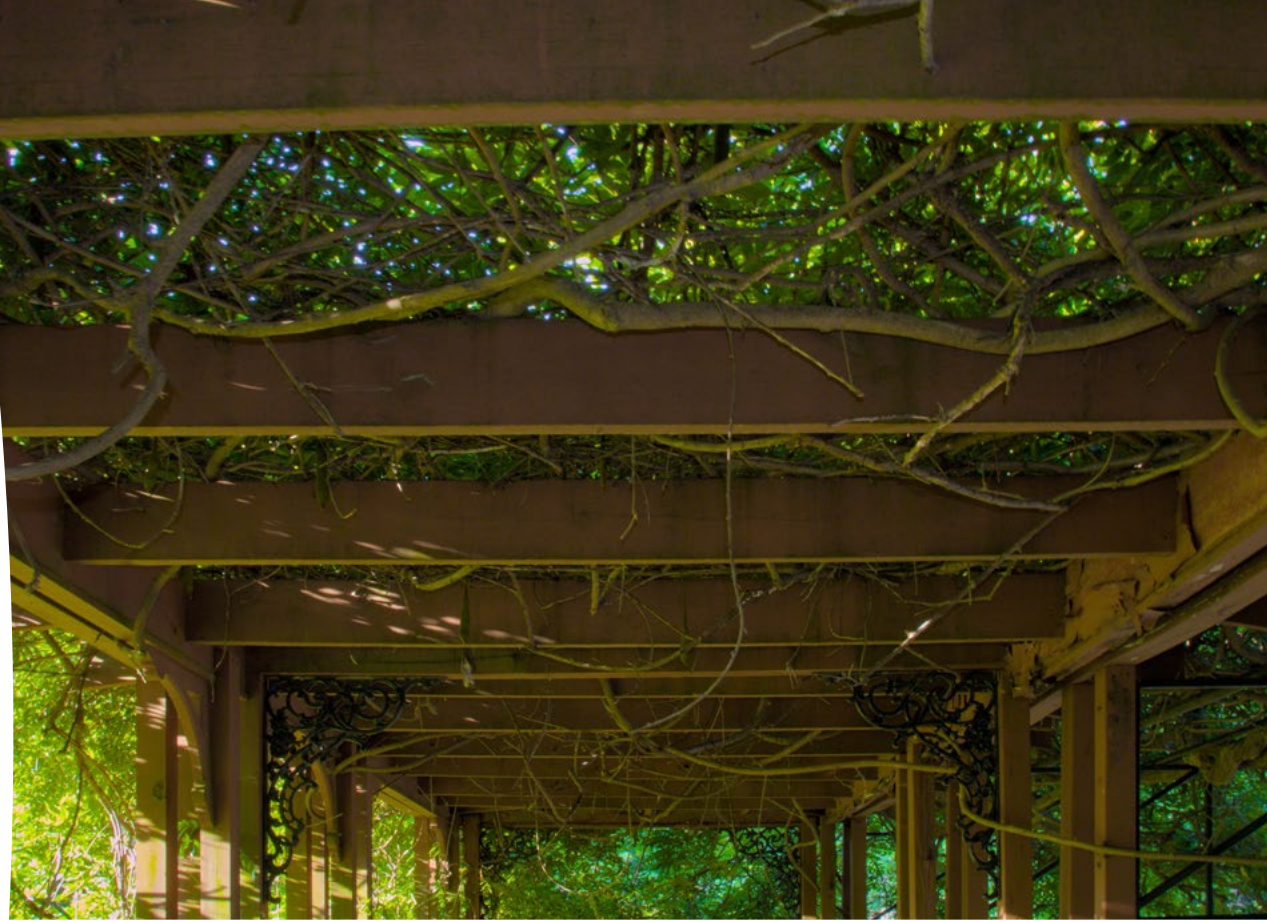
Students can be involved in **decisions** and **caring for nature** as **'active citizens'**

Sustainable Drainage (SuDS) planters contain low maintenance planting and minimise surface water flooding

Provision of equipment and kit encourages **more active break and lunchtimes**

After: in more detail

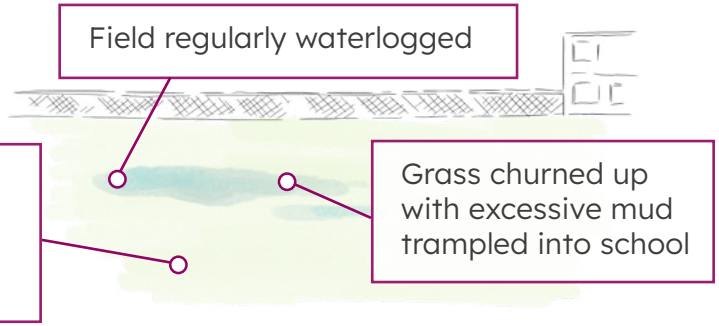
- **Shade** from the pergola green wall and roof **keeps students cooler during hot summers**, improving wellbeing, ability to focus and learning outcomes once they are back in class.
- **Sustainable Drainage (SuDS) planters** contain **low maintenance** planting and **minimise surface water flooding** previously affecting classroom access after storms.
- **Sensory planting** choices (e.g. colour/scent) **enhance student wellbeing and inclusion**.
- Planters can be filled and maintained by students as part of curriculum enhancement and **student-led** clubs. Planting choice can attract **pollinators**, help **nature restoration**, and empower students as **active citizens**.
- **Positioning of the planters** may enable windows to open further (see regulations), supporting **air circulation and cooling** leading to improved **wellbeing** and **learning outcomes**.
- Provision of equipment and kit encourages more **active break and lunchtimes**, even where space is limited. **Outside lockers** for equipment storage can be helpful.



