

Project guide – for making the most of your school grounds

Happy By Nature Fund applicant schools must:

- *Commit to completing the project between September 2026 and July 2027*
- *Have a current lack of access to quality outdoor green space*
- *Secure strong internal leadership and strategic support for the project*
- *Offer a whole-school approach to pupil involvement in the project*

Please do not apply for Round 2 funding if you are an English school who has received National Education Nature Park funding since 2019.

Introduction

Throughout this project a Learning through Landscapes (LtL) Project Officer will guide you and your pupils to design and create nature-rich play spaces, helping make your school grounds ‘Happy by Nature’. This will follow a simple structure, which you can find in the toolkit: <https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-10/From-grey-to-green-a-blueprint-for-a-better-playground.pdf>

Along the way you will be able to access resources to inspire your project as well as discover ways nature-based play can grow beyond the school gates. This process will require strategic commitment, time and thought from you and your staff to make sure that the project is a success.

Below is an overview of how the project will work.

- To begin the project your LtL Project Officer will work with you to plan how the project will run in your school. At the same time, you will be supported to find and engage a Landscape Architect locally, who can support with making meaningful, realistic changes to your school grounds for nature-based play.
- They will help you to establish your needs, both within your grounds, but more importantly for your pupils’ development and enjoyment.
- We will work with your pupils and staff to define the aims of your project, and the play experiences you want your pupils to have outside in nature.
- Through a creative, problem-solving stage, you will have the support of both your project officer and your Landscape Architect / designer to define solutions that meet your school’s needs.
- As a team you will decide how those changes are made and how your pupils can be involved with this.
- You will be supported in establishing a budget and finding a suitable contractor to undertake the work.
- You will receive training on how to use the new changes as well as how to maintain them.
- Finally, you can celebrate the changes made and start to think about what comes next for your setting.

The project in more detail

This project is about creating nature-rich play spaces in your school grounds so that your pupils can have more opportunities for natural play. This means they can spend more time in nature and have more lessons outside of the classroom.

We have created Happy by Nature because we believe that school grounds, whether small or large, full of tarmac or with a large school field, are places where children get close to nature. They are places where children play with friends, build relationships with each other and the environment, and where they develop their interests and enthusiasms that can last a lifetime.

Before you start on the project

If you are successful in your application, before you start you will be asked to complete a number of forms. This may include:

- An agreement between the school, WWF and LtL outlining what you will receive as part of the project as well as your commitment to the different aspects of the project.
- Individual photographic permission forms for any child or adult who will be photographed (this will not exclude anyone from taking part in the project, just from being in photographs).
- Evidence of permission from the Head Teacher/Principal and the owner of the land to undertake the project. Further permission for the changes may also be required once plans have been created.

Where are we now and where do we want to be?

Before enrolling on the project, if you are shortlisted you will be contacted by a member of the LtL team to make sure you understand how the project works. During your LtL Project Officer's first visit they will meet with those involved in leading the project. This might include the head teacher/principal, the member of staff leading the project, a governor and/or parent or carer, and ideally whoever manages the grounds maintenance.

At the first meeting:

- The school staff will talk about why you have chosen to take part in the project and your general goals.
- The project officer will take you through the different parts of the project and the support they can provide. They will also talk with you about the ways this process can link in with your curriculum and other needs.
- You will define who is taking part in the project: this could be a year group, members of an eco or gardening group, or a group of different pupils who will benefit most from the project. We also expect everyone in the school to have opportunities to actively learn about the project.
- You will take a tour of the grounds to begin to establish where you are now, what spaces you have and how they are used.
- Pupils will also take the LtL Project Officer on a tour of the grounds to establish what the pupils currently do outside and how they feel about their grounds.
- The project officer will observe play time if possible.

- You will be asked to undertake some consultation tasks before the next visit to help inform the design process.
- The school will establish who will be involved in the project and how.
- You will set dates for the workshops leading up to working with a designer.

On the second visit:

- Your LtL Project Officer will work with your pupils in different ways. This could include:
 - a whole school assembly
 - working with the key group within and/or outside of lessons
 - going outside to talk about your grounds
 - measuring spaces
 - understanding plans and scale
 - marking out where changes could take place
 - thinking about the nature-based play experiences they would like to have outside
 - learning about the nature you have or could have in your grounds and the needs of native wildlife
 - starting to create a vision statement for your project
- The project officer may also want to talk with staff to get their views on any issues and challenges, what is working well and their vision for the project if this has not been completed on the initial visit.
- Different elements of the consultation could be with different groups of pupils e.g. different classes in a year group.

