

Design of School Grounds Developments

Gabby Nickson

Gabby Nickson is a garden designer and works with Lancashire County Council on school grounds development projects.



I am employed by Lancashire County Council in the Children and Young People Directorate as part of a small team to design and manage projects to develop school grounds. The team works with schools and nurseries across the county designing and implementing landscaping schemes of all sizes.

The development of school grounds is important for several reasons. The Department for Children, Schools and Families has developed National Strategies for the education and development of children at different stages of school life. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is the first of five stages and one of its four principles recognises that the environment plays a key role in supporting children's learning and development. Being outdoors has a positive impact on a child's sense of well-being and offers an opportunity for children to do things in different ways and on a different scale than indoors. It also gives them a connection with the weather, seasons and the natural world. In schools in socially deprived or heavily built up inner city areas this may be the first introduction a child will get to interacting with nature. By creating high quality outdoor play and learning environments the children are given the opportunity and freedom to explore, use their senses and be physically active in a safe and secure environment.

Schools receive funding for improvements for their grounds from many different sources and head teachers have a difficult choice to make at the start of a project; who should they employ to design the scheme, who needs to be consulted and how will the work be carried out? Teaching professionals are busy people and, in my experience, they usually want a service which is all-inclusive. More often than not the schools I work with want a development plan for the site and landscaping contractors are appointed to carry out the work. I mostly work with head teachers or Key Stage leaders and rarely work directly with the children. Working in this way has the benefit that comes with dealing with an individual rather than a group. As the teacher will have the children's best interests and wishes at heart it always works well and the finished schemes are well received.

Each project is different from the last but our portfolio of schemes includes some key types of development; Early Years Foundation Stage play areas, wildlife gardens, outdoor classrooms and agility areas.

Early Years Foundation Stage Play Areas

Many schools are now looking at providing all weather play areas for their Early Years Foundation Stage children (up to age 6). These are intended to be an extension of the classroom environment to the outdoors, and will ideally be sympathetically fenced areas which can be accessed directly from the classroom. The play area should contain as many of the elements which are available indoors as possible, including seating, performance and art areas, sand play, water play and a free play area. A planting area is also usually included and this is sometimes the first time children have the chance to plant and tend their very own garden. Sensory plants are very popular for children of this age and these will include different textures (Stachys, Alchemilla, various grasses), colours (Heuchera, Lavandula, variegated foliage) and aromas

(Rosmarinus, Salvia, Nepeta). Familiar plants are also good to use here as the children will make the connection between the school garden and their own gardens.



Gabby Nickson, 2008



Gabby Nickson, 2009

Photographs of a Foundation Stage Play Area, before work started and at the end of the construction. Brightly coloured rubber safety surfacing with graphics has been laid over the existing flags and tarmac to provide a safe play surface and to brighten and unify the free play area. The existing grass bank has been excavated to a more usable level artificial grass installed to provide a maintenance-free all weather alternative to grass. The raised planting bed at the forefront will be planted and tended by the children.

Wildlife Gardens

Wildlife gardens are very popular amongst Key Stage 2 and 3 children as they can provide an opportunity for science, maths and art lessons to be held outdoors. They can be used as an ecological learning area and will give the children chance to experience wildlife in a safe environment. Pond dipping platforms, vegetable gardens, compost areas and planting to attract wildlife feature heavily in these gardens.



Gabby Nickson, 2009



Gabby Nickson, 2009

This pond development project has enabled the children at the school to learn about science and nature in a safe environment. This is a valuable resource for the school and is also available to other schools and community groups to use. The decking is constructed from recycled plastic and is designed to be used for pond dipping. The bird hide has viewing slots cut out for children of different heights. The hide is open at the back and is large enough to fit an entire class.

Outdoor classrooms

Building classrooms outdoors is an effective way of providing learning opportunities outside the classroom. Out of classroom learning enriches the curriculum, contributes to learners' enjoyment and achievement and is a requirement of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection process. Access to outdoor activities and curriculum development also promotes the ethos of National

Healthy Schools, a government initiative which promotes a whole school/whole child approach to health.



This outdoor classroom is an amphitheatre built into an existing grass bank. There is an area of rubber safety surface at the bottom and the graphics represent a stage for the children to perform from.



This outdoor classroom has detachable shade panels on the top and on some of the sides. It has an all weather flooring so that it can be used all year round and is used for storytelling, performances and lessons by classes of all ages.

Gabby Nickson, 2008

Agility Areas

Agility areas and trails are play areas with a purpose. They are intended to help children to develop skills such as jumping, climbing, balance and co-ordination, but also to encourage problem solving, team work and imaginative play. If an agility trail is designed well it will allow the children to traverse it safely, with some degree of risk and physical challenge. There are many play equipment companies supplying “mix and match” equipment to make up individual areas but the design and installation of these areas requires careful consideration, both to comply with current safety requirements and to ensure that the finished area has long lasting play value.

The Design

Schools rely on the designer to provide a design which works practically, as well as aesthetically, and to supply realistic estimates, which are crucial to secure funding and ensure that the project can be completed. Therefore, it is always worth employing a qualified designer to produce a design with construction drawings, an outline budget and full specifications.

A typical brief for a school garden or play area has to reflect the needs of several different people. The teachers will want the garden to be stimulating and challenging, the governors will want the garden to be visually attractive to encourage prospective parents and the children will want anything and everything to be included! It is tricky, but not impossible, to get the balance right between all of these needs and to provide something which pleases everyone and is also safe and accessible to all.

