Scotland's Learning
Estate Strategy

Connecting

People, Places and Learning



COSLA

Smarter Scotland
Scottish Government







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1 Foreword

Scotland's vision is clear: to provide the opportunities and skills for everyone to thrive from early years, schools, colleges, and universities through to lifelong learning. Supporting children, young people and learners of all ages to reach their full potential in life and work is not just a goal; it's a national priority.

Our learning estate is central to this ambition. Since 2007, the Scottish Government, local government and our other partners have invested significantly to improve the spaces and places where learning happens. These environments are evolving to meet the needs of learners today and tomorrow.

These buildings do more than house learning; they enhance it and remove barriers to learners' attainment, achievement and participation. They support curriculum delivery, strengthen community ties, connect with public services, embrace digital innovation and encourage parental engagement. They provide safe spaces and help to lift people and families out of poverty, at all stages of life. Together, they enrich the learner journey and contribute to Scotland's success.

As we celebrate and learn from these achievements, we also need to continue to look ahead. Since the Strategy was first launched, things have changed around us, and these factors need to inform the way forward. The COVID-19 pandemic, global financial instability, increasing need for learning support, technology advancements, demographic shifts and a drive for even greater inclusivity all need to be reflected in our vision for the learning estate.

To provide the best long-term value and impact for public resources, we need to consider sustainability in its widest sense. This should include a needs-based assessment of space requirements, whole life energy consumption, embodied carbon, suitability, utilisation, emissions, consideration of where we can co-exist public services and climate adaptation. Every decision about the future of the learning estate should be informed by these factors.

It is vital that we continually assess the opportunities for work and driving growth in our economy, and we must continue to use our learning estate to equip all learners with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed. Collaboration remains key and placing the learning estate at the heart of our communities, and adopting a more integrated approach, will help us deliver better outcomes and drive sustainable, inclusive growth.

We are excited to continue this journey in partnership, working together to realise Scotland's learning ambitions.



Jenny Gilruth MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills



Cllr Tony Buchanan
CoSLA Children & Young People spokesperson

2

Introduction



2.1 The Learning Estate

2.1.1 The Learning Estate is an integral part of Scotland's overall public sector estate, spanning everything from early learning and childcare settings, primary and secondary schools to residential education facilities, colleges and universities.

2.1.2 The learning estate, not including Universities who are autonomous institutions, accounts for around 20% of all public buildings. The estate is varied in size, design and location. It extends from small island or rural early learning and childcare settings which cater for less than ten children to complex, inner city universities accommodating thousands of students from across the world. The estate varies in age from historic, listed buildings to modern facilities. Therefore, the opportunities for different learning experiences will inevitably vary.

2.1.3 Regardless of their scale, the number of users or the function they serve, these buildings are often civic anchors at the heart of communities. While this can vary significantly depending on the needs of the place, there is a need to provide an all-encompassing vision and set of principles that can be applied across the learning estate when considering what we want it to be in the future. This vision must uphold the principles of equality of access to education, as enshrined in the Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010, ensuring that all learners regardless of background or circumstance can benefit from an inclusive learning environment.

	Early Learning & Childcare	Schools	Colleges	Universities
Number of Buildings	Circa 2,500 settings offering funded places (not all of these are public sector)	Circa 2,500 schools across primary, secondary, special and residential schools	24 Colleges with 270 blocks across 97 campuses,	19 Universities, with many buildings making up each university



