

Evaluation Report on the Growing Upwards Project

Part of the Growing Schools Initiative

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1. Introduction

This report presents the findings from the evaluation of the Growing Upwards project from May 2002 to July 2003. Details of the setting's individual projects and achievements can be found in the case studies.

Learning through Landscapes (LTL), the national school grounds charity is embarking on a new national programme to support settings and schools in using and developing their outdoors for delivering the Foundation Stage Curriculum.

LTL has worked with the Early Years sector for a number of years and has provided a level of support which has gone some way towards meeting the very diverse needs of practitioners and children so enabling them to achieve high quality outdoor provision. We want to do more and respond pro-actively to the ever-growing demand from the sector for further help in the form of practical advice and support. The Early Years sector is currently the fastest growing area of demand for our services and programmes.

2. Aims and Objectives

The **aim** of the programme was to demonstrate the commitment of the DfES to the effective development of first hand educational experiences in growing food and to set new standards of achievement in this area which would be an inspiration and source of knowledge and expertise from which others could benefit.

The **objectives** of the programme were to:

- Support the development of best practice by Early Years settings through first hand and appropriate educational experiences in farming and horticulture
- Realise the full curriculum, child development, health and community benefits of growing and harvesting food in Early Years settings
- Encourage and support the participation of parents and the wider local community through partnership working
- Support the delivery of every child's entitlement to active participation in growing projects.

3. Project Delivery

In May 2002, Learning through Landscapes, in consultation with early years partners, began to identify settings that could be recruited for this project. Once appropriate settings had been identified, each received and signed a project agreement, which clearly stated the roles and intentions of the parties involved. Each setting, with LTL's assistance, devised and submitted an action plan and a budget for approval by LTL. Funding was then distributed accordingly and regular visits were made to the settings to support them in making improvements to their outdoors. As the planning and physical changes took place, LTL also initiated a monitoring and evaluation system, which is outlined in more detail later.

4. Partner Organisations

In order to deliver this project LTL set out to establish a wide range of partnerships with other educational initiatives as well as with business, local communities and other voluntary organisations. These partnerships have developed in relation to the needs of individual project participants and have so far been identified as:

Pre-School Learning Alliance	Sure Start (Sheffield)
North Yorkshire Early Years & Childcare Partnership	Local Businesses
Sheffield Early Years & Childcare Partnership	Flamingo Land
Sheffield Young Children's Service	Sherburn SEN School
Selby Countryside Management Project	After School Clubs
Selby Disabilities	Community Teachers
Sheffield Wildlife Trust	Education Action Zones
Local Farms	Local Garden Centres

In all settings the interest and involvement of parents has been high. Also the wider community has contributed, with neighbours offering seedlings and help to construct features or with ongoing maintenance.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

As part of this project LTL has undertaken to conduct a thorough monitoring and evaluation of Growing Upwards to measure the success and impact of the project against the project's aims and to identify good practice that can be disseminated to the Early Years sector. To stimulate discussion and agreement with the settings a paper was produced giving guidance and outlining possible methods that settings could adopt for this exercise. The methods involved collecting data from staff, children and parents at the start of the project, during it and at the end.

The greatest challenge was in identifying how to collect meaningful data from the children who at such a young age lacked comprehensive language skills. Using the latest research in this field, LTL has initiated with the settings ways of exploring children's ideas, awareness and interest. This includes videoing the project's activities to children themselves taking photographs of their favourite activities/improvements.

Settings were visited in July 03 and their own evaluation of the project collected through a structured interview. In addition, all settings were asked to give feedback on the service of LTL.

6. Background of the settings

The settings were chosen for their variety, in order to represent the full Early Years sector and consisted of:

- 3 private nurseries
- 5 maintained classes within primary schools
- 1 voluntary Community Pre-school
- 1 family centre within a nursery school
- All created growing areas.
- Three installed greenhouses and one kept livestock.
- Four were in rural locations
- Six were in urban areas

7. Summary of Findings

Below are the main findings that LTL is able to make, based on visits to the settings and the data collected as part the evaluation exercise.

