

Every Child Matters
Change For Children



SureStart

Every building matters

A visual guide to designing Sure Start Children's Centres and other early years facilities and spaces



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Foreword

In the last 10 years the Sure Start programme has transformed the delivery of integrated services and quality early learning to children and their families.

Children's centres are crucial to the government's 10 year strategy for childcare, *Choice for parents, the best start for children*, and are key to improving outcomes for young children as part of the *Every child matters* agenda. By 2010 there will be 3,500 children's centres, one in every community. We want centres to be accessible, welcoming, flexible, inspirational spaces.

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) is the government's advisor on architecture urban design and public space. CABE has worked in partnership with the former DfES and now DCSF since Sure Start's inception. By providing advice and guidance to partners involved in the delivery of children's centres, CABE promotes good design, helping children's centres to become the focus of the community.

This guide has been created with CABE for the next phase of delivery. Drawing on the lessons that local authorities and other key partners have learned and highlighting the importance of quality design, the guide focuses on both the preparation for, and the design of, a children's centre and other early years facilities.

The first section 'vision statement' highlights the importance of five strategic issues that need to be addressed and outlines the qualities that should be present in the final building. Writing a project brief and how the design process works are also introduced. The main section 'creating an inspiring building' focuses on specific issues to consider when creating an inspiring building for children and families, and demonstrates how small changes can impact positively on a building. This section uses visual examples of practical ideas and suggestions and highlights good design practice. Lastly, a summary of overriding qualities focuses on key aspects of every project, including incorporating sustainability features efficiently.



'Every building matters' is aimed at local authorities and other key stakeholders including children, schools and families, to be used as a visual tool and reference – to provoke discussion, encourage debate, enable consultation – which will promote decision-making about priorities and provide practical, quality solutions which can easily be incorporated.

Good design matters – from providing a warm welcoming entrance for visitors to a stimulating outdoor space to encourage healthy, active children. This comprehensive guide will inspire and encourage decision-makers to consider design choices so that children's services will be delivered from buildings that work for today and long into the future – every building does matter.

Sheila Scales

Director, Early Years, Extended Schools and Special Needs Group
Department for Children, Schools and Families

Understanding the aim of this guide

- **What is a children's centre?**
- **Why has this guide been created?**
- **How can this guide be used?**

In 2001, the government published *Every child matters*, a 10-year plan of action committed to giving young children the best possible start in life. One part of this agenda involves the creation of a large number of children's centres, which will act as a focus for the delivery of services that support and enhance family life. By 2010, there will be 3,500 centres, one for every community in England. Centres being developed between 2008-10 will be mainly outside the most disadvantaged areas and will offer a less intensive level of support than those developed in earlier phases.

– What is a Sure Start Children's Centre?

A children's centre is a facility where the under 5s, and their families, can go to receive a range of integrated services commissioned by the local authority and other support services. Some services within the buildings may be provided by other agencies. Welcoming and easy to access, these inspiring places bring together flexible childcare, early education, family health provision and other support services. Help is also available to parents – mothers and fathers – and carers who would like to receive further training, or those seeking employment.



– Why have we created this guide?

A large number of children's centres have now been completed in the most disadvantaged areas in England. This visual guide has been created to share the experiences of those involved in the design, construction and running of these buildings. These include representatives from the DCSF, Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), CABE, and a number of local authorities.

The next phase of children's centres needs to be delivered within two years, and may have lower budgets than previous projects. Situated outside the most disadvantaged areas, they will

build on existing provision offered in family centres, primary and maintained nursery schools and health centres. In some areas, services may need to be delivered from more than one building. Where this occurs, the buildings should be close to each other to enable parents to access all the services they need easily on a single 'campus'.

Using a mixture of practical advice and inspiring images, the aim of this guide is to show local authorities how to make best use of available monies, and deliver inspiring buildings that enhance family life, within challenging timescales.



– How can this guide be used?

This document is primarily aimed at local authorities, but it should also be helpful for designers and end users of early years buildings. Part of the information included may already be known by some readers, but not by all, making it a useful document to share across the development team.

It is envisaged that it may be used in a variety of ways: as a client guide to creating a Sure Start Children's Centre, as a starting point for strategic discussions, or as a sourcebook for design inspiration. The guide contains two main sections.

It is created as a pdf rather than a print document, so can be read easily on screen or modified for presentations. It can of course be printed off.

The first section explains the purpose of a **vision statement**, and why it is important to create one during the initial stages of a children's centre or early years project. This part of the document also sets out the five

strategic issues that the vision statement must address, and provides suggestions on how to structure discussions to achieve this.

The second section introduces a series of **design themes** that address the five strategic issues. Each design theme is broken down into a number of specific principles. These are individually explained, and illustrated using images of completed children's centres. Summary boxes are also provided with links to specific policy documents and other useful information. It is important to bear in mind, however, that this guide does not replace any existing publications, and should be read in conjunction with the 'Building for Sure Start' document.

Finally, although this guide has been specifically created to aid the design of Sure Start Children's Centres, it is of relevance to any community building with provision for small children.



Writing a vision statement

- **What should be included in a vision statement?**
- **What are the key issues to think about?**

Once a local authority has decided to build a children's centre or early years facility, the next step should be to define the broad principles for the project. Together, these are known as a vision statement, which can be used to describe the aims of the project to a wider audience, including the local community.



– What should be included in a vision statement?

A vision statement is generally created by a local authority and should express its own and other stakeholders' aspirations for the project. Collective discussions are a useful way of capturing issues and ideas at an early stage, and outlining the qualities that should be present in the completed building.

The final document may cover how the building is to be used, what it might look and feel like, ambitions in relation to environmental sustainability, and the way in which the local community should be involved. If the local authority is delivering a number of projects, a vision statement should help achieve consistent results, although individual projects might be singled out for specific approaches.

Vision statements should be created before design team professionals become involved, and provide a useful way of measuring whether a project is meeting its objectives. While schedules of accommodation and finishes are important to the finished building, these should be covered in a more detailed project brief.

It is important that vision statements are allowed to evolve during the design and construction of a Sure Start Children's Centre or early years facility, and reviewed when they are finally in use. This will help to improve the quality of subsequent buildings through changes to project briefs, detailed design and specification.



– What are the key issues to think about?

Early years facilities including Sure Start Children's Centres are likely to differ in size, location, style and internal arrangement, but there are a number of key issues that must be addressed in order to meet the key objectives.

These are described in the following five statements, and a number of questions are also provided to help start discussions.