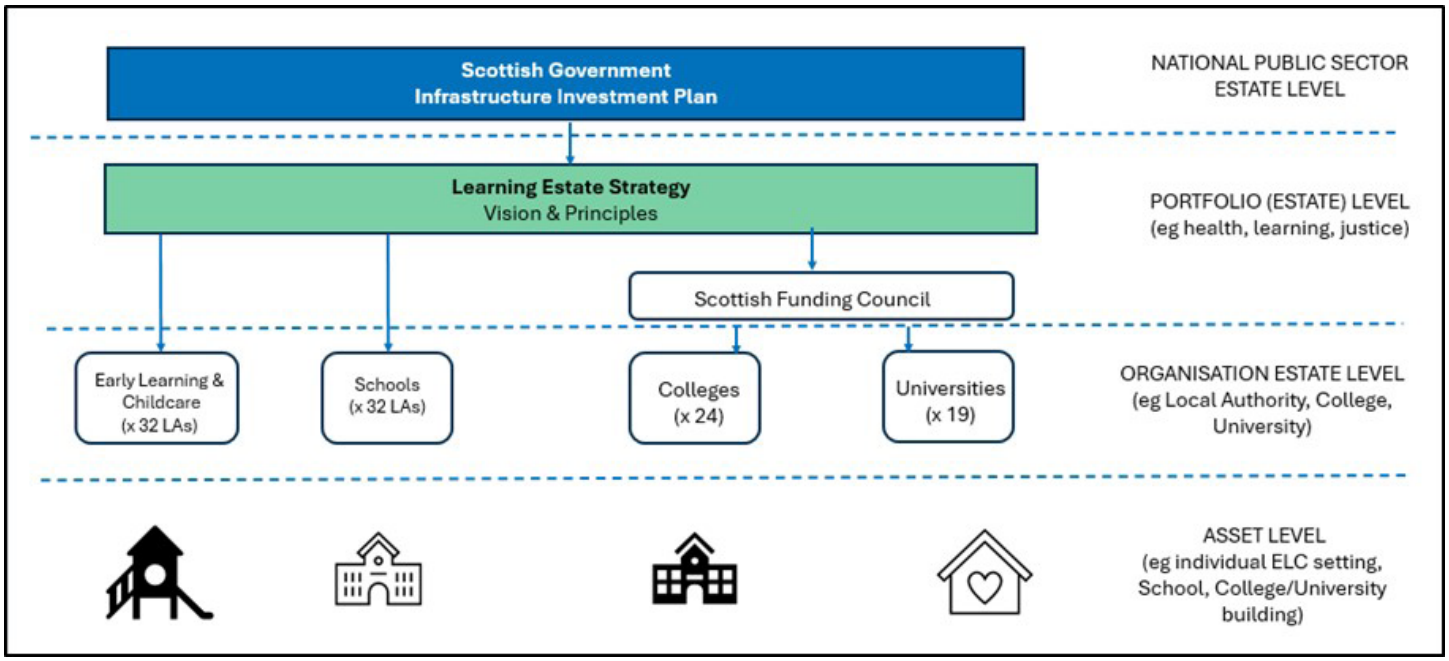
2.2 The Learning Estate Strategy

2.2.1 The Learning Estate Strategy, originally jointly published by Scottish Government and COSLA in 2019, reflects the shared vision of Scottish Government, local authorities, colleges and universities to inspire indoor and outdoor environments which enhance experiences for learners, staff, parents and the wider community.

2.2.2 This refreshed Strategy sets the aspirations of Scottish Government for the whole country across ELC, schools, colleges and universities. This strategy should be used to help shape all future decision making in reference to learning estates. It is anticipated that each organisation (e.g. Local Authorities, Colleges and Universities) will have their own learning estate strategies which are aligned to the vision and guiding principles of this document.

2.2.3 This should be considered alongside the published Asset Strategy guidance.





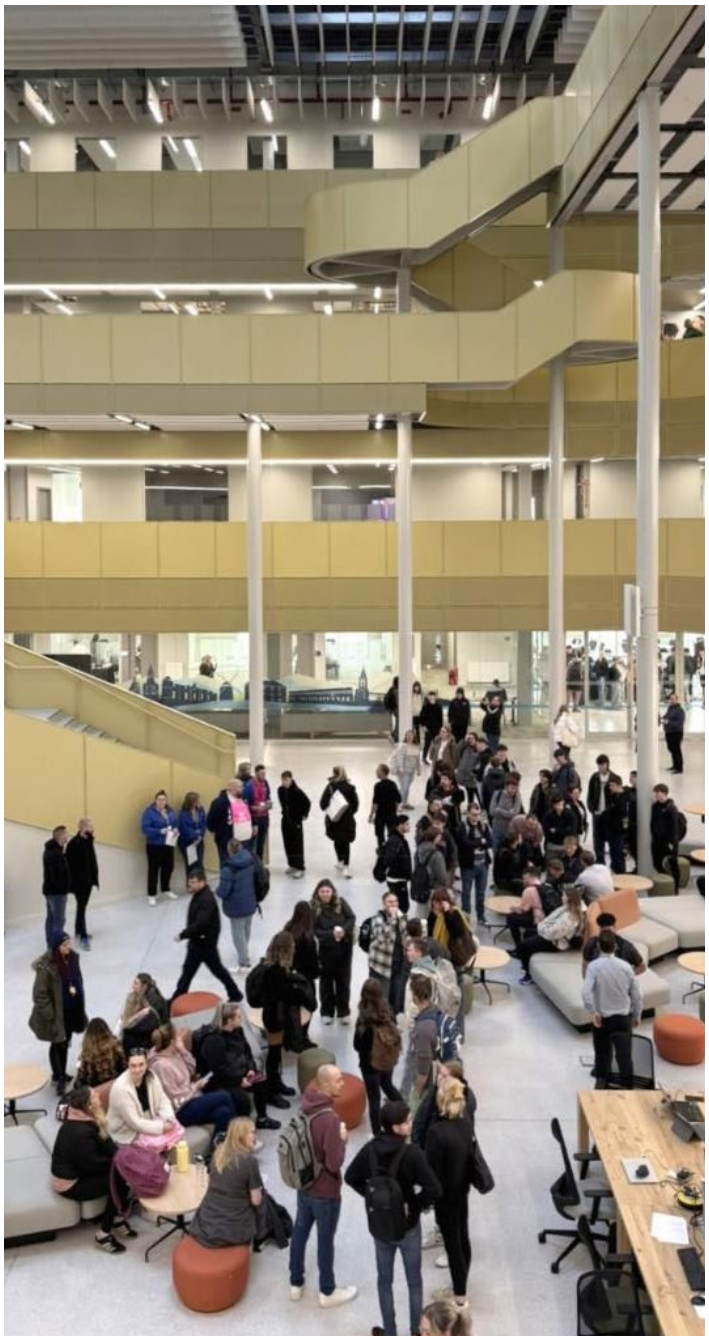
2.3 Learning from previous Learning Estate improvements