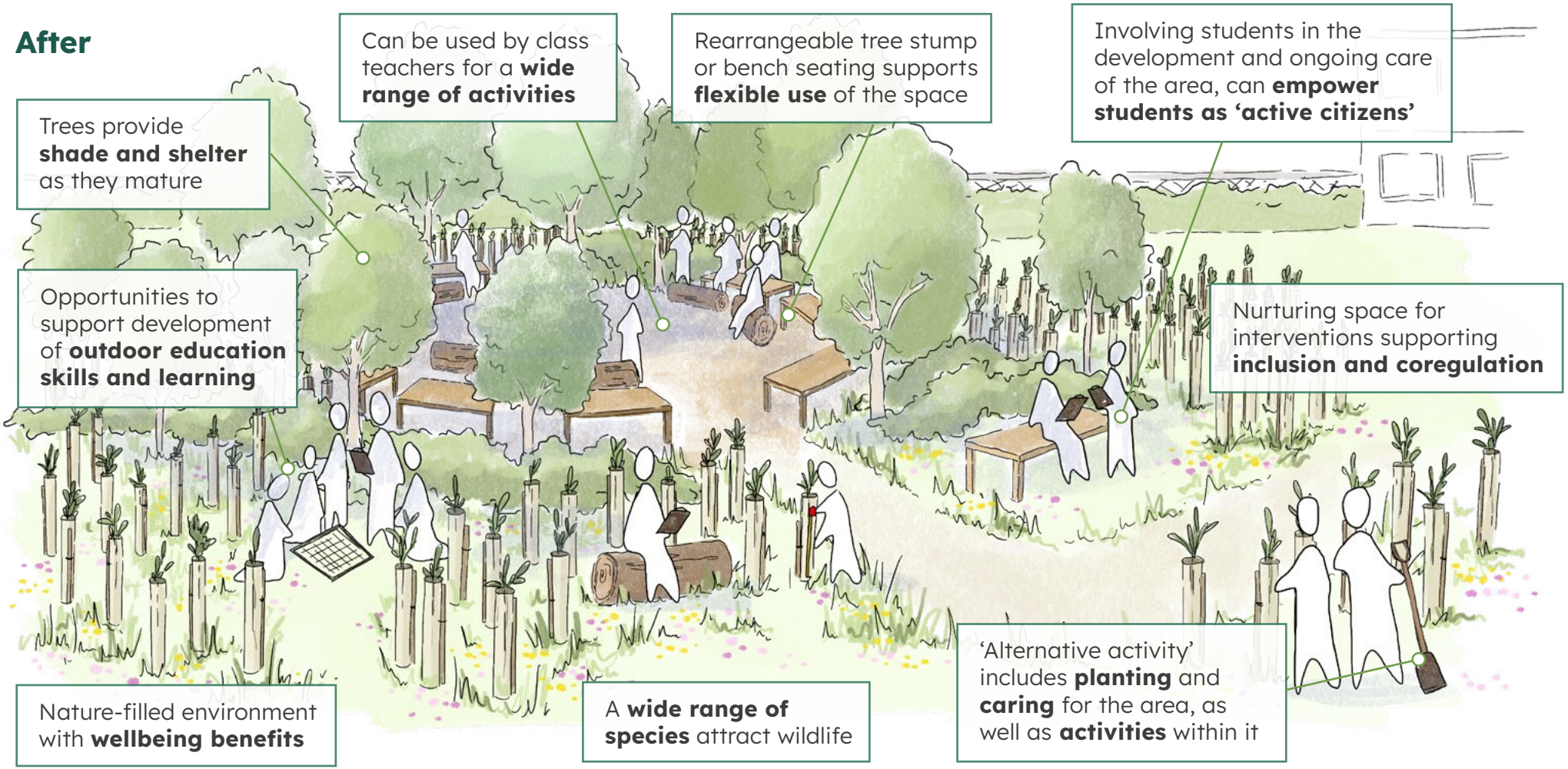
Scenario 2: **Planting a pocket forest for outdoor learning**

Areas of woodland within the grounds bring wide-ranging opportunities. As trees mature, outdoor learning activities (forest school and bushcraft-style) also become possible, which previously would have required travelling to.