A children's centre should:

Be inspiring to local children, their families and staff.

Think about the different ways a children's centre could enhance family life.

- How could it nurture children's imagination and build self-confidence?
- How might it dramatically improve the delivery of combined services?
- What would make it a stimulating place to work?



A children's centre should:

Be highly valued by the community that it serves.

Consider what would make a children's centre the heart of a neighbourhood.

- How might the wider community be involved in the design process?
- What would make local people look upon the centre with pride?
- How could it be used to raise awareness of valuable services such as health and Job Centre Plus?

**A children's centre should:****Be welcoming, accessible and easy to use.**

Imagine the different people that would benefit from a children's centre.

- What would make the building inviting to everyone?
- What needs do different users have, and how can these be accommodated?
- What would make the building easy to operate and move around in?

**A children's centre should:****Be sustainable and respect the environment.**

Reflect on the long-term responsibilities of creating a new building.

- How might rooms adapt to allow for a variety of uses, including health services?
- What is needed to deliver social, health and educational development?
- How could maintenance and running costs be minimised?

**A children's centre should:****Be flexible, supportive and responsive to changing needs.**

Consider how well-designed spaces might support different activities.

- How might rooms adapt to allow for a variety of uses?
- What is needed to deliver social and educational development?
- How might spaces encourage interaction between staff and parents?
- Where can reclaimed materials be used and which construction materials can be recycled?

Creating an inspiring building

- **What is a project brief?**
- **How does the design process work?**
- **What are the most important design issues?**



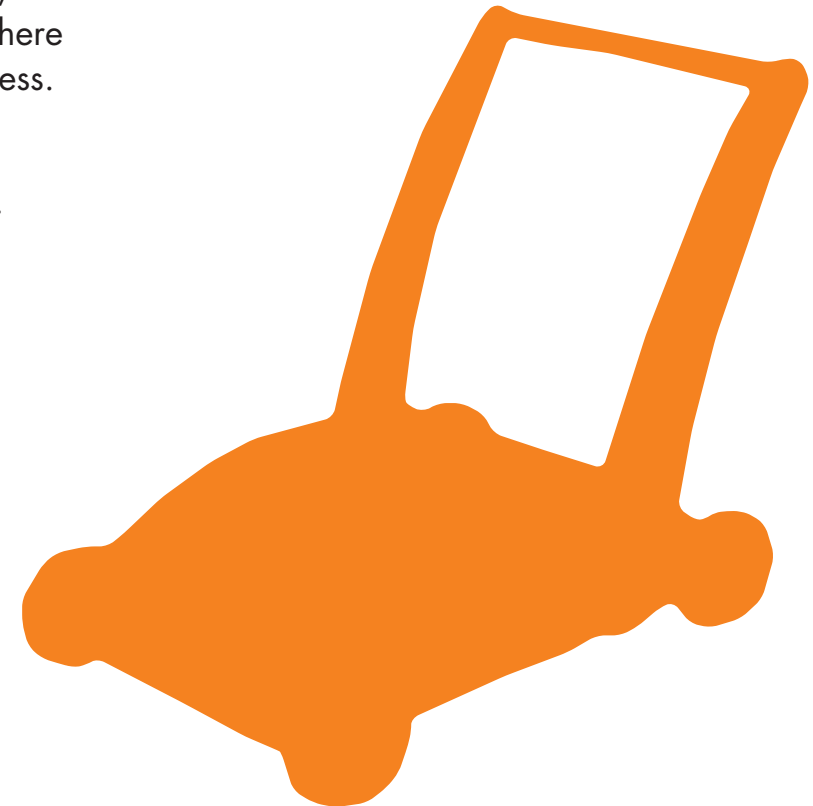
Having produced a vision statement, a local authority will need to commission a designer to carry out each project. While it is not necessary for them to have experience of creating an early years building, a designer must be able to demonstrate flair, innovation, practicality and passion for the project, as well as the ability to engage and communicate with stakeholders and the local community.

During the interview process, each designer should describe how they work, showing examples of completed buildings, and outline what their approach to the project would be. Often, a client will benefit from appointing a small design office that sees the building as a flagship project. But it is important that their level of commitment is matched across the whole development team, and that they receive a clear and concise project brief.

– What is a project brief?

While a vision statement sets out the overall aspirations of a local authority for one or more children's centres, a project brief will contain more detailed information about each individual building. These documents should outline the specific activities that will take place, include estimates of space requirements and storage needs, and provide an insight into operational processes.

It is quite normal for a project brief to evolve during the design process, as different alternatives are explored for delivering services. If things do change, record why this has happened so that there is a record of the decision-making process. Try to keep the project brief up to date, and use it as a checklist each time the design is being reviewed to ensure that all requirements are being met.



– How does the design process work?

Great buildings are the result of creative and flexible working relationships between clients, designers and local communities. Generally, a project will start with detailed discussions about **the brief** and an investigation into a series of different options for development. Once the most effective approach has been agreed, the designer will produce a set of 'concept sketches' to illustrate the overall **look and feel** of the building. Try not to have preconceived ideas about what an early years facility including a children's centre should be like before this meeting as a creative designer will seek opportunities to make a building more inspiring and economical, so their ideas may not be wrong, just different. But if something is not right, then say so. These early discussions offer an ideal opportunity to identify misunderstandings, and clarify operational

issues that might appear obvious to staff, but which still need to be clearly communicated.

As the design progresses, more accurate plans, sections and elevations will be produced, and the overall organisation of the building will settle into its final form. Discussions will gradually become more detailed and focus on issues such as the layout of individual rooms, choices of furniture and materials, and the use of colour. During the design process ask to be shown three-dimensional sketches and physical models of what the final building will look like and feel like, both inside and out. These are invaluable in helping to understand the design and to communicate with others.

When complete, a building should never surprise its client, unless it has surpassed all expectations.



What are the most important design issues?

Due to their different site locations, varying community needs and budgets, each children's centre is likely to be unique. But in order to be successful, these buildings must all address a common set of design issues.

These have been developed into a series of five design themes that relate directly to the strategic issues outlined in the vision statement. Each theme contains within it a set of principles, and together these should be used as the basis for starting conversations with the design team, and developing proposals for children's centres.

The design principles set out in the following pages are illustrated using images of children's centres completed within a range of financial budgets. Although approaches vary, they all demonstrate the benefits of creative thinking, and a commitment to providing young children, their families and staff with an inspirational environment.



