

(6) ACTION on Grounds

All schools have grounds. It is estimated that the grounds of the approximately 24000 schools in England make up an area around twice the size of the Isle of Wight. Individually, these might be quite expansive, with substantial green space within the school fence, or limited, with no green space at all. Whatever space you have, however, there are things that you can do with your grounds to contribute to your action against climate change. Some of these actions are about raising appreciation of nature in the minds of pupils and adults in order to motivate them to take action against the threat that climate change presents to our natural world. Others can have a direct positive impact, particularly if many schools take action together.



ACTION 1 → Engage with the NATIONAL EDUCATION NATURE PARK



National Education
Nature Park and
Climate Action Awards

Its aim is “*to empower children and young people to make a positive difference to both their own and nature’s future*”

The [National Education Nature Park](#) was launched in Autumn 2023 as part of the government’s Sustainability & Climate Change Strategy for Education (2022). It is an ambitious project, seeking to create a vast network of spaces, made up of school grounds from all over the country, working together to boost nature in education.

These free programmes will provide educators with the resources, support and guidance needed to put nature at the heart of education. Embedding nature across everyday teaching and learning will give every child and young person in England the opportunity to develop a meaningful connection to nature, contribute to nature recovery across the country and build resilience for a changing world.



Having registered via the website, schools will have access to free guidance and resources that will lead them and their pupils through a process of evaluating their available spaces, identifying and making changes, and then recording the impact of these changes. These changes by schools across the country, when taken as a whole, will:

- deliver improvements in biodiversity
- contribute to the implementation of the nature recovery network
- play a part in halting nature’s decline
- drive greater climate resilience

When pupils develop greater understanding of nature, and through this of the impact that climate change will have, it is hoped that this will create a generation who are passionate about taking action to protect what we have.

The project is in its early stages, but already there are plenty of resources to support schools in getting involved. More resources are promised through the year and beyond.

Alongside this initiative, the government have promised to introduce **Climate Action Awards** to provide national recognition to schools and colleges that have “*brought about change and supported their students in developing green skills, championing nature and working towards a sustainable future.*” This will include schools who have already taken action. These are not yet operational, but you can sign up to a newsletter to stay up to date with developments.



ACTION 2 ➔ **ADAPT YOUR GREEN SPACES**

Most schools do have access to some green space, even if it is limited. How you use these spaces, however, can make all the difference. For many schools these spaces are simply mown grass. Quite apart from the maintenance cost of this, these spaces are a relative desert with regards biodiversity. There is a need to continue to manage some space in this way, for example for sports pitches and some open play spaces. However, some of this space could be used more creatively to increase the biodiversity, interest and educational usefulness of your grounds.

Here are some ideas:

- **Allow spaces to simply grow up on their own** – There is no real reason for all your green spaces looking ‘neat and tidy’. In fact, allowing nature to do her own thing is much more beneficial environmentally. For example, long grass and the plants that grow up with it encourage much greater biodiversity, in terms of plants and animals. As part of an overall plan, patches of your grounds could be allowed to grow wild in this way. You could even get pupils to chart the changes that this brings over time.
- **Create ‘habitat’ areas** – Another alternative is to specifically create areas to support this increase in biodiversity and encourage particular species. These spaces can include specific planting of trees and/or flowers, elements like log and/or rock piles, ponds etc. Guidance can be found in developing such spaces for example:



- [Encouraging wildlife in your school garden](#) – Royal Horticultural Society ‘School Gardening’ campaign
- [Wildlife areas for schools](#) – Young People’s Trust for the Environment
- [How to help wildlife at school](#) – The Wildlife Trusts



It is worth noting, however, that these sort of spaces do need some management to support their development and keep them at their best. This will be an ongoing commitment, but involving pupils in doing this work might further deepen the impact of these spaces on their understanding and love of nature.

- **Create growing areas** – Research shows that gardening and growing things has beneficial effects on wellbeing. It can also provide an enjoyable form of physical activity, as well as teaching pupils the benefits of hard work and perseverance. Not only this, but taking part in the process of growing things, including the set backs and challenges, can give pupils a much greater understanding of the food they eat and the process of its production. Areas can be set aside for growing vegetables or fruit, with groups or classes given responsibility for managing these spaces over time. If expertise is lacking among staff, it can often be found in the local community. Schools have used experienced gardeners from the local community as volunteers to support this work. And the sense of achievement felt by pupils in eventually eating the produce that they themselves have grown is considerable. The [RHS ‘School Gardening’ project](#) is designed to support schools with this sort of project, including resources, training and an awards scheme.
- **Create a sensory area or reflection space** – Experiencing nature can be hugely beneficial. Areas of your schools grounds could be planted and/or landscaped to enhance this benefit. With careful planting, schools can create a sensory garden for pupils to experience [[RHS – Plants for a Sensory Garden](#)]. Alternatively, an outside area can be developed to create a quiet space in natural surroundings for pupils, encouraging reflection and prayer.



BUT WHAT IF MY SCHOOL HAS NO GREEN SPACE, ONLY PLAYGROUND?

- This does not need to stop you. [Planters, growing boxes and pots](#) can provide a range of opportunities for pupils to grow all kinds of things. Not only this but, if all you have is a tarmac playground, an array of such growing oases can bring your grounds to life in a new way and enhance your school environment. There will be initial investment required to purchase or build these, but the benefits long term will be worth it. Here’s [one idea you could adapt](#) to get you started.