- All settings commented on the high level of enthusiasm, interest and involvement of parents.
- At least half the settings involved secured additional funding to support this project.
- The opportunities to deliver a substantial number of the Foundation Stage curriculum objectives have been recognised in all settings. Language had been especially well supported. In several instances, settings have changed their curriculum planning so that the topic of growing/farming could be extended.
- Examples of good practice have included supporting the understanding of growing through imaginative play and relevant indoor activities.
- There is evidence that children are highly motivated by this theme and that their interest in growing is being extended into their home lives.
- Most settings have made links and involved businesses from the farming and horticultural sector and benefited from making visits either to local farms, garden centres and/or supermarkets.
- The project has generated a rich range of curriculum ideas and experiences, from the development phase through to harvesting.
- It appears that many of the rural settings, to a varying degree, have experience of promoting this theme while urban settings have less.
- This project has highlighted a number of examples of good practice for Early Years, most notably that in some settings the learning activities are being child-led with adults acting as facilitators. In some cases curriculum planning has become more flexible to allow use of the activities to follow children's interest and utilise opportunities as they arise.
- Settings in multi-cultural areas have experienced a higher than expected involvement of parents in their growing activities (especially fathers).
- Many settings have made good use of their local community for resources and support.
- Across most settings there is a high level of participation by the children in the project, from practical involvement to assisting in making key decisions.
- Several settings have commented that this project has encouraged greater team co-operation amongst the staff and has helped them professionally in developing curriculum practices.

- There appears to be a general view in all settings that this project and the theme of growing is appropriate to this age range and that it provides many meaningful and engaging opportunities to support the delivery of the Foundation Stage curriculum.
- The common difficulties that most settings mention are: the timescale of growing and spending the funding; finding and working with contractors; time and commitment of managing such a project with full children's participation.

8. Settings' Evaluations of the Project

8.1 Children's Awareness and Understanding of Growing/Farming

All settings stated that through this project, children's understanding and knowledge of growing/farming had increased. By providing practical hands-on experiences of growing most settings indicated that the children gained a greater understanding of the subject than through previous topic work. The 'awe and wonder' of observing seeds growing into plants that could be harvested and eaten was commonly mentioned. The children gained insight into the care and maintenance of growing and consequently showed greater respect and concern for the outdoor environment on many occasions. Many settings established garden centres either outdoors or indoors for children to play out the roles and tasks they had experienced. These activities together with visits to farms and supermarkets reinforced an awareness and understanding of where our food comes from.

The evaluation asked, "How well has this project increased children's knowledge and understanding of growing/farming?"

- Many settings observed the children's excitement and desire to observe the daily changes and growth of the plants they were cultivating. Close observation encouraged greater understanding of the different types of plants and their structure. Due to the children's enthusiasm in many settings it became a daily routine to observe the changes and carry out any maintenance.
- In all settings children were regularly involved in the maintenance of the plants (and animals where appropriate) and gained further understanding of what is required for growth. In some cases children's understanding of food chains was extended.
- Evidence of children's care and respect for the environment was identified in several ways. Children's concerns were observed in some settings when the weather and/or vandalism prevented crops from growing. Children took great care in most settings to avoid trampling on growing crops and to avoid damaging their plants when weeding. There was a strong sense of ownership and pride amongst children for the crops they had grown.
- Settings used such phrases as 'concrete experiences' and 'firmly embedded' to describe how the hands-on approach had helped to promote the understanding and knowledge of growing/farming. One setting said that growing food that the children eat at home was more relevant and effective for understanding where food comes from, than growing cress indoors.

The settings' evidence of this increased awareness and understanding was collected through regular observations, discussions and from the work the children produced.

8.2 The Practitioners

"Effective education requires both a relevant curriculum and practitioners who understand and are able to implement the curriculum requirements."

"Practitioners must be able to observe and respond appropriately to children, informed by a knowledge of how children develop and learn and a clear understanding of possible next steps in their development and learning." [Foundation Stage guidance, DfES 2000, p11]

Practitioners played a key role in ensuring the success of this project and the high quality of education to be gained. Practitioners' own experiences of growing varied in

the different settings and this was reflected in how ambitious some setting's projects were. Building upon the enthusiasm of the children, practitioners themselves gained further confidence and knowledge of the subject and most capitalised on the children's motivation and genuine interest.