Before



After



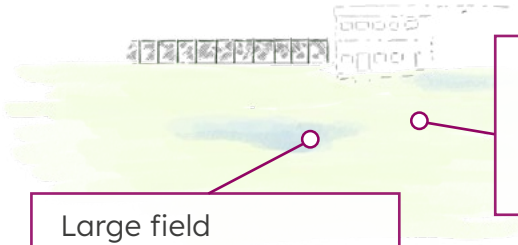
After: in more detail

- Nature-filled environment with **wellbeing benefits** for all who use it. Inclusion can be further supported through careful planning of **sensory elements**.
- Nurturing space for interventions supporting **inclusion and coregulation**. Can also be used for **inspiration, reflection, mentoring, and emotional regulation**.
- **Trees provide shade and shelter** as they mature. Uptake of water by trees **reduces surface water flooding**, making paths usable and enabling grass to recover.
- **Rearrangeable tree stump or bench seating** supports **flexible use** by large and small groups, and **bark flooring** in areas of intensive use aids drainage. A **tarp shelter** could be added to provide protection from rain and shade.
- Setting can also be used by class teachers for a **wide range of activities** including art, performance, discussion and reading.
- A **wide range of species** attract wildlife (birds and insects) supporting **nature recovery. Bird and bat boxes, bug hotels and camera traps** can be incorporated, enhancing teaching outdoors and providing connection to classrooms.
- Involving students in the development and ongoing care of the area, while making links to **local nature recovery and climate**, can **empower students as 'active citizens'** and encourage **student leadership** of clubs, including citizen science initiatives.
- **'Alternative activity' is supported through** planting and caring for the area, monitoring growth and watering, engaging with nature trails, geocaching etc.
- Opportunities to support development of **outdoor education skills and learning** (e.g. forest school/ bushcraft) will evolve as the trees mature.

Scenario 3: **Creating a nature area and pond to reduce flood risk**

Introducing a pond as a sustainable drainage solution, can turn a regularly waterlogged area of a playing field into a nature area for all - as an outdoor classroom, for interventions and extra-curricular activities, at the same time reducing excess water in the surrounding area.

Before



Limited access to football pitches for extended periods after rain

Large field underused due to regular waterlogging

After

Involving students in the development, construction, and ongoing care of the nature area can **empower students as active citizens**

Hedge planting in front of perimeter fences increases wellbeing, air quality and biodiversity

Real-world teaching and learning opportunities

Additional features/ activities could include **nature trails and camera traps**

Large tarp provides a cost-effective **shelter** from sun/ rain

Flexibly designed space with **moveable seating** enables whole class teaching

Space can be used by class teachers for a **wide range of activities**

Landscaped area with pond enables **storage of excess water**

Peaceful, **nature-filled space**

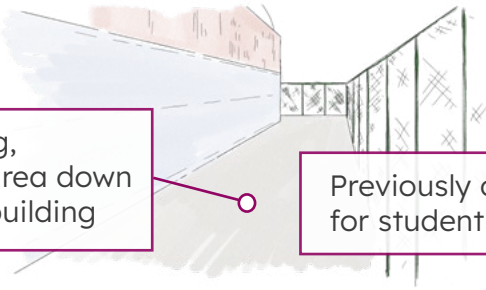
After: in more detail

- Landscaped area with pond enables **storage of excess water**; full access to grounds (including paths and football pitch) is restored and can help to regulate local temperature.
- Peaceful, **nature-filled space** supports inspiration, reflection, mentoring, and emotional regulation.
- **Flexibly designed** space with **moveable seating** enables whole class teaching, use by pastoral groups, small group work or work with individuals, as well as by clubs.
- Large tarp provides a **cost-effective shelter** from sun/ rain.
- Involving students in the development, construction, and ongoing care of the nature area, while making links to **local nature recovery and climate**, can **empower students as active citizens**.
- **Real-world teaching and learning** opportunities include ecosystems, species, soils, water-cycle and climate across the geography, biology, and environmental science curriculum.
- The space also be used by class teachers for a **wide range of activities** including **art, performance, discussion and reading**.
- Additional features/ activities could include **nature trails** (with bird/bat boxes and bug habitats) and **wildlife camera traps**.
- **Hedge planting** in front of perimeter fences further increases wellbeing, air quality and biodiversity.

Scenario 4: **Growing food in raised beds**

By turning an underused area into a food-growing area and from ‘grey to green’, a fully activated space is created for timetabled lessons and extra-curricular activity, which works equally well as a peaceful, inspiring space for mentoring and coregulation.

Before



South-facing, underused area down the side of building

Previously out-of-bounds for students

After

Large roller blinds create **rain protection or shade**

Storage space for tools and equipment

Nature-filled environment brings **wellbeing benefits**

Teaching on **food, nutrition and healthy eating** can inform design of the space