The facilitator – LtL Project Officer - will take all the information gathered on the visit and create a report for the Landscape Architect or designer. The designer will then visit the school and discuss the information they have been given. They will also undertake a tour of the site to collect information to inform their design ideas, and also work with pupils to develop their first design phase.

How can we get there?

Your designer will create a vision plan for you – this may include a plan of the site, sketches or photographs of their ideas and an estimate for the cost of the changes. You will be able to comment on the plans and there will be an opportunity for changes to be made.

When you have agreed on the plans the project team will work with you to create an action plan for the work needed - who is going to do what, timescales, additional resources required etc. This will include budgeting and getting quotes for the work to be carried out.

At this point you will send a project budget to LtL who will then release the funding to your school. You will then receive up to £12,000 which you are responsible for spending under the terms of the grant – to be split between the designer’s fees and the on-site physical changes.

Making the changes

Ideally, we will use local contractors to carry out any work that the school community cannot do yourselves. If you are lucky, you may have in-house skills, and these will need to be checked for insurance, indemnity and ability to carry out the work just as any contractor would be. You may know people you have worked with before or be able to access local environmental charities. The designer can also support and signpost in this process.

The project team will identify where pupils, staff and volunteers can be involved in the changes and make sure this is planned into the work.

When the changes have been made, your staff will receive training on nature-based play and outdoor learning in order that the most is made of your new resources. We will also provide you examples of a play policy and a maintenance plan/guide for the new nature-based features in your grounds.

Timings for Round 2 – 2026/2027

The first visits to the school will be in the Autumn 1 term of 2026/2027. Any tree or shrub planting will need to be completed by Spring term 2027 whilst the plants are dormant, but there may be an opportunity to carry this over in to October 2027 (see below). Depending on what else the school choose to do, most works must be carried out by July 2027 at the latest.

The school will be able to retain some of this funding for the Autumn term of 2027/2028 for additional planting and final changes to their projects. This can be up to £3,000.

The grant

Schools on the programme will receive a grant of £12,000 (inclusive of VAT)

This must be used on the following:

- To employ a Landscape Architect or similarly qualified Grounds Designer
- To buy the physical elements of the change e.g. plants, timber, logs, ropes, tarpaulins, hammocks, large stones or boulders, chalk, landscape work e.g. creating mounds, tunnels, seating, loose parts.
- To pay for a contractor to undertake larger elements of the work.

In order to receive the grant the school will need to submit costed plans for change. We would expect the Landscape Architect to create a design with and for the school and help the school get costings for the project. This will be submitted to Learning through Landscapes before the funding is released. This will require confirmation of approval of the landowner, who may be third-party such as a Local Authority.

On completion of the project receipts will be required for the work done. Copies of these will also be submitted to Learning through Landscapes. Any underspend will be returned to Learning through Landscapes.

If the school wishes they can supplement the grant through money, gifts in kind and volunteer time. All elements should be recorded so that we can advise other schools who also wish to make changes to their grounds.

What can the grant pay for?

This can include:

- Woody plants such as trees and shrubs
- Seeds, seedlings and other plants
- Natural loose play parts such as large sticks and stones
- Items that enhance nature-based play such as tarpaulins, hammocks and ropes
- Bark chips, pea gravel and other natural surfacing materials
- Sand and sand pits
- Mud pits, digging areas and access to water
- Straw bales
- Raised beds and planters
- Willow structures
- Equipment that supports nature-based play such as baskets, buckets, spades and trowels, chalk, watering cans
- Rocks, tree stumps and branches for climbing or sitting on

This cannot include:

- Large plastic or metal play equipment
- Rubber crumb safety surfacing
- Large shade sales
- PE equipment – from football goals to balls and hockey sticks

If you are not sure what the grant can be used on please ask first rather than take the risk that the grant will not pay for the item.

Where are we now?

To conclude the project, we will look back at what you have done, celebrate the changes and start to think about what you could do next. You will be supported to think about next steps, such as further funding or training, which your school might benefit from.

You will be asked to complete a short online questionnaire on completion of the project. We will also follow up the project one and two years after it has concluded and again you will be asked to complete some simple feedback. This is essential to help improve what we do and to secure funding for future projects. We very much appreciate you taking the time to help us with this vital part of our work