Climate School 180

Seating and Meeting Spaces

Introduction

Seating and meeting spaces are important for all age groups, from ‘story time’ gathering spaces in the early years through to comfortable areas to ‘hang out’ in secondary schools. A variety of seating and meeting spaces should be created to suit the social, emotional and cognitive developmental of pupils during breaks and before and after the school day as well to enable a range of formal curriculum needs.

A common complaint from teachers and pupils relates to a lack of shade and shelter and of suitable site furniture – seating, tables, shelters, storage etc. How the grounds are used at different times depends to a considerable extent on what seating is available, how it is designed and where it is located. The majority of schools already have spaces around the building and grounds which could serve well as social gathering and meeting spaces if suitable furniture and/or features were provided.

This guidance uses the Learning through Landscapes process of change to lead you through your decision-making about seating and meeting spaces for your school grounds.



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Where are we now?

Firstly, review what provision you already have in terms of formal and informal seating opportunities and gathering spaces throughout the whole school site. Start by undertaking a survey of your grounds recording features in terms of the type, location, number, materials they are made from and condition. Look at:

- Fixed seating, i.e. benches, seats and picnic tables
- Movable seating, i.e. log stumps, straw bales or crates
- Informal seating edges where pupils may perch or sit, but which are not necessarily designed for seating, such as low walls, raised planters, steps or grass banks
- Permanent structures, canopies or building overhangs that provide shelter and/or shade
- Temporary shade from demountable sails or tarpaulins, deciduous trees or den making areas

In terms of the condition of existing physical features, you could colour code items i.e. green is good to retain; orange is ok but may require replacement in around 5 years; red should be removed and/or replaced. Also consider if any existing features could or should be relocated, reconfigured or modified where practicable.

Identify and map environmental conditions in terms of areas of sun and shade as it changes through the school day, where it is windy or sheltered, damp or dry and review how this relates to current provision and level of use of the existing seating and/or gathering spaces. Do you have seating in an area that is never used because it is too windy or regularly waterlogged or, vice versa, are there areas where pupils sit on the ground because it is particularly sunny or sheltered or has good views of an interesting activity, but currently lacks seating and/or shelter?

Review where pupils currently congregate at break time and consider if there clashes with the flow of movement and/or if there is or isn't enough provision for seating. Also, review where pupils currently don't go, is that because those areas lack a formal access route and/or suitably surfaced space with provision for seating?

Ensure pupils feed into this site analysis process, asking them about why they do or don't use certain spaces and which areas they find comfortable or uncomfortable, so that this conversation can form the basis for mapping priorities for change. Also ask teachers which areas they currently use or deliberately don't use for outdoor activities and/or lessons to gain an understanding of what presently works well and what doesn't, considering things like the amount of seating and space for the numbers of pupils required, accessibility and distance from the building or specific class spaces, provision of or lack of any specific external resources.

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Where do we want to be?

This stage and the next one do often merge together a bit, but we recommend you look at this stage first to make sure you have identified your needs before you start to think about different possible solutions. Otherwise they can lead your thinking and you end up with something that might look nice but not really meet your needs.

- So start by considering what the whole school community wants to be able to 'do' within the school grounds in terms of how they could use seating a meeting spaces. At this stage try not to think about what things you want to create and where they might go – so you might like to ask the following questions:
- Do we want to take lessons outside and bring a whole class together for this?
- Do we want pupils to be able to work in small, break-out groups as part of lessons?
- Do we want pupils to be able to gather outdoors in all weathers?
- Do we want pupils to be able to socialise together outside of lessons, in break times or before and after school?
- Do we want our parents to be able to meet each other in the school grounds and socialise as they drop off or pick up their children?
- Do we want to be able to bring large groups together for assemblies or performances outside?
- Do you want to encourage specific activities, such as reading?
- Do you want pupils to be able to undertake activities in specific locations e.g. pond dipping or planting out seedlings?
- Do we need different spaces to have a different 'feel' to them?
- Do we need spaces for children to chill and calm down in?
- Do we want our pupils to be able to sit around a camp fire or cook outdoors?
- Do we want seating that enables pupils to watch sport taking place?
- Do you envisage any of the outside spaces being used by community groups and if so, will they have any specific requirements in terms of safe/secure routes or lighting etc?
- Is there a need for a 'friendship stop' or 'buddy bench' and where would this be best located so that it is visible and inviting?