The evaluation asked, "How well has this project involved and increased participation of practitioners?"

- As the project progressed, several settings mentioned that they grew more confident to let the children to take the lead and be more responsible for caring for the plants. In a few cases, practitioners indicated that their role had changed to be more of a facilitator to the children, rather than leading on activities.
- It became apparent to all settings that this project could help deliver most aspects of the Foundation Stage curriculum. In several cases the setting decided to alter their curriculum planning to focus mainly on this project.
- In over half the settings, practitioners mentioned that they had enjoyed the project and had gained in confidence and knowledge to deliver such a project. Several indicated that their increased knowledge had been gained through their increased ability to research and seek assistance. One setting said they felt more comfortable about not knowing or being well versed in growing, seeing that they could learn with the children.
- This project had helped in about half the settings to aid the practitioners in team building and to improve communication within the teams. Only in one case did the practitioners feel that they had little involvement in the project; in over half the settings, it was a whole foundation team approach.
- A sense of ownership and achievement was identified and a greater commitment and enthusiasm in several settings to growing and the general use of the outdoors. Several said that they now had a greater sense of purpose to using the outdoors.
- The enthusiasm for this project was not only confined to the children and in several cases, practitioners put in additional time to ensure the project was successful. Some practitioners acknowledged that through this project their own interest in growing had increased and that they had become more engaged in gardening at home.

8.3 Motivated Children

"Early Years experience should... encourage a positive attitude and disposition to learn and aim to prevent early failure." [Foundation Stage guidance, DfES 2000 p11]

The interest from the children in growing was very high and well sustained over many months. They showed a high level of willingness and desire to care for their plants on a regular basis. Settings observed how patient even three year olds were and observed the children making a variety of predictions. The high level of motivation was clearly observed in most settings through children's questioning and the genuine interest generated.

The evaluation asked, "How has this project motivated children to be more interested in growing?"

- Children found observing the changes in growth to be fascinating. Consequently, settings noticed that the children wanted to be outdoors more. The children in several settings started taking the initiative in watering and caring for the plants.
- Children were keen to share their knowledge with other children and in some schools older children supported younger ones, in turn enhancing their self-worth and motivation.

8.4 Impact at home

Over half the settings reported that they had knowledge of children's enthusiasm leading to them either supporting their parents more with gardening or starting their own growing project at home. In two settings the practitioners suggested that more

than 15% of their children had become engaged in these activities as a result of this project, although the figures given are only approximate.

8.5 Enriched Curriculum

“Children are entitled to provision that supports and extends knowledge, skills, understanding and confidence, and helps them to overcome any disadvantage.”

“To be effective, an early years curriculum should be carefully structured. In that structure, there should be: provision for the different starting points from which children develop their learning, building on what they can already do; relevant and appropriate content that matches the different levels of young children’s needs; planned and purposeful activity that provides opportunities for teaching and learning, both indoors and outdoors.”

“Children do not make a distinction between ‘play’ and ‘work’ and neither should practitioners. Children need time to become engrossed, work in depth and complete activities.” (Foundation Stage guidance, DfEE 2000, p11-12)

It is clear that settings found that the growing theme offered all elements of the Foundation Stage curriculum in a holistic, meaningful and engaging way for young children. For many staff it raised the status of outdoor experience and play generally as an environment for young children’s learning and well-being.

The evaluation asked “how well has this project supported and enriched the curriculum?”