Flexible seating enables the space to be an **outdoor classroom**

Real-world links can be made across a range of **curriculum subjects**

Raised beds are **accessible by all**

External gates enable easy access by **community groups and volunteers**

Incorporation of **water butts and compost bins**

Planting can incorporate **sensory elements**

After: in more detail

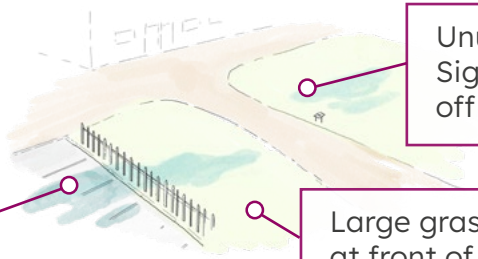
- Nature-filled environment with **wellbeing benefits** for all who use it. Multiple opportunities to engage **student voice** and develop **student leadership** through **curriculum enhancement** and **clubs**.
- Nurturing space for interventions supporting **inclusion and coregulation**. Planting can incorporate **sensory elements** (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste).
- **Flexible seating** enables the space to be an **outdoor classroom** for curriculum lessons and a quiet, relaxing space for **group work**.
- Teaching on **food, nutrition and healthy eating** can inform design of the space and approach; **vegetables and salad crops** grown can be used in **food tech** lessons or **taken home** by students. **Outdoor cooking** of food grown can provide further inspiration and experiential learning.
- **Real-world links** can be made across a range of **curriculum subjects** e.g. science, geography, art, food tech, design and technology.
- Raised beds are **accessible by all** and can vary in height. Vertical planters can achieve great outcomes in **smaller spaces. 'Alternative activity'** is enabled through planting, watering, and other gardening related tasks, important for those students less engaged in sports or other exercise provision.
- **Storage space** is provided for tools, equipment, and teaching materials.
- Large **roller blinds** pull out across the space creating **rain protection or shade**, maximising use and minimising weather disruption.
- External gates enable easy access by **community groups and volunteers** outside of the school day and during holidays.
- Learning about **sustainability** is supported through planting choice and incorporation of **water butts and compost bins**, with links to farming, soils, pollinators, and climate change. Kitchen **food waste composting at scale**, elsewhere on site, will provide **savings in waste removal costs** as well as supporting decarbonisation goals.

Scenario 5: **Establishing an orchard and willow-sculpting whilst reducing flood risk**

Green space at the front of the school is reimagined as an orchard with creative willow-sculpting opportunities, thanks to introduction of a swale (landscaped dip) to manage waterlogging.

Before

Car park and wider area affected by surface water flooding/waterlogging (due to run-off from car park)



Unused area. Signs say: 'Keep off the grass'

Large grassy area at front of school

After

Fruit grown can be used in the **school kitchen, food tech lessons or taken home** by students

Benches can be easily moved into the **shelter** if needed

Signs explain the **importance of the site** to visitors

Caring for and maintaining the space provides **'alternative activity'** for students

Fast-growing **willow** can be sculpted, supporting creative projects and aiding take-up of excess water

Nature-filled environment brings **wellbeing benefits for all**

Wildflower meadow, fruit trees and fruit canes support high levels of biodiversity

Students are **involved in design, planting choices and caring for the area** via curriculum enhancement and clubs

Landscaping (swale) **redirects excess water**

Easy access by **community groups** and **volunteers**

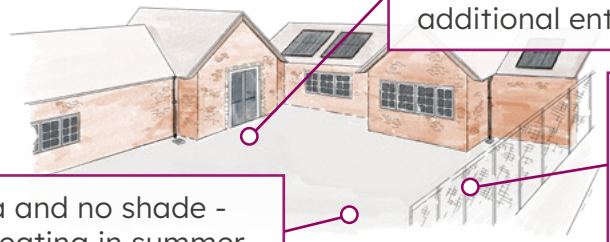
After: in more detail

- Nature-filled environment with **wellbeing benefits for all**, also used for small group and one-to-one interventions e.g. **mentoring** and **emotional coregulation**.
- Student involvement in design and planting choices via curriculum enhancement and clubs, supports **student voice and leadership**. Links to **nature recovery** can further engage students as **active citizens**.
- Caring for and maintaining the space provides **'alternative activity'** for students less engaged with other forms of outdoor sport/activity provision.
- **Wildflower meadows, fruit trees and fruit canes** (inspect pots and bug hotels too) support high levels of **biodiversity**, especially pollinators.
- Whole-school engagement is supported through real-world links to learning around **food origins, nutrition, sustainable farming, and climate**. **Fruit** grown can be used in the **school kitchen, food tech lessons or taken home** by students, and stories shared in newsletters and assemblies.
- Visitor signs explain the **importance of the site** for health and wellbeing, nature recovery and climate mitigation (enhanced cooling and flood-risk reduction).
- **Benches** can be easily moved into the **shelter** if needed. Outdoor **waterproof cushions, stored in the shed**, enable **use of the area by full classes** e.g. reading, discussions.
- Landscaping **(swale) redirects excess water** away from buildings and infrastructure and reduces waterlogging that previously limited use of the area.
- Fast-growing **willow** aids take-up of excess water and can be woven and sculpted, providing a creative, group work activity.
- Easy access by **community groups** and **volunteers** outside of the school day brings support and income generation potential.

Scenario 6: **Rethinking a small outdoor space and entrance area**

Creative design and thoughtful sensory planting can transform underused areas from 'grey to green' spaces that support wellbeing and inclusion, including self-regulation on arrival and during breaktimes, mentoring and coregulation interventions, and provide inspiring settings for whole-class discussion and performance.

