

# Early Learning and Childcare: Delivering High Quality Play and Learning Environments Outdoors

## Practice Note



The Care Inspectorate has a strong desire to support innovative models of early learning and childcare. In partnership with Scottish Government and Scottish Futures Trust we launched [“Space to Grow – Design guidance for early learning and childcare and out of school care settings”](#) in June 2017. This online resource promotes the adoption of good design principles which contribute to high quality and stimulating care and learning environments that support all children no matter what their individual needs are.

Space to Grow aims to maximise the positive experiences for children by encouraging providers to think innovatively and flexibly about the design, and the impact the internal and external environment can have on the quality of the child’s care and learning experience. The new **Health and Social Care Standards** outline what children and families can expect from settings and how the experiences of children are focused on high quality outcomes. The Care Inspectorate are working with Inspiring Scotland in the development of a “How To” Guide which will provide support and guidance to providers developing and accessing outdoor space for children.

The expansion of early learning and childcare to 1140 hours aims to provide high quality care and learning experiences for all 3 and 4 year olds and eligible 2 year olds by 2020. This expansion of high quality early learning and childcare experiences for Scotland’s children will play a vital role in delivering the national outcomes and making Scotland the best place it can be for children to grow up.

All early learning and childcare settings are registered by the Care Inspectorate under the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 (the “Act”). Schedule 12 of the Act outlines the characteristics of a “daycare of children’s service” as a service that consists of any form of care provided for children, on premises other than domestic premises. To support providers to consider new models of early learning and childcare we have developed some descriptions of settings using the outdoors as part of their space for registered numbers of children. It is important to emphasise this is not an exhaustive list but has taken into consideration existing models of delivery and some innovative and emerging models of early learning and childcare. It is intended these descriptions will support providers when considering development of provision.

During this period of expansion the Care Inspectorate will work closely to support the sector. Our registration team will have a key role in encouraging and guiding providers to develop high quality environments that meet the needs of children and their families. Whether we are working with a provider registering a new setting or undertaking a variation to increase the number of places or extend the age range of children, our registrations team’s assessment of applications will continue to be based on how well individual children and family’s needs will be met through high quality provision and supporting new delivery models and not constrained by conventional approaches.

The Health and Social Care Standards state; “As a child, I play outdoors every day and regularly explore a natural environment”. Traditionally early learning and childcare settings have been premises based with an outdoor play area, however in recent years there

have been an increasing number of outdoor settings or forest kindergartens registered with the Care Inspectorate. These outdoor settings enable children to experience their care and learning in a different way as all of their session is spent outdoors in a natural environment. As new and innovative models of early learning and childcare develop there will be learning for everyone involved; scrutiny bodies, providers, policy makers and commissioners. Some of the new models developing place a greater emphasis on children spending some or all of their session in a high quality outdoor environment and the Care Inspectorate is responsive to supporting children have greater access to outdoor settings.

**Space to Grow** for the first time acknowledged that early learning and childcare will not be solely indoor or outdoor provision but may well be a combination of both with an indoor/outdoor setting. In addition in taking forward the expansion of early learning and childcare and delivering on its 2020 vision, Scottish Government invited local authorities to devise and submit for trial, new delivery models that would not compromise on the quality of experience, would deliver positive outcomes for children, and ensure excellence and equity in the sector. Through the trials a further model of using the indoor/outdoor experience using two distinct, physically separate locations was piloted.

To date four different approaches for the delivery of early learning childcare environments have emerged and the Care Inspectorate will continue to support further innovative models of early learning and childcare. When considering your approach in your setting the following should assist you in considering the setting you are offering or are planning to offer to parents and children:

**Indoor setting** – This is the more traditional model of provision where the number of registered places will be calculated on the play and learning space available to children in the physical building as detailed in appendix one of Space to Grow. However these settings will have adequate outdoor space that enables children to freely access indoor and outdoor play and learning opportunities every day during their session. These indoor settings will also have access to outdoor areas and community facilities such as libraries, sports centres, parks, beaches and woods for children on a regular basis.

**Outdoor setting** – This model of setting has developed over recent years and can sometimes be referred to as a forest nursery or kindergarten. In these settings children are outdoors all of the time except in extreme weather conditions. Children and staff will have access to a sheltered area this could be a permanent or temporary structure. There may also be a meeting point, premises or a base camp used for the drop off and collection of children. These settings will have a comprehensive contingency plan which has been articulated and agreed with parents in the rare occasion where severe weather conditions prevent children from being outside.