- Most settings felt that their projects offered the whole early years curriculum, meaningfully and in considerable depth. Each element of the project or individual activity gave the children a holistic experience touching on all areas of the curriculum.
- That the experiences had prompted children to talk (even those normally reluctant or with limited ability) about what was happening in nursery and at home was identified by most settings. Children had talked more to both adults and other children. Language was of a high level and vocabulary gain was significant. *“The stimulation of new language, understanding and use in context has been amazing”.*
- Another strong feature, identified by more than half the settings, was the high levels of curiosity and fascination together with awe and wonder expressed by their children. This led to highly motivated and engaged learners.
- Some settings found that the project prompted the development of problem solving and thinking skills and that children were increasing their understanding of cause and effect through the experiences available. Individual children were reported to concentrate for long periods and to be surprisingly persistent.
- Increased collaboration and teamwork amongst the children were identified by some settings. Shared interest prompted dialogue between children. *“We have far more cooperative play now”.*
- Some settings felt that children’s self-esteem and self-direction had grown, with children taking responsibility, leading activities (with adults facilitating), getting their own equipment or being confident to ask for additional resources. *“We now have independent and confident learners”.*
- Settings reported that children were motivated to follow through their learning, and that there was continuity of learning for the children within the context of the theme and the new environments. Several settings gave examples of children being motivated to find information, to draw and to write. One setting reported more interest in books.
- Some also gave examples of children applying their learning from earlier experiences, maybe weeks before. *On a cold winter’s day, “I want to work in the greenhouse because it’s warmer in there”; After some rain, “I’ll just tell you Mrs Wetz that we won’t water today – it’s been raining all morning”.* A setting remarked on a child’s ability to relate to another’s thinking because of the meaningful context of the real task of watering the plants.
- Some settings felt that children related to the project so well because of its sensory nature, especially for touch and smell and the many opportunities for observation. A setting commented on how well the project supported children’s schema, particularly transporting and enclosing.

- Several settings used their produce, observing it closely, eating it, cooking with it, selling it and sending it home with children.
- Settings made some common comments around specific areas of the curriculum. Some were surprised at how much all the areas of mathematical development were prompted and supported. Physical development opportunities, at both gross and fine motor level, were very apparent. Children's awareness of nature, the environment, seasons and weather, together with a growing awareness of time passing and ability to predict change, were all strengthened. Children were enabled to make appropriate selection of clothing and tools for a task.
- Many and wide ranging creative experiences related to the first hand activities were offered to children or initiated by them, responding to their need to express ideas and feelings. One child asked to make a 'Bob the Builder' display, stimulated by the building of their raised beds. She drew a plan for it, delegated tasks and the group of children worked all day on their display, in place of the planned activities.

8.6 Other benefits

The most commented upon 'other benefit' was the settings' ability to have sufficient quality resources for each child through the funding provided. In several cases these resources and new features were used for other activities, such as to provide seating and social areas, and helped to improve the appearance of the outdoors. In nearly all of the school settings it was noticed there was a high degree of interest and support from other sections of the school.

The evaluation asked, "What other benefits has this project brought?"

- Troubled & challenging children and children with special educational needs were seen by several settings to benefit from this project, as they found such children to be more readily engaged in the activities. In at least one setting, the pastoral care team became involved with this project because of this. Relationships were improved between adults and children, with several settings citing how the theme reached out not only to challenging children but also to shy children and reluctant speakers. More than one setting observed that it made the atmosphere more relaxing and that there was less conflict.
- Several settings reported that the project had helped to demonstrate to trainees and temporary staff the benefits of using the outdoors and how growing projects can be delivered in an imaginative manner.
- This project enabled two settings to provide additional after school activities to local children.
- At least one setting noticed that children were inclined to eat produce grown that had not been tried or had been disliked before. This was noticed also in older children who had helped the young children in the growing project. As one Headteacher pointed out, this is an effective way to promote healthy eating. It was highly satisfying, for children and practitioners alike, to be able to eat the produce they had grown.
- Several settings mentioned that the improvements made had enhanced the appearance and usability of the outdoors, and in some cases provided an area for multi-use (e.g. seating and socialising). For some settings this helped with their own self-esteem and the ability to market their services, particularly in the private and voluntary sector.

8.7 Parental and Community Involvement

"Parents and practitioners should work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect within which children can have security and confidence." "[Practitioners] must build positive relationships with parents in order to work effectively with them and their children." [Foundation Stage Guidance, DfEE 2000, p11]

A strong feature to emerge from the evaluation is that parental interest in setting's projects was high. Parents seemed to be keen that their children had these

experiences. In many of the settings the community, both local and further a field became increasingly involved.

The evaluation asked, "How well has this project involved the parents and the local community?"