2.3.1 The future of the learning estate should continue to be informed by previous experience. There are many excellent examples of effective delivery of high quality, sustainable learning environments that enhance the experience for all users. However, lessons could also be learned from challenges with multi-stakeholder engagement and integration of governance processes.

2.3.2 Examples to learn from include the following:

- Campus incorporating a college and two schools and community facilities to maximise opportunities for staff and learner collaboration
- Campus next to university research centre including high school, ASN school and community leisure to facilitate improved collaboration
- Agricultural college involved in development of a high school campus to determine the best fit for the skills need within the area. Campus now incorporates outdoor planting areas, polytunnels, glasshouses and workshops capable of accommodating tractors for maintenance
- High school working in partnership with neighbouring technology innovation park
- Campus incorporating – ELC, primary, secondary, Police Scotland and community leisure to improve collaboration and enhance service delivery to the community
- Secondary school with integrated NHS medical centre
- Largest Passivhaus education project in the world minimising whole life energy consumption
- First EnerPHit school refurbishment in UK

2.3.3 Projects should undertake evaluation to understand what went well and what could be improved upon, to build on previous successes. Many of these lessons are transferable across projects and sectors and should be shared as widely as possible, such as through the joint SFT/ A+DS Shared Learning Events.



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Drivers for Change



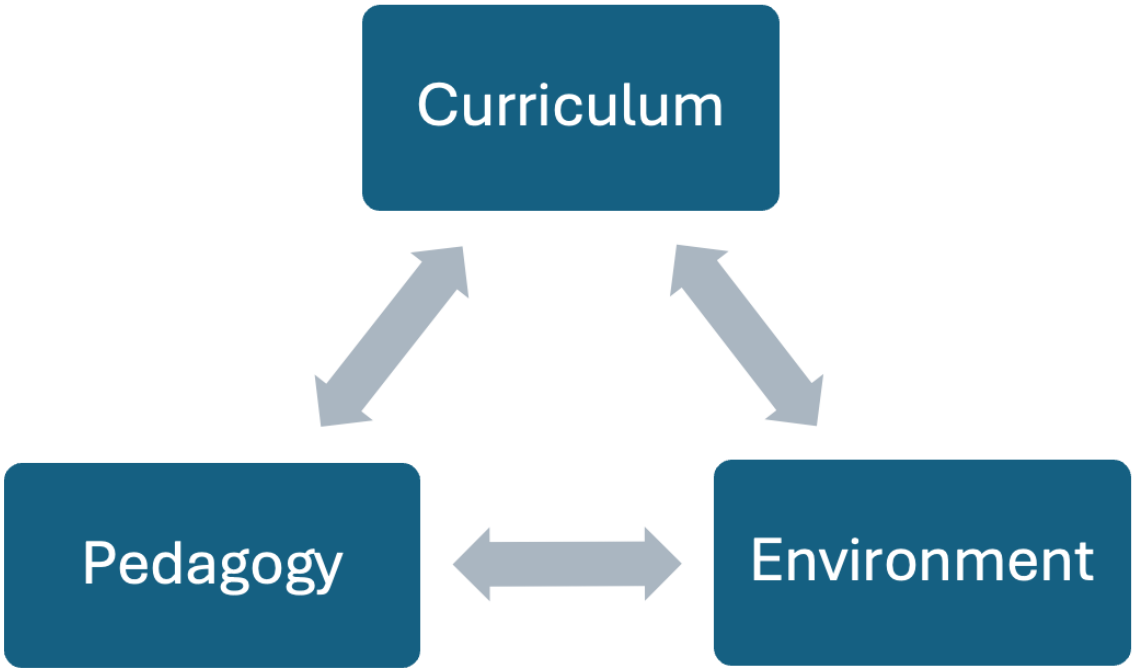
3.1.1 The previous Learning Estate Strategy was launched in 2019 with a vision of "Connecting People, Places and Learning" The key aims which will still be maintained are:

- To place the learner at the heart of decision making
- Encourage connections across all stages of the learner journey
- Taking a place-based approach, using the wider public sector estate



3.1.2 Since the launch of the Learning Estate Strategy in 2019, there has been significant change at a national and worldwide level, and it is now considered pertinent to review the strategy in light of these considerations:

- **Wellbeing** – COVID-19 in 2020 saw the closure of the majority of the learning estate across Scotland. There are many lessons to be learned across the current estate, e.g. digital capability, outdoor learning, welcoming spaces, healthier learning environments and user wellbeing.
- **Sustainability** – It is critical that public sector resources are used effectively and efficiently to ensure financial sustainability and viability for the future. There is therefore the need to think strategically about our estate and how it can best deliver efficient use of resources whilst still ensuring user experience and improved outcomes are at its core, e.g. clear assessment of needs, sharing facilities, re-using existing buildings.
- **Additional Support Needs** – There has been an increase in the number of school age pupils with Additional Support Needs from 30.8% in 2019 to 40.5% in 2024 and, therefore, a need to understand how best to accommodate these needs. In November 2023, the Education, Children and Young People Committee undertook an Additional Support for Learning Inquiry in which the physical environment played a key role in the responses and recommendations. This should inform how the learning estate could best support a diverse range of user needs, both in terms of capacity and user experience.
- **Skills Development** – In 2023-24 colleges delivered 116,602 FTE places and almost one in five of 18/19 year olds in the population attended college on a full-time basis. The demand for new and different skills and the introduction and adoption of new technologies and industries, are always changing. Planning for the learning estate needs to be cognisant of current and future trends, enabling learning and teaching that develops the skills needed for the world of work. The economy drives a need for skills planning to train the workforce, with flexibility and responsiveness to constantly adapt to the skills required most by industry. Approaches to education and learning, and technical requirements for buildings are constantly evolving and there is a need to continuously reflect this when developing the learning estate. Curriculum, pedagogy and physical environments (indoor and outdoor) are intrinsically linked and it is, therefore, important that any changes are holistically considered.



- **Key Priorities** – This strategy aligns with and takes direction from wider strategic ambitions and policies of Scottish Government. This will enable an estate that can deliver excellence and equity across the learning estate in line with Scottish Government's key priorities set out below:

Key Priorities	Impact on Learning Estate
Eradicating Child Poverty	Ensuring the learning estate provides a welcoming, safe, nurturing, healthy environment to meet the needs of every learner.
Growing the Economy	Planning for the learning estate should facilitate innovation, research, entrepreneurship and skills development. Working in partnership with industry, planning should reflect SG's 'Place Principle' supporting inclusive growth and the creation of sustainable communities.
Tackling the Climate Emergency	The learning estate needs to reflect the Scottish Government ambitions of reducing energy and material consumption, developing a circular economy, minimising emissions and increasing adaptability to climate change.
Ensuring High Quality and Sustainable Public Services	The Learning Estate should support and enable high quality learning and teaching. The learning estate is often at the heart of the community and therefore has the potential to provide places where wider public services and support could be accessed.