1/Designing play spaces

- 1.1/Delivering a learning experience
- 1.2/Making the most of the site
- 1.3/Allowing run-in, run-out play
- 1.4/Creating challenging outside play
- 1.5/Providing appropriate toilet facilities



Skylights provide natural light and ventilation

Movable partition

Circulation space used as play space

Wall space for display

1.1/Delivering a learning experience

For children to connect with play space it needs to be **rich and varied** in character: a place that encourages independence, exploration and creativity. The most successful play spaces are flexible and have good proportions, and offer lots of possibilities for different kinds of activities. But remember to also create some **special areas**: small places full of character and interest, which children will want to call their own.



Remember to design windows that allow children to see out

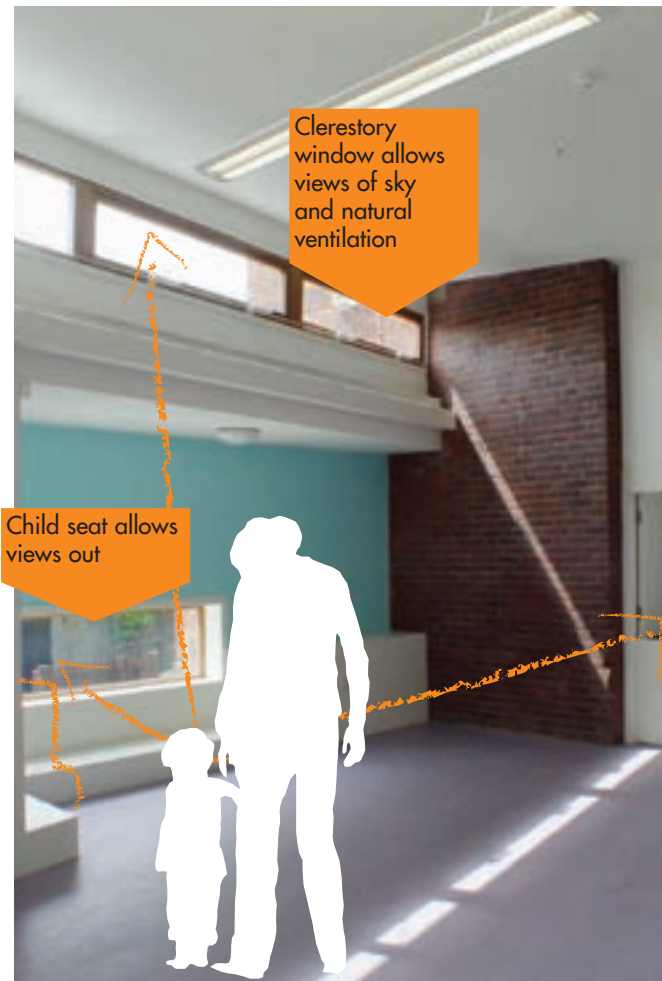
Stretching the budget to allow for a door allows better access to the exterior



1.2/Making the most of the site

Think carefully about the way play spaces are related to their immediate surroundings. Check the path that the sun will take during the day and use this to help plan the building. Also, take advantage of any natural elements such as trees.

Create interesting views of the outside using doors and windows, but bear in mind that these need to work for small children as well as adults. If having a deep room is unavoidable, then consider using a skylight. These bring daylight into dark corners and are good for providing natural ventilation. They also make interiors more interesting by creating glimpses of the sky.



Clerestory window allows views of sky and natural ventilation

Child seat allows views out



Natural environment used as integral part of building design

Tree acts as textural interest and provides shading during summer

1.3/Allowing run-in, run-out play

Young children are active learners and like to move around when they play. Try to **link indoor and outdoor** play spaces together, so that they can run between them, but make sure there are no steps so that it is safe.

Give every internal space a view of outside, and external play spaces a view back in. Also, think creatively about areas where the inside and outside meet, as fixed canopies or flexible awnings can create further opportunities for play and provide shelter or shade when it is needed.

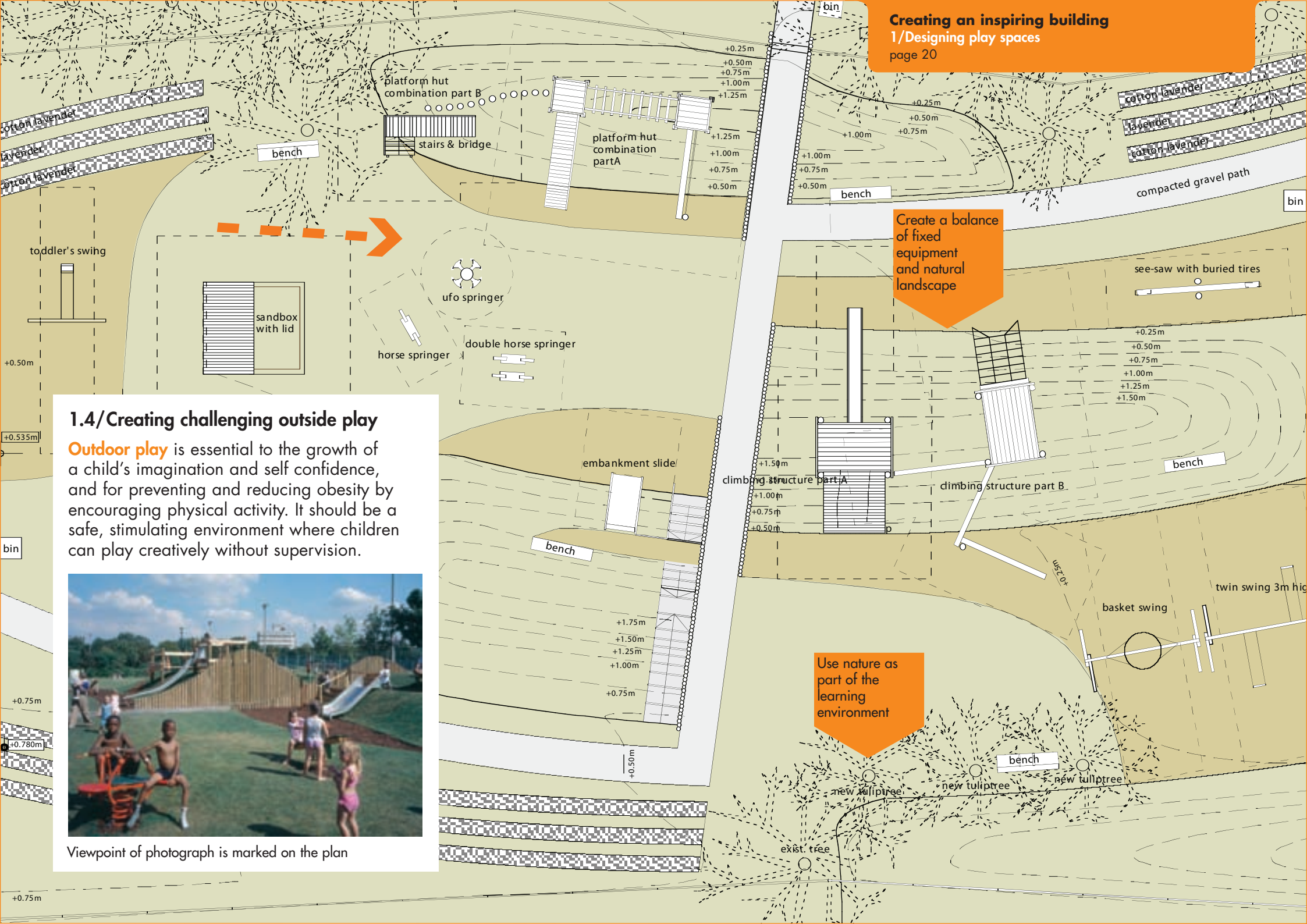
Skylight allows ventilation and views to the sky