Doing this will help you come up with ideas and solutions that are right for you – and not just those you may have seen elsewhere. Only when you know what you want to be able to 'do' outside (what experiences you want your pupils to have) can you come up with the solutions that meet those needs. This is when we move onto the problem-solving stage.

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How can we get there?

Ideally, school grounds should offer a variety of spaces and seating opportunities to appeal to different groups and to accommodate different activities. Things to consider include:

- What type and scale of space would be desirable to enable outside learning and lesson activities, i.e. for whole class and/or for small group activities?
- Consider the location of any seating. Do you want to encourage reading, then outside the library could be a good spot.
- If an area needs to accommodate a class activity, what is the minimum number of fixed or moveable seats that would be required and what other features and/or resources or teaching aids would be desirable, i.e. tables/surfaces for writing on that could also be used for outdoor dining and/or storage for any specific equipment?
- Within these spaces should seating be arranged to focus on a speaker and/or would they benefit from a focal feature, such as a stage, sculpture, or fire pit?
- Where would be the best location for these spaces in terms of ease of access, but also to avoid disruption of ongoing indoor lessons?
- Consider accessibility for all both to the location of the seating and from the seating area itself.
- Do spaces need to fulfil a few different functions, i.e. performance space, dance area, seating/waiting space for parents, outdoor art display or space for design activities?
- In terms of playtime socialising, what type and scale of space would be desirable for pairs or small groups to congregate and chat?
- Girls in particular have been found to enjoy chatting whilst swinging; would it be desirable to add features that enable the swinging sensation and if so, where would these be best placed?
- Where would be the best location for small intimate quiet spaces for lone contemplation, recentering, or quiet reading and study?
- In terms of seating, it is important to provide enough seating to avoid creating competition for a scarce resource and pupils often like informal seating opportunities that allow them to create their own seating arrangements. Consider what is required in terms of numbers, height to suit the age of anticipated users, fixed versus moveable (and if any storage will be required), arrangement (gathering and chatting is encouraged by circular as opposed to linear arrangements) and comfort (temporary perch opportunities or more comfortable seating for longer periods of use).

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- Could you introduce formal or informal seating opportunities that would allow spectating on to active games and sports areas?
- Can the seating you create have more than one function e.g. a piece of climbing equipment that could also be used for social seating?
- When considering shelter, do any areas require protection from the sun, wind (prevailing and/or eddying), noise, public views and/or rain?
- In terms of shelters, do features need to be permanent structures able to protect users from torrential downpours or could they potentially be temporary and demountable, affording shelter from light rain and/or UV rays?

Once you have gathered your thoughts together, create a zoning plan for the site, identifying what types of seating, shelter and meeting spaces are desirable in which locations. Use this to assist in prioritizing which areas will be developed in what sequence.

Solutions

Now you have a good idea about the types of seating and meeting spaces that would be desirable, let's look at some predominantly nature-based solutions. As you do this, consider the form and layout of the seating that will work best for you. Long straight benches do not allow for interaction whilst horseshoe or circle layouts often provide the best spaces for teaching and for socialising. Also think about which way the seating is facing – you don't want your pupils looking into the sun whilst a prevailing wind should be considered as it can affect how well the teacher's voice will travel.

Also consider the atmosphere you would like in different areas of the grounds and how this might affect the choices you make. What about brining planting such as willow in around a space that is used as a quiet space, or adding swathes of coloured cloth from time to time to change the feel of an area?

With all options, ensure the management and maintenance implications are considered and that the whole school community, including teachers, playground monitors and maintenance staff are consulted. Also, consider sustainable procurement in terms of conserving resources and energy, carbon reduction, reducing waste, where materials are being transported from and limiting pollution. This can be achieved through reusing materials you already have on site where practicable, sourcing things locally, making things yourselves as opposed to purchasing and through specifying recycled materials and Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) or similar responsibly sourced timbers.

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Seating

Timber – natural logs and stumps

Large logs and smaller stumps offer a range of fixed or moveable seating opportunities whilst also providing natural, tactile, and sensory properties. Heavy logs will last a long time, but small moveable stumps will eventually dry out, crack, and break. Choose species with care to avoid heavy sap or excessive degradation. Suitable, naturally resilient timbers include oak, sweet chestnut, beech, cedar, pine, redwood, plane, acacia, and robinia.





If sourced timber has already had chance to air dry (>12 months) so that the moisture content is suitably low, treat prior to installation with a natural teak oil or similar product in accordance with manufacturer recommendations. If the timber is supplied green, install without treatment, but include for treating with teak oil after 12 months.

