

# School Grounds in Scotland in 2025

## Key Points and Reflections from a 'State of the Nation' Report



Learning  
through  
Landscapes



# Scotland's School Grounds

Throughout the world, it is widely accepted that school grounds have an important role to play in ensuring that schools are environments in which children thrive. Here in Scotland, this importance has been asserted through [Vision 2030+](#), building on the recommendations of the [Learning for Sustainability Report](#), and more recently reasserted through [Target 2030: Learning for Sustainability Action Plan](#).

As an important public space, creating school grounds that facilitate quality play experiences is also consistent with the [Play Vision Statement and Action Plan 2025 to 2030](#). School grounds can afford opportunities for pupils and the wider school community to interact with peers through leisure and play, connect with nature, enhance mental wellbeing and be physically active, and facilitate learning across the curriculum. Is this potential being realised in Scotland today?

## School grounds are at the heart of Scottish policy



## About this work

In early 2025, over 1000 schools in Scotland, including primary, secondary and specialist schools, and those with early years provision, showed how much they value school grounds by responding to a voluntary invitation to share their experiences of using these vital spaces for nature, play, learning, and sport.

Instigated by Learning through Landscapes, NatureScot and Play Scotland, the use and character of grounds was profiled through a comprehensive survey that replicated and developed the [first national survey of school grounds in Scotland](#) which was undertaken in 2005. The survey canvassed Head Teachers (or their nominees) on the character of grounds, access to grounds during and beyond the school day, the ways in which their grounds are a resource, planning and rules, community issues, and improvements.

## About this report

This report highlights some of the key findings from the full report that is free to access from partners websites. We use the 4Cs (Curriculum, Culture, Community and Campus) underpinning the LfS Target 2030 vision on Sustainable Learning Settings to structure these findings. We use a fifth C (Changes) to compare today's school grounds to those of 2005.



# Changes

In the last 20 years, [childhood in Scotland has changed dramatically](#). We also found some significant changes in Scotland's school grounds over the same period, reflecting wider research showing a decline in outdoor learning provision in primary schools. ([Mannion & Ramjan, 2023](#)).

- **A changing estate reduces space for some.** There has been significant change to Scotland's school estate over the last twenty years, with the majority of secondary and special schools reporting significant renovations, extensions or new builds, as well as two-fifths of primary schools. For one-in-seven schools, this has resulted in a loss of school grounds.
- **More diverse, more utility, more use ... but not for all.** Progress can be found. Many schools have more features and area types; primary schools are more likely to acknowledge the utility of grounds as a curriculum learning resource and more schools are reporting using their grounds more often during teaching time. But in many other ways, there has been little change since 2005. Approaching one-half of schools still perceive low utility in their grounds as a resource to support play/leisure and most natural area types are absent from most schools.
- **Becoming less of a priority for improvement planning.** School grounds were less of a priority in school improvements plans of 2025, compared to the development plans of 2005 for primary and secondary schools. Lack of time and lack of money still remain the main barriers to improving grounds. Similarly, most schools reported that they did not have a grounds maintenance policy.



# Key Statistics

## Negative



16% of secondary and 15% of primary schools report that they have lost school grounds to building development in the last 20 years.



## Positive



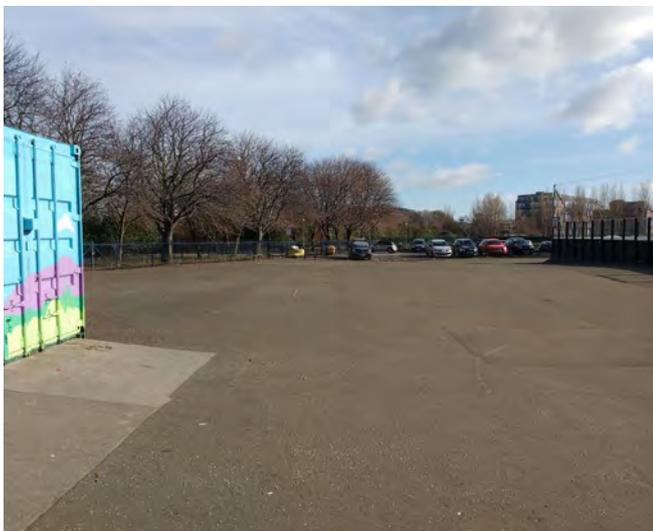
94% of secondary schools have a bike rack/storage area in 2025, compared to 55% in 2005.



60% of special schools now have bird boxes/tables, whereas only 38% did in 2005.



49% of primary schools reported that “all” their pupils were physically active in the playground at breaktime in 2025, compared to 31% in 2005.



# Curriculum

- **Being used.** Almost all schools are using their school grounds to facilitate and support curriculum learning. Most commonly, schools are using their grounds for sport, but there is also widespread use for ‘health and wellbeing’, ‘expressive and creative arts’ and ‘Learning for Sustainability’.
- **Being highly valued, but not by all.** Although more schools rate the utility of their grounds to be “essential”, rather than “not at all useful” for curriculum learning, sport/ physical activity, and play, overall schools are fairly evenly split between those who accord high and low value. In the same assessments, more schools are only likely to rate their grounds as “quite useful”, rather than “very useful”.
- **Scope to be used more.** One-quarter of schools reported that their lack of use in teaching was a problem. More than one-half of secondary schools report using their grounds ‘never’, ‘rarely’ or ‘not very often’ during teaching time for learning other than physical education, as did one-third of primary schools and special schools.



# Key Statistics

## Negative

7%

7% of secondary schools are using their school grounds “very often” or “all the time” during teaching time for learning other than physical education.