Sliding door allows area to be used as single play space

No trip hazards between buildings and external play

Easy to clean floor surface





1.4/Creating challenging outside play

Outdoor play is essential to the growth of a child's imagination and self confidence, and for preventing and reducing obesity by encouraging physical activity. It should be a safe, stimulating environment where children can play creatively without supervision.



Viewpoint of photograph is marked on the plan

Creative change
in levels can
enhance the
character of a
play area



1.4/Creating challenging outside play

Bear in mind that the design of outside play areas should always focus on the **quality** of the experience, rather than the quantity of space. This is especially the case when access to outside is limited, and in some situations, such as heavily built-up areas, a balcony or rooftop may provide the answer.

1.5/Providing appropriate toilet facilities

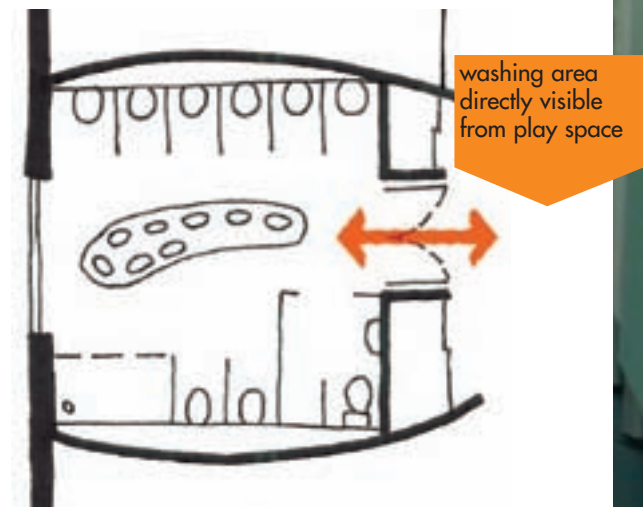
Try to locate toilets next to play spaces, so they are easy for children to reach and encourage their independence. Make sure a member of staff can see them and avoid obstacles such as heavy doors. Remember that not all children are able-bodied, and that toilet provision needs to be made for a range of disabilities.

If toilets for different age groups are located together, they will be cheaper to build, and it is easier to share equipment such as a changing table or sluice. Providing them in this way will also make it easier to remodel play spaces in future without the expense of moving plumbing and sanitary ware.

Fixtures and fittings at child height

Consider spray taps to reduce water use and risk of flooding

Non-slip flooring material



2/Involving the community

- 2.1/Developing a neighbourhood presence
- 2.2/Building on a school site
- 2.3/Working with local people
- 2.4/Designing for social interaction





Think about working with an artist to create a character for the building



Welcoming signage



2.1/Developing a neighbourhood presence

The services on offer in a children's centre are designed to benefit a wide range of people, so it is important that the building is well connected within its immediate neighbourhood. A location close to good public transport links will ensure that it is easy to reach, and clear signage is important, especially if a building is off the beaten track.

Models help clients clearly understand complex building relationship more clearly



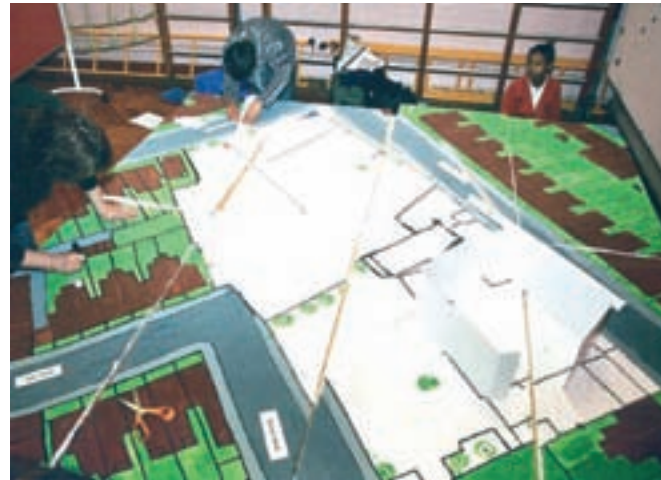
Design stage model

2.2/Building on a school site

Placing a children's centre on an existing school site will create opportunities for the two buildings to share common spaces and facilities. It will also help enhance the area as a focus for the community. Consider how each of the buildings might benefit from this new relationship, but also work through detailed operational issues such as whether to have separate or combined entrances, and how external play spaces might be defined.

Positioning of new building creates enhanced sense of enclosure and opportunities for shared outdoor play space





2.3/Working with local people

Involving local people in the design process is an essential part of understanding the specific needs of a community and how these might be addressed. Some groups of people are difficult to reach and may need to be engaged on their home patch or at a community event. Discuss with them what the vision for the building is, the services that are to be delivered and how these might influence the design. But be clear about what you are consulting about, and keep expectations realistic by explaining what parts of a project participants can influence. Afterwards, remember that some people are sensitive to change, so find effective ways to keep them regularly informed about what is happening.



Space is well located next to reception area

A well-proportioned room allows flexibility

2.4/Designing for social interaction

A children's centre should be designed to attract parents and families, and encourage them to take advantage of what is on offer. For this to succeed, spaces for healthcare and other services need to allow staff and families to **work together** in an effective and enjoyable way.

