



# Provision for Learning Outdoors for Under 5s

## State of the Nation survey

**Final Report  
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## **About the Early Childhood Forum (ECF)**

The Early Childhood Forum (ECF) [www.earlychildhoodforum.org](http://www.earlychildhoodforum.org) is a coalition of nearly 40 of the key national professional associations, voluntary organisations and interest groups (Early Education, Preschool Learning Alliance, 4 Children, Montessori International Centre, National Association of Headteachers etc.) ECF unites the sector in the common interest for the well-being, learning and development of young children from birth to eight, their families, and the practitioners who work with them.

## **About Learning through Landscapes (LtL)**

Learning through Landscapes <http://www.ltl.org> is the UK charity dedicated to enhancing outdoor learning and play for children. LtL's vision is that every child benefits from stimulating outdoor learning and play in their education.

## State of the Nation survey: Provision for Learning Outdoors for Under 5s

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2015 the national charity Learning through Landscapes (LTL) working with the national Early Childhood Forum (ECF) and other partners, initiated a survey to ‘check in’ with the state of outdoor play in early years in the UK.

The survey had nearly 400 respondents from the sector, and found continued strong support for outdoor play and learning that promotes healthy child development in the early years. Encouragingly, many respondents also reported that they have made improvements in their outdoor provision over recent years. However, the survey also found a wide variation in what children are offered in terms of their statutory entitlement to daily outdoor experiences as part of their core early education provision. Many providers are unsure of what is required, are struggling with inadequate space or in some cases have no outside space at all. The survey responses also identified the need for additional staff training as well as more detailed information for parents, planners and childcare commissioners.

Government funded early years education and childcare is offered through a range of schools and settings, voluntary groups and private provision. Unlike the schools sector however, **there is little guidance and no statutory requirement for the minimum outdoor space per child.** This survey shows that the importance of outdoor space as a key learning and development resource (not simply recreation) is not fully understood by some planners and developers of childcare businesses. **This is of particular concern as the Government rolls out its plans for the expansion of free childcare for working parents from 15 to 30 hours per week** with the potential for growth in the market and expansion of places as a result.

The statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) still requires that **“Providers must provide access to an outdoor play area or, if that is not possible, ensure that outdoor activities are planned and taken on a daily**

**basis” (EYFS 2014 para 3.58).** The survey found a wide variation in what is offered to young children in terms of the entitlement to daily outdoor experience under the EYFS, with many settings struggling with inadequate or insufficient space to provide high quality outdoor learning, and that there may also be a small minority of children who are not getting this entitlement at all.

Ofsted is the regulating body for the EYFS, and whilst there are good case studies on their website (the latest we could find was dated 2012), the survey results suggest that many providers are unsure about what is required, or find it difficult to do so well. There was a particularly strong call from providers for more staff training in this area and also for help with engaging with parents about the importance of outdoor play for young children’s development in all weather!

#### SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ECF and LTL should lobby the government to develop statutory guidance and standards for the provision of publicly funded Early Years and Childcare provision. There should be support for schools, nurseries and pre-schools that do not meet the standard to create a plan to achieve these standards within a given timescale.
2. ECF and LTL should share the findings of this survey with Ofsted and explore what further research would be helpful in relation to regulation of this area of work.
3. ECF and LTL should work with Ofsted to encourage inspectors to consistently ask about and assess teaching and learning outdoors and the entitlement to daily outdoor experiences for children in the EYFS.
4. ECF and LTL should work with Ofsted to create an up to date report on their findings on the quality of provision for Early Years learning outdoors and to develop and publish more guidance for providers.
5. ECF should share the findings of this survey with membership organisations in the sector and ask for feedback and collaboration for further research and in developing responses to the findings.
6. ECF and LTL should work with partners (eg Health) to commission more research on factors which impact on young children’s experiences of outdoor play and learning and its correlation with health and educational outcomes.
7. ECF and LTL should work with training providers to commission a more in-depth study about the quantity and quality of training provided by local authorities and in each local authority area.
8. ECF and LTL should consider working with partners and training providers to develop a menu of locally available and quality assured training courses to meet continuing professional development needs at all levels.
9. LTL and ECF should work with partners to develop information for parents and staff working in early years about the importance of daily outdoor play and learning for young children’s healthy development.