- **Changing Demographics** – The overall population trend in Scotland is one that is ageing and declining. There are, however, areas that do not follow this trend and there are some capacity challenges with the learning estate aligning with the needs of its users in that locality. There can also be issues with rapid increases or decreases in transient populations such as migrants, refugees and international learners. These demographic shifts can present a challenge with regard to suitability and sustainability of the learning estate at all stages. All planning for the future learning estate should be agile enough that the buildings could be easily adapted to a different use regardless of the continuing demographic changes.
- **Diversity and Inclusion** – The increasingly diverse nature of Scotland's population as per the 2022 census and the increase in instances of discrimination and inequality, including racist incidents, gender-based violence and anti-LGBT+ discrimination. The learning estate must be able to provide inclusive, supportive learning environments where all learners can thrive safely and with dignity.

4 Strategic Context



4.1 National Performance Framework



4.1.1 The National Performance Framework (NPF) focuses on creating a more successful country with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish and thrive, through increased wellbeing and sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

4.1.2 Education and associated infrastructure are integral to many of the national outcomes and their indicators and development goals. The specific national outcomes which most relate to this Learning Estate Strategy are:

- We grow up loved, safe and respected so that we realise our full potential
- We are well educated, skilled and able to contribute to society
- We are healthy and active
- We live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe
- We have thriving and innovative businesses, with quality jobs and fair work for everyone
- We have a globally competitive, entrepreneurial, inclusive and sustainable economy



4.2 Learning Estate Efficiency

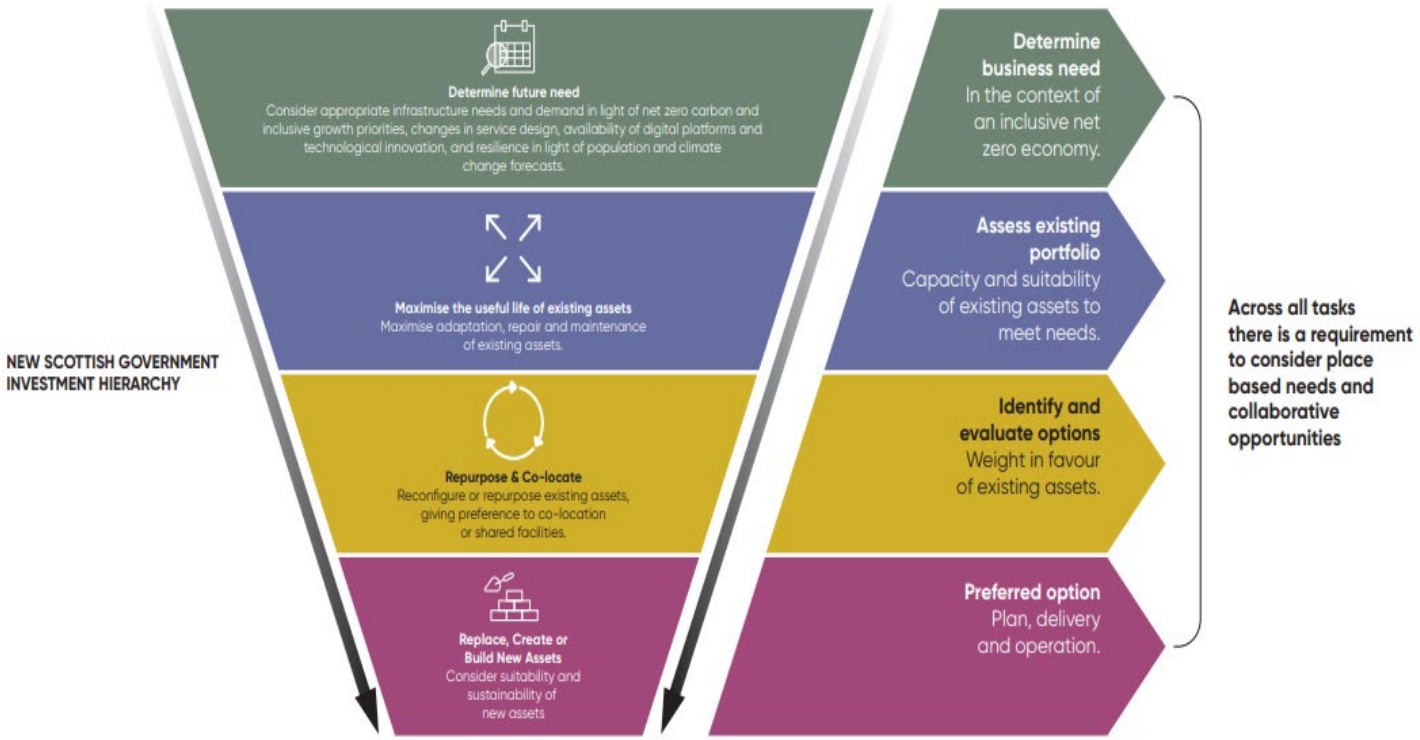
4.2.1 Long term planning for the future of the learning estate needs to be strategic and provide the best use of resources. Any decision in relation to the learning estate should first be considered through the lens of the Scottish Government's Infrastructure Investment Plan hierarchy:

1) Determine future need

2) Maximise the useful life of existing assets

3) Repurpose or co-locate where possible

4) Replace, create or build a new asset



4.3 Public Service Reform

4.3.1 Scottish Government's vision is of a Scotland where everyone has access to services that are efficient, good quality and effective. This vision and the approach to achieving it is detailed in the Public Service Reform Strategy. The Learning Estate offers the opportunity to support this improvement of outcomes to deliver public sector services that are joined-up, in the right place and achieve better outcomes for people and their communities. All public sector partners should seek to remove barriers to the more effective delivery of public services through collaborative assessment of needs, joined-up governance, coordinated funding, imaginative development and maximising utilisation of the learning estate.

4.4 Digital

4.4.1 There are a number of drivers for developing our digital ambitions to support learning and teaching, including:

- access to new and diverse skills
- agile and integrated learning experiences
- increasing digital content through free access to a range of industry leading tools and services
- developing opportunities for remote learning
- widen access for learners in rural areas
- improved links to business and enterprise

4.4.2 To support these digital ambitions, planning for the learning estate should consider both services infrastructure and spatial requirements, while also ensuring safety of learners and confidentiality of data.

4.5 Outdoor

4.5.1 Outdoor environments offer wider benefits, opportunities and experiences for all learners. Outdoor spaces and access to nature can enhance mental health, physical wellbeing and concentration. Outdoor spaces in the learning estate can also contribute to Scotland's National Adaptation Plan 3 whilst educating learners on adaptation to the changing climate through water management, planting for carbon absorption, planting for growing food and biodiversity improvements.

4.5.2 The learning estate, therefore, needs to support this by providing enhanced and diverse outdoor areas for learning, teaching, play, physical activity and social interactions. This approach is embedded in early learning and childcare and is encouraged throughout primary and secondary education, for example by the Learning Estate Investment Programme requiring enhanced and sheltered outdoor areas. Lessons should be learned from all sector examples and applied throughout the learner journey.

4.6 Social Justice

4.6.1 The learning estate plays a vital role in advancing social justice in education by creating environments that are inclusive, equitable and responsive to the diverse needs of learners. By ensuring that facilities are accessible, safe and designed to support wellbeing and participation, the estate helps to remove structural barriers that disproportionately affect disadvantaged and marginalised groups. A socially just learning estate reflects the values of fairness and dignity, enabling every child and young person to engage meaningfully in their education and reach their full potential.