Also, think carefully about staff accommodation, and how social and working areas might be organised to support greater collaboration between the different organisations and agencies delivering services.



Good balance of natural light in a busy office environment

3/Making an entrance

- 3.1/Creating a sense of arrival
- 3.2/Making a welcoming reception area
- 3.3/Planning an accessible centre
- 3.4/Providing suitable buggy storage



Supporting structure and rooflight signals main entrance

Canopy for shade and shelter

Intercom elegantly integrated with building

Different materials used to break up elevational treatment

Angles of new extension create sense of enclosure

3.1/Creating a sense of arrival

To make a building that is cherished by the community, it needs to appear welcoming and **accessible**. Think carefully about the way people will approach the building and try to create a sense of arrival. The entrance should be as prominent as possible on the street so that it is easy to find.





3.1/Creating a sense of arrival

Make the doors wide enough for large buggies and use plenty of glazing to allow views into the reception area. A delicate balance needs to be struck between providing security for the building and allowing ease of access. Don't forget to provide somewhere sheltered for people to wait outside.



Desk allows good surveillance into main parts of nursery

Entrance is a key place for meeting and discussion

3.2/Making a welcoming reception area

The reception area is the first space people encounter in a building, so it needs to create a good impression by being hospitable and easy to use. Busy and cramped reception areas feel chaotic and are stressful to use, so even when space is limited make them as large as possible, so that people feel comfortable and can relax while they wait.



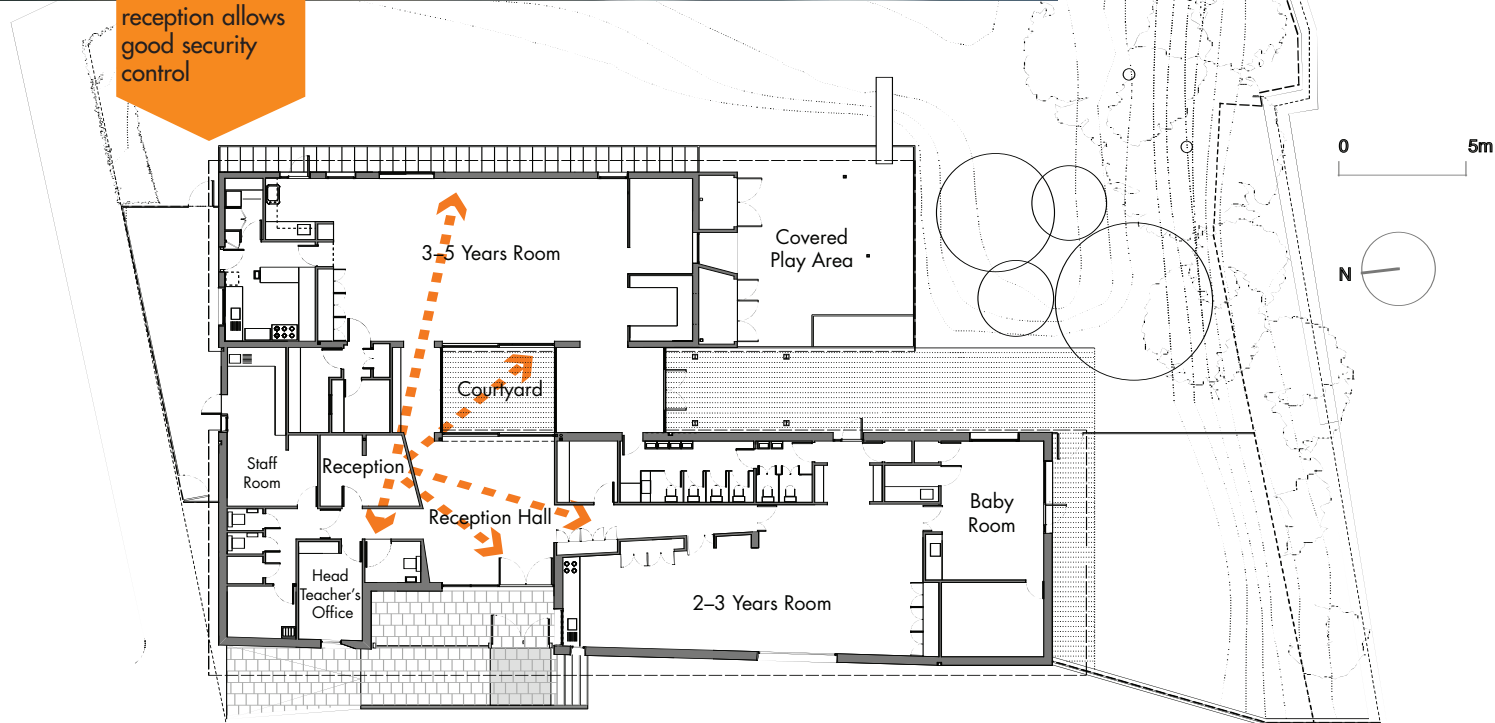
Reception allows glimpses of all parts of the building

Security is integrated into reception design

Location of reception allows good security control

3.3/Planning an accessible centre

Children's centres are small buildings with small budgets, which makes space a valuable resource, so work hard to make as much of the floor area usable as possible. **Planning** the main spaces so that they are **easily accessed** from the reception area will help to reduce circulation space. It will also mean that the building has a simple, logical layout that can be navigated without the need for signs.





3.4/Providing suitable buggy storage

Buggy storage is often a problem in early years buildings and needs to be carefully planned from the start. If it is outside, it needs to be sheltered and may work best if it is designed as part of the entrance canopy. It is also important that it can be easily seen from the reception area for supervision and security.

If buggy storage is inside, keep it close to the entrance area, but remember that most families will pick up their children at the same time, so make sure it is big enough.



Buggy storage is important but it should not define the whole building

Storage can be viewed from reception



Simple and robust cover for storage



Cycle rack to facilitate sustainable travel

4/Respecting the environment

4.1/Being sustainable

4.2/Allowing for adaptation

4.3/Minimising energy use


4.4/Generating renewable power



4.1/Being sustainable

It is essential that a children's centre is sustainable and does not compromise the world that young people will inherit. This issue needs to be considered from the outset as the siting of a building, its form and orientation are all key factors in environmental design.

As they are relatively small in size, early years buildings should be naturally ventilated using opening windows and skylights. This gives local control to the user, reduces running costs, and creates a healthier environment. Think carefully about conserving water and consider using low-flush toilets and spray taps. Also, an increasing number of recycled building products have recently become available, so ask for materials that do not have an adverse effect on the natural environment.