10. ECF and LTL should work with SENSE (reference their inquiry launched in September 2015) and other relevant organisations to consider more specifically the needs of disabled children and their access to outdoor experiences within the EYFS

## **State of the Nation survey: Provision for Learning Outdoors for Under 5s FULL REPORT**

### **BACKGROUND**

In July 2015 the national charity Learning through Landscapes (LTL) working with the national Early Childhood Forum (ECF) and other partners, initiated a survey to ‘check in’ with the state of outdoor play in early years in the UK.

A long tradition in nursery education in the UK, backed up by a wealth of contemporary research, shows that getting outdoors is important for the healthy development, wellbeing and early learning of all children. But ECF and LTL together with Early Education and other partners shared a concern that the ‘daily outdoor experiences’ enshrined in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) may no longer be seen as a priority by early years settings, schools, or indeed by policy makers and politicians.

LTL had heard from providers of examples such as wellington boot storage space being removed to make space for a new literacy corner, doors to the outside being closed rather than left open for children to flow in and out, and staff coming to work with no wet weather gear meaning that the children could not be outside when it rains. They knew of settings where precious outdoor play space has had to be sacrificed to build rooms for additional children, including the funded 2 year olds.

The Early Childhood Forum’s mission is to enable the early years sector to work together to monitor the impact of policies on the ground. The purpose of the survey was to call on all those working with and for young children to provide a clearer picture of the impact of recent policy changes and help identify where we need to work together to improve the provision in the future.

### **METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS**

The aim of the survey was to learn more about what is happening in practice, consider where to focus support and where there are issues that need further investigation or raising with partners, government or other agencies.

The survey was live from June 2015 – October 2015. The main communication about the survey was via members of ECF and its membership organisations and it was incentivised with a prize draw for respondents, with thanks to prize sponsors Early Education, Learning through Landscapes and Muddy Faces.

There were also good leading articles about the survey and its intentions in Nursery World and Teach Nursery and Teach Primary, and the level of responses was very close to 400.

The report was initiated without a budget and therefore the channels used to promote the survey were somewhat limited. This also impacts on the depth and quantity of the data that could be collected and the level of detailed analysis that could be undertaken. Therefore the survey should be considered as an initial measure representing an important voice from the field rather than in-depth academic research.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The scope of the survey did not permit more detailed drilling into other areas of interest such as the needs of disabled children and those with special educational needs, for whom access to outdoors is often more restricted. During the data collection and analysis we became aware that further research would be useful to drill down into providers understanding about entitlement and regulation of the EYFS in respect of outdoor play and learning, and to work with partners in health about links with outcomes for physical development and health priorities and objectives.

- ECF should share the findings with membership organisations in the sector and ask for feedback and collaboration for further research and in developing responses to the findings.
- ECF and LTL should share the findings of this report with Ofsted and explore what further research would be helpful in relation to regulation of this area of early years provision.
- ECF and LTL should work with SENSE (reference their inquiry launched in September 2015) and other relevant organisations to consider more

specifically the needs of disabled children and their access to outdoor experiences within the EYFS.

## FINDINGS

### Who responded to the survey?

There were a total 393 respondents to the survey, and 83% of these (325) were practitioners working directly with children in a setting. The occupational breakdown of the largest groups of respondents is:

| Group of respondents                       | % of respondents | Number of respondents |
|--|------------------|-----------------------|
| Early years practitioners                  | 32%              | 127                   |
| Managers/leaders of an early years setting | 36%              | 143                   |
| Owners of a childcare business             | 9%               | 35                    |

The remaining respondents included school governors, advisory teachers or consultants, childminders, childcare lecturers, researchers and parents.