ACTION 3 **PLANT TREES**

This is really a version of Action 2, but one that is worth highlighting. Areas of trees, even if relatively small, can bring great benefits to biodiversity and the environment. What is even better is that the strength and impact of these benefits only increase over time. Planting trees in an area of your school grounds is a long term, visionary act. You and your current pupils will gain some benefits, but you are really helping the pupils of the future, who will benefit from those trees as they mature.

You can get [FREE packs of hedgerow or trees from the Woodland Trust](#). There is also plenty of information and guidance from them to support you. You will need some permissions from the owner of the land (for example, the Diocese, the Local Authority, etc) but it will be worth it for the enhancement this planting can bring long term to your school grounds. And it doesn't need a huge area for such a project. Their 30 sapling packs need just 6-8 metres of double row hedging. So why not create a new copse in your grounds and watch it grow!



ACTION 4 **LEARN OUTDOORS**

It is not just our colleagues in Early Years that tell us what can be gained from learning outdoors. Schools are increasingly catching on to the host of opportunities for using their outdoor spaces to enrich and deepen the learning experiences of their pupils in a wide variety of ways and across curriculum subjects. Below are just some initial ideas of the possibilities for this. However, once this becomes something that is an embedded part of your learning offer, you will find creative teachers coming up with many more. Most importantly, learning outdoors can further develop pupils valuing of nature and outdoor spaces, whilst making them happier, healthier and more determined to protect the natural world they have.

- **Science** – Many elements of the curriculum can be greatly enhanced by first hand learning experiences in the outdoors. For example, looking at real life growing plants rather than diagrams when studying plant structures, searching for actual mini-beasts and their habitats in wild areas of your grounds or looking at the varied properties of natural materials. A useful [free download](#) of ideas for each year group has been produced by Primary Science Education Consultancy
- **Geography** – Your outdoor space is a great place to start the development of pupils' understanding of maps and map making. Simple routes can also be created to support learning about the compass and directions. Outdoor demonstrations of some geographical features, such as soil erosion and river valleys, can be useful.
- **Maths** – The outdoors can be the stimulus for plenty of maths work, giving a concrete grounding to the development of mathematical concepts. There are endless things to count, many shapes to identify, sets to recognise etc. In addition, any form of data handling is enhanced by real life data and the outdoors can provide a rich source of data for this purpose. There are [loads of free ideas for outdoor maths activities](#) on this page from Creative Star Learning.
- **English** – Your grounds can be a brilliant stimulus for writing and speaking, whether that is descriptive writing, poetry, persuasive argument or other forms. Starting with writing about real things can develop the skills to write more effectively in general. For more [ideas for outdoor English](#), follow this link.
- **Art** – Similarly, your grounds can support the teaching of art. Art skills, such as shading and perspective, can be developed from real life examples. Objects and scenes from within your grounds can be used as subjects for art projects. The same picture can be produced more than once, using different media each time to help understand the difference of each. Natural material gathered from your grounds can be used as a medium in producing the art. Follow [this link for some more ideas for outdoor art activities](#).
- **Design Technology** – Important elements in design technology are designing to solve problems and utilising the properties of materials. The process of design, trying ideas and then improving them, is also key to the learning. Design projects outside can serve this learning well. Whether designing a way to get water from one place to another, creating a working catapult or simply building a den, pupils can undertake practical design with real purpose.
- **Physical Education** – Most schools already do games and PE outside at times. However, there are more ways of taking physical exercise. A good session digging soil for the planting bay is a work out for anyone!
- **Modern foreign language** – Your school grounds can be a great source of vocabulary for pupils learning a modern foreign. Signs can remind pupils of the words. Games or trails can be created to help them learn these.

In addition, the outdoors can be a stimulus to get pupils to begin to join words into sentences. “Il y a cinq arbres”. “Les fleurs sont bleues.”

- **Personal development** – The [Forest School](#) approach is now a very popular way of using the outdoor spaces to engage pupils in personal development. You probably won’t have a forest in your grounds, and might not even have trees, but some of the principles of the approach can be adapted to suit what you do have (See [Myth 3](#)). Even if you don’t use a Forest School approach, your outdoor spaces can be used in a variety of ways to provide personal development and team building challenges for your pupils.
- **Wellbeing** – Just being outside, gardening, learning, enjoying nature or just running around, is life enriching and great for the wellbeing of your pupils and the adults who work with them. Increasing time outdoors can be very beneficial to your school community.
- **Climate Change Education** – Your grounds can play a part in this important work. However, how to go about integrating this focus into your curriculum offer will be the focus of [Action Sheet 7: Action on Education](#).



Resources

For schools seeking to integrate outdoor learning into their curriculum in a systematic way, there are a variety of books and resources commercially available, for example the [National Curriculum Outdoors series](#), to support your planning processes. Resources of this kind can be helpful, particularly in looking also at factors beyond the learning ideas, such as rationale and safety considerations.

Developing your grounds as a resource to support learning

Many of the organisations and websites cited have guidance on how you can develop your outside spaces to support the learning and wellbeing of your pupils. There are also organisations, including charities, who specialise in this. For example, [Learning Through Landscapes](#) is a charity set up to *‘inspire and enable positive outdoor experiences through cultural change, and the transformation of school grounds and outdoor community spaces. In so doing, we encourage greater appreciation of the environment and access to nature.’* There is a membership fee to pay, but for members they provide a wide range of support in developing your grounds. They are also involved with a range of climate focused and other projects linked to the use of schools grounds and the outdoors, including [‘Climate Ready School Grounds’](#), [‘Climate School 180’](#), [‘My School My Planet’](#) and [‘Outdoor Classroom Day’](#).