



Association of  
Play Industries  
[www.api-play.org](http://www.api-play.org)

**National Play Strategy  
Wave Two  
April 2009 – March 2011:**

**Ensuring Best Delivery:  
A Practical Guide for Local Authorities**

April 2009



# Contents

Background to the Government's Play Strategy	3
About the Association of Play Industries	5
Ensuring Best Delivery:	7
1. Deliver Diverse Facilities	8
2. Achieve a Balance between Landscaping and Equipment	9
3. The Importance of Good Community Consultation and Evaluation	10
4. Timely Planning Ensures Smooth Delivery	11
5. Work With Other Departments	12
6. Ensure Sustainability	15
7. Simplify Procurement and Liability	16
API's Top Tips for Successful Delivery of the National Play Strategy	19

**We are in the midst of a-once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to drastically improve the way our children play and socialise. With the Government allocating £235 million, through the National Play Strategy, to be spent on building or renewing play facilities in England before 2011, there has never been a greater stimulus to deliver first class play areas for the benefit of both children and our wider communities.**

**The Association of Play Industries has written this paper because we believe that in moving forward into Wave Two of the Strategy, it is vital to get the delivery of the Play Strategy right. This paper aims to bring together the experience of the API, as one of the key 'on-the-ground' deliverers of the Strategy, and to offer practical guidance on how those Local Authorities, now embarking on Wave Two of the Strategy, can maximise their success in delivering these new play facilities to improve the happiness of our children and young people.**

## **Background to the Government's Play Strategy**

**"Play is not only extremely important for children's personal and social development, but is one of the simplest ways to overcome many of today's youth problems like childhood obesity, anti-social behaviour, under-age drinking and mental health problems."**

Barnardos, 2006

On 11<sup>th</sup> December 2007, the Government announced the largest ever investment in play facilities for children in England, through a £235 million National Play Strategy. It outlined five key areas for action:

- Providing more places to play by investing £235 million in new and improved play areas and 30 new adventure playgrounds;
- Supporting play through childhood;
- Addressing safety issues with new guidance to help local authorities deliver exciting, safe and accessible environments;

- Establishing child-friendly communities with guidance and training available to help ensure that the design and management of public space responds to the needs of children; and
- Embedding play in local priorities, with Children's Trusts and local authority planners taking account of children's play needs. A new national indicator has also been launched to check levels of children's satisfaction with their local play areas.



The popular "basket swing" teaches children of all ages and abilities to play together and share

At the heart of the strategy is that the Government wants 'a variety of places for play, free of charge, supervised and unsupervised, in every residential area ... and children and young people to have a clear stake in public space – their play to be accepted by their neighbours'.

The first phase of delivery of the Strategy ended in March 2009, with the Government stating that 500 playgrounds, through 63 local authorities, have already been delivered. The second phase of delivery began in April 2009, (the third phase has now been fast-tracked into the second), with around 90 local authorities being offered funding. All top tier local authorities will receive at least £1 million, and 30 pathfinders will get on average £2.5 million to build new or to significantly refurbish existing play areas. The strategy signifies the biggest ever commitment towards play the UK has ever seen.

With £235 million being spent on this initiative, and play being recognised as a key element of children's health and well-being, Local Authorities now have a vital role in ensuring that this Strategy is delivered successfully. If delivered well, this is a great opportunity for Councils to really make a difference to children and young people in their area – improving the way they play and socialise as well as having a positive effect on our communities.



An exciting £222,500 development of Chediston Vale Park in Nottingham, includes a fantastic new play area complete with a multi-use games area, exercise equipment and landscaped natural play elements.

The facility was opened by the Sheriff of Nottingham and was a real community event. The rejuvenated site will provide plenty of opportunities for local residents of all ages to not only enjoy the new landscaped play area, but also improve their fitness levels!



## About the Association of Play Industries

The API is the lead trade body within the play sector. With over 70 Members it represents the interests of designers, manufacturers, distributors of both indoor and outdoor play equipment and play area surfacing. API Members deliver more than 2,000 play spaces a year.

The API is passionate about play, play which encourages appropriate thrill and reward from assessing and taking risk. Best practice in play area design offers visible challenge and risk and API members use their years of experience to design and create environments that deliver this within well-developed safety standards.

The member companies of the API have played, and are playing, a significant role in the delivery of Phase One of the Government's National Play Strategy, working with Local Authorities to build and redevelop playgrounds, delivering new, exciting and challenging ways for children to play.

## Ensuring Best Delivery

The Government's National Play Strategy vision is "to make sure that every residential area has a variety of high-quality places for all children to play safely and free of charge". However, the actual delivery of the strategy is not prescriptive and, aside from predisposed guidance issued from organisations such as Play England, it is up to each individual Local Authority how it implements the scheme in its area.

From the API's experience over the last year of working in partnership with numerous Local Authorities and delivering new or refurbished playgrounds through Phase One of the Strategy, we have built up a considerable amount of knowledge and expertise. In light of our lessons learned, below are our recommendations for those Local Authorities now undertaking delivery of Wave Two; our "**Top Tips for Delivering A Successful National Play Strategy**". The paper then goes into more detail to