The design of a school play area should not be too prescriptive. There are many impressive pieces of play equipment on the market, specifically aimed at schools, however, children need to be able to use the equipment in different ways. Early Years Foundation Stage advisors recommend avoiding the use of too many set pieces of equipment, such as boats and play houses and instead recommend building bespoke symbolic structures which could be interpreted by the children in different ways. What is used one day as a stage on which to perform a play may tomorrow become a kitchen to prepare an imaginary healthy meal. Similarly, paths and paving should be designed with this approach in mind so that it can form part of that moment's play. Imagination is very important in the world of children's play and it is vital that the designer

acknowledges this and finds ways in which to meet the brief whilst at the same time satisfying safety requirements and providing an inspirational play area.



Gabby Nickson 2009

These photographs show how a simple hexagonal timber stage in a Key Stage 1 play area has been renovated to give it more play appeal. As well as having a small stage area at the front it now has two rooms at the back with crawl and peep through holes, an artificial grass rug and wooden artwork to decorate the walls.

When designing for schools and other public places it is vital to consider the implications for future maintenance of the finished scheme. It is an important issue, especially in terms of health and safety, and any good designer will advise clients on how to keep the grounds safe as well as tidy. In public places this will mean carrying out regular checks for splinters and shakes in wooden play equipment, damage to rubber crumb safety surfacing, etc. Lancashire County Council offers a regular play equipment inspection service to its schools to identify any potential problems in play areas. In school gardens keeping the area tidy with or for the children is also important as it gives the children ownership of the area and discourages vandalism or damage in the future.

Along with keeping our children fit comes the matter of keeping them healthy. Health and safety is sometimes an unpopular concept but it has its place and should certainly not be overlooked. It is important to identify possible hazards and eliminate the major ones whilst minimising risk of injury from minor ones to give the children the opportunity to learn about the perception of danger in a controlled environment. An occasional fall from a climbing frame is unavoidable, but as long as there is a safe surface to land on there is less chance of injury. A child will always learn from a fall and will take more care at the next attempt. A designer's risk assessment should be completed and signed by the designer and the client to document any potential dangers and confirm that these are the responsibility of the school once the scheme is completed.

It is always advisable to check if a development requires planning permission before starting work. Interpretation of planning regulations is very subjective and varies greatly between councils. Planning applications currently cost around £170 to submit and can be completed electronically on the government's Planning Portal, see www.planningportal.gov.uk. It can be time consuming to complete the application and collect all the required supporting documents, however, if a development goes ahead without permission the planning authority may ask for a retrospective application to be completed. The development may be halted whilst the application is considered and if permission is refused the site may need to be returned to its original state. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that even when there is a presumption against development, for example on land which is designated as "green belt", if very special circumstances can be demonstrated the development may be permitted, even where objections have been received. It is always, therefore, worth discussing the development with a planning officer at a very early stage.

Project Management and Construction

The decision of who should carry out the construction work should also be taken very carefully. Offers of help from willing parents and children are kind, but are not always the best solution. There is more than initially meets the eye to a successful landscaping scheme and it is prudent for the school to employ a project manager and qualified landscape contractors with experience of working with schools. There are several reasons why I recommend this:

Health and Safety

Health and Safety is extremely important on construction sites on school grounds, even if the work is being carried out during school holidays. Qualified and experienced landscape contractors should always be used and they should provide written method statements and risk assessments before starting work to show that they have considered any hazards and resulting risks and taken appropriate action to minimise them. The site should be secured with appropriate safety fencing throughout the work and all tools and equipment taken off site at the end of each day to avoid danger to staff, pupils and members of the public. Also, deliveries of materials to site should not be made at lunch or break times or at the start or end of the school day. Checks should be carried out before work starts to identify any known underground service pipes or cables and further investigations should be made before excavation starts using scanning equipment and careful hand digging of trial holes.

Working with Children (CRB Clearance)

Anyone working with or near children should, ideally, have Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) clearance (enhanced disclosure) and this includes project managers and designers as well as landscaping contractors. A good landscape contractor working regularly with schools will have made arrangements for all permanent staff to be checked.

Groundworks – Changes to Design Agreed on Site

Any large landscaping scheme will be subject to design changes as the project progresses. This is especially true of schemes involving excavation work as what lies under the ground is not always apparent until construction work starts. The decision to make design changes will often need to be made quickly on site to avoid delaying work, which can be costly as well as inconvenient. It is useful to have an experienced project manager, ideally the designer, working on behalf of the school to ensure that the correct decisions are made. It is good practice to include a contingency sum in the agreed budget for the scheme and this should cover any extra work needed to complete the scheme.

Working for local government as a designer and project manager on landscaping schemes in Lancashire's schools and nurseries is a thoroughly rewarding job. It is really important to give our children the opportunity to spend more time outside. A safe outdoor environment is both physically and mentally rewarding for children and by connecting with nature during lessons children will have a greater appreciation for their surroundings. By offering children the chance to take responsibility for their own gardens within school they will learn to respect and nurture their outdoor areas at home now and in the future. By giving them ownership of these areas whilst they are at school they will be less likely to vandalise or tolerate vandalism of public gardens as they grow up.

For further information please contact me by email at info@gardenangel.biz or at Lancashire County Council by email at gabby.nickson@lancashire.gov.uk or telephone 01772 531894.

Other useful information may be found at:-

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