31%

31% of secondary schools consider that their grounds are either ‘very useful’ or ‘essential’ as a curriculum learning resource.

43%

43% of primary schools do not consider that their grounds are either ‘very useful’ or ‘essential’ for play.

## Positive

78%

78% of primary schools report that their grounds are being used to support learning in numeracy and mathematics.

82%

82% of secondary schools report that their grounds are being used to support learning in the sciences.

67%

67% of special schools report that their grounds are being used to support Learning for Sustainability.



# Campus

- **Environmental challenges.** Our schools face a changing climate and biodiversity loss. Two-thirds of primary and secondary schools report that environmental issues that need to be managed in the grounds have become more common in the last few years, with high winds and flooding being the most common issues to manage.
- **Most are the right size, but many lack space.** Three-quarters of primary and secondary schools (and two-thirds of special schools) feel that their grounds are “about the right size”. Unfortunately, most of the remainder report that they are “too small”.
- **Diversity of spaces and features, but not always within each school.** In many respects, Scotland’s school grounds are diverse. Across Scotland, schools report having a range of ‘natural’ and ‘built up’ area types on site, and a range of ‘environmental’ and ‘utility’ features. However, individual schools do not generally contain a diverse range of features or area types. For example, in-ground food growing areas are found in ‘only’ two-fifths of primary and secondary schools, and one-third of special schools and other food growing areas are found in ‘only’ one-half of secondary schools, and almost one third of primary and special schools.
- **Demand for more.** A wide range of features are wanted by most schools, with the key asks varying by school type. Similarly, most schools want more ‘natural’ area types.



# Key Statistics

## Negative

34%

34% of primary schools have issues with flooding in the school grounds.

32%

32% of special schools consider that their school grounds are “too small”.

70%

70% of work to improve school grounds in primary schools covers a “small part” of the grounds.

38%

38% of settings have fewer than 5 trees on site.

## Positive

50%

50% of secondary schools have a polytunnel or greenhouse for food growing and 43% have an in-ground area for food growing.

85%

85% of secondary schools would like more ‘environmental’ features in their grounds, such as habitats for wildlife, or nature trails.

36%

36% of work to improve school grounds in primary schools is reported to have the purpose of “enhancing biodiversity”.



# Culture

- **Evidence for an improvement culture.** Four-in-five schools report that they have improved their grounds over the last three years, yet only one-in-ten report that further improvements are planned, most commonly to facilitate outdoor learning and to add social spaces.
- **Evidence against an improvement culture.** School grounds are reported not to feature prominently in school improvement plans (almost half reported that they did not feature at all in their plan) and very few schools report that teachers are using the grounds as part of their professional learning.
- **Involving pupils.** In most cases, pupils took an active role when school grounds were being developed, particularly in primary schools. In primary schools, three-quarters of improvement projects involved pupils at the stage of planning and one-half involved pupils in design work, an example of children's rights in action.



# Key Statistics

## Negative



35% of secondary schools report that their grounds are never used for staff development / professional learning.



Only 7% of secondary schools consider that their grounds are either “main” or “high” priority in their school Improvement plan.



57% of primary schools report restricting access to their school grounds for more than six days per year due to inclement weather.

## Positive



25% of secondary schools report that pupils were involved in initiating school grounds improvements.



# Community

- **Making use of the wider community.** Three-quarters of special schools, one-half of primary schools and one-third of secondary schools report using natural areas for outdoor learning, physical activity or play that are within walking distance of the school.
- **Problems to address.** Most schools identified at least one problem in their grounds. Common problems included maintenance, vandalism and poor drainage.



# Key Statistics

## Negative



36% of secondary schools identify “pupil safety” as one of the problems associated with car parking in and around their school.



Only 11% of primary schools report that their school grounds are open for the use of the local community outside school hours.

## Positive



71% of special schools access natural areas for outdoor learning that are in walking distance within the community.



27% of work to improve school grounds in special schools aims to “add social spaces”.



## Final Thoughts

We were delighted that over 1,000 early years, primary, secondary and additional needs settings participated in this research, underscoring the value that educators place on school grounds. Children and young people spend approximately one-sixth of their school time in outdoor spaces, making these environments a vital part of the school and early years' experience. It is essential that these spaces actively enhance children's daily experiences.

Despite strong intentions, many schools are not fully utilising their grounds for teaching and learning, and very few are using them for staff professional development. Increasingly, schools are turning to off-site facilities for nature-based learning, play, and sports. While this trend is encouraging, it raises important questions about the suitability of school grounds to support these activities. Further research is needed to understand the underlying challenges and opportunities.

The report also highlights persistent barriers—both real and perceived—to creating, adapting, maintaining, and effectively using school grounds for learning and development. Most improvements are modest and initiated at the school level, with limited evidence of broader support or strategic direction from local authority or Government policy. We are particularly concerned about inequities in access to quality outdoor spaces, especially those that support nature connection and climate resilience.

While Scotland's school estate is diverse at a national level, this report shows individual school sites often lack a variety of natural environments, leading to inconsistent experiences for learners. There is significant potential to enrich the natural diversity of school grounds. With many schools reporting environmental challenges, nature-based solutions offer a powerful way to transform these spaces into vibrant, multifunctional environments that support learning, play, and sport every day.

At present, Scotland's learning estate is not fully delivering the breadth of Learning for Sustainability, which encompasses meaningful, authentic, student-led experiences in the outdoors. Although environmental and social policies in Scotland are evolving rapidly, these shifts are not yet reflected in learning estate policy and strategy. There is a real opportunity to align these policies more effectively, delivering an improved experience for all children, young people and educators.





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