- Parental interest was high and, even in settings with good relationships with parents, involvement had been increased. Staff enthusiasm for the project may have been an influence on this.
- Several settings commented upon the sense of pride in their work children showed through sharing developments with their parents. One parent reported that their child gave a daily report to them on his growing plants. A setting also commented on the pride the parents felt seeing their child taking an active part.
- Improved links to home were identified by several settings in different ways. Children often brought knowledge from home and related what they had been doing at home (gardening, visits etc). A parent commented that their child's experiences and sense of connection between home and nursery was stronger. Some settings sent seeds or plants home; in one case children wanted to take carrot thinnings home and every child did so. In another setting 'Squawk' the parrot helped children grow at home and relate their activity back at nursery.
- Several settings drew on parental expertise. Some settings discovered expertise, which they had previously been unaware of. A setting commented that they had found out more about their children's home life and gained an insight into parents with whom they had had little contact
- Children brought parents in to nursery to look at their plants and displays they had made indoors. A setting reported that parents came early in order to sit and wait in the garden. Two settings changed their practice to have children collected by their parents from the outdoor area, rather than from indoors. Where children's interest in growing had prompted projects at home, a setting said that parents were asking to borrow gardening books from them.
- Several settings reported that they were talking more to parents at the beginning and end of the day. Parents were pleased to see the project, interested in developments, commented upon the improved environment and their children's activities at home and in nursery: All these gave them openings, which they needed in order to start dialogue with staff and which had not been available before.
- Parents attended events in nursery from helping with developments to celebration. Work and other commitments made this difficult for some, but one setting felt they had not given enough notice. Celebrations were well attended and settings were pleased at parental commitment to attending.
- Some settings felt that parents were getting more involved in their child's education and their understanding of it. Parents had increased the value they placed on outdoor experiences. One setting said that staff gave more attention to the outdoor area when showing prospective parents around the nursery.
- Most settings had included visits to places in the local community and further afield in their projects, including visits to local shops to look at food and to purchase materials. Visitors from outside nursery had been part of the children's experiences, including staff from Sheffield's new Winter Gardens, a plant nurseryman and a community policeman (when part of the garden was vandalised). One setting felt an important aspect of the project was that the children had met many more adults from the community.
- Some settings have had offers of support from residents and the general public, who have appreciated the visual improvements. A community playgroup has accepted an offer from a neighbouring dental practice to water their garden over the summer.
- In two settings, parents have made use of the garden through adult training onsite and in another two Muslim women's groups have expressed interest in being involved in ongoing work.
- One setting entered Sheffield in Bloom (part of Yorkshire in Bloom) and was Highly Commended in the 'best newly developed school garden' category, after a visit by the Lord Mayor. Two children went to the Town Hall to collect their certificate. The

children in this setting had been very involved in planning and carrying out the developments.

8.8 Challenges and Issues

The greatest challenge to most settings was the time and energy needed to manage the project in the context of other demands and priorities. Demands such as new premises, new children, staff redeployment and academic expectations were cited. Maintenance of the growing areas, especially over the holidays, proved to be another major issue for several settings. Some settings solved this by practitioners coming in on days off, while others have considered irrigation systems. The time scales of the project also presented a challenge, in terms of the natural growing and harvesting schedule.

The evaluation asked, "What were the challenges and issues you faced? How did you overcome them?"

- Variety of crops and harvesting time proved an issue that settings had to consider carefully. The best approach was to have a variety of crops with short and longer growing times, offering many opportunities for comparing and contrasting. Several settings sold their produce to staff and the school community and settings found it advisable to do this on a regular weekly basis rather than hold one big event due to shelf-life of produced once harvested.
- For several settings, liaising with contractors and ensuring that they kept to the work schedule caused some difficulties. In other cases, settings mentioned how helpful and child-friendly their contractors were.
- The influence of the weather conditions was a minor issue for the settings and many used it as an educational tool. Parents' concern about children getting muddy was also raised, although high involvement of parents in the project counteracted this concern in some cases.
- The issue of religious sensitivity was a challenge for a particular setting within a multicultural context. The setting made significant progress in involving the local Muslim community and being sensitive to their particular beliefs & practices.
- Looking back, a few settings thought that they had probably been too ambitious with this project, not realising the time and energy it would take. Several had to find additional funding to ensure their plans could be implemented. The high level of enthusiasm and excitement amongst parents in one setting had to be managed and dealt with sensitively, as the parents occasionally disrupted other planned activities.
- Health and safety did not prove to be a major issue, although at least two settings commented upon it, particularly around chemicals in garden products and the use of tools.
- Some settings found the need to monitor and evaluate the project, particularly for external uses, to be demanding. However these settings commented that it had also been a useful development for their professional practice.