We asked what age range of children they worked with, and the option of multiple answers if they worked with more than one age group. The breakdown of responses is:

| Age group                | % of all respondents | Number of respondents |
|--------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Children aged 3 - 5      | 84%                  | 334                   |
| Children from Birth to 3 | 50%                  | 198                   |
| Children aged 5 +        | 28%                  | 110                   |

### Outdoor space to play and learn – getting better or getting worse?

Of the 325 people who work directly with children we asked whether their school or setting had a dedicated outdoor space to play and learn. 97% (316) of respondents said yes but 3% (9) of respondents did not have any

outdoor space and had to use local parks etc. to provide the children in their care with the required daily outdoor experiences.

85% (265) of those with a dedicated outdoor space confirmed that the space is adequate for the number of children but 15% (46) of respondents said it is not. The reasons for this were a mixture of limited space or shared space use.

- *“It does not have a sufficient grass area or trees and is not big enough to create this space. It is part of a church hall”*
- *“Too restrictive, doesn't allow children enough space to explore”.*
- *“Its very small and no grass at all.”*
- *“Our outside play space is underneath our building and not large enough for the size of our setting”*

Some said restrictions limited the number of children who could go out at any one time:

- *“We can only have 6 - 8 children in the garden at one time yet 18 are in attendance at each session”*
- *“Due to planning regulations there is a limit to the number of children that can be outside at any given time”*
- *“Small courtyard, managed by taking smaller groups of children out.”*

One quoted the growth in funded two-year-old places as putting pressure on outdoor space

*“We now have more 2 year olds who NEED lots of outdoor space”*

We asked those that do have a dedicated space whether it has increased or decreased over the last 10 years and the responses were as follows:

| <b>The outside space over the last 10 years has:</b> | <b>% of respondents</b> | <b>Number of respondents</b> |
|--|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| Increased  | 39%                     | 120                          |
| Decreased  | 6%                      | 17                           |
| Stayed the same                                      | 55%                     | 168                          |

Of those that said their outdoor space had decreased, the reasons were related to pressure on places, having to share with new provision or create more rooms for 2 year olds places.

When we asked whether resources for outdoor play had improved, the feedback was as follows:

| Outdoor resources have: | % of respondents | Number of respondents |
|-------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Improved                | 80%              | 246                   |
| Not improved            | 15%              | 47                    |
| Not sure                | 5%               | 14                    |

We asked about free flow play and whether children can access the outdoors throughout the session, independently of an adult. 235 (76%) responded yes and 23% (70) responded no.

### **Those without dedicated outdoor provision**

We asked the 9 respondents who had no dedicated outdoor space whether they were able to take all children out everyday. 66% (6) of these said yes and 22% (2) said no. Of the two that did not take children out every day one cited the weather as a reason for not going out and the other cited Health and Safety - '*no safe place to take them*'.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

It is encouraging to note that most practitioners feel that opportunities for outdoor play and learning are improving for children in their provision. It is of great concern however, that for a small number of children the entitlement to daily outdoor experiences is restricted, decreasing, or in some cases non-existent. With an expected increase in the Government funded childcare places for 3 to 5 year olds over the next few years, it is timely for ECF and LTL to lobby the government to re-look at its standards and guidance for outdoor provision to ensure that standards are not eroded, but that they are further developed and sustained.

- ECF and LTL should work with partners to commission more research on factors which impact on young children's opportunities for and

experiences of outdoor play and learning and its correlation with health and educational outcomes.

- ECF and LTL should lobby the government to develop statutory guidance and standards for the provision of publicly funded Early Years and Childcare provision. There should be support for schools, nurseries and pre-schools that do not meet the standard to create a plan to achieve these standards within a given timescale.

