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Design Nathan Somers Design

Minister's Foreword

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr Katherine Zappone, TD



The Government's **First 5 plan** sets out a vision of high quality early learning and care settings that are inclusive and accessible to all. These settings seek to support young children's learning and development and meet the needs of families, of practitioners, and the wider community. Universal design is a concept that fits perfectly with that vision, pushing us to think of how we can design settings that work for everyone. So, these Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings - the first of their kind internationally - are welcome and timely.

The Guidelines developed from AIM - the Access and Inclusion Model, an inter-departmental programme to support the meaningful participation of children with disabilities in ECCE - but the scope and the benefits extend much further. They offer practical actions that planners, architects and early learning and care providers can take to build the inclusive and accessible settings described in First 5. I particularly welcome the combination of both large-scale and small-scale actions. There is guidance here for planners and developers of new housing estates who want to know how to meet all children's needs in the buildings they provide. And there is guidance here for early learning and care providers who want advice on small-scale, low-cost actions that can make a difference.

The early learning and care sector in Ireland is diverse, and these Guidelines are designed for that diversity. The Guidelines will support quality improvements in all settings - whether they are small one roomed pre-schools or larger full day crèches newly developed or newly transformed - helping to build places and spaces for high quality learning and care.

In striving to create safe, functional environments for children, we must also ensure opportunities for interaction, exploration, learning and play. These guidelines achieve this balance and are a welcome addition to the growing body of practical resources supporting quality provision.

I congratulate and thank all those who have been involved in the preparation of these Guidelines. The fruit of their labour will be seen for many years to come in new and redeveloped settings for early learning and care as well as in the learning opportunities those settings create for the next generation of babies, young children and families in Ireland.

Foreword

NDA Chairperson, Helen Guinan



Designing early learning and care settings so that they include all children, including those with disabilities, requires a knowledge of their diverse needs so that they can fully participate in their learning. This guidance gives the detailed technical and practical information on how this can be achieved. The NDA welcomed the opportunity for our Centre for Excellence in Universal Design to work with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Early Childhood Ireland, to develop such guidance on the Universal

Design of those settings to support an inclusive environment and service.

Access to early learning and care services are important for young children and their families, as they learn, socialise and prepare for the pathway to school education. The guidelines have been developed having regard to the various types, size and locations of setting in which those services are provided, recognising that some may be provided in a home setting, while others may be in a community centre or other setting. Adopting a Universal Design approach is important in getting best value in the use of the setting now and in “future proofing”, especially in achieving access, positive learning, and play experiences for all children. Good design also benefits the staff, families and visitors to the centre. Universal Design is a good approach for early childhood settings as it takes account of human diversity, requiring buildings, places, products, services and ICT to be designed so that they can be easily accessed, understood and used by everyone regardless of age, size, ability or disability.

These guidelines are informed by research and workshops with stakeholders, and build on previous research and resources produced by the National Disability Authority and its Centre for Excellence in Universal Design of terms of quality early childhood care and education services and also technical guidance for Universal Design buildings, facilities and environments. This project also involved the development of a self-audit tool designed to help owners, managers, practitioners or architects examine and reflect on the environment - indoors and outdoors - to help plan for improvements. The tool is published separately but is also a practical resource to complement the guidelines.

I would encourage everyone involved in planning or delivering an early learning and care service to consider these guidelines, and to use the self-audit tool. These guidelines and audit tool will assist everyone involved in works for early learning and care settings, including those engaged in their design, construction, retro-fitting and management. We look forward to their adoption and implementation in early learning and care services.

Frequently used acronyms and key terms

Key acronyms

AIM – The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a model of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme

AT – Assistive Technology

CEUD – Centre for Excellence in Universal Design

DCYA – Department of Children and Youth Affairs

ELC – Early Learning and Care / ELCS - Early Learning and Care Setting

ICT – Information and Communications Technologies

NDA – National Disability Authority

UD – Universal Design

QRF – Tusla Early Years Quality and Regulatory Framework

Key terms

Accessible – With respect to buildings, or parts of buildings, means that people, regardless of age, size, ability or disability, can access and use the building and its facilities.

Aistear – The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.

Assistive Technologies – Technological devices (equipment or systems) that are used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals.

Design Brief – A design brief is a document prepared by the client in consultation with key stakeholders that captures the vision and key requirements for the building project. It is used by the design team to prepare any proposals or detailed designs.

Early Learning and Care Setting – A setting providing Early Learning and Care to children primarily aged from birth to six years. These settings may be stand-alone; co-located with a primary school; part of an employment, healthcare or educational building or campus; or, part of a private dwelling.

They include sessional settings (where children attend for up to 3.5 hours), part-time settings (where children attend for up to 5 hours) or full-day settings. These settings may provide afterschool facilities catering to primary children up to the age of 14 years.

First 5 Strategy – The Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028.

Placemaking – Placemaking is a people-centred approach to the design of places and buildings that identifies the importance of ‘place’ and a ‘sense of place’ for human and community health and wellbeing. It is a process that carefully examines, among other local things, the social, cultural, ecological and physical attributes of a location.

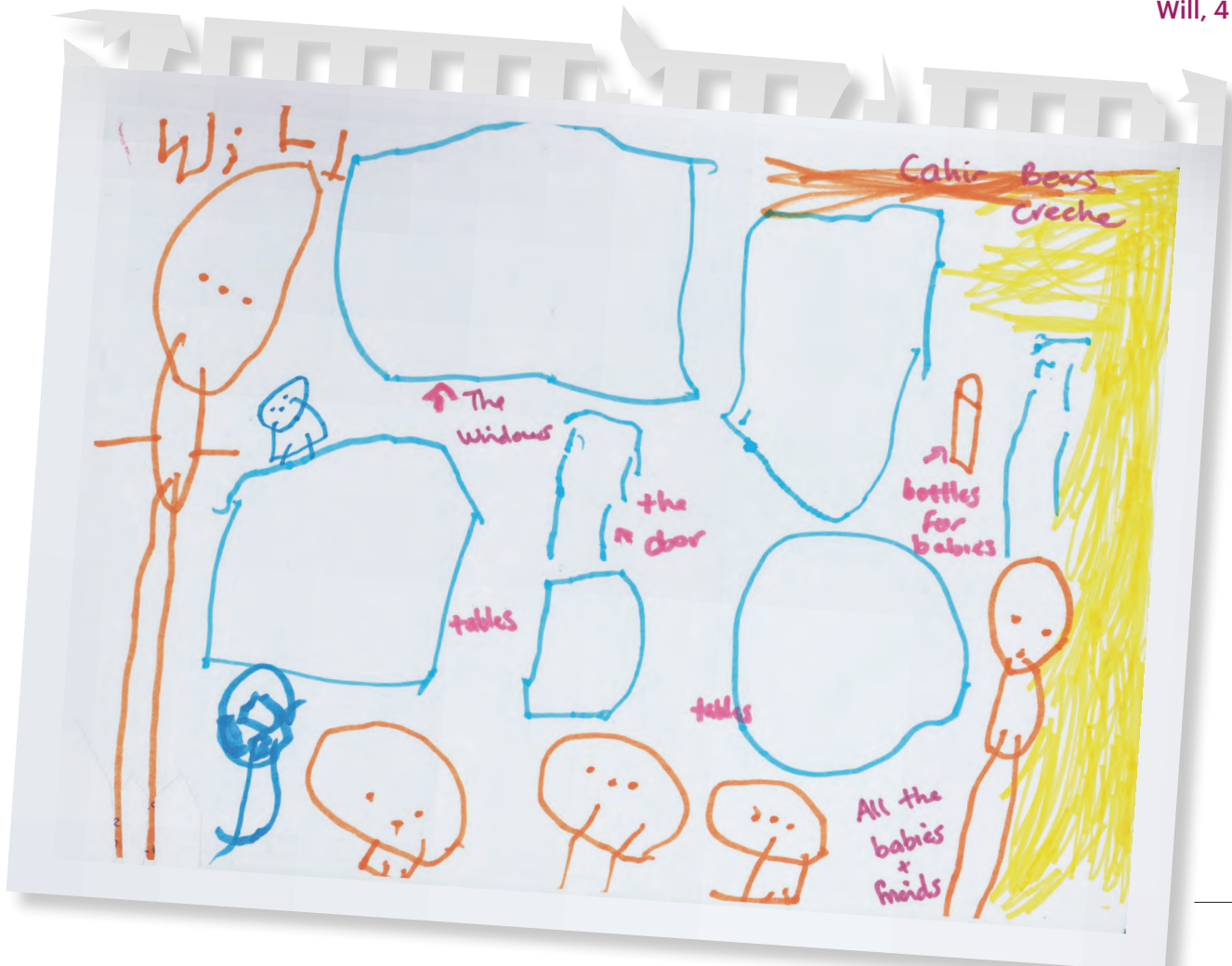
Public Realm – Public space in villages, towns and cities and usually consists of streets, squares, parks, or the internal public space within public buildings.

