

Name	Cowgate Under 5's Centre
Local Authority	Edinburgh City Council
Type	Urban, city centre nursery
Numbers	76 children, 26 staff
Joined Eco Schools in...	2003
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Overview

We are a small nursery in the centre of a very busy city; our children come from all over Edinburgh and beyond.

On coming to the centre there are no 'obvious' opportunities to encourage the children to have direct contact with nature, but there are many visible signs illustrating our wastefulness.



How our involvement with Eco Schools came about:

From the very beginning we wanted an eco-friendly nursery as we strongly believe biodiversity and sustainability matters to all of us. Working with young children means we have an opportunity to help shape their values and attitudes. It is after all their world; it belongs to the children, and we borrow it for a short while. So with this in mind, we began visiting other eco-schools. One of the nurseries was Norduberg Nursery in Iceland. It was inspirational and my experience there encouraged me to explore the option of becoming a Green Flag Nursery.

Who's involved ?

- The Children
- The Parents
- The Families of the Children
- The Staff Team
- The Local Community

The children meet regularly as a small group. The adults (made up of parents and staff) meet as a group.

How we communicate

- The children visit the local recycling banks on a weekly basis - (three classrooms, three trips) making ourselves visible to the whole community.



- We have a eco display in our hallway, displaying all current relevant information, we send out monthly newsletters and we use signage throughout the building.



- We invite eco speakers to come and talk to the children and their parents and staff.

Details of actual activities and topics studied

We have tried to embed our eco philosophy throughout the centre. Here are some examples from the seven elements:

Litter

- We have very few litterbins throughout the building, but we do have several baskets positioned in the building to encourage people to sort and recycle their waste.
- We have approached the local prison with a request for the inmates to build a 'wooden' bin for our garden. The idea behind this is more to support local residents [who access the centre garden out with nursery hours] rather than our children, who thoughtfully separate their waste into the appropriate baskets or containers.

Waste Minimisation

- We have developed a web site to reduce the amount of paper produced for parents.
- We compost as much as possible in our bins which then feeds our garden.
- We use recycled materials in as many areas as possible.
- We record how much waste we recycle with the intention of reducing this as a goal.
- We no longer use paper clips but a recycled stapler. We print on both sides of paper.
- Our fruit delivery service takes away our cardboard and they use the cardboard again and again.
- We only use real nappies – we monitor this as well, in that we count how many nappies we are saving.
- All staff and children use terry towelling hand towels reducing our paper towel usage.



Energy

- We use only soft lighting, lamps etc & energy saving bulbs.
- Our heating system is a domestic system.
- We pull down our blinds in the evening to harness the heat.
- Where we used to use a tumble dryer, we now hang our washing out to dry.



Water

- We have filled plastic bottles in all our cisterns to minimise how much water we use.
- The children use left over water from lunch to feed the plants.
- At the end of the day, we empty the water from our water trays into our water butt in the garden. The children then use this to feed the plants in the garden.



Transport

- There is no car parking at Cowgate, therefore users have to use public transport, bicycles or walk. We take the children on many local walks and rarely use public transport to get around.

Health & Well-Being

- We are a registered Health-Promoting School - this involves a variety of initiatives, including only healthy food cooked in the centre [the children bake their own bread daily for snack]. As a health-promoting school, we cover many areas that overlap with our eco philosophy.
- We grow our own fruit and vegetables in the garden for children to have as afternoon snack.
- The children have access to the garden at all times – no matter the weather.



School Grounds and Biodiversity

- This is undoubtedly our main achievement. Our dream was to develop our nursery garden from a hard tarmac space to an inspirational garden that was for life.
- We wanted to create a nursery garden that was much more than a play area where children could 'let off steam' but a space that had secret and magic places where the children could dream, walk, sit, picnic, run through, touch, marvel at the colours and smell of plants.
- This was to be a garden bringing life, colour and song, where the children, their families and local people could relax and enjoy their surroundings.



- We are passionate about our eco-school development and a crucial aspect of being an eco-school is biodiversity. The children are our valued resource, they are our future, we need to bring the beauty of the world to their environment. The Cowgate parents are very busy parents, with not a lot of spare time to grow flowers with their children. Here was an opportunity to teach the children the names of precious flowers, to encourage their care of living things. We wanted to broaden their knowledge of where food comes from and provide an opportunity to eat some of what we grow.
 
- As an eco-school we are very conscious of the fact that wildlife such as birds, butterflies and hedgehogs are increasingly dependent on our gardens for places to live and feed because their own habitats are disappearing. We wanted to consider these issues when planning our garden, so we aimed to organise planting and garden features that would welcome wildlife. We have fund raised to purchase ladybirds and lacewings and bug boxes to encourage other insects to the garden to promote the cycle of life.
 
- Our aim was to create a garden that was a play space where children could climb, slide, swing, but more importantly create an environment that was / is good for health too – where the children could relax, read books under the pergola, listen to the soothing water from the pond, observe the wealth of birds arriving at the bird table. The intention was to create a rural setting within an urban environment.
- Under the natural screening of a bank of rowans, our children can play in dappled shadows, smell the aroma of lavender and rosemary, duck under trailing ivy or softly shifting bamboo. It is hard to imagine, once you enter our garden that we are situated in the very centre of a busy bustling city. And this was our dream, come to fruition.

Our garden supports our ethos, that the children should have the opportunity to access our outdoor space in any weather, the choice would be theirs in this safe yet stimulating environment.

Future Plans

- A recent meeting with the waste minimisation team revealed that we could use food-composting bins to further reduce our waste – it is our intention to have a training session on this and then purchase the container.
- We are having living willow planted around our house.

Hot tips for success...

- We can all do it!
- Visit other settings – after that you will realise how much you already do
- Visit us – build a relationship with us and we can share our successes together.

“Among all the objects the dearest for me are those used...entered in the use of many, often changed, improving the share - they become precious as they are appreciated many times”.

B.Brecht

“Re-using means to use again: first you use it, and then again until it is done and there is no more...” **Mariachiara, 3 years.**

What our Green Flag assessors thought

- A wonderfully calm, welcoming space which made excellent use of natural light and had created an amazing garden in what is, essentially, a tarmac-covered ‘back green’. This garden provided a real haven for wildlife, as well as several different areas for the children to explore and learn in.
- Very strong links with the community around them - recycling and other eco work was very visible. These good relations led to community help in identifying vandals who had caused damage to the children’s garden and offers of financial help to remedy the situation.
- Strong sense of staff ‘togetherness’ on the eco work being done and good communication with children which was evident in their understanding of **why** they were doing their various eco activities.
- Lots of ‘small’ things eg use of natural light, hanging nappies up to dry, individual terry towels for children instead of paper ones etc which added up to a really eco-friendly environment.
- Visitors were asked to remove their shoes when entering the infants’ zone as these children were encouraged to have bare feet when in their part of the building. A recording of birdsong was being played in the background, adding to the feel of bringing the outdoors ‘indoors’. Children were calmly interacting with each other and listening attentively to staff.