Leave areas of bark to provide texture and interest (the whole point of using trees is for their natural surface). Consider children's learning and seating comfort when deciding whether to modify a horizontal log, i.e. creating a flat upper surface versus the experience of sitting on the natural wood and bark in different conditions. Chamfering ends of timbers will help to avoid splitting and remove sharp edges and splinters, projections, pegs, twigs, spikes, or burrs if deemed to potentially cause injury.



Wooden stumps should ideally be around 30-40cm tall and 30-45cm diameter, but test out different heights with pupils to see what is best for them. Horizontal logs should create fall heights no greater than 60cm. Seek advice about suitable natural surfacing underneath if this is not possible. Logs should ideally have a forked end, so that the log is stable and cannot be rolled over. Timber in contact with the ground will be most susceptible to rot and will last longest if placed on a free draining surface.



Inspect logs regularly for signs of decay, damage and/or instability. If significant cracks or weaknesses appear, follow suitable precautions. Dead wood creates important habitat, so consider using them elsewhere on site for their wildlife value.

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Timber – benches and seats

Timber offers an economic way to create strong, enduring structures. You could source premade timber seating from local suppliers or alternatively, you could design and create seats yourselves using relatively basic tools and skills. You might also want to consider personalising your seating with carvings, sculptural elements, or practical features like integrated storage. Consider working with an external artist or craftsperson, or your own specialist staff to create unique solutions that meet your needs.



If creating DIY timber solutions, be aware that timber in contact with the ground (that has exposed end grain, or that is flat and not designed to shed water) will eventually rot if not correctly specified. To avoid this, either use suitably treated timbers or use naturally resilient and durable varieties (these may be more expensive). Preserving treatments increase longevity and protect the timber from decay, fungi, and wood boring insects. The preservative should be permanent, insoluble in water, safe, clean and compatible with finishes, and must not contain Copper Chromium Arsenate (CCA) or creosotes. Designs should allow for adequate drainage, ventilation, and protection below ground, avoid sharp edges or corners, and be suitably robust based on applicable ages and abilities.



Consider how seating will be used. Straight seating does not allow for good interaction between small groups of pupils, so platforms, horseshoes, and circles of seats are likely to work better. When designing or purchasing fixed seating, consider the needs of pupils with physical disabilities in terms of back and/or arm rests, heights, and hard surfaced accessibility. Allow space between or next to seats for those who use wheelchairs so they can interact with those sitting on benches. If you use moveable seating, can it be removed from the grounds easily?



Timber offers good environmental credentials, being low in embodied energy and carbon positive. However, there are now many timber-effect products made from recycled plastics that would otherwise have gone to landfill, can themselves be recycled, and require no maintenance or chemical treatments once installed.



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Low walls and informal edges

Where vandalism is severe or sufficient seating cannot be provided in other ways, low walls integrated into the design of outdoor spaces can increase opportunities for children to sit down.

These could be made from suitably treated timbers (such as machine rounded logs or railway sleeper-style timbers), from (reclaimed) brick or from metal gabions (mesh cages) with a suitable upper surface, i.e. timber, recycled plastic, or external cushions. Gabion cages can be filled with site won or locally sourced natural materials (rocks, logs, etc.) or potentially other reclaimed materials to avoid things going to landfill, if the materials are robust and gabions are well packed and secured.

Timber or recycled plastic decking can also be used to create stage areas, platforms, and structures that also offer informal seating edges.





Landform

Provide grass spaces for sitting and socialising, and consider providing sloped grass areas around games areas to form a natural amphitheatre for spectators.

If you have a sloping area anyway, you might want to use it as it is or develop it into something more formal such as an amphitheatre or steps that double up as seating.





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Non-seating seating and meeting places

There could be other features around your grounds that could double-up as seating and meeting spaces, such as some play features, sculptures, or rocks used to show geological features.



Other options

Hammocks are available as low-cost demountable fabric versions for solo relaxation hung between existing trees or features, as well as larger metal and timber features that afford increased play value and seating opportunities for multiple users.



Locally sourced rocks and boulders can be used as informal seating as well as to define a space and to offer play value. Look to source these locally to avoid transportation carbon and cost. Nominal sizes should be around 30-40cm above ground in terms of height, with no fall height greater than 60cm. Rocks should be smooth with no sharp/jagged edges and should be seasoned, free from cracks, and not susceptible to frost cracking. They should be bedded at minimum one third below ground on well compacted earth or type 1 MOT stone to ensure stability.