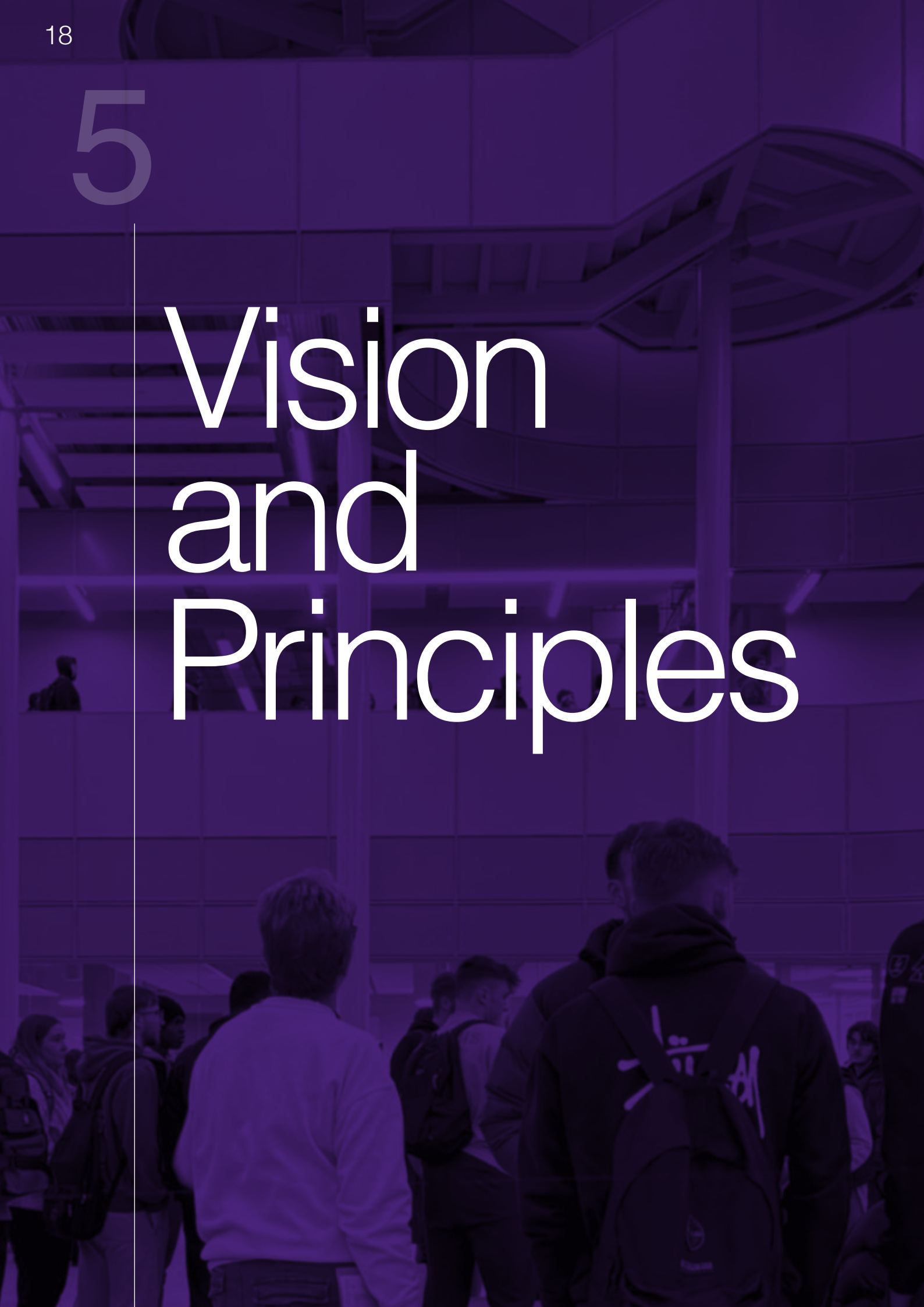
4.7 Policy Priorities

4.7.1 Our learning estate should support all relevant strategies and policy ambitions, such as:

- National Improvement Framework (NIF)
- Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)
- Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)
- Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)
- United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- Learner Participation in Education Settings
- Scottish Attainment Challenge
- STEM strategy
- Digital Learning and Teaching Strategy for Scotland
- College Infrastructure Strategy – Scottish Funding Council
- Parity of Esteem between Learner Pathways
- School Leaver Destinations
- Learning for Sustainability and associated "Target 2030" Learning for Sustainability Action Plan
- Outdoor Learning in CfE
- Realising the Ambition National Practice Guidance / play pedagogy in the early level of CfE
- School Libraries Strategy
- Gaelic Education Development
- Out of School Care development
- Community Learning and Development
- Learning Together
- The physical activity for health framework
- The National Walking Strategy, Cycling Action Plan for Scotland (CAPS) and the Long-Term Vision for Active Travel in Scotland
- A Connected Scotland
- The Anti-Racism in Education Programme
- Equally Safe Strategy
- The Gender Equality Taskforce in Education and Learning
- LGBT Inclusive Education
- Climate change: Scottish National Adaptation Plan 2024-2029

5

Vision and Principles



5.1 Vision

5.1.1 The Learning Estate is wide and varied, comprising many different places and environments. These different places have to cater for a population of children, young people, lifelong learners and communities with diverse life experiences, needs and ways of learning. Thought must be given to all learning environments and what the user experience will be, in order to support and enhance the learning experience for all.

5.1.2 To help shape the content and direction of the future learning estate and to guide decision-making, Scottish Government sets out its vision:

> "Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy – Connecting People, Places and Learning"

> "Creating Environments that Enhance Experiences"

5.2 Guiding Principles

5.2.1 The Vision for Scotland's Learning Estate is presented as a series of guiding principles. These guiding principles are aligned with the ethos of the 2019 strategy and have been updated to reflect the drivers for change above.

5.2.2 The guiding principles are ways of delivering the vision and act as a framework for decision making on the nature, extent, location and other characteristics of the future Learning Estate.

