Universal Design Guidelines

Early Childhood Ireland Explainers

Development

The Universal Design Guidelines were launched in June 2019 by the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr Katherine Zappone. Work on them began in 2017 when an Early Childhood Ireland-led consortium tendered to develop the guidelines. Other partners included Trinity Haus, Mary Immaculate College, Nathan Somers Design and the consortium collaborated with the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the National Disability Authority (CEUD/NDA).

The support of the CEUD/NDA was sought by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to advance the work. The main purpose of the Guidelines is to support the development of an inclusive culture and to guide settings to support inclusion. This forms part of the suite of resources included in the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM).

The development of the guidelines involved carrying out a literature review, conducting ten case study visits to settings, and developing guidelines to support Early Years settings to implement Universal Design concepts, as well as a self-audit tool to guide this.

A team from Mary Immaculate College and Trinity Haus carried out the literature review, with support from Early Childhood Ireland . The literature review examined evidence-based research regarding best practice in Early Years provision and Universal Design and made links to the relevant Standards of Síolta.

Ten settings from around the country were chosen for the case studies. The settings included a variety of urban and rural contexts. They varied from small, medium, large, private, community, purpose-built, converted, sessional, and full-day settings. The selection was steered by geographical location and the Pobal Early Years Sector Profile, in addition to Early Childhood Ireland's previous engagement on quality improvement initiatives with settings around the country. During visits to the selected settings, children were given cameras to take photos of the areas they liked best, many of which feature in the guidelines. Providers, educators and parents were also interviewed and surveyed regarding design elements of the settings. The guidelines were developed from the data from the literature review and the case study visits, as well as from the architectural and Universal Design expertise of Trinity Haus, and the expertise and experience of Early Years

of Early Childhood Ireland. In addition to the case study settings, images are included from many settings in Ireland to demonstrate good Universal Design practice. The guidelines also feature examples of good design from Japan and Italy.

The self-audit tool reflects the guidelines and can be used to help identify aspects of the physical environment, indoors, and outdoors, that could be adapted. It can also help show how any adaptation can be done.

Guidelines

The guidelines are divided into four sections:

1. Site Location, Approach Entry and Design
2. Entering and Moving about the Early Learning and Care Setting
3. Key Internal and External Spaces
4. Elements and Systems

The guidelines look at access, waiting areas, layout, colour, noise, storage, signage, and more. All settings can get ideas from the guidelines, including small home-based settings and larger purpose-built settings. The guidelines include ideas that can be implemented at a low cost, and service providers who are planning larger projects can also get inspiration.

1. Site Location, Approach, Entry, and Design

The location, approach, and design of an Early Years site are critical. An Early Years setting should be integrated with the local community and set within a high-quality public realm. The public realm refers to public footpaths, streets, roads, squares, parks, and other public open spaces in villages, towns, and cities. The approach to the site should produce a positive relationship between the setting and the community. The design of the setting should create a safe, comfortable, and stimulating environment with high-quality pedestrian, cycling, parking, and pick-up and drop-off facilities.

The guidelines have suggestions on providing accessible approach routes and access points that are clearly visible upon approach. There is also advice on providing a site layout that is accessible, easy to understand, usable, and provides comfortable pedestrian paths and convenient set-down and parking areas

2. Entering and Moving about the Setting

Critical to the Universal Design approach is ensuring it is easy and comfortable to enter and to move around a setting. As settings can be attended by a range of people, it is important that circulation areas are accessible, easily understood, and usable. The building's layout should be coherent, logical, easily navigated, and made up of distinct routes. In open-plan settings or where there are flexible space arrangements, clarity can be improved using distinct colours, landmarks, focal points, or other visual cues . Circulation

areas should also act as stimulating, exciting social spaces for children so they can play, develop skills, engage with others, and interact with their environment.

The guidelines suggest that the main entrance be clearly visible and easily identified, as well as being secure and controlling access to the setting. A covered entrance area provides a sheltered transition space. Settings should provide accessible and welcoming spaces for parents, families, and carers. The guidelines also provide advice on constructing clear and easily understood circulation areas where key spaces are easily located and identified.

3. Key Internal and External Spaces

Early Years settings contain a range of internal and external areas, from infant spaces up to School Age Care spaces for older children. Settings may also have staff rooms, offices, family rooms, toilets, and other ancillary areas. Children's spaces should form the heart of the setting and should be connected and integrated within the whole setting.

Outdoor space is also a crucial component and should be designed in tandem with the internal layout to guarantee a good relationship between the inside and outside of the setting and to ensure direct access for children to nature and the outdoors.

The Universal Design document provides guidance on how to create calm, legible, and distinct spaces that support Early Years learning and care. It provides examples of both large and smaller indoor and outdoor spaces for children to explore and navigate, as well as quiet indoor and outdoor spaces where adults and children can connect.

4. Elements and Systems

The elements and systems of an Early Years setting vary from building materials and finishes to natural and artificial light, heating and ventilation, as well as fittings and technology. These elements and systems provide the most hands-on aspect of the inside and outside environment. These will also directly influence a child's experience of a setting.

The guidelines have advice on the careful use of materials and finishes, to create a gentle and multisensory environment that is accessible, usable, and easily understood. There is also guidance on how to optimise the use of natural and artificial light to create a calm, gently stimulating, and accessible environment. The guidelines provide examples of furniture and fittings to support the care and educational needs of a diverse range of children, as well as acoustic designs and the use of materials to ensure a calm and supportive setting for all users.

Self-Audit Tool

The self-audit tool, developed as part of the Universal Design Guidelines, can be used by anyone to assess how an Early Years built environment, both indoors and outdoors, meets the needs of all users. The audit can help see the possibilities for adding and/or adapting features in an existing setting. It can also be used to identify what to include if you are planning an extension or a new build.

First 5

First 5 emphasises the importance of any future capital investment that facilitates the participation of all children in Early Years care and promotes settings that are inclusive and accessible, should be informed by the Universal Design Guidelines . The Building Blocks – Improvement Grant requires all Early Years and School Age Care settings to consider the Universal Design Guidelines in the refurbishment, renovation, and building of facilities.