NB: The terms forest nursery or forest kindergarten are not exclusively used for outdoors settings.

**Dispersed setting** – This model is where there is an outdoor satellite space not adjacent to the premises registered as part of the Setting. This might be a forest, park or other outdoor space and can be within walking distance of the building setting or further afield. The setting is run by a single provider, manager and one overall staff team. This model involves children spending some of their time at the indoors setting and some at the outdoors setting ie a split placement between indoors and outdoors. Parents must be aware that the agreement is to their child receiving their early learning and childcare in dual locations and their contract with the setting must reflect this. The dual location supports children to have indoor and outdoor experience. The outdoors elements of these settings will mirror the outdoor or forest kindergarten settings and the provider will need to have plans in place for shelter, toilets, hygiene, resources, and transport arrangements for children moving between the locations. Consideration needs to be given to contingency arrangements if on a rare occasion children cannot access the outdoor setting.

If over the sessions different staff groups are involved in the provision of the indoor and outdoor settings, the provider needs to have systems in place for the sharing of information and the development of the child's personal plan fully considering how staff would effectively liaise to share information/experiences/learning for the children/staff development and support/supervision.

**Indoor/outdoor setting** – This model is as an indoor setting but where the scale and quality of the outdoor space is appropriate for enhancing the child's quality of play and learning experiences and is suitable to register additional capacity and high quality natural outdoor spaces when combined with the indoor space. Settings looking to expand capacity to provide an indoor/outdoor setting must use the information in Space to Grow as a guide to what they need to consider i.e. freeflow access indoors and outdoors; suitability and (naturalistic) quality of outdoor space; aims and objectives of the setting; staff skills, knowledge and experience; sufficient toilets accessible to children – full details are set out in Space to Grow.

An indoor/outdoor setting will take account of the outdoor practice of an outdoor kindergarten or forest setting and combine this with a high quality indoor experience. An indoor/outdoor setting is not a traditional setting using their outdoor space to raise the numbers of children. **Both indoor and outdoor areas will be accessible to children 100% of the operational time.**

There are a number of providers considering use of their outdoor play space as capacity for additional children– outdoor space will only be considered as additional when it is a combined environment, naturalistic and extensive. It is not anticipated many existing settings will be able to benefit from this model given in the majority of settings the outdoor space is already limited to providing outdoor experiences for the number of children currently registered.

Space to Grow says: If a setting wishes to maximise the outdoor space to increase the number of children, the following elements should be considered to support the provision of indoor/outdoor settings.

- Do the aims and objectives of your service clearly reflect both indoor and outdoor experiences?
- Have parents been be involved and consulted in the development of the service to enable staff to share the positive effects on health and wellbeing of children of being outdoors?
- Have children been consulted and supported to provide ideas for the environment?
- Do you have a comprehensive proposal on how the outdoor space will be used every day?
- Have you given careful consideration to the opportunities and experiences that will be available outside to compliment indoors experiences?
- Do the staff team understand the value and ethos of outdoor learning?
- Are staff motivated and enthusiastic and do they have appropriate training to provide children with a range of learning experiences both indoors and outdoors?
- How can the outdoor space be directly accessed from the playroom?
- Are children able to go outside independently when they choose to?
- Will staff be suitably deployed to enable children to use both indoor and outdoor space?
- Is the outdoor area as natural as possible, offering a range of different surfaces, a stimulating environment which promotes challenges and provides elements of risk for children to manage?
- Is there a suitable sheltered area to enable children to access outdoor space in all weathers either fixed or of a temporary nature?
- Is there a variety of different areas to allow children to have quiet time, have space to play alone, with small or large groups?
- Are resources suitable to an outdoor learning environment and to encourage active play?
- Is there easy access to toilets, hand hygiene and to changing facilities where changing facilities are appropriate?
- Is there appropriate outdoor clothing and footwear which is easily accessible to children and staff?
- Is there suitable storage including storage of used outdoor clothing and footwear?

We hope this practice document assists you in the planning and delivery of your provision in the future. If you would like to discuss any early learning and childcare development you can get assistance calling:

**0345 600 9527** or

Email: [enquiries@careinspectorate.com](mailto:enquiries@careinspectorate.com)