Guiding Principle	Expansion of Guiding Principle
Education – Support and facilitate excellent learning and teaching to meet the needs of all learners.	Joined-up, collaborative approach – learning environments should be reflective of changing approaches to education and learning, and should enable opportunities for working across ages, stages and sectors. This should actively challenge structural inequality in education.
Skills – Provide inspiring spaces to develop skills required for learners to positively contribute to communities.	Skills – consideration should be given to creating inspiring spaces that help to deliver skills requirements e.g. construction skills areas, maker workshops, project-based learning and strategic partnerships. The Inspiring Learning: Space Toolkit is a useful tool to use when thinking how an inspiring learning space could be created in any educational facility.

Guiding Principle	Expansion of Guiding Principle
Wellbeing – Provide suitable indoor and outdoor learning environments to meet the needs and wellbeing of all users.	Inclusivity – the space should be welcoming and inclusive for all, including those learners from marginalised groups, whilst ensuring a safe and secure place, in reference to Universal Design principles for learning. Equality – Equality in education should underpin all of this work, to ensure that spaces meet the needs of a diverse range of learners including disrupting racism and racist incidents and gender inequality. Spaces should aim to support the needs of local communities, e.g., laundry facilities, social dining spaces, family and life skills rooms, spaces that can be used for Breakfast/After school clubs. Additional Support Needs – this could include neurodivergent design, sensory/biophilic design and trauma informed design. Nurture spaces – these dedicated, nurturing environments should be designed to support everyone, including those who may be experiencing social, emotional or behavioural challenges. Outdoor spaces – external environments should be considered an integral part of the learning experience and spaces should be designed to include covered external spaces, horticultural areas, rewilding zones, forest learning and performance areas that support outdoor learning, play and health. Transitions – spaces should encourage and help to enable smooth transitions throughout the day and across the learner journey e.g. infant rooms in close proximity to ELC, shared common spaces, community campuses, school to college partnerships, partner links with FE/HE and industry.
Digital – Digitally enable learning environments to support the delivery of Scottish Government's digital learning and teaching strategy.	Digitally enabled – the estate should be future proofed with appropriate underlying digital infrastructure to enable and enhance learner collaborations.
Engagement – Engage with the community to understand their local needs, including under-represented voices.	Place Principle – learning environments should serve the wider community and where appropriate be integrated with the delivery of other public services e.g. health, leisure, social care, libraries, in line with the Place Principle.

Guiding Principle	Expansion of Guiding Principle
Place – Provide the right facilities in the right place to ensure public services are inclusive, sustainable and effective in improving people's outcomes.	Single Scottish Estate – consider the delivery of public services in line with the Single Scottish Estate programme. Optimisation – the estate should maximise occupancy and utilisation, making the best use of existing assets.
Data informed decisions – Inform good decisions through the use of clear and cohesive data.	Data Informed Decision Making – appropriate data should be collected to ensure decisions are made on an informed basis. e.g. help to determine air quality, energy efficiency, utilisation, occupation levels and capacity.
Public Resources – Ensure best use of public resources to meet current and future needs.	Demographics – thought should be given to how indoor and outdoor spaces could be easily re-purposed, adapted or differently utilised to respond to changing demographic and societal needs. Existing Estate – innovative thinking is required to develop environments to meet user needs and enhance service delivery. Optimisation – consideration should be given to the size of the estate and what future demand is going to require.
Condition – Manage and maintain environments in a good condition.	Condition, management and maintenance – each learning environment should be in a good condition. Works should be prioritised with the key emphasis on keeping buildings safe. Whole life cost – the estate should deliver best value from both a capital and ongoing revenue perspective.
Sustainability – Achieve low energy consumption, low carbon and low emissions.	Carbon – projects should be guided by principles of a carbon management plan. This could include the use of renewables, consideration of embodied carbon in design and construction, locally sourced materials and suppliers, net zero heat sources, electric vehicle charging infrastructure, active travel planning and in-use energy targets. Learning for sustainability – Any project should be used as a learning opportunity particularly in relation to learning locally for sustainability. Projects can educate learners on adaptation to the changing climate through water management, planting for carbon absorption, planting for growing food and biodiversity improvements.

6 conclusion



6.1.1 This is an overarching vision that guides the direction of learning estate strategies and individual asset planning. It should be referenced and adhered to when organisations (e.g. local authorities, colleges, universities) are making decisions on their future learning estate.

6.1.2 For any future national investment, adherence to the vision and guiding principles outlined in this strategy will be a consideration for attracting Scottish Government funding support.

6.1.3 The vision is to create environments that enhance experiences for all.





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