### **How important is outdoor play and learning for young children and what gets in the way?**

We asked all respondents to rate the importance of outdoor play for early childhood development. 96% (366) agreed that outdoor play was 'very important' with 3% (11) thinking its 'quite important' and just one respondent choosing 'optional extra'

We asked what gets in the way of spending as much time as possible learning outdoors, and respondents cited the following (with some of the illustrative comments included):

- **Health and Safety Concerns 33% (124)**

*"not enough staff once accidents happen"*

*"we had Ofsted giving us bad marks because of a ladder"*

Several also commented on the need to maintain staff ratios and pressures on staffing to ensure adequate supervision

- **Inadequate quality of resources for use outdoors 31% (118)**
- **Negative parental attitudes to outdoor play and learning 26% (99)**

*"If the weather is bad many children choose to stay inside because that is what their parents say to them before they come in.*

*"Parents often complain their children get 'dirty' if they go outside"*

- **Lack of sufficient outdoor space 18% (70)**

*"We are in a church hall outdoor area not easily accessible for children"*

*"We don't have free flow access due to the position of the garden, at the back of the building and the ratio staff/children."*

*"Constraints of using a multi use hall...difficult to develop a mud kitchen on a lawn to be used for a wedding at the weekend"*

- **Lack of appropriate training and development for staff 31% (116)**

*"unwillingness of staff to engage outside in the way they do inside"*

*"Lack of positive attitude from staff"*

*"(the child) being blind makes parents and staff nervous"*

*"In my experience it is more often the staff who do not want to go outside rather than the children."*

*"negative attitudes from both, (staff and parents ) however we are very much an outdoor learning provision"*

*"More staff need to understand the benefits"*

- **Education and care policies and regulation that take focus away from outdoors 26% (100)**

*"For us time not enough to fit everything in"*

*"Literacy numeracy work"*

Many also cited the weather as the main obstacle to spending as much time as possible learning and playing outdoors, for example:

- *"Northumberland temperatures even in suitable clothing"*
- *"Children not coming adequately dressed - too cold/wet outside for their clothing, or parents complaining about mud on clothes."*
- *"We can't afford to supply waterproofs and wellies for all our children"*
- *"the howling wind and rain in Scotland"*
- *"Mostly the weather"*
- *"Parents sending children with unsuitable clothing"*
- *"Weather/ mud on clothing"*

- *"the weather is a factor, whilst we do go out regardless of the weather it does hamper a lot of activities and amount of time spend outdoors"*

### **Conclusions and Recommendations:**

Despite a long tradition of outdoor play in early years provision in the UK, parental and staff attitudes seem to be major barriers, particularly in relation to the weather.

Responses suggest that some staff are unsure about what is required by the EYFS, what is possible and what is suitable. Attitudes and understanding of staff and also parents seem to be a major barrier.

- LTL and ECF should work with partners to develop information for parents and staff working in early years about the importance of daily outdoor play and learning for young children's healthy development whatever the weather.
- ECF and LTL should work with Ofsted to create an up to date report on their findings in this area, and to develop and publish guidance and more recent examples of best practice.
- ECF and LTL should work with Ofsted to encourage inspectors to consistently ask about and assess teaching and learning outdoors and the entitlement to daily outdoor experiences for children in the EYFS.

### **More about Staff training in working outdoors**

41% (156) of respondents confirmed that they had some dedicated training in working with children outdoors in the last year, whilst 54% did not have any.

Of those who responded that they had done training in the last year the majority cited Forest Schools training. The answers did not make clear why Forest School training was chosen by so many.

Some responses suggested that the training was introductory only

*"all staff had an introduction to Forest Schools training 3 years ago",*

*"Cluster of schools did a teacher training day with a Forest Schools provider"*

Other national providers of training on outdoor learning and play mentioned in the survey were Learning through Landscapes (Grounds for Learning in Scotland), Early Excellence, Mindstretchers Online, Montessori International

and Creative Star. A few respondents mentioned Local Authority courses or in-house courses.

Comments from people who did not attend any training included  
*“Not yet but keen to do so”,*  
*“discussion has taken place within meetings”, etc.*

### Conclusions and Recommendations:

The survey responses do not give a clear enough picture, and suggest that more information is needed about the quality and quantity of training on outdoor learning and play available to early years practitioners by local authority area.