Síolta – The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education.

Wayfinding – A collective term describing features in a building or environment that facilitate orientation and navigation.

Universal Design (UD) – Is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be **accessed, understood** and **used** to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. This includes public places in the built environment such as buildings, streets or spaces that the public have access to: products and services provided in those places; and, systems that are available including Information Communications Technology (ICT).

Will, 4 years



About These Guidelines

In 2016 the Department of Children and Youth Affairs introduced a suite of supports to enable the full inclusion and meaningful participation of children with disabilities in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. The model of supports called AIM – the Access and Inclusion Model – is a child centred model, involving seven levels of progressive support, moving from universal to targeted, based on the needs of the child and the Early Learning and Care setting. The goal is to empower settings to deliver a quality and inclusive early learning and care experience ensuring all children can fully participate in their early learning and care. The development of these guidelines originated at the AIM Cross Sectoral Implementation Group where it was agreed to utilise the concept of universal design in producing guidelines. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs partnered with the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the National Disability Authority to advance this work. These guidelines set out the key Universal Design (UD) considerations and guidance for Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings in Ireland. These guidelines apply to both new-build and retrofit projects and provide a flexible UD framework to ensure that settings are accessible, understandable and easy to use for all children, staff, families, and visitors.

An ELC setting provides Early Learning and Care to children primarily aged from birth to six years. This may include sessional settings (where children attend for up to 3.5 hours), part-time settings (where children attend for up to 5 hours) or full-day settings (where children attend for over 5 hours). These settings may also provide school-age facilities that cater for children up to the age of 14 years.

In Ireland, in 2018, 39% of settings are located in the house of the ELC setting owner and are one-person settings. 66% are in urban areas, 34% in rural areas. 74% are privately run, while the remaining 26% are community based.

An ELC setting can take many forms in various locations such as: a standalone setting within the community; part of a larger community centre; co-located with a primary or post-primary school; or, attached to, or part of a private dwelling. Some settings are converted from previous use, for example a home office, full dwelling house or community hall. Some are purpose built and some may be in a modular building (pre-fab). An ELC setting may also consist of a childminding service undertaken by a registered childminder within their own home.

With the introduction of initiatives such as The In Early Years and In School Therapies Demonstration Project that utilise the ELC setting as a key contact and support point within the community, many settings are providing extended services to young children, families, and staff. The In Early Years and In School Therapies Demonstration Project was launched in 2018 and is the first ever project to provide in-school and pre-school therapy services. The project is managed and co-ordinated by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE).

The model has been developed by the Departments of Education, Children and Youth Affairs and Health. The purpose of the project is to test a model of tailored therapeutic supports that allow for early intervention in terms of providing speech and language and occupational therapy within 'educational settings'. The pilot will complement existing HSE funded provision of essential therapy services within each of the nine Community Healthcare Organisations.

These guidelines are underpinned by a systematic literature review including national and international best practice; site-based case studies; and a wide-ranging stakeholder engagement process. The guidelines raise awareness about the importance of a supportive built environment in inclusive Early Learning and Care settings and the role of UD, in the following ways:

- **An Introduction Section** that sets out the wider context for ELC settings in Ireland and the benefits of UD.
- **An At a Glance Section** that provides a brief overview of the key UD considerations and issues across a variety of typical Early Learning and Care settings. This section shows how the guidance can respond to different levels of design and intervention, from minor to major works. It provides information relating to design, participation and collaboration to ensure the design process takes account of the expertise, needs and preferences of all users.
- **Four Sections** of detailed guidance ranging from overall site approach and entry to detailed guidance around building components and technology.
- **An Appendix Section** with a bibliography, glossary of terms, links to useful information, and an outline of the stakeholder consultation process.

These guidelines will be equally useful for small, medium and large settings and are flexible enough to apply to retrofit or minor works to existing settings, or to guide major redevelopments or new-build projects. In this context, the guidelines will also be useful for somebody providing a childminding service in their home to think about how their dwelling or garden might benefit from a UD approach. **The Universal Design Guidelines for Homes in Ireland (2015)** will provide useful guidance regarding UD in the home environment and will complement these UD ELC guidelines.

The guidelines are not intended to be prescriptive, but to provide a flexible approach that informs and inspires both designers and setting operators, through best practice, national and international exemplars and UD quality features.

It is hoped that these guidelines will not only inform the design of an accessible, usable and easily understood ELC setting, but also play an important role in supporting key government policy aimed at providing inclusive, child-and-family centred Early Learning and Care in Ireland.

Introduction



01 Collage of images taken by the children in various ELC locations.

Evolving Landscape of Early Learning and Care in Ireland.

The Early Learning and Care setting is one of the most important environments that babies, toddlers and young children will experience in their early years. These settings must provide inclusive environments that cater to a diversity of children with varying abilities and a range of educational and care needs, while also supporting the families and staff who use the buildings every day. In this context, Early Learning and Care in Ireland has undergone a significant transformation in recent years resulting in key legislation and major policy developments across the sector. In 2018 this culminated in the launch of **First 5**, a whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families, but many key policy developments led to this. These are outlined below.

First 5 - A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019 - 2028

First 5 is a ten-year cross-departmental strategy to support babies, young children and their families. It aims to deliver:

- 1 A broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring.
- 2 A new model of parenting support.
- 3 New developments in child health, including a dedicated child health workforce.
- 4 Reform of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) system, including a new funding model.
- 5 A package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty.

This strategy has many implications for the planning and design of ELC settings and how these settings interact with and influence the design of the public realm. For instance, the strategy promotes public places that are inclusive and designed with babies and young children in mind. These should be places for children to play and learn, and that provide opportunities for parents and young children to meet. In terms of the design of settings, the strategy states that investment should facilitate the participation of all children in ELC and promote settings that are informed by Universal Design and that are **accessible, understandable** and **easy to use** to all children, families and practitioners.

The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016

These regulations set out the minimum criteria that must be complied with by registered Early Learning and Care settings in Ireland. This includes settings across the spectrum from purpose-built stand-alone-settings, to settings attached to private dwellings, and childminding services provided within the childminders' private residence.

These regulations cover eight key areas including: **Registration; Management and Staff; Information and Records; Care of Child in Pre-School Service; Safety; Premises and Space Requirements; Notifications and Complaints; and Inspection and Enforcement.**

In the context of the built environment, a number of these areas refer to specific minimum spatial and design requirements that must be complied with by all registered ELC settings. These are minimum requirements and should be considered the basic level of quality to be complied with. Many settings exceed these minimum standards, as illustrated in these UD Guidelines.

The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 can be downloaded at:

 [https://www.dcy.gov.ie/docs/Child_Care_Act_1991_\(Early_Years_Services\)_Regulations_2016_/3780.htm](https://www.dcy.gov.ie/docs/Child_Care_Act_1991_(Early_Years_Services)_Regulations_2016_/3780.htm)

Tusla Early Years Quality and Regulatory Framework

The Early Years Inspectorate within the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) is tasked with implementing the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016, and with supporting services to comply with these regulations. To achieve this, the Inspectorate has devised a Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) that sets out the core regulatory requirements of the regulations and provides supporting documentation such as best practice guidelines, samples and templates for setting-based policies and procedures. The Early Years Inspectorate conducts pre-school inspections to monitor the sector and ensure that settings are compliant with the regulations.

Information about the Quality and Regulatory Framework can be downloaded at:

 <https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/early-years-quality-and-regulatory-framework/>

Department of Education Guide to Early Years Education (EYEI) focused inspections (DES 2018)

In 2018, the Department of Education and Skills published this framework to guide their inspections of settings providing the universal pre-school programme (ECCE). It is based on **Aistear** and **Síolta**. The Guide to the EYEI can be downloaded at:

 <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/guide-to-early-years-education-inspections.pdf>

Childcare Facilities Guidelines for Planning Authorities 2001

The guidelines support local authority decision-making around Development Plans and Local Area Plans with respect to inclusion of early education and care settings. They promote a range of issues including the need for diverse facilities in a variety of locations, or the role of Early Learning and Care in disadvantaged areas. The guidelines also encourage local authorities to identify appropriate locations within urban centres, residential and employment areas, and near public transport.