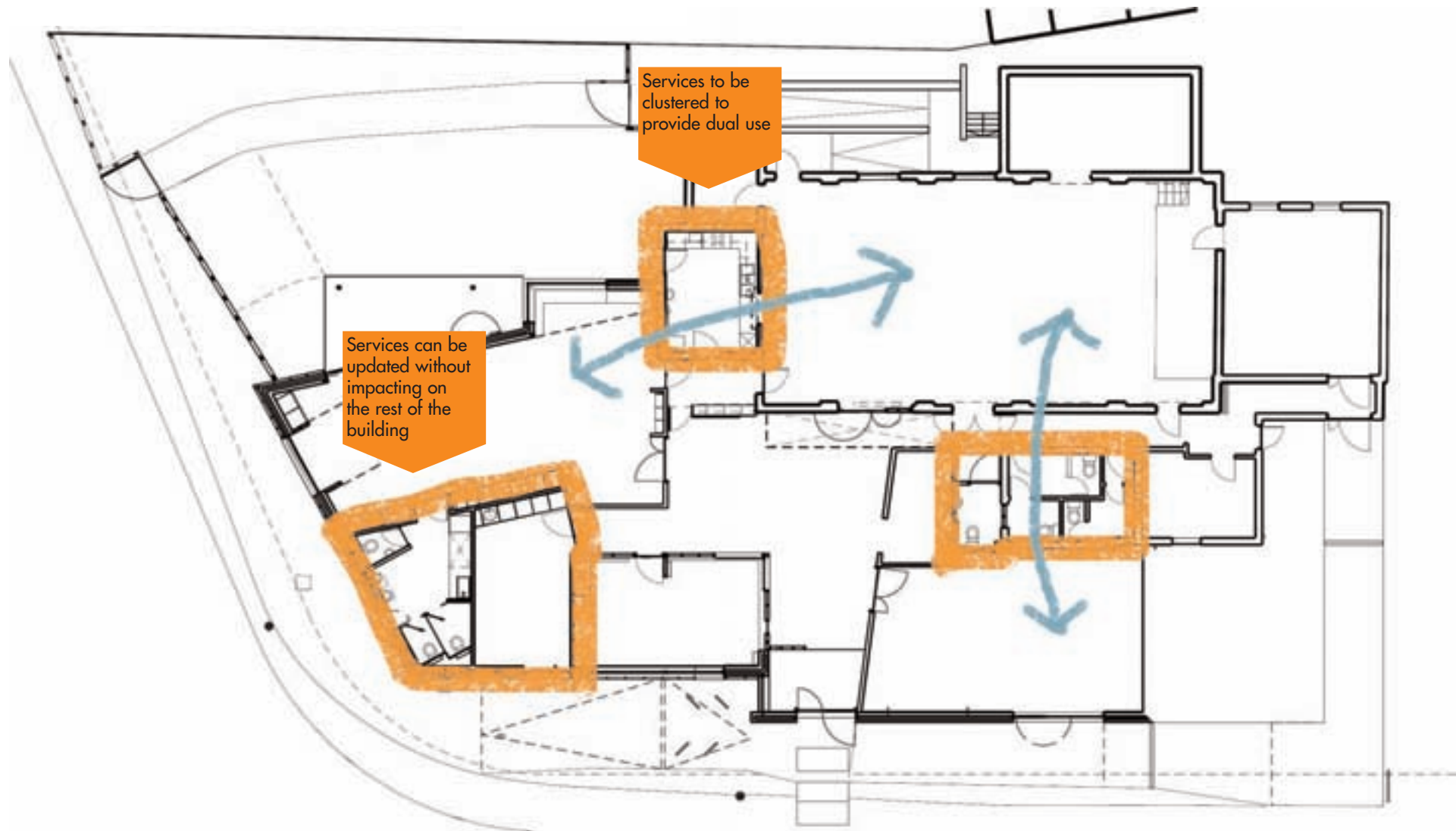
'Living' planted wall uses recycled rainwater

Brown roof uses recycled building material as bed for flora

Slim plan form helps to allow for natural ventilation

4.2/Allowing for adaptation

It is likely that, at some point, the interior of a children's centre will need to change. Shifting emphasis in community needs, new technology or changes in operational practice can all make an impact, and the best response to this is to build as few fixed walls as possible. Try to cluster all the services conduits such as heating, water, soil pipes and lighting controls into a few concentrated locations. This will make remodelling the interior less expensive, and easier to achieve, at a later date.





4.3/ Minimising energy use

Think of energy as a precious resource and aim to use as little as possible in a children's centre. This will reduce the environmental impact of the development and help keep down running costs. A good designer will know how to utilise and control the effects of the sun on a building through its positioning on the site, its shape and the use of devices such as roof overhangs and solar shading. Minimise heat loss by using high levels of insulation, and get a specialist to advise on energy efficient appliances and whether heat recovery technology could be used.

Installing features like visible smart meters can help monitor energy savings and are useful in demonstrating to children and parents the seriousness given to resource use in the children's centre.

Micro wind generator and solar panel supply power to building

Careful use of appropriate technologies

4.4/Generating renewable power

Once passive energy design measures have been incorporated into a children's centre, assess whether it is appropriate to use technologies for generating **renewable energy**.

A number of systems are available on the market, including wind turbines, photovoltaic cells, solar panels and ground source heat pumps. An environmental engineer can advise on the relative merits of each, whether they are suitable for a specific project and how much they cost to install and run.

In some cases, such as a biomass CHP system, renewable power only becomes viable if it is part of an integrated site strategy and linked into adjacent school buildings or the wider neighbourhood.



5/Planning for change

5.1/Designing for the future

5.2/Programming use of space

5.3/Ensuring adequate storage

5.4/Embracing flexibility




5.1/Designing for the future

Buildings generally evolve over time and, although it is difficult to predict the future, it is important that a children's centre provide opportunities for growth. Bear this in mind when the building is being located on the site, and try to imagine how any future building might be extended at a later stage. Occasionally, this approach might be unfeasible and should not compromise the quality of the proposed building.



5.2/Programming use of space

When writing a design brief, create a simple timetable to show how each of the spaces will be used during the week. If there are gaps in the schedule it is likely that some rooms could serve more than one purpose. By using space more efficiently the money that is saved can be used to improve quality in other parts of the project. To achieve a realistic programme seek advice from those providing the services, but ask them to be flexible about the way the building might operate and how it meets their needs.