Hay and straw bales can be locally sourced and used to provide informal seating and/or to create dens, shelters, or wind breaks. If they become wet lay a tarpaulin over the top to provide a dry set, and when they disintegrate get some new ones and think about different options for location or layout and try something new!

Consider reuse of existing materials and/or materials that can be easily obtained at no or low cost such as large decorators' paint pots that can also be moveable and provide additional flexibility.



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Shelter

Most schools would benefit from additional shade and shelter and low cost, sustainable solutions could include:

- Maximising the use of existing trees or planting new trees to provide shade and an immediate focus for imaginative play. Careful location and the use of tree grills or seating can reduce damage around the trees to stop undue soil compaction. Take advice regarding species selection, as some trees provide heavy shade which is cooler whereas others offer a lighter more dappled and thus 'warmer' shade
- Consider planting suitable trees, shrubs, or hedges around a space to provide protection from the wind
- Introducing new or making use of existing timber pergolas and adding climbing plants and/or attaching additional tarps or screen features to increase shade and shelter
- Maximising use of existing building over hangs, canopies and/or sheltered corners
- Using bungee cords and tarps between existing trees, structures or den making poles
- Planting willow domes of various styles and sizes
- In early years and primary settings, den building materials can be provided to allow children to make their own temporary shelters and small seating spaces
- Some schools have successfully used fabric teepees and yurts for occasional use whilst others have created similar effects by hanging tarpaulins from fixtures on posts, walls, fences, or from trees









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Where budget permits and/or if a more permanent solution is required, consideration could be given to timber gazebos, green roof structures, free standing or wall mounted canopies, tarpaulins, umbrellas, or awnings. Consider the function of any structure – is it a play feature or a space to bring a class? Does it need any extra resources including storage for your outdoor equipment.

When considering the introduction of shelters, fixed seating, or planting, also consider:

- Would features introduce a potential climbing aid for undesirable access into or out of the school or allow access to restricted areas, such as on to the roof
- Consider surfacing below and around features, i.e. grass may perish due to shade and heavy use
- Will structures also provide desirable/undesirable shade in to internal spaces
- Will planning permission be required (max. 2.5m tall within 2m of site boundary)
- Foundations and excavations should avoid below ground utilities and the root protection areas of retained trees
- Consider maintenance and emergency access and service easements and avoid introducing any fixed structures where there could be clashes
- Consider supervision (which is overt) and surveillance (which is more subtle) during the design phase; try to optimize natural surveillance to make the most of overlooking interactions with staff and other students
- Consider the orientation of shelters and the required degree of enclosure and privacy, i.e. would it benefit from shelter belt planting, bunds, trellis or other free-standing structures to protect from winds and/or to screen views
- Consider where the shade falls at different times of day or year. Can the structure be adjusted to allow for this?

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Making the changes

To ensure solutions are viable, they should be sustainable (i.e. consider sourcing, long term maintenance and recyclability or reuse at the end of life), holistic (i.e. considered as part of the whole site), and participatory (i.e. include the whole school community throughout the process, from design and consultation to inform location, to construction and use).

Can the school make the changes with pupils, staff, and parents, or will you need to appoint competent contractors? Can materials be source locally and/or freely from local businesses, parents, or community groups? Consider implications in terms of liability, health and safety. and cost when making these decisions.

Wherever possible, involve children in making the changes to their environment i.e. planting or seating solutions; giving opportunities to learn new skills and allowing them to take ownership and gain pride in their school ground improvements.

Whatever solutions you implement, aim to allow for adaptability and flexibility, with consideration for continued development and ongoing evolution as the needs of the school change.

Your Risk Benefit Assessment (RBA) should highlight maintenance as part of risk management, for example recycling and replacing broken wooden stumps over time and checking for signs of rot and decay. Your school will already have a maintenance regime for the grounds and any new seating or structures should be included into this.



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Where are we now?

Now review what has been achieved and consider:

- Have we achieved our goals in terms of improvements to seating and meeting spaces?
- How do users now feel about the various spaces and level of provision?
- Are we now able to take more lessons or activities outside?
- Are there enough opportunities for different groups to sit and talk with friends, for solo seating, spectating etc?
- Is there enough permanent and temporary shade and shelter?

If any areas are still lacking, start the process again by considering 'where do we want to be?'

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