Before



Underused area - additional entrance

Space next to public footpath and road, separated by wire fence (no privacy)

Tarmacked area and no shade - excessive overheating in summer

After

Sheltered group work space next to the sensory garden - tarp provides a **cost-effective shelter**

Downpipes into a **water butt** (and also a **raingarden**)

Storage lockers are provided

Small **sensory garden** provides interest, a focus for activity, and supports **wellbeing and biodiversity**

Drought-tolerant planting thrives during summer months

Wooden seating and structures, bark flooring and even murals featuring nature, can bring additional **biophilic benefits**

Larger groups can enjoy the space for a **range of activities**

Climbing plants on a wire fence form a **'green wall'** providing **privacy** and **shade** and improving **air quality** and **biodiversity**

After: in more detail

- Small **sensory garden** provides interest and supports **wellbeing** via planting decisions (sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste) and a **water feature**.
- Sheltered space next to the sensory garden supports **inclusion, self-regulation** and **coregulation interventions**.
- Downpipe into a **raingarden and water butt** help manage excess water and watering of specific plants. **Drought-tolerant planting** thrives during periods of water stress.
- Tarps make a **cost-effective shelter** (shade/ protection from rain). Seating can be rearranged as needed.
- **Physical activity** can be further encouraged through design and equipment provision. **Caring for nature** e.g. planting, weeding, and watering, helps **activate the space**.
- Climbing plants on the wire fence create a **'green wall'** providing **privacy** and **shade**, supporting wellbeing, and benefiting nature by **attracting pollinators**. Importantly, **air quality** is improved (less particulate matter from car exhausts enters the space).
- Wooden seating and structures, and bark flooring bring additional **biophilic benefits**.
- Larger groups (curriculum/ pastoral) can enjoy the space for a **range of activities** e.g. independent reading, discussion. Waterproof seating pads can be helpful, to maximise access and use.
- **Storage lockers** can be used for **seating pads, clipboards** for outdoor teaching, and **gardening equipment**.

calm

enable **emotional self-regulation, relaxation and wellbeing**

inspire

stimulate **wonder, curiosity and creativity**

facilitate

bring-in **external support** and volunteers, as needed

empower

enable **active citizenship** and **student leadership**

include

provide **access** to all and sensory stimuli to support **high-quality interventions**

Nature-filled, flexible spaces in the school grounds...

extend

open-up **underutilised space** for the curriculum and extra-curricular clubs

strengthen

enhance **biodiversity** and **reduce climate risk** to the school estate

educate

bring the curriculum alive through outdoor opportunities

develop

support **personal understanding** of health and wellbeing

socialise

support **physical activity,** fun, and **interactions**

activate

encourage **movement and physical activity**

progress

build **essential skills** for learning and **employment**

protect

reduce risks from **overheating and flooding**

Section 3

Steps to implementation

The following provides a step-by-step guide to planning and funding space for nature in school grounds; it is designed to support school leaders develop a plan that considers short-term steps, through to development of a longer-term vision.

STAGE 1:
Assess needs and gather evidence

STAGE 2:
Develop options and plans

STAGE 3:
Consider funding and support available

STAGE 1: Assess needs and gather evidence

Whether considering small-scale improvements or a full transformation of the grounds, gathering evidence early helps shape a clear vision and plan.

1.1 Survey the school community and stakeholders

Engage staff, students, and stakeholders to understand current use, concerns, and aspirations. Perspectives often vary widely, even within the same group. Though this guide focuses on benefits to students, staff wellbeing will also be enhanced through well-designed space, benefiting recruitment and retention. If the grounds are, or could be used by the wider community, early consultation may unlock funding or income opportunities (see **STAGE 3.3**).

1.2 Check your official flood risk

Use this tool to '**Check your Flood Risk**'. Schools at higher risk may be eligible for more in-depth advice and support and are encouraged to contact ECC via our advice clinics (see **STAGE 2**) or **environment@essex.gov.uk** to explore options.

1.3 Map your school grounds

Mapping the existing school grounds, issues, and patterns of use, can help support discussion about the present and develop ideas and options for the future. This could include:

- **Surface water flood risk** – base this on past observations, noting frequency and potential causes [do this in addition to 1.2 above]
- **Overheating risk** – base this on past observations, noting areas uncomfortable in summer due to lack of shade.
- **Coverage and types of biodiversity** – base this on observations (n.b. free online resources to support student-led activity are available from the **National Education Nature Park**).
- **Current use** – base this on surveys and observations noting time/day/seasons, how frequently is it used, and by whom.

Student leadership opportunity

Students develop surveying, mapping, and presentation skills (including GIS) from KS3 onwards in **geography, ICT, design and technology, and science**.

Useful reflection points selected and adapted from Sport England's Active Design Checklist

- How **inclusive and accessible** are the grounds, and within them, more biodiverse or 'nature-filled' areas?
- Is use of certain spaces dominated by a **particular group** of students?
- Do certain groups **self-exclude**?
- What **new types of activity** for different groups of students could be supported?
- How might **student voice** and the wider school community be engaged in developing proposals?
- How might space be developed to remain accessible and **well-used throughout all seasons** (hotter summer months and colder, darker, winter months)?
- How can spaces **support social connections** to be made, from informal socialisation to group work skills?
- How might **flexible seating** support both outdoor classrooms and small group mentoring and inclusion support?
- What **infrastructure or equipment (and storage)** is needed, beyond traditional sport and games, to help get more students 'active'?
- Where will drinking fountains, recycling bins and outdoor taps **be positioned**?
- What space can be allocated for **cycle access and bike racks?**
- How can **those responsible for maintenance** be best involved in the design stage?