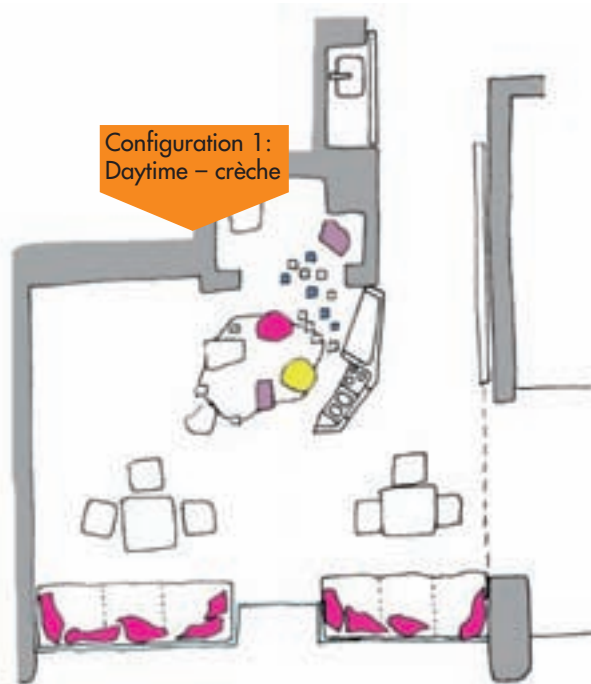
Well-proportioned space can allow adaptation and change



Used sparingly, acoustic partitions can allow great flexibility

5.2/Programming use of space

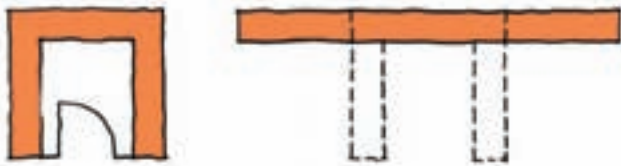
As a general rule, one large simple space can accommodate a diverse range of activities more easily than several smaller spaces. This approach also allows services to be changed or extended in the future.



5.3/Ensuring adequate storage

Well thought-out storage is essential for the smooth running of a children’s centre. Get it wrong and it will be difficult to deliver services or run activities effectively. Think about storage needs from the outset and ensure there is enough for each user group, that it is convenient, and where necessary secure.

Start by listing everything that needs to be stored. Ensure that there are a variety of cupboard depths suitable for different sizes of items, and think about issues like weight, as heavy or cumbersome objects may need more robust solutions than smaller, lighter things. Where possible use self-service storage that is open to children, as this helps youngsters learn the value of materials and helps develop organisational skills.



Access to storage can be incorporated into open-plan areas in order to save space

Discreet full-height wall storage cupboards

Child accessible storage



5.4/Embracing flexibility

Early years activities need to be rethought on a regular basis to challenge staff, stimulate parents and excite young children. Moveable items such as screens, partitions and trolleys can be used to change play spaces and create a different atmosphere from one day to the next.



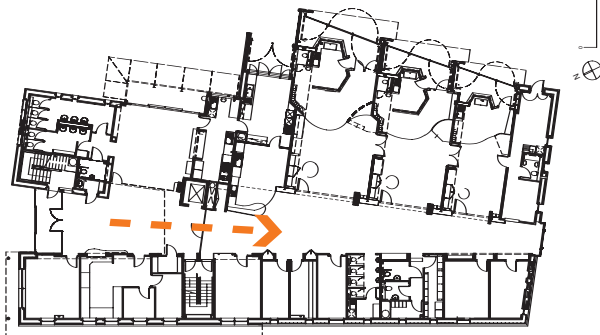
Fixed walls to define service areas

Large open space kept free of obstructions

Moveable furniture used to define areas

5.4/Embracing flexibility

Make sure that cosy corners can easily be created within a larger space using moveable elements that are stable and do not turn into a hazard. Soundproof folding partitions are expensive but are worth considering in small buildings as they can allow multiple use of a single space.



Arrow shows viewpoint of main image

Folding door/partition between play space and shared area allows flexibility of use



– Overriding qualities

What qualities should a Sure Start Children's Centre embody?

Think of a children's centre not as a building with walls, but as a container for life. Inspiring places are beautifully designed, well cared for and filled with joy. When a project is complete, the client and design team should be able to show how it embodies the following 10 qualities that can deepen and enhance the experience of families and staff alike.

1 Passionate ownership

Clients need to take ownership of the design from the outset, ensure the building looks and feels like an integral part of the community, and encourage staff and parent involvement.

3 Location specific

Buildings should be responsive to their surroundings, work within the scale and grain of the neighbourhood, and capitalise on views of the natural environment.

2 Sustainable development

Projects should control the effects of the sun by using passive design principles to determine building form, siting and orientation, and consider the use of renewable energy technologies where budgets allow.

4 Welcoming & inclusive

A children's centre should be welcoming to all people by having a friendly neighbourhood presence, clear identity and a well-located and inviting entrance.

5 Inspired & accessible

Interiors should be attractive and enhance everyday life, with sensible layouts that reduce circulation, aid wayfinding and allow effective supervision by staff.

6 Robust & changable

Projects should allow for future adaptation by identifying areas for later extensions, and grouping services to reduce the cost of reconfiguring the interior.

7 Well-proportioned & flexible

The layout of play space should allow a multitude of activities, be reconfigurable, and animated with natural light and thoughtful use of colour.

8 Accessible outdoors

Indoor play spaces should be directly linked to secure external environments that provide safe, stimulating learning opportunities for young children.

9 Effective workplaces

Staff accommodation should be spacious and well thought out, encourage collaboration between service providers, and allow for future expansion.

10 Smart storage

Storage space needs to be carefully defined by staff, integrated into the overall building concept, and allow children direct access where appropriate.

– Food for thought

Environment ‘affordance’

Childcare expert Harry Heft suggests that all environmental features should be considered in terms of the developmental activities they encourage in the young: a concept he calls ‘affordance’.

A smooth flat surface encourages walking or running, while a soft spongy surface ‘affords’ lying down and relaxing. Similarly, a room full of light and shadows will stimulate children in a particular way, while a dark, warm place with soft furniture, lots of cushions and soft flooring is more calming and provides a suitable setting for storytelling, resting and sleeping.

Considered in this way, the atmosphere of each place within a nursery should offer developmental possibilities. Entrances, washrooms and circulation areas all have ‘affordances’ which can provide children with the opportunity to play in an imaginative way, if they are safe and accessible.