- LTL and ECF should work with training providers to commission a more in-depth study about the quantity and quality of training provided by Local Authorities or commissioned within each local authority area
- LTL and ECF should consider working with partners including local authorities and training providers to develop a menu of locally available and quality assured training courses to meet continuing professional development needs at all levels.

### What should Leaders, Managers and Governors prioritise?

We asked respondents if they could make just one recommendation to their management about outdoor play and learning in their school or setting, what would it be?

| <b>Respondents' own recommendations:</b>   | <b>% of respondents</b> | <b>Number of respondents</b> |
|--|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| Staff need more training and ideas in outdoor play and learning  | 22%                     | 82                           |
| We need to re-design our outdoor space and make improvement to layout  | 16%                     | 60                           |
| We need to prioritise better resources for outdoor play and learning   | 15%                     | 56                           |
| We need training and information for parents about the health and learning benefits of outdoor play whatever the weather | 15%                     | 50                           |

|  |     |    |
|--|-----|----|
| We need to change the way staff are deployed to make it easier for children to access high quality outdoor provision | 10% | 37 |
| We need to make it a key selection criteria of new staff that they enjoy working outdoors                            | 9%  | 34 |
| Other  | 28% |    |

The ‘other’ comments referred to frustrations about the lack of capacity to deal with the physical limitations of the outdoor space available within the setting and how it can be used. Some mentioned the need for cultural and pedagogical shifts in attitude:

- *“We would like to acquire more space, but the only possible space available is a small side road and we will have to seek permission from the highways if this was to happen!!”*
- *“Change society’s attitude to what a child’s play space should look like. Any group hiring premises that are used by other groups suffer huge problems when trying to return environment to look like municipal gardens after a morning of mud kitchens and forest school activity”*
- *“Less focus needs to be placed on small group work like maths. Children should be given more time to select themselves what they would like to do and not be adult-led. The children seem to be very young and the Nursery provision is becoming more like school.”*

### **What policy changes would help?**

We asked respondents what they would like ECF and LTL to campaign on that would help improve early years’ provision outdoors. They were able to tick multiple boxes for this question.

| <b>Respondents own suggestions:</b>   | <b>% of respondents</b> | <b>Number of respondents</b> |
|---|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| Need funding for training and the development of staff  | 52%                     | 192                          |
| A strengthening of the requirements for minimum outdoor play space for all early years and childcare settings | 40%                     | 149                          |
| More support to persuade local authorities, planners and architects to prioritise the high                    | 38%                     | 140                          |

|  |     |     |
|--|-----|-----|
| quality design and build of provision  |     |     |
| More public information for parents and policy makers about the evidence for the benefits of outdoor play for young children's development | 36% | 132 |
| Would like to see more protection of greenspace within communities for children's play and learning  | 31% | 113 |

Additional comments and requests for policy change included:

- *"Access to outdoor play for children with SEN and disabilities"*
- *"Outdoor play to feature more significantly in the Statutory Framework (EYFS) and therefore in inspection criteria"*
- *"I strongly think that no early years setting should open without access to an outdoor space, no matter its size!! Especially in urban places such as London, children need to see the sky and get the opportunity to observe their environment!"*
- *"We have partaken in a huge amount of research. This has proved beyond any doubt the Massive impact that the outdoors can have on all areas of a child's development. It is also a vital contribution towards staff wellbeing!!"*
- *"Stressing that young children should be free to chose what they would like to do. Less pressure for adult-led activities and formal learning at such a young age."*
- *"Promoting outdoor nurseries and their benefits"*
- *"it helpful for outdoor play to be statutory in the curriculum"*

One comment however was against any additional regulation and quoted:

*"No more strengthening requirements for minimum outdoor play space please. It will just put even more pressure on settings to comply with more regulations. Most of us do the best we can, with the facilities we have. We don't need more regulation!!!"*

### **Other Support Needed**

We asked what other support is needed for schools and settings to improve early years education outdoors?