1.4 Check planning permission

Check with your landlord whether planning permission is needed for your site.

1.5 Consider surrounding nature and wildlife corridors

Greater Essex should have 25% of land dedicated to natural green infrastructure by 2030 with an aspiration to achieve 30%. Currently the county has some 14%.

Essex's Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) identifies priorities and makes recommendations for biodiversity increase, habitat creation, and climate resilience. Published in July 2025, along with a useful **interactive map**, it aims to better connect green spaces to provide nature corridors, giving wildlife the best opportunity to thrive.

Schools can contribute, for example, by:

- Planting native species
- Creating habitats
- Removing barriers to wildlife corridors

Resources for whole-school engagement

The Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), along with other Essex-focused **climate education resources**, offer positive local stories for assemblies and curriculum teaching (geography, science, citizenship), and support student understanding of local and national government action, helpful in addressing climate anxiety.

Camera traps to monitor wildlife in your grounds

Camera traps can be loaned from **Colchester Zoological Society** along with full instructions, tips and ideas for use. Their schools team also support wider Climate Action planning in schools through the **Climate Ambassadors** scheme.

> "If children don't grow up knowing about nature and appreciating it, they will not understand it. And if they don't understand it, they won't protect it. And if they don't protect it, who will?"
>
> **Sir David Attenborough,**
> **Patron of Learning through Landscapes**

STAGE 2: Develop options and plans

For schools still considering their options, advice and support is available from ECC

School Grounds FAQ Helpsheet

A **FAQ Helpsheet** has been compiled to support school leaders move forward with their planning and includes essential 'need-to-know' information, top tips and addresses common misconceptions.

It also outlines indicative costs and considerations relating to the six scenarios shared in **Section 2**.

School Grounds Advice Clinics

ECC is trialling **on-line clinics offering advice and support** for school leaders wanting to raise general queries. Schools will also be signposted to more in-depth support.

The clinics are open to all state-funded primary and secondary schools in Essex and will be held several times per term this academic year, subject to demand. More information, including dates and details can be found on **Developing school grounds | Essex Schools Infolink**.

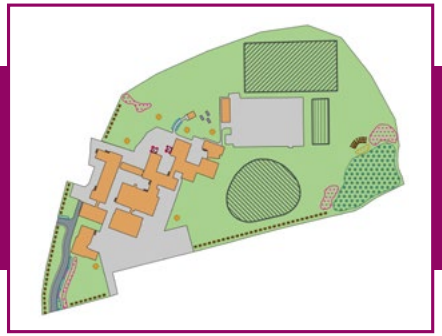
For schools with well-understood options...

... a next step would be to apply for financial support for implementation (see **STAGE 3**).

Those schools with several ideas, or more complex interventions in mind...

... may consider getting expert input from a landscape designer, to map out options, consider feasibility and draw-up costs. This could provide a vision for the future that can be worked towards, in steps over time, and will help to establish immediate priorities.

A wide range of landscape designers offer support for schools across Essex, and we encourage schools to research which might best suit their needs.



Mapping of options can support discussion, plans and prioritisation.

STAGE 3: Consider funding and support available

The growing availability of support for school grounds and their development for broader educational, wellbeing, inclusion and sustainability goals, has been a key driver behind development of this guide.

3.1 Essex County Council

Unless otherwise indicated, ECC offers are available to all state-funded primary and secondary schools in Essex. It may be possible to combine funding and support from a variety of ECC sources.

Student inclusion, health and wellbeing support

Inclusion Framework and Associated Funding

The Inclusion Framework supports early intervention and inclusion in mainstream education following the principle 'Lives without Labels'. The Framework supports schools to identify barriers to learning and implement effective, timely interventions. The action planning process supports schools to consider their physical environment as well as workforce development and targeted interventions. Many schools have implemented creative solutions, including development of sensory spaces, and areas for outdoor learning and emotional regulation. School leaders are encouraged to work with their Inclusion Partner (IP) to implement the Inclusion Framework and consider any support needed. Where the inclusion project involves development of the school grounds, schools are encouraged to consider information provided in this guide to support them.

Essex Healthy Schools Programme grants

The Essex Healthy Schools programme provides schools with support, guidance and access to training to help them identify and implement projects that will improve student health. Grants are also available in 2026 for projects which specifically focus on improving student 'food and nutrition' and/or 'emotional wellbeing' outcomes.

For more information, schools can contact their Healthy Schools Engagement Worker healthyschools@barnardos.org.uk.

Research in progress at ECC relevant to school grounds:

Creating Active Schools (pilot)

Active Essex (with funding from Public Health), are supporting 50 Essex Schools to take a 'whole school approach to healthy behaviours', including identifying underutilised space and making them more active and engaging.

Supporting Outdoor Learning (pilot)

Public Health have commissioned Groundwork East to deliver a pilot scheme in 10 primary schools to enable more curriculum lessons to take place outdoors by improving teaching confidence and skills (subjects include maths, English, art, music, science and PSHE).

