

This section will deal with the sensory garden:

The inclusion of a sensory garden within the Maynooth Harbour Field development would be most welcome. Sensory gardens are popular with and beneficial to both children and adults, especially those who have sensory processing issues including autism and other disabilities. To get the maximum use from a sensory garden it is important to take into account for whom the garden is primarily intended. It is also important to understand what plants and features will best achieve the atmosphere that is desired.

A sensory garden can be very therapeutic for people who suffer from sensory problems. It may be used as a calming place and as a gentle way to stimulate the senses. This type of environment can become a place where those with autism and other sensory processing disorders feel safe and comfortable in exploring their senses without feeling overwhelmed by them.

Depending on the person's needs, a sensory garden can primarily focus on one sense or it can incorporate all of them. For those who are hyper-reactive to stimuli, the garden should provide a relaxing environment, and for those who tend to be under-reactive to stimuli, the garden is a great way to stimulate the senses. For children who do not suffer from a disability, a sensory garden is beneficial in that it is a fun educational tool which allows them to explore and learn about their senses and nature. While in the garden they are encouraged to touch, smell, taste, and generally interact with the environment around them. It presents a healthy place of discovery and gets children outdoors.

Well balanced sensory gardens include features, surfaces, objects and plants which stimulate our senses through touch, sight, scent, taste and sound.

Touch: Sensory gardens provide an opportunity to explore natural textures by touch. Different plants present a variety of feels for example the soft and fuzzy feel of Jerusalem Sage, the smooth foliage of a Peace Lily, and the silky sensation of Lamb's Ear. Yarrow and Feather Grass are also excellent examples of suitable textures for a sensory experience. The incorporation of hardscape elements such as benches, paths, water features, bird feeders and garden art can provide stimuli for all of the five senses.

Sight: For visual stimulation or sight, colour is an important consideration. When designing a garden creativity in the use of colour is necessary. Colours may be seasonal, placed for maximum contrast or grouped in clusters. Colour doesn't only pertain to plants either. Choose colours carefully when adding brick, gravel or stone to the garden. Create a balance between energising colours and soft, restful colours to avoid overstimulation. Butterflies and birds also add to the visual interest of a garden. Visual interest can be heightened by the inclusion of plants with a variety of habits to include a mixture of upright plants, bushes, creepers and climbers.

Scent: Smell is the primordial sense, more intimately tied to our emotions than any other sense. A scent can trigger spiritual, emotional and physical peace and stimulate healing and wellness. Gardens are filled with mingling scents, from the soil to the plants and the air itself. Gardens should include a variety of plants that release scents in different ways such as flowers (which release smells naturally) to vegetables (which change smells as they grow) and plants such as geraniums which only release scent when crushed by hand. Examples of highly aromatic plants include gardenia, honeysuckle, jasmine, lilac, sweet pea, herbs and spices. Smell is closely linked with memory, those

with olfactory function find smells evoke particular memories conjuring up recollections of childhood in many instances. This is known as “The Proust Effect”.

Taste: Explore taste by planting edible herbs and other plants in the garden. Examples of edible flowers include nasturtiums, evening primrose, hibiscus and pansy. Fruit trees and plants that produce vegetables are also a natural and obvious choice when it comes to taste in a sensory garden. When planting edible flowers take care to differentiate them from other non- edible flowers. This is particularly important if the garden is for children. Place edible flowers together in a designated area.

Sound: Sound is a fun feature of a sensory garden and it is crucial to create a calming environment. Certain ornamental grasses create unique sounds, and the rustling of leaves is also soothing. The inclusion of a bird bath in this area would provide both sounds of water and birdsong. Wind chimes and musical instruments (xylophone) to encourage young visitors to create sounds of their own.

We would like to see the garden incorporating places to sit and rest providing a variety of suitable, age friendly seating, strategically placed in areas that would also provide shelter from the weather as appropriate.

As stated earlier it is important to take into account for whom the garden is primarily intended. We would like to see a sensory garden which would meet the needs of young and senior members of our community and would be fully inclusive to cater for those with and without disabilities. We would like to specifically request that consideration be given to the fact that half of the autism population are non-verbal therefore it would be appropriate to use signage to communicate the intention of certain areas of the garden. We understand that communication boards are under consideration by the council for use in other areas of the Harbour Field development and would suggest that the sensory garden should also include such a communications board.

The design plan makes reference to a sensory play area as opposed to a sensory garden. We have outlined above our reasons why we believe the inclusion of a sensory garden into the Harbour Field would be beneficial to all users of the facility, not only young children.

Should you proceed with the plan for a smaller sensory garden for toddlers, of course all of the benefits associated with a sensory garden as indicated above would still be relevant. The inclusion of items such as a busy board, playhouse with sandbox, soft play equipment and sensory blocks would be beneficial.

It is not clear to us from your plans as to whether the proposed sensory play area is protected by fencing or if it is enclosed in any way. In the section Play Strategy it is stated that the playground is protected by a 1M high fence with 4 self closing gates and safety surfacing to relevant fall heights will be used where required. The plan also states there will be a smaller sensory play area for toddlers close to Leinster Street, but no indication is given as to the provision of fencing around this area. We are of the opinion that it is imperative that secure fencing is in place in this location given its proximity to Leinster Street and that adequate and suitable passive supervision areas be included in the design for this toddlers sensory play area.