| Respondents additional suggestions:                                       | % of respondents | Number of respondents |
|---|------------------|-----------------------|
| Access to funding to develop the outdoor space                            | 50%              | 183                   |
| Access to high quality training for staff about outdoor play and learning | 26%              | 97                    |
| More ideas for provision for specific age groups                          | 17%              | 64                    |
| More information about designing for high quality play and learning       | 7%               | 25                    |

22 respondents gave other requests for support, included:

- *“create/designate more sites for use with Forest schools or similar programmes.”*
- *“Ofsted to have more specific guidance on inspecting outdoor areas”*
- *“Studies that support and urge administration to consider the importance of outdoor play and laws put in place to require such things nation wide”*
- *“Councils to help and provide the space required”*
- *“share the connections between a positive mental health and being outdoors!”*
- *“I care for mainly under 4's, a lot of babies, what can we do that is safe and enjoyable?”*
- *“Provision for pack away settings”*
- *And one comment that “planning outdoor provision doesn't need to cost money!”*

## OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this survey are quite encouraging for supporters of outdoor provision in early years education and care. 96% (366) of respondents think it

is very important to child development and the work that they do. Many respondents also report that they have made improvements in their outdoor provision over recent years.

However, the responses show that there is a wide variation in what is offered to young children in terms of their daily outdoor experience under the EYFS, with many settings struggling with inadequate or insufficient space to provide high quality outdoor learning and play, with a number of settings not providing outdoor experiences at all.

The Government could helpfully commission more research to obtain more detailed data, including evidence of the needs of particular types of settings or groups. This supported by regulation and clearer standards developed with leaders in outdoor learning would help the sector target its resources and support more effectively.

There is a strong call from the field for more training and funding for training. Staff attitudes as well as parents approach are seen as a major barrier. As the planning of training and development for staff is increasingly removed from local authorities, it is often difficult for schools and settings to access comprehensive information about available quality assured and affordable training. Small settings are unlikely to have the time or purchasing power to research and afford the training they need. The sector needs to work together with local authorities to ensure a more accessible and consistent offer for training and professional development of staff in this area.

Looking to the future the sector also needs to be mindful of the potential impact of the increased entitlement for childcare places to 30 hours for working parents, due to be implemented from 2017. LTL and ECF should highlight the challenges faced by providers, and to lobby the government for statutory guidance and appropriate funding to ensure any capital developments will not have a further impact on restricting access to outdoor space and children's vital early opportunities for play and learning outdoors. The summary of recommendations of this report is listed in Appendix 1.

## APPENDIX 1

### SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ECF and LTL should lobby the government to develop statutory guidance and standards for the provision of publicly funded Early Years and Childcare provision. There should be support for schools, nurseries and pre-schools that do not meet the standard to create a plan to achieve these standards within a given timescale
2. ECF and LTL should share the findings of this survey with Ofsted and explore what further research would be helpful in relation to regulation of this area of work.
3. ECF and LTL should work with Ofsted to encourage inspectors to consistently ask about and assess teaching and learning outdoors and the entitlement to daily outdoor experiences for children in the EYFS.
4. ECF and LTL should work with Ofsted to create an up to date report on their findings on the quality of provision for Early Years learning outdoors and to develop and publish more guidance for providers.
5. ECF should share the findings of this survey with membership organisations in the sector and ask for feedback and collaboration for further research and in developing responses to the findings.
6. ECF and LTL should work with partners, including in Health, to commission more research on factors which impact on young children's experiences of outdoor play and learning and its correlation with health and educational outcomes.
7. ECF and LTL should work with training providers to commission a more in-depth study about the quantity and quality of training provided by local authorities and in each local authority area.
8. ECF and LTL should consider working with partners and training providers to develop a menu of locally available and quality assured training courses to meet continuing professional development needs at all levels.
9. LTL and ECF should work with partners (eg Health) to develop information for parents and staff working in early years about the importance of daily outdoor play and learning for young children's healthy development.
10. ECF and LTL should work with SENSE (reference their inquiry launched in September 2015) and other relevant organisations to consider more specifically the needs of disabled children and their access to outdoor experiences within the EYFS.