These guidelines can be downloaded at:

 <https://www.housing.gov.ie/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Planning/FileDownload%2C1601%2Cen.pdf>

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education 2006

Síolta is the national quality framework for Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland. It was published by CECDE in 2006. It establishes **16 quality standards** that all early childhood services should work towards. These standards of quality

are underpinned by 12 principles. It guides the way all ELC settings work and develop. It does this by establishing core principles to which all services must adhere and by guiding ELC settings towards quality practice in all areas of service provision.

 www.siolta.ie

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework 2009

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009) is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland. The purpose of Aistear is to provide information for adults to support them in planning and providing enjoyable and challenging learning experiences to enable all children to grow and develop as competent and confident learners.

 www.ncca.ie

Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015)

This online guide links the principles of Síolta and Aistear and provides tools to support ELC settings to use the two frameworks together to support quality.

 www.aistearsiolta.ie

Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care (The Department of Children and Youth Affairs, DCYA, 2016)

The aim of the charter and guidelines is “...to support and empower those working in the sector to explore, understand and develop inclusive practices for the benefit of children, their families and wider society” and to promote “... the values of diversity, equality and inclusion for all children attending early childhood services.” They can be downloaded at:

 <http://aim.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Diversity-Equality-and-Inclusion-Charter-and-Guidelines-for-Early-Childhood-Care-and-Education.pdf>

Access and Inclusion Model

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a child centred model of of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the Universal Pre-school Programme, ensuring every eligible child can meaningfully participate and reap the benefits of quality early learning and care. AIM provides seven levels of progressive support, moving from the universal to the targeted, based on the needs of the child and the pre-school setting.

 www.aim.gov.ie

Overall Benefits of Universal Design (UD)

The application of Universal Design (UD) thinking to Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings recognises the diversity of ages, abilities, needs and preferences that these environments must accommodate. It also acknowledges that with each new year a typical ELC setting will take in a new group of children with a set of needs, and that the physical setting will have to respond to these children, along with their families and carers. To accommodate these demands, a UD ELC will integrate the following at the outset of the design and construction stages:

- **Flexibility and ease of adaptability to meet users' changing needs over time in a cost-effective way.**
- **Sustainable design to improve comfort and energy efficiency.**
- **Technologies to support Early Learning and Care.**

UD is not about a 'one-size-fits-all' model – the UD environment enables the widest possible number of people to participate in society and to operate independently. A UD ELC setting works well for everyone and supports the education and care of a wide range of children while providing an enabling environment for a diversity of staff, family members and visitors. It is mainstream in aesthetics, not separate or distinct for those with sensory, physical or cognitive difficulties.

UD supports the United Nations (UN) **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** and many of the associated **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs). In the context of ELC and the built environment, SDG 11 'Sustainable Cities & Communities - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' is particularly relevant. This goal is reinforced by the UN New Urban Agenda, which was adopted at the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in 2016. The New Urban Agenda sets global standards of achievement in sustainable urban development and rethinks the way we build, manage, and live in cities through cooperation with committed partners, relevant stakeholders, and urban actors at all levels of government as well as civil society and the private sector.

Information about the UN SDGs can be obtained at:

 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>

Information about the UN New Urban Agenda can be obtained at:

 <http://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>

Considering the alignment between residential development and ELC provision, the key principles relating to UD homes are also applicable to ELC settings. These principles and some typical applications of these principles include:

- **Integrated into the neighbourhood**

For example, urban or suburban settings that are centrally located and within easy reach of the community will make the setting more accessible for pedestrians, cyclists, and those using public transport. It will also help embed the setting within the community and create a connection and relationship between children, staff, families, and people in the local community.

- **Easy to approach, enter and move about in**

A setting with entrance footpaths that are a minimum of 2000mm wide (preferably up to 2400mm) and will provide a safe and accessible entrance route for all users whether this is a parent with a buggy, older childminder or grandparent, or a staff member or visitor with sensory, physical or cognitive challenges. Wide entrance doors or double doors will allow ease of movement at peak times or comfortable access for wheelchairs or double buggies.

- **Easy to understand, safe to use and manage**

A calm and legible setting where the layout is easy to understand and use will provide a supportive environment for all users, particularly for those with sensory, physical or cognitive challenges. Fixtures and fittings that are clearly visible, accessible and intuitive to use will make the setting comfortable and safe, while also making it easier to operate and manage.

- **Flexible, cost effective and adaptable over time**

ELC settings must cater to a wide diversity of ages, abilities and sizes and will benefit from moveable partitions, flexible and adaptable furniture, and other features that allow spaces to be reconfigured based on children and educator needs. This will also provide multi-purpose spaces than can be used for play, dining, social gatherings or special events. Such flexibility and adaptability will reduce costly and disruptive building modifications that may otherwise be required.



An ELC setting underpinned by these 4 key principles will not only provide a more accessible and inclusive environment, but it will also confer a market advantage for a service provider as the setting offers a supportive and attractive environment to a wider section of the community. It is important to think about UD in terms of retrofit or refurbishment projects, as these offer a good opportunity to create environments that are accessible, understandable and easy to use for all users. In situations where a service is already operating from a building that is due for retrofit or refurbishment, the operator should make sure they are aware of the key problems or design issues, so these can be addressed as part of the project. Such incremental change will allow the ELC sector evolve towards UD settings that are supportive of all children, staff, families, and visitors.





In many ways UD is first and foremost good design, but it also provides future-proofed ELC settings that are cost-effective, flexible and adaptable into the future.

Key Design Issues as Framed by Selected Síolta Principles

The Síolta principles present a good framework to examine how UD can help to provide a built environment that supports the aims of inclusive, child-and-family centred Early Learning and Care policy in Ireland. While all 16 Síolta standards have some bearing on the built environment, there are **7 Standards** that are directly relevant to Universal Design. **Síolta Standard 2** pertains to **Environments** and this standard highlights how a child’s physical environment has a direct impact on their well-being, learning and development. The Environments standard therefore underpins all aspects of these guidelines and provides the backdrop for the other 6 Síolta standards.

The standards are:

	<p>Rights of the Child</p>	<p>Provide spaces and settings that are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • designed so children can circulate and associate with their peers and with older or younger children in mixed age situations. • facilitates children’s choice. • provides opportunities for children to express their voice and individuality. • enables children to be appropriately independent.
	<p>Interactions</p>	<p>Provide settings with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • indoor and outdoor spaces where adults and children can interact with each other, or where children can be alone. • a mixture of large and smaller indoor and outdoor spaces for children to navigate and explore to maximise children’s talking, listening and overall engagement in learning. • a range of experiences to provoke inquiry or stimulate the imagination placed in central spaces to support collaborative, inquiry-based learning for all children. • dining spaces that echo the home and position cutlery and delph at children’s level to support independence. • attention to environmental stimuli such as excessive noise, glare, or strong odours that may be problematic for some children and hinder their opportunities for interactions and relationship building.

	<p>Parents and Families</p>	<p>Create environments that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide accessible and welcoming spaces for parents and families. • reflect the diversity of the community and help build relationships between ELC practitioners and families. • make the curriculum visible and provide formal and informal staff-parent meeting spaces. • accommodate families including extended families for specific occasions.
	<p>Play</p>	<p>Support the important role of play through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adequate indoor and outdoor space for children to play. • accessible, usable and easily understood outdoor spaces with a good transition between indoor and outdoor. • covered outdoor space that can be used during inclement weather or by children who may be sensitive to outdoor conditions. • range of spaces and materials to attract and stimulate children's interests, promote communication and encourage problem-solving and critical thinking. • spaces that encourage free play, group and individual play for children of mixed ages, and allow children an easy transition between play activities.
	<p>Professional Practice</p>	<p>Support staff through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • spaces that facilitate the role of adult-child interactions as part of the child's learning and development. • a physical environment that helps ELC practitioners adopt a reflective approach to their practice. This will be assisted by a calm, supportive environment with office, study areas, or staff rooms that support relaxation and reflection. • a flexible environment in terms of spaces and materials to support the ELC practitioner as environmental planner and evaluator.
	<p>Community Involvement</p>	<p>Promote a positive relationship between the child and the community through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • spaces that connect and integrate the setting with the community in a safe and appropriate manner. • increased visibility or presence regarding the setting and the community.