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[Ref. Heft, H. (1988) ‘Affordances of children’s environments: a functional approach to environmental description’, Children’s environment quarterly, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 29–37.]

Symbolic spaces

Educational researcher Alison Clark has observed and recorded the way children spend their time in early years settings, and found that many youngsters identify with their environment in a symbolic way.

Surprisingly, features that might appear unimportant to adults actually form key elements of the nurturing environment for a child. Clark’s examples of this included a bench where children kissed their parents goodbye, and a seat in the sick bay where they recovered from a fall, both of which were significant places that provided a strong sense of security and belonging.

Likewise, informal meeting spaces such as the cloakroom, and defined ‘landmarks’ such as the reception desk and notice board, were also important for children, helping them identify with a place and develop a sense of security.

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[Ref. Clark, A. (2006) ‘Talking and listening to children’, Children’s Spaces. Edited by Mark Dudek, published Architectural Press.]

A family environment

In 1928, the respected British pioneer of nursery education Margaret McMillan alluded to the ideal early years environment as a ‘garden city of children’. By this she meant that unlike a conventional school, a nursery should be designed as a set of small-scale buildings, set in a green landscape, each housing a family-sized group of children.

While it is not possible to follow all of McMillan’s principles, a number of her ideas are still relevant today, for example, the notion that indoor activity spaces should open directly to the outdoors for providing run-in, run-out play. Also, her views on buildings can be interpreted as the need to design environments that have soft, child-orientated qualities, as opposed to being hard, over-sized and out of scale with the young people using them.

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Dudek, M, Kindergarten Architecture, 2001, SPON, pg 4

The curriculum and your designer

If a designer is creating a children’s centre for the first time, they may not be aware that a specific early years curriculum exists, and that this affects the way space is used in a nursery. These requirements should be discussed at an early stage in the design process, as important learning experiences, such as those involving water, sand and construction, may require special floor finishes, built-in drainage or other careful detailing.

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[Ref. Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage.]

The importance of dens

Dens are hideaways: secret spaces that allow children to create and inhabit their own imaginary worlds. They provide safe environments in which they can challenge themselves, both mentally and physically.

‘The den is the chrysalis out of which the butterfly is born.’

David Sobel, psychologist

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Outdoor play

Recent research has demonstrated the importance of access to external play for the development of young children. In a large study undertaken by the Faculty of Education at the University of Plymouth, Dr Sue Rogers has shown that the outdoor environment provides unique experiences for role-play and the social development of children. Conversely, Michael Shayer, Professor of Applied Psychology at King’s College University of London, has established that a lack of experiential play is a core reason for the decline in children’s cognitive ability.

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Early years legislation

When designing a children’s centre it is important to remember that these buildings need to conform to existing legislation and standards such as the OFSTED regulations and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

The EYFS refers to the phase of learning and development starting from birth and finishing at the end of the academic year when a child turns five. From September 2008, it will be applied across all registered early years settings, including maintained and independent schools. This will ensure that all children have access to an integrated learning and care experience, and that parents will receive a consistent quality of service whichever setting their child attends.

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Play space guidance

A number of government publications already exists that relate specifically to early years buildings, and these need to be taken into account during the design stages. Of particular relevance is the former ODPM document ‘Developing Accessible Play Space – a Good Practice Guide’ published in 2003.

The EYFS also asks for time outside and knowledge and understanding of the world, including the opportunity to ‘encounter creatures in their... natural environments’.

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Special educational needs

Children's centres should be inclusive and designed to take account of youngsters with special educational needs (SEN). Building Bulletin 77 (in draft form at the time of writing, available from www.teachernet.gov.uk), an advisory document relating to schools, identifies ways in which the environment may affect different disabilities and provides in-depth design guidance.

Other useful technical literature includes:

- Building Regulations Approved Document Part M 2004
- BS8300:2001 Code of Practice for the design of buildings and their approaches to meet the needs of disabled people
- 'Colour and contrast': design guidance produced by Dulux for the use of colour and contrast to improve the built environment for visually impaired people
- 'Building Sight': design guidance produced by the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)
- DCSF design guidance Building Bulletin 102 (issued Jan 2008) includes guidance on early years

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Providing health facilities

Delivering integrated services is a key objective and health partners need to be consulted early in the design process to discuss space requirements.

NHS planning and design guidance for consulting rooms is generally too complex for provision in a children's centre, and spaces need to be less clinical and intimidating. Instead, designers should create a more home-like atmosphere with soft lighting and soft furnishings to encourage those who would not normally seek healthcare. Treatment rooms should be equipped with a couch, desk, washbasin, clinical sink, and sufficient cupboard storage for a basic medical kit. Thought also needs to be given to a crèche function, or toy storage, for situations such as when a mother needs to be examined.

Provision of health services may require the temporary use of other spaces in the building, such as an office for the midwife, a location for antenatal classes and casework meeting spaces. In most instances this can be achieved through careful room scheduling.

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For further technical details refer to the NHS website www.primarycare.nhsstates.gov.uk

Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)

A children's centre is a public building and needs to be carefully considered in terms of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). The intention of this legislation is to make sure that services are available and accessible to disabled people in a manner comparable to those who are able-bodied.

Although it may be difficult to meet everyone's requirements, many needs can be assessed and reasonable measures adopted to meet the requirements of the Act. These should remove potential barriers for the full age range of disabled children, and be achievable and affordable for the service or educational provider.

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Renewable energy funding

The Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) run a Low Carbon Buildings Programme providing funding for the purchase and installation of renewable energy technologies in developments carried out by non-profit organisations.

For a project to qualify it must be demonstrated that every effort has been made to increase energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions. Funding may cover up to three different technologies, including solar/thermal hot water techniques, ground water heat pumps, combined heat and power systems (CHP) and wind turbines. The grant is available for a maximum of three buildings per project.

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Further details are available at www.lowcarbonbuildings.org.uk

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Additional contributors

Bo Emecheta, DCSF, Early Years Foundation Stage; Fergus Donaghy, XCO2 Environmental Engineers; Jane Simpson, Aedas Access Consultancy
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Design

Duffy, www.duffydesign.com

Copywriting

Eric Holding

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1 Kemble Street
London WC2B 4AN
T 020 7070 6700
F 020 7070 6777
E enquiries@cabe.org.uk
www.cabe.org.uk

Commission for Architecture
and the Built Environment

The government's advisor
on architecture, urban design
and public space

department for children, schools and families

Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT
T 0870 000 2288
F 01928 794248
E info@dcsf.gov.uk
www.dcsf.gov.uk