In two settings the external evaluators noticed design issues, notably the omission of installing a water supply nearby to the growing area and of designing out ample space for children's movement. We also identified in two settings the disadvantage of not involving all the staff and keeping the wider school community informed. As a result, in these settings there is less ownership and full use by the other staff and children in the setting has taken longer to develop.

8.9 Recommendations from participating settings

Settings made the following recommendations to other settings who might wish to embark on similar projects:

- The need for capital investment is clear for a project of this scale, in order to put in the infrastructure for providing many years' future use by the setting.

- Careful planning in advance but allowing some flexibility for development is recommended.
- Careful consideration needs to be given to the type and variety of plants grown, their educational value and the harvest time. Some plants need more specialised conditions and care than others. Different crops can be grown year to year.
- Involving the children from the start, as well as all staff and everyone interested is important to help make the project successful. The learning and development opportunities provided by involving children fully in every step of the developmental stages are manifold.
- Start small and simple to begin with, adding to the project year by year. See this as an ongoing project over several years – you don't need to do everything this year!
- Involve parents as much as possible as they provide additional support in terms of advice, donating resources and helping with various tasks. Many parents have professional skills or links that are valuable to a project such as this. They can also help to reinforce what is happening at nursery, linking up children's lives at home and the nursery with projects at home and through mealtimes.
- Design considerations should include storage of resources, outdoor water supply and how children can work independently.
- Visits to local farms and supermarkets are very beneficial and should be encouraged.
- Don't hesitate to ask for help and contributions from parents and the wider school community. Many local businesses are very willing to donate materials or to visit – be bold!
- Make the best use of your resources. Several settings recommended a digging pit as it provides wonderful opportunities for relevant activities. Several settings included plants that provide sensory experiences.

8.10 Sustainability

All settings plan to continue their projects in the next growing season, incorporating any lessons learned into next year's growing and curriculum planning. Several settings wish to extend their project in various ways.

The evaluation asked, "How do you intend to sustain this project into the future?"

- Continue to involve the parents and inform the wider school community.
- Develop parents' understanding of the value of the project to their children.
- Prioritise on-going staff development and support for this project.
- In schools, extend the project so that KS1 & KS2 pupils can use the resources.
- Ensure the project is embedded into the curriculum planning, to maximise the learning opportunities it offers.
- Will continue through the wider development of their school grounds.
- Extend the use of the resources to external users, whereby the setting's children act as hosts, guides and experts
- Produce information sheets for external visitors, written and illustrated by the children with adult support.
- Develop the curriculum regarding growing.
- Disseminate their own learning and achievements to other Early Years providers.

8.11 Early Years Best Practice

"Practitioners should ensure that all children feel included, secure and valued."

"For children to have rich and stimulating experiences, the learning environment should be well planned and well organised. It provides the structure for teaching within which children explore, experiment, plan and make decisions for themselves, thus enabling them to learn, develop and make good progress."

"There should be opportunities for children to engage in activities planned by adults and those that they plan or initiate themselves."

“Well-planned, purposeful activity and appropriate intervention by practitioners will engage children in the learning process and help them make progress in their learning.”
[Foundation Stage guidance, DfEE 2000, p11]

Most settings developed and used their projects in ways, which were in accord with the principles of the Foundation Stage curriculum. Many elements of good early years pedagogy were supported and promoted through the project as a whole. Practice in some settings evolved as a direct result of the project and the way children and adults responded to it together. Several settings feel that they have made a lot of progress with their provision and, more importantly, their practice.

The evaluation asked, “How has this project supported the development of Early Years best practice?”