At a Glance - Early Learning and Care settings

The ELC setting as a whole

These guidelines examine ELC at four key built-environment or spatial scales, ranging from the broad scale issue of location to small scale issues such as building fit-out or materials. These spatial scales include:

- **Site location, approach, entry and site layout** (setting location, adjacent public spaces, entrance gates, and site design including access roads and footpaths).
- **Entering and moving about the setting** (main entrances and key internal circulation areas, stairs and lifts).
- **Key internal and external spaces** (all internal spaces including children's spaces, staff areas, toilets, other internal support spaces. Also includes key outdoor play or garden areas).
- **Elements and systems** (materials and finishes, fit-out elements, heating and ventilation, and technology issues).

The guidelines also emphasise the importance of designing the ELC setting as a whole and as a continuum of spaces that draw together these scales. This helps ensure the creation of a cohesive, integrated environment for all users. In this context the **Síolta standards** provide an overall early childhood framework, while UD emphasises accessibility, usability and understanding across all aspects of a setting. In addition to these, it is important to reiterate the following overarching built environment characteristics:

- **Integrated and connected** to the community, local context and natural environment to help forge positive relationships between the children, educators, families and the locality.
- **Connected spaces** that flow across the entire setting that allow appropriate freedom of movement and link activities and occupants.
- **Coherent and unifying building layout** that facilitates diverse and distinct activities and spaces, while also drawing them together to create a cohesive setting that is easily understood and navigated.
- **Space for play, movement, adventure and challenge** through the creation of a flexible, interesting and diverse setting. The environment should provoke and celebrate investigation, risk taking and critical thinking, while promoting engagement with all the senses. It should consider children with sensory, physical or cognitive challenges.

- **Balanced multisensory stimulation** provided by calm, uncluttered and carefully structured spaces. A balanced approach to visual, auditory and tactile stimulation is required to provide an appropriate level of interest. This benefits all children, not only those who are hyper / hypo sensitive to their environment.
- **A good sense of place** achieved through placemaking (i.e. making high quality and highly valued places that have a distinct identity) and the creation of a meaningful setting that resonates with children, adults, the community, and local context.
- **Weaving together indoor and outdoor space** to encourage contact with nature, risk and outdoor activities, and allow freedom of movement and physical expression, as much as possible.

Applying Universal Design to Some Typical Settings

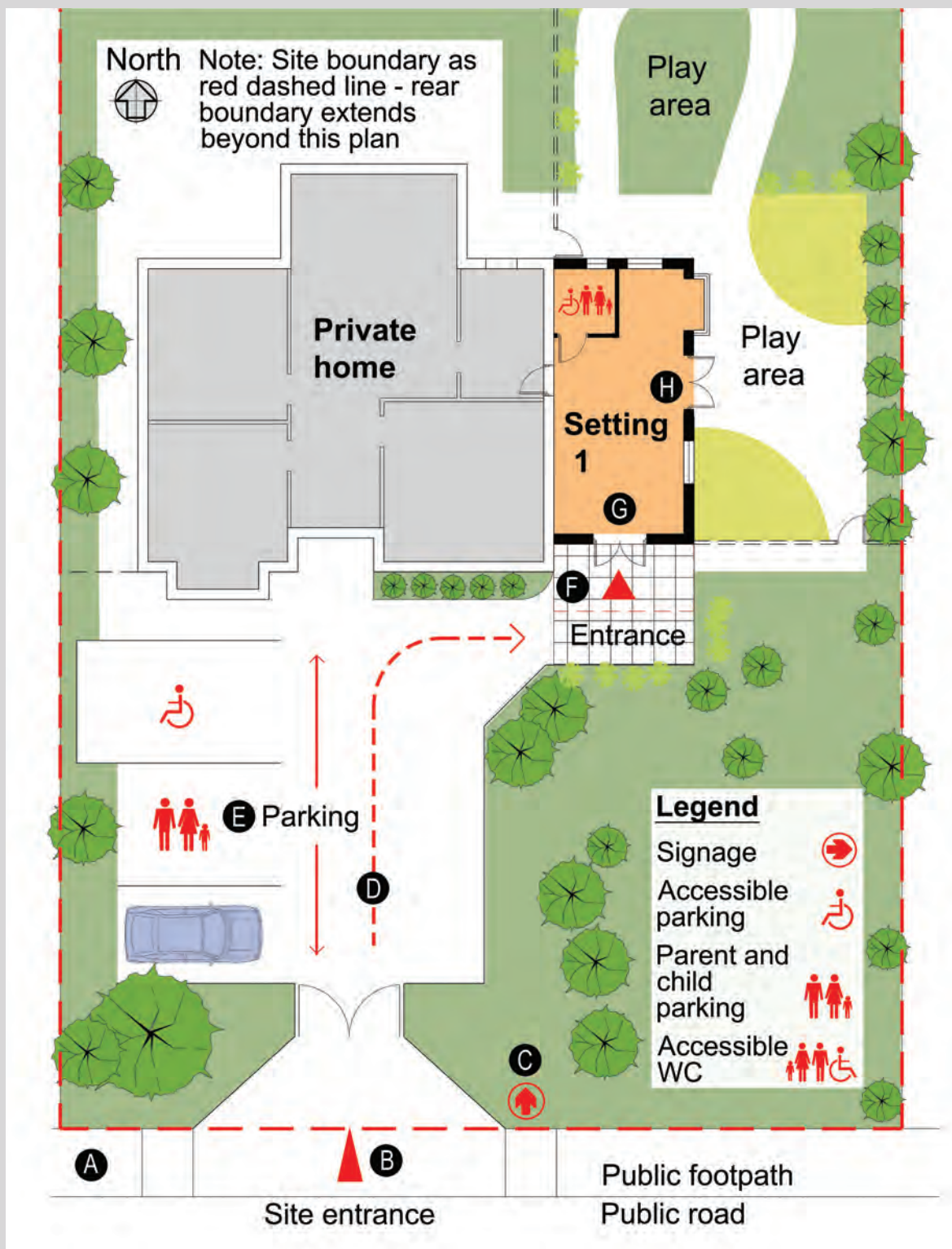
The following pages present site and floor plans for a range of typical ELC settings to illustrate some of the key Universal Design features that may be considered in various setting types. These design features are applicable to existing and new-build settings – a small number of selected features may be applied as a part of minor works, a greater number of features may be applied as part of a major retrofit, or indeed all features may be selected for a new-build project.



Ben, 4 years

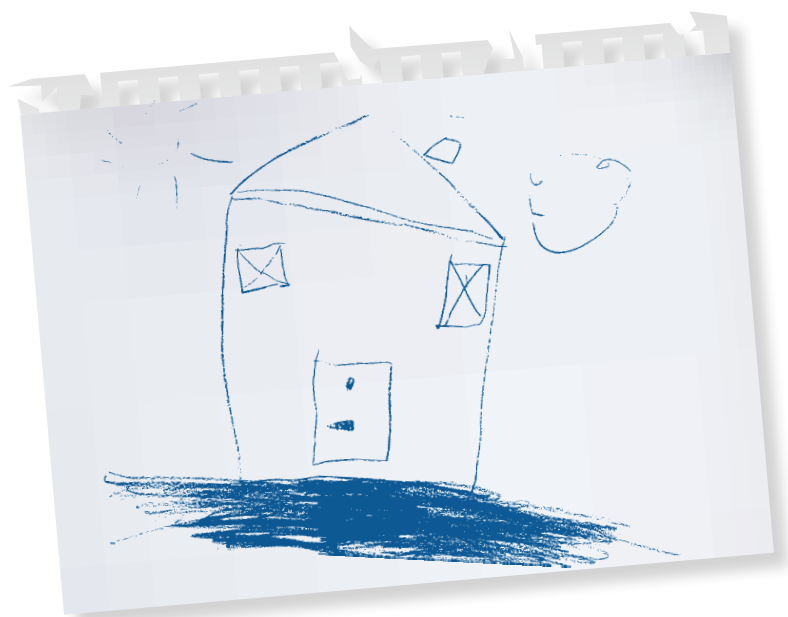
1. Small scale single room setting attached to a private dwelling

Setting 1 is a small single room sessional service with 14 children that is directly attached to a private home on a large rural site. The setting has an independent front entrance and a dedicated play area to the side that is enclosed with a fence.