Landscaping, planting and sustainable drainage support

ECC's Climate Adaptation and Mitigation team works with communities across Essex to plant trees and implement sustainable drainage measures to help build the county's resilience to increasing risks from flooding and overheating.

Support for schools varies over the year according to programmes active, and can include:

- **Nature recovery** - facilitation of tree and hedgerow planting and/or signposting to a wide range of support and funding, including engagement with the Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy – see **STAGE 1.5**.
- **Flood mitigation** - helping communities understand their flood risk - see **STAGE 1.2** and supporting schools at higher risk; this includes interventions funded by the Department for Education's 'Sustainable Drainage (SuDS) for Schools' programme, which helps build ponds, raingardens, swales and provides drainage planters.

Schools can talk directly to members of this team via ECC's **School Grounds Advice Clinics** – see **STAGE 2**. New offers and opportunities will be listed on **Developing school grounds | Essex Schools Infolink**.

Over 8000 trees were planted in schools through the Essex Forest Initiative (2020-24).

ECC paid-for services

Place Services, an environmental consultancy and part of ECC, supports public sector organisations deliver sustainable development by offering landscape design, including advice and wider services to schools.

Essex Outdoors, a part of ECC, have a long-standing commitment to outdoor learning and offer their services to schools with woodland on site or nearby. They played a leading role in the development of Forest Schools within Essex and are active members of the **Forest School Association** and **Essex Learning Outside the Classroom forum**.

Equipment and kit offers

- Schools are eligible for **subsidised compost bins and water butts** (schools should use the household link and enter their postcode).
- Engaging, accessible on-line resources to support with **composting are available from Love Essex**.
- Sustainability Kits can be 'won' by schools including seed starter kits, wheelbarrows, composters, and environmental books from winter 2025. Users of the **Carbon Cutting Essex App** vote for a school to win (using their points). Interested schools are invited to **register here** to take part.

3.2 Key national organisations and networks

National Education Nature Park, funded by the Department for Education, is a free scheme supporting students to map the school grounds, record biodiversity and identify actions to improve them, for example, by building habitats, raingardens, or ponds. Curriculum materials and skills development webinars for both teachers and students are provided. Also see **Section 1** and **STAGE 1.3**.

The National Education Nature Park's extensive resources for schools include a '**Finding Funding**' page, signposting schools to grant funding, free trees, volunteering support, curriculum resources and more.

Woodland Trust offer **free trees for schools** each year. Deliveries are in March and November with application deadlines several months in advance. Support with applications and planting may be available from ECC – find out more from **environment@essex.gov.uk** or via the **School Grounds Advice Clinics**.

Learning though Landscapes have extensive experience of working in school grounds and will be offering **Local School Nature Grants** again in Spring 2026; last year funding was available to cover outdoor training for school staff, webinars, a Climate Curriculum Kit and outdoor equipment.

Essex Local Nature Partnership Community Fund 2025 aims to empower local communities to take action. Schools can apply for grants to support nature-based projects that align with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy – see **STAGE 1.5**.

RHS Campaign for School Gardening offers a wealth of support, free resources, curriculum materials and teacher training to get schools started with gardening, food growing and composting throughout the year.

Essex Wildlife Trust provide an extensive array of **on-line resources** to inspire and help schools attract and support wildlife on their site, including hedgehogs, pondlife, butterflies and much more.

3.3 School supporters and the local community

Practical help, sponsorship and funding can be sought from trustees, governors, parent and teacher associations, with projects in the school grounds of particular interest to local businesses, as well as community groups, and suppliers.

Where projects in school grounds are co-designed to serve both students and the wider community, they are more likely to attract a wider range of funding and longer-term support - for example, up to £20,000 grant funding can be applied for from **National Lottery Awards for All England – Environment | The National Lottery Community Fund**.

Providing community access to inspiring spaces in the school grounds may also offer potential for income generation. **Active Essex** provides useful case studies and good practice to support schools build relationships with local partners and community groups in **Opening Schools Facilities**.

Wider ‘Climate Action Planning’ in Essex schools

The Department for Education (DfE) has set a clear expectation that all schools have a **Sustainability Lead and Climate Action Plan (CAP)** in place to address:

- **A**daptation
- **B**iodiversity
- **C**urriculum, **C**areers, and
- **D**ecarbonisation

ECC is working with the **Association of Secondary Headteachers in Essex (ASHE)** to support school leaders manage the DfE ask by providing targeted, streamlined advice and easy access to guidance.

A joint **ASHE/ ECC Secondary Sustainability Lead Network** meets termly. Further details on how to register via ASHE, plus meeting dates, can be found under **Sustainability Lead Support | Essex Schools Infolink**.

Resources for Sustainability Leads from ECC and partners can be found on **Climate and sustainability | Essex Schools Infolink** including links to training and information across a range of **topic areas for climate action**.

A copy of this guide, updates and new offers, as well as more information on ECC’s School Grounds Advice Clinic, can be found on **Developing school grounds | Essex Schools Infolink**.

In supporting schools to develop their grounds, ECC is working closely with the DfE funded **National Education Nature Park**, mentioned throughout this guide, and the **Climate Ambassadors scheme** which can connect schools to climate and environmental sustainability volunteers specialising in this area. Essex schools are encouraged to register with both to access support.