- Through the project several settings improved their use of their outdoor areas. Children were out for longer and more often, difficult areas were more useable throughout the year, different age groups were using the outdoors together, parents were seeing their children playing outdoors at collection time.
- Some settings identified that the quality of their outdoor play was improved and several settings reported that indoor-outdoor linkage was much enhanced, initiated especially by the children themselves. Two settings commented that the developments in practice (see below) had had an impact on practice indoors also.
- During the developmental stage of their projects, children were involved to varying degrees in both planning and making changes. Settings that did this well got the most out of every opportunity and saw how the children’s enjoyment, development and self-esteem were enhanced. It also changed their views of children’s interests and competencies.
- Most settings involved the whole staff team and some delegated tasks to each team member to share the load, but also to bring everyone on board. A setting commented on how the project had given them the chance to reflect on their current outdoor practice. One setting was conscious of how much had been lost by not involving the whole team.
- Significant and related impacts of the project reported by several settings were evolutions of how planning is done and the role of the adults, and development of the curriculum. Planning had become much more flexible and less time-limited, allowing staff to follow children’s interests and let them see things through and also allowing them make the most of spontaneous opportunities.
- They reported that they were now much more child-led, with adults acting as facilitators and sharers of interests and work tasks. Even in the more adult-supported activities, there were more suggestions from the children and more discussion. *“Our instruction mode has gone”*. Children were much more confident to take the lead because they realised that this would be supported by the adults. The dynamics of decision-making on a day-to-day level has shifted to a more even balance between adults and children.
- The demands of monitoring the project for evaluation, together with the changed adult role had resulted in staff in some settings observing children more and being aware of their reactions and comments. Observation-led planning is a priority for effective teaching and learning in the Early Years, and for tuning into individual children’s needs.
- In two settings the levels of child and adult enthusiasm generated by the growing theme have resulted in a major change to the curriculum content. In one, the outdoors and growing have *“replaced all of our original plans for the next six months”*. In the other, the summary was that *“the project has become the curriculum”*. Staff in these settings have become convinced of the role of outdoor learning in children’s lives, in particular the strong connection children have to growing and nurturing, and of their role as co-learners.
- Some settings were aware of the staff development that had taken place over the course of their project, from curriculum development to project management and several specific skills. *“We’ve learned just as much as they have”*. The demands of monitoring and evaluation for the project had enhanced these skills, with some

starting as beginners in this. A setting with a high level of temporary and trainee staff felt that the impact of their project would go out into other settings in due course.

- Nearly half the settings identified significantly increased independence and self-selected activity as a major outcome of their project. This was due both to adult's intentions and to children's responses to the new provision and experiences.
- Strong features of the projects were the many opportunities for first-hand experience, real tasks and responsibility for children. "*Children thrive on working outside with adults.*" This project has added to a growing awareness of the importance to young children's well-being and self-image of real partnership with adults, as well as the stimulus for learning and developing.
- Alongside this, several settings integrated play opportunities into their provision for growing, in some cases using the created 'landscapes' for small-world play, or providing digging areas and role play, for example. Resources for play purchased with the project funding have added value to the developments since children process first hand experiences through their play, individually and together.
- Most settings also gave children many opportunities to express their ideas and feelings through a wide range of creative activity, from singing and dancing, telling or enacting stories, to pencil, paint, craft and design work.
- More than half of the settings also designed into their projects seating that would encourage calm, reflection and conversation, from simple benches to wooden pavilions, since these are elements of all successful gardens. The latter have lent themselves to places for group story and snack and for role-play associated with the garden.
- The project was seen by many to promote emotional health and well-being, to encourage socialisation (there was more playing, doing and talking together) and to meet young children's learning styles (active, sensory, exploratory, open-ended, play-based, expression through many 'languages'). Several settings found that troubled and challenging children related strongly to these experiences and better those they had been offered before. There were also several reports of children with additional needs engaging well through these new experiences. For example, in one setting a child with autism watched, learned and then planted shallots independently.
- As detailed in a previous section, most settings found that parental interest was high and that their projects have enhanced their partnership with parents in many ways, some quite subtle but significant. Where the setting placed importance on this and relationships were already good, the impact appears to be greatest. The triangle between home-child-nursery has clearly become stronger in some settings, giving children more continuity across their daily life and increasing the potential for their learning and development.

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