Some typical UD features evident in this plan:

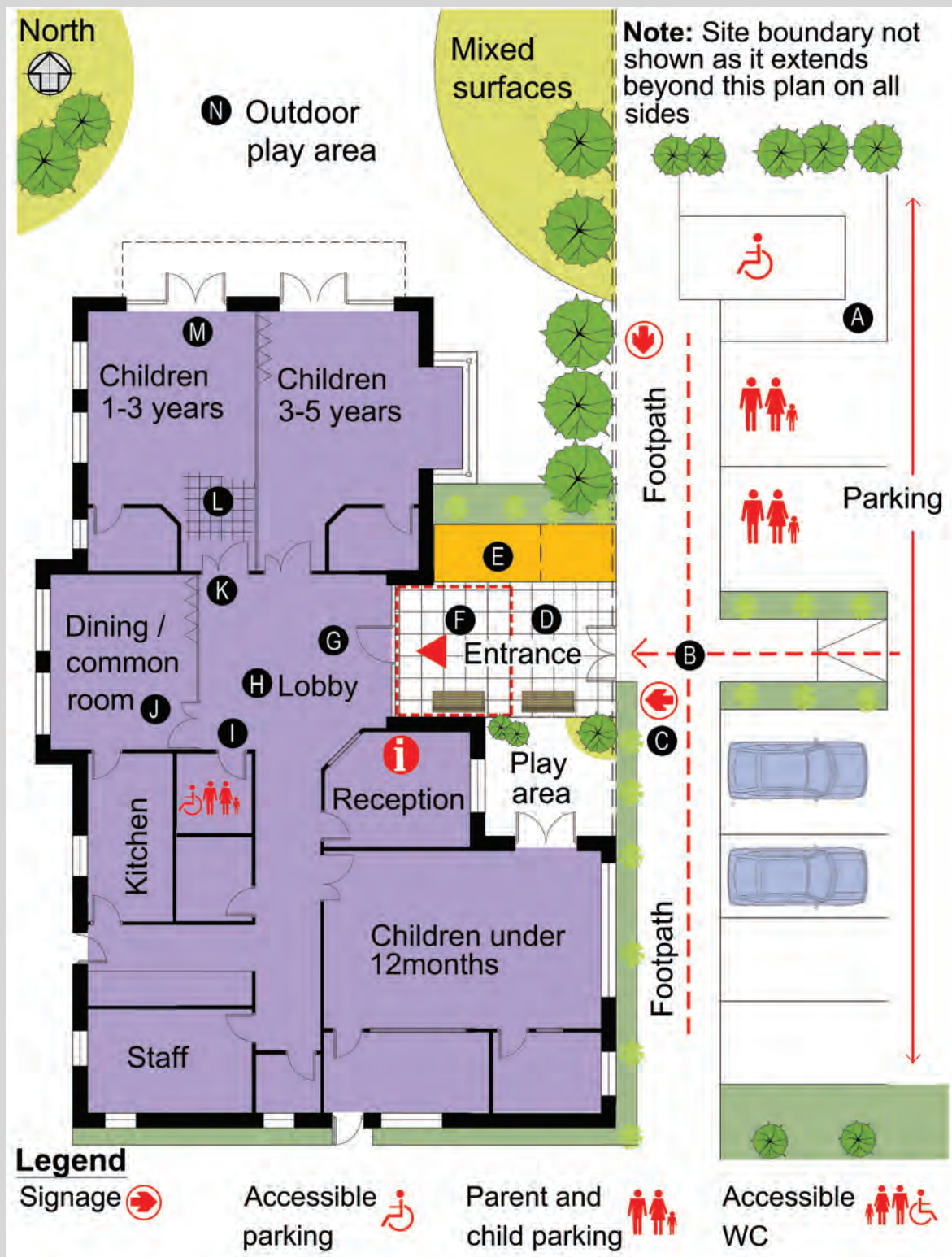
- A** 2400mm wide public footpath that is clear of obstructions and is flat, even, well-drained and has a non-slip and non-glare finish.
- B** Site entrance is easily identified and accessed from the public road and footpath. Footpaths to have dropped kerbs at the entrance to provide easy access for all users.
- C** Simple and clear signage at the site entrance to identify the setting on approach.
- D** All access routes within the site are smooth and solid underfoot (i.e. no gravel or pebbles) with non-slip and non-glare finishes that avoid strong patterns or sharp colour contrast.
- E** Accessible parking space (6000x4800mm) provided along with a parent and child spaces (4800x3600mm). For safety reasons, parking is reverse only so that when children are entering or leaving the back seat of a car they are at a greater distance from the road. Appropriate signage is provided to inform drivers.
- F** Covered entrance creates shelter and provides a transition area between inside and outside. This also makes the entrance clearly visible and easy to identify.
- G** Level entry front door with double doors for easier access (primary opening leaf with a clear width of 1000mm).
- H** Level exit to external play area through double doors (primary opening leaf with a clear width of 900mm).



Evie, 4½ years

Setting 2 is a medium scale purpose-built service in a suburban location. The setting is set back from the road with car parking to the front. The plan below shows a part of the site but the outdoor and play areas extend beyond what is shown on the plan below.

2. Medium scale, suburban, stand-alone setting

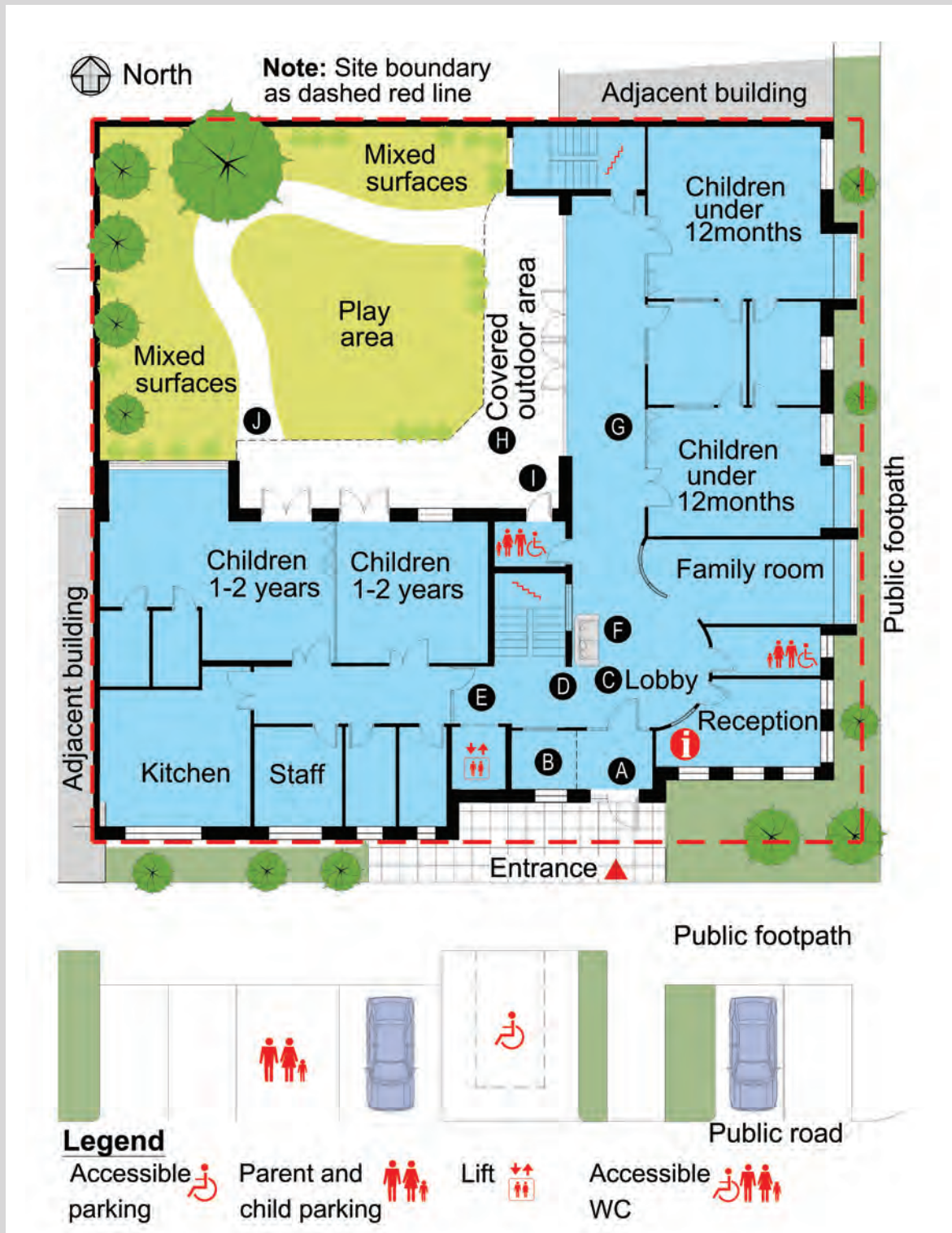


Some typical UD features evident in this plan:

