Context
Children today spend less than half the time playing outdoors than their parents did and are less likely to spend time outdoors at school. They are growing up in an increasingly indoor, sedentary and virtual world, ever more divorced from the real world around them. This has a significant impact on their physical health, emotional wellbeing, social competence and their connection with the natural world and their local communities.

The best place for children to enjoy the outdoors, learn about the natural world and take vigorous exercise on a regular basis is in the school grounds. School grounds are safe and accessible, you need no additional staff, no consent forms, no transport, and there is no additional cost.

Currently there are a number of threats to school grounds which, when considered separately are important, but when considered together form grounds for real concern.

Proposed removal of School Premises Regulations that relate to School Grounds
At present School Premises Regulations exist to ensure that all children over the age of 8 years have a statutory entitlement to a minimum of area of team games playing field. Other types of playing field such as paved and grassed informal and recreation areas, playgrounds and habitat areas have no statutory protection but all providers of schools have, until now, been strongly encouraged to provide at least each type of playing field within a recommended area range. There is a proposal to remove the detailed school premises regulations in their original form and introduce the following replacement statement...

Suitable outdoor space must be provided in order to enable—
(a) physical education to be provided to pupils in accordance with the school curriculum; and
(b) pupils to play outside

Although new guidance will exist to inform the criteria for ‘suitable’ this will be guidance only and will not be legally binding.
Nowhere will it say that the outdoor space must be provided on the school site or be of any particular size, configuration or standard.

The removal of statutory protection of outdoor playing fields is a loss for future generations who could be taught in schools that have been built without playgrounds or playing fields. Loss of statutory protection for playing fields also brings huge risk to existing school playing fields and school grounds as this is the only remaining regulatory requirement against which applications for the disposal of school playing fields will be assessed to ensure they retain sufficient provision. The process of disposing of school playing fields is, itself, also being reviewed at this time.

This revised regulation will apply to all schools which is good news (currently Academies, Free Schools and Independent schools are not bound by the School Premises Regulations that apply to school grounds) but in reality many Academies are created on existing school sites and so inherit their playing fields (provided under statutory regulations and paid for with public funds) and most Independent schools have extensive high quality playing fields already.

The bigger picture
A perfect storm is brewing over the playing fields of England – statutory protection is being removed, the disposal process is being simplified, there is increasing pressure on schools to provide more classrooms for the rising numbers of children through the Basic Need Programme (see below – 2) whilst the Priority Schools Building Programme (see below – 3) has insufficient funds to ensure that the school grounds will be protected during refurbishment processes.

Why are school grounds so important?
There is plenty of evidence that shows that the provision of good quality, diverse and appropriately designed school grounds brings in rich rewards for most areas of a child’s health, well being and educational achievement. (See below -1)

Request for debate
Learning through Landscapes believe that the issues raised above are worthy of further exploration through an Early Day Motion or an adjournment debate.
APPENDIX

1 Benefits of School Grounds

Physical Health
Playing and learning outdoors can improve muscular strength, co-ordination, balance, dexterity and aerobic fitness. Children can burn as many calories in an active outdoor play session as in a PE lesson. Enjoying the outdoors in childhood leads to a greater use of the outdoors for active recreation in childhood and later life.

Learning
“When planned and implemented well, learning outside the classroom contributed significantly to raising standards and improving pupils’ personal, social and emotional development.”
(Ofsted, 2008)
When they took part in outdoor learning children:
• “Performed significantly better on achievement tests”
• And pupils “expressed high interest and well-being and low anger, anxiety, and boredom”
(Maller C in Dillon, 2010)

The draft revised primary Science curriculum includes a requirement that elements of the curriculum should be delivered in the natural environment – where better than the school grounds?

Emotional health
There is a wide body of research demonstrating the positive impact of nature on emotional wellbeing.
“In outdoor learning, pupils develop more positive relationships with each other, with their teachers and with the wider community. It can develop community pride and a greater sense of place, belonging and community.”

Nature deficit
Outdoor learning connects children and young people with the natural world. Positive experiences of nature in childhood have a significant impact on environmental attitudes and behaviours in adulthood. This is essential if we are to ask people to change their lifestyles and be more environmentally aware.

2 Basic Need provision
The need to provide additional pupil places owing to an increase in the numbers of school age children has led to £800m being committed to providing additional teaching space for schools. This additional space will take the form of new temporary or semi-permanent buildings on the school grounds or extensions into the school grounds of current school buildings.

Learning through Landscapes is a charity that helps children to connect with nature, become more active, learn outdoors, develop social skills and have fun.
www.ltl.org.uk
The impact on the usable space of the school grounds will be significant. It is not just the direct loss of outdoor space that will affect the quality of the outdoor space. The re-shaping of the grounds and the layout of the new buildings is likely to make the school grounds harder to use effectively.

3. Priority School Building Programme (PSBP)
This programme will deliver the refurbishment of building stock that is in poor condition, in total 261 schools will receive PSBP funding. In some cases this will involve elements of rebuild which will have to take place on the school grounds before pupils decant from the old building and the old building is demolished. The focus is on the internal spaces and there is little or no funding in the PSBP budgets for the effective restoration of the ground surface post-demolition. This could lead to poor quality outdoor spaces that, in the worst cases, may have to be taken out of use.