Glossary

Bark-covered surfaces – increasingly popular in areas of high footfall, these are an alternative to tarmac, paving and other artificial surfaces, including in areas where grass has been worn-away; they allow infiltration whilst helping reduce soil compaction, and also bring biophilic benefits (see below).

Biodiversity - the variety of all living things in an area, including all plants and animals, as well as the places and spaces in which they live.

Biophilic design - an architectural approach that integrates light and nature into the built environment to create spaces that improve mood, reduce stress, and improve cognitive function. When planting options are limited, even the use of wood, or mimicking nature in artificial ways has been shown to have a positive impact e.g. use of murals, bark flooring, logs, and water features.

Climate adaptation and resilience – though different in meaning, the terms are often used interchangeably; adaptation in this context is about changing to better survive in a new environment (i.e. locally higher average summer temperatures, milder winters and changing rainfall patterns) whereas resilience describes having capacity or ability to anticipate, cope with and recover from shocks (e.g. flood events/ drought) in a timely and efficient manner.

Drought-resistant gardening – planting choice and techniques that minimise water demand and maximum water retention, becoming increasingly important as our climate changes, particularly in the south of Britain.

Green infrastructure – a network of green spaces which conserve wildlife and natural ecosystem functions (e.g. natural flood risk mitigation), sustain clean water and air, and provide a wide array of benefits to people and wildlife. This includes parks, open spaces, woodlands, rivers, allotments, and school grounds.

Green Skills - knowledge, experience, values, attitudes, and abilities that range from supporting carbon reduction through to working with the natural environment, to increase climate adaptation and resilience.

Green walls – range in form from climbing plants on fences and trellises, with vines rooted in the ground or planters, through to higher-cost living wall systems where plants are artificially supported and irrigated; in addition to supporting engagement with nature and pollinators (dependent on planting), structures provide shade and cooling benefits, privacy, and importantly, if next to a road, can improve air quality.

'Grey to green' - the process of transforming outdoor space from areas dominated by concrete and asphalt into spaces with more nature and vegetation (and which also reduce flood-risk by being permeable). This may be through large scale removal, however, removal of small areas of tarmac to enable planting is becoming more common; specialist advice and permission of landlord is advised. Raised beds can also be beneficial though may require more watering, depending on design; SuDS planters (see below) can be a low-maintenance solution.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) - a new, statutory, system of spatial strategies that must establish priorities across England for various habitats, and map proposals for actions to drive their recovery and provide wider environmental benefits.

Natural Flood Management (NFM) – reducing flood-risk by utilising nature to increase water storage and slow the rate at which water runs through a system.

Nature recovery – actions aiming to restore and enhance natural habitats and ecosystems to increase biodiversity, improve ecosystem services, and strengthen ecological resilience.

Outdoor education – learning that supports personal development by using nature as a dynamic classroom that supports hands-on experiences. Evidenced benefits include physical health, mental wellbeing, social skills, and critical thinking. Outdoor education in a forest setting, 'forest school' and bushcraft involve similar activities, with differences in delivery and outcomes relating more to students' age, size of the group, practitioner expertise and depth of engagement/ period over which engagement happens.

Sensory planting - designing an outdoor space to improve wellbeing by appealing to all five senses - sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. Different plant textures, fragrances, colours, and sounds, and water features, provide an engaging space, designed for interaction. Additionally, individuals with special educational needs, including autism, benefit from being able to explore multiple senses in an environment that feels safe and soothing. There is no set approach and elements of sensory planting can be incorporated into any area.

SuDS planters – located next to school buildings, they are connected to downpipes so rainwater can be collected, stored, and used by the plants; designed with various layers of gravel and soil layers, they can be low-maintenance in terms of plant care.

Sustainability - a characteristic or state whereby the needs of the present and local population can be met without compromising the ability of future generations or populations in other locations to meet their needs.

Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) - interventions to manage surface water that take account of water quantity (flooding), water quality (pollution) biodiversity (wildlife and plants) and an area's use as a natural amenity. These include ponds, swales (see below) and 'SuDS planters' (see above). Green rooves are also a SuDS solution but are not considered in this Guide.

Swale – a SuDS intervention that takes the form of a shallow ditch (flat base and gently sloping sides), designed to store, transport and absorb runoff. It can be planted with grass or other species.

Water Scarcity - a relative concept, which refers to the amount of water that can be physically accessed as supply and demand changes. Water scarcity intensifies as demand increases and/ or as water supply is affected by decreasing quantity or quality.

Shelter solutions – where there is no natural shade from trees, or those being planted are not yet mature enough to provide this during hot summer months, simple, cost-effective solutions can be found in the outdoor education sector (e.g. use of sails/tarps tensioned between posts) and home garden retail sector (e.g. roll-out blinds on the side of buildings); if also waterproof, use of outdoor spaces can be planned for more confidently by teachers.

Willow - trees that are fast-growing, and thrive in damp soil, near water. They are hugely diverse in size, stem colour and foliage and may have catkins. Most willow trees are quick and easy to grow and are very hardy. Sculptures can be created with the branches (or withies) e.g. figures, hedges, bowers, dens, arbours and walkways.

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