- A** Accessible parking space (6000x4800mm) provided along with a parent and child spaces (4800x3600mm). For safety reasons, parking is reverse only so that when children are entering or leaving the back seat of a car they are at a greater distance from the road. Appropriate signage is provided to inform drivers.
- B** There are a clear and easily identified pedestrian routes to the building entrance that are smooth and solid underfoot (i.e. no gravel or pebbles) with well-drained, non-slip and non-glare finishes that avoid strong patterns or sharp colour contrast.
- C** Clear wayfinding signage in key locations, such as in the parking area and at the main entrance, providing directions to the front door.
- D** An outdoor entrance patio is provided as a waiting and social area adjacent to the setting entrance. This has some seating as a resting point for all users and is provided with adequate artificial light.
- E** A covered external buggy and bike storage area is provided near the entrance.
- F** A covered external waiting area adjacent to the entrance provides shelter and acts as a transition area between inside and outside. It also makes the entrance clearly visible and easy to identify.
- G** Level access front door with a clear opening width of 1000mm.
- H** A spacious waiting area and reception lobby provides enough room for people with buggies, people in wheelchairs, and all users.
- I** An accessible WC is visible and easily identified from the entrance. A WC seat height of 480mm and a washbasin height of 720-740mm will accommodate a range of users but a toilet step is provided for younger children.
- J** A central shared and multifunctional space is provided that can be opened or closed off as required using folding partitions.
- K** Cat and kitten door (door-and-a-half) with a primary opening leaf with a minimum clear width of 850mm.
- L** Internal finishes, colours and materials that achieve a calm and balanced visual environment.
- M** Level exit to external play area through double doors (primary opening leaf with a clear width of 900mm).
- N** The play area contains a mixture of surfaces such as grass, clay and mulch along with coloured concrete surfaces to provide accessible areas and circulation.

3. Large scale, urban setting

Setting 3 is a large scale two-storey setting purpose built in an urban location and is part of a block that consists of two and three storey residential units. The plan below shows the full extent of the ground floor and this layout is largely replicated on the first floor. Only the ground floor is shown as this is enough to identify some of the main UD issues.



Some typical UD features evident in this plan:

- A** Level entry front door with double doors for easy access (primary opening leaf with a clear width of 1000mm).
- B** Buggy storage area provided adjacent to the entrance lobby within easy reach of all users.
- C** A spacious waiting area and reception lobby provides enough room for people with buggies, people in wheelchairs, and all users especially at peak times.
- D** The stairs and lifts are visible and easily reached upon entry. The steps on the stairs have a 150mm rise (height) and 350mm going (depth) that make it an easy and comfortable to climb. A lower handrail fixed 650mm above pitch line provides support for children and people of smaller stature.
- E** Spacious and wide circulation areas with a minimum clear width of 2400mm are provided to allow play and social interaction within the circulation spaces.
- F** Sound absorbing soft furnishings and textiles to create a calm and relaxing acoustic environment.
- G** Openable internal partitions allow flexible use of space as required.
- H** A covered outdoor area provides a sheltered transition space and an activity/play area during inclement weather.
- I** An accessible WC is directly accessed from the outdoor space. A WC seat height of 480mm and a washbasin height of 720-740mm will accommodate a range of users but a toilet step is provided for younger children.
- J** The play area consists of a mixture of ground surfaces such as grass, mulch, and Impact Absorbing Surfacing (IAS). These areas are connected with a 1500mm wide IAS path that provides an accessible circulation route for all users.

Sample Early Learning and Care Setting

The following sample is based on a possible brief set out by an ELC operator who is developing a new centre for 47 children on a 0.1-hectare site (1000m² or approximately ¼ of an acre) as part of a new mixed-used residential development.

The schedule of accommodation

The schedule of accommodation set out by the operator is detailed below.

Table 1.

Children's Spaces	Ancillary Spaces
Children under 12 months (9 children)	
1 Main Room (3.5m ² minimum per child)	1 Reception area
1 Sleeping area (design capacity 6 children) x 1	
1 Nappy changing area	1 Office
1 Milk kitchen	
Children 1-2 years (10 children)	1 Kitchen
1 Main Room (2.8m ² minimum per child)	
1 Sleeping area (design capacity 6 children)	1 Dining area
1 Nappy changing area	
1 Milk kitchen	2 Staff toilets
Children 2-3 years (12 children)	1 Visitor / Accessible toilet
1 Main Room (2.35m ² minimum per child)	
2 Toilets	1 Laundry
Children 3-5 years (16 children)	
Main Room (2.3m ² minimum per child) x 1	3 Store rooms (including external)
1 Toilet	
A. Outdoor Space (for all children)	Circulation area
Overall outdoor space (9m ² per child)	This may incorporate communal areas, family areas or central play spaces
This includes all outdoor space including covered outdoor areas, play structures, storage for outdoor toys etc. There is currently no minimum requirement in the regulations however at least 9m ² per child would be appropriate. (see Appendix 9 for information on outdoor space area provision per child in an ELC setting)	

Note: The floor areas listed above in Table 1 (Children’s Spaces) are minimum and refer to the clear floor space available in the setting for children’s work, play and movement. This floor space excludes dedicated sleeping areas, toilets, nappy changing areas and milk kitchens (these are listed separately). It also excludes the areas listed as part of the Ancillary Spaces.

Many ELC settings provide school-age childcare for children outside school hours. The space required for these children and the ancillary facilities such as toilets may also need to be considered in addition to the spaces described above if the setting is to provide afterschool care or similar care.

See Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 for further information on Premises and Space Requirements.

Key Design Requirements

As part of a detailed brief (including the schedule of accommodation contained in Table 1), the client has set out the following key design requirements:

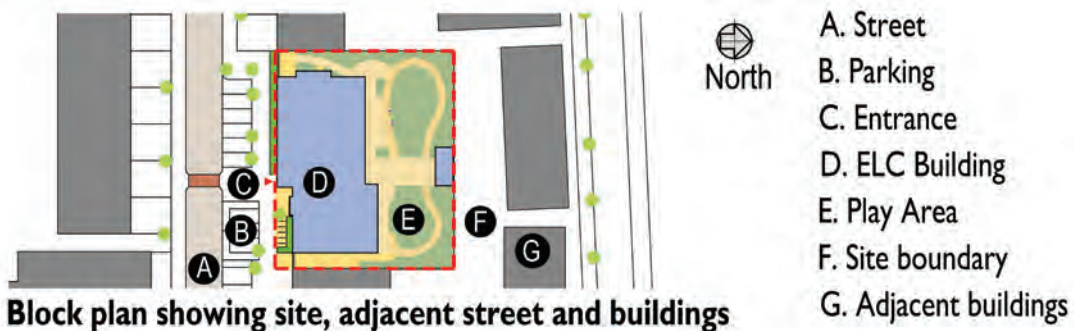
- Free flowing and connected children’s spaces allowing the mixing of age-groups as required.
- While the baby room should connect to the other rooms, it should also have a dedicated access door to the main circulation area.
- All children’s rooms should be bright, have good views and direct connections to the outside.
- Welcoming and spacious entrance spaces that provide casual seating and waiting areas for families and visitors.
- A central communal area at the heart of the setting that is visible upon entry and is connected to the outside. Integrated dining and kitchen area to provide a more homelike setting.
- Good staff facilities with some separation from the main areas to provide respite during breaks.
- Spacious outdoor play areas that are well integrated with the main building.

Overview of the sample site and building design

The building sits directly on the site boundary with the public street creating a strong visual relationship with the locality. Perpendicular on-street parking is provided along the front boundary where both accessible parking and parent and child spaces are available. Internally the setting is organised around a main circulation spine that also acts as a central social/gathering area. The outdoor and play areas are located to the rear of the setting and are directly accessed from the central social area and from all key children’s rooms.

The following page shows a block plan and a combined building/site plan for the sample setting that will be used throughout Sections 1 to 4 to illustrate key design considerations and Universal Design features.

Block plan and building/site plan of the sample setting.



Block plan showing site, adjacent street and buildings



Site plan and building plan

The Universal Design Process – Design team and consultation/participation with key stakeholders

It is very important to engage with key people such as staff, parents and children during the design process to ensure the design is in line with user requirements. All key stakeholders can be invited to contribute in a meaningful way to the design process to ensure their needs and preferences are incorporated into the design, delivery and management of the Early Learning and Care setting. Participatory design is important in terms of the design process and catering to the educational and care needs of children; supporting families, carers and staff; and reinforcing inclusive Early Learning and Care.

Small and medium scale projects

Small and medium scale projects associated with the lower levels of interventions, adaptations, or design described in the previous section may not require extensive consultation with key stakeholders or involve a design team. Minor building works such as signage or fitting new finishes or fixtures can often be completed with minimum disruption and may not require specialist input. However, in all cases key staff members should be consulted and the setting operator should seek professional advice if they are unsure about the implications of any changes to the building, particularly in relation to the health, safety and welfare of children and fire safety measures.

Larger scale projects

For large scale works such as extensive retrofit, structural modifications, building extensions or new-build projects, a design team will be necessary along with a more extensive stakeholder consultation process. Projects of this nature will require the preparation of detailed project brief to set out a vision and to define the key project requirements. Some of main components of this process are described below.

Design team

The design team will vary depending on the scale and complexity of each project. For example, a small setting considering a retrofit project will not involve the same design team as a large, green field project will. Among others the following building design professionals should be considered:

- **Architects.**
- **Civil Structural Engineers.**
- **Mechanical and Electrical Engineers.**
- **Landscape Architects.**
- **Quantity Surveyors.**

Key stakeholders

Depending on the circumstances of each project, the design team should consider engaging with key stakeholders, some of whom may include:

- **Children within the setting.**
- **Parents, grandparents, siblings, and other family members.**
- **ELC staff.**
- **ELC's ancillary staff.**
- **Owners and managers.**
- **Allied education and therapeutic professionals associated with the setting such as speech and language therapists and occupational therapists.**

Depending on the extent of the work it may also be necessary to consult:

- **TUSLA Early Years (Pre-School) Inspectorate.**
- **Local authority planning department.**
- **Fire officer.**
- **HSE Environmental Health Department.**
- **Relevant local community groups, for example, if there is going to be a community room or similar shared space.**

The brief

Rather than seeing the brief as a final static document, it may be better to see the preparation of the brief as a participatory process that the client, design team, and key stakeholders go through to establish the vision and project requirements. In this regard, The Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) recommends the following stages:

- **Statement of need: the basic document, which defines the client's objectives.**
- **Preliminary brief: considers financial resources, accommodation requirements, site availability, timescale and other factors likely to affect the project.**
- **Strategic brief: brings together the statement of need and the preliminary brief. It sets out the broad scope and purpose of the project and the key parameters of the preferred options including budget and programme.**
- **Design brief: the full statement of the client's functional and operational requirements for the project. Following initial design work, the strategic brief is translated into the design brief.**

For more information see:

 http://www.riai.ie/consumer_services/working_with_an_architect_-_larger_projects/design_project_stages/

Key elements for the client to consider when preparing the design brief from a universal design approach

- **Set out a strong vision and values for the project:** For example, you could call for a child-centred setting that reflects the local context, is well integrated into the community, and is universally designed. This will help to define what you want and inform the design team of your aspirations and priorities for the project.
- **Outline how the building should relate to the local public realm and some overall site design requirements:** How will the location of the building and proposed boundaries help to integrate the setting with the community? How will the site design provide a community and child-centred setting?
- **Indicate the kind of layout that would support your vision:** Depending on the vision set out for the project, will the setting cater to mixed ages or defined age groups? What does your ethos and curriculum demand of the building? Describe the kinds of spaces that might help fulfil this vision.
- **Describe the overall qualities of the internal spaces:** Will the interior of the building receive high levels of natural light? What kinds of materials and finishes do you believe are needed to achieve a stimulating yet calm environment for children? What colours would you like?
- **Define the relationship between inside and outside:** Is there to be free flowing movement between inside and outside? Will the children's spaces have direct access and good views to the outside? Thinking about windows and doors, describe how this might work.
- **Describe how you envisage the outside spaces:** Is there to be one shared outdoor area or will there be separate areas for different age groups? What level of challenge and exploration should the outdoors provide? What kinds of spaces and objects do you think should be provided so that children can run, climb, hide, jump off things, or play with water, sand or mud? Would a covered outdoor space such as a veranda be useful?

Key elements for the client to consider in change of use, fit-out, or retrofit involving existing buildings projects

When looking at various sites and existing buildings for projects that involve a change of use (e.g. from a dwelling or office building to an ELC setting), the fit-out of an existing building shell and core, or a major retrofit, there are many things to think about. Issues such as the location of the site, public transport access, and parking will be part of the overall site feasibility. The key elements to be considered by the client when preparing the design brief, as outlined previously, will be important. **When a project involves an existing building, the existing site and building conditions will require careful thought such as:**

Internal floor area and circulation space: Will the building accommodate the floor space required as outlined in **Table 1**? Will the existing floor area provide comfortable, accessible entrance, circulation, and toilet areas?

Availability of outdoor space: Bearing in mind the guideline outdoor space area of 9m² per child (this area is not required by regulation but best practice suggests that as generous space as possible be provided) as outlined in **Table 1**, does the site provide enough uninterrupted outdoor areas for children to run, play, and explore? Will the outdoor space be adjacent to and directly accessible to all internal children's rooms?

Internal layout and structural walls: Will the layout of the existing building allow you to achieve the kinds of internal spaces you require? If not, is it possible to remove certain non-load bearing internal walls, or are there major structural implications?

Building services: Are the existing plumbing, ventilation and electrical services in locations that will serve the proposed spaces? Can the appropriate plumbing or ventilation services be supplied to areas in the building planned for toilets, milk kitchens, or nappy changing areas?

Children's rooms on an upper floor: If children's rooms are to be located on an existing upper floor, will the existing circulation and stairs comply with fire regulations? Will children on this upper floor have direct access to outdoor space in the form of a roof terrace, balcony or to ground level outdoor space via external stairs? If not, how will access to outdoor space be managed?

See page 317 for a Learning Story regarding an ELC operator who took over and redesigned an existing building to suit the needs of their new service.

Levels of Design

Five levels of interventions, adaptations, or design

These guidelines are applicable to both new build and existing ELC settings. In this regard, we have identified five different levels of design that can be applied as part of a UD approach. These different design levels illustrate that users of these guidelines can select appropriate guidance relevant to the nature of their project. This will depend on whether it is a new-build or an existing building, the available budget, and other factors.

The design levels are based primarily on the potential disturbance to the building and cost. The introduction of art display boards or signage may cause no disturbance to the building structure and cost very little. The addition of certain assistive technology such as 'grab-bars' may only cause minor disruption and be low cost. Moving up the design levels involves greater disruption to the building, culminating in **design level number 5**. This would involve spatial layout changes, structural modifications, or new-build and would be at the upper end of building costs within this framework.

The five design levels which are shown in **Figure 1** are as follows:

- 1 Signage, painting, artwork or planting:** This is a low disturbance, low cost solution and can be considered in all scenarios, whether this involves a retrofit, or a new build project.
- 2 Building-related assistive technology:** There is wide variety of building-related assistive technology available for Early Learning and Care settings including induction loops, therapeutic lighting and more. Considering that many of these can be easily retrofitted without structural implications, this could also represent a low disruption option.
- 3 Interior and exterior furniture, fixtures and fittings:** This could involve replacing internal floor finishes, upgrading bathroom fittings, or providing new shelving, storage units, or furniture.
- 4 Building fit-out:** This level of intervention may involve fitting new windows to increase thermal or acoustic performance or installing new sanitary fittings. It may also involve internal works such as fitting new doors or widening door openings.
- 5 Building layout and structure including new build:** This applies to all new build or projects with major renovations and entails disruptive construction work. It involves building layout considerations such as room location, orientation or size, along with all associated structure and fit-out elements such as windows, doors and more.

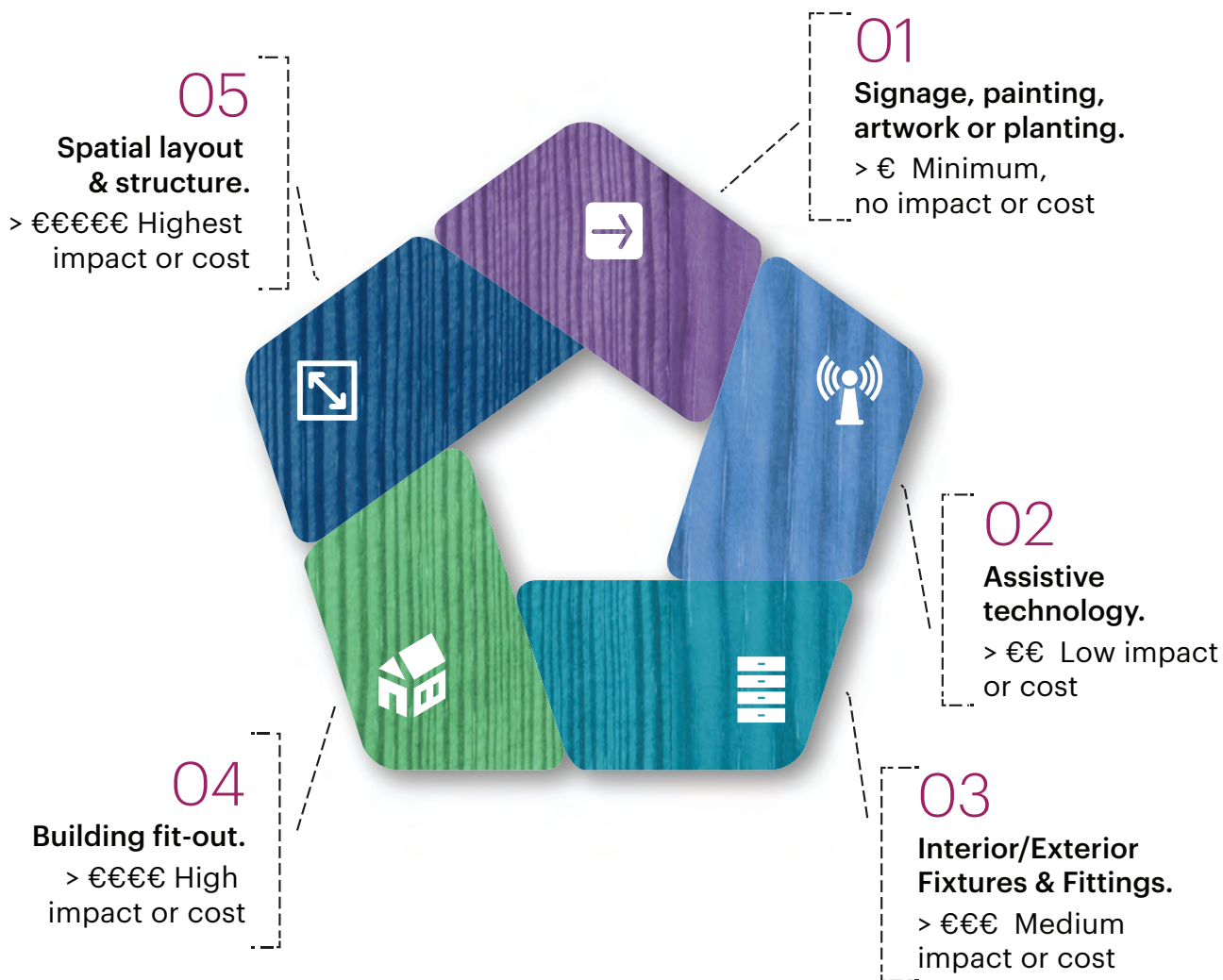


Figure 1. Levels of design and scales of intervention

These five levels of design have been identified to outline how the guidelines are:

- **Applicable to both new and existing settings.**
- **Usable across a wide spectrum of issues; from minor low-cost adaptations such as painting or signage, to major works involving structural changes or new-build.**
- **Usable by various stakeholders, including educators who want to implement minor changes, the setting owners, management, or the design team involved in new-build or refurbishment.**

The reader should consider these design levels as part of the design process to help inform decision-making in line with user needs and construction budget.

How to use the guidelines in Section 1-4

This guidance document largely follows the same format as the **Universal Design Guidelines for Homes in Ireland** and comprises the following:

- Four sections of design guidelines that flow from the location and outside of the building, to key internal and external spaces, to specific elements and systems.
- Each section describes design considerations with photographs of existing buildings to communicate key Universal Design features.
- Design quality guidelines with indicative floor plans and sketches of technical details are provided and can be applied to any new or existing settings.
- The design guidelines apply to all **five levels of design** as described earlier in this section to ensure that the guidelines are applicable to new and existing settings. This also means they can be used for minor or major works.
- Universal Design guidance and Design Features and Tips are also provided to raise awareness and assist in decision making about good design.
- Appendices include brief case studies of ten Early Learning and Care settings in Ireland, a summary of the stakeholder engagement process, Bibliography, Key Terminology / Glossary, and Guidance and Template for Developing a Design Brief.

Lauren, 4½ years



Guidelines at a Glance

Universal Design ELC setting quality features

Section 1 – Site Location, Approach, Entry and Site Layout



- Early Learning and Care setting located so it is within easy reach of the community and close to public transport.
- Accessible approach routes and access points that are clearly visible upon approach.
- Safe and secure boundaries that allow the setting to be integrated and connected to the community.
- A site layout that is accessible, easy to understand, usable and provides comfortable pedestrian paths and convenient set-down and parking areas.

Section 2 – Entering and Moving about the ELC setting



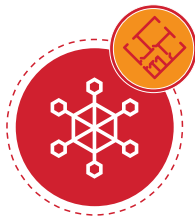
- Clearly visible and easily identified main entrance.
- Covered entrance area to provide a sheltered transition space.
- Accessible and usable main entrance that is secure and controls access to the setting.
- Clearly visible access to reception and waiting areas.
- Accessible and welcoming spaces for parents, families and carers.
- Clear and easily understood circulation areas where key spaces are easily located and identified.

Section 3 – Key Internal and External Spaces



- Calm, legible and distinct spaces that support early learning and care.
- A mixture of large and smaller indoor and outdoor spaces for children to explore and navigate.
- Adequate space to ensure children can partake in activities and move about.
- Quiet indoor and outdoor spaces where adults and children can connect or simply be on their own.
- Learning experiences in central spaces to support inquiry-based learning for a diversity of children regardless of ability, or size.
- Accessible, easy to understand, usable outdoor spaces with a good transition between indoor and outdoor.

Section 4 – Elements and Systems



- Careful use of materials and finishes to create a gentle and multisensory environment that is accessible, usable and easily understood.
- Light switches, door handles, sanitaryware and other fittings that are safe and easy to use by everyone, particularly young children.
- Optimum use of natural and artificial light to create a calm, gently stimulating and accessible environment for all users.
- Use of unobtrusive features to ensure a safe and secure environment for all users.
- Furniture and fittings to support the care and educational needs of a diverse range of children.
- Clear and legible signage to support wayfinding.
- Careful acoustic design and use of materials to ensure a calm and supportive setting for all users.
- Assistive technology and information and communications technology (ICT) to support the education and care of children regardless of ability.

Riona, 3 years





➤ ABC Club, Dunboyne, County Meath.

Learning Stories

Mag Coogan, ABC Club:

At the **ABC Club, Dunboyne, County Meath**, partnership with parents is essential to our provision of quality practice. After 21 years evolving and improving practice, we have discovered, that parents, where possible, like to be included in their children's lives and children likewise love having their parents involved.



Our garden and outdoor play is one of the many “ins” with parents. Every year we have family days where parents come and decorate our garden for Halloween and Christmas. These are a “get to know me” opportunity and many friendships have ensued. At Halloween we have an evening session so children get to experience playing outside in the dark, finishing with a singsong for families around the bonfire. The St. Patrick’s Day parade involves consultation and collaboration with the children and parents before we build the float together. This year we made a time machine to go back to save the dinosaurs. During the snow, we ran a snowperson competition and more recently a sunflower growing competition, where whole families got involved sharing their photos, which were displayed in the classroom.

Parents are a valuable contribution to any setting and using their talents and resources has benefited us immensely. Practitioners, parents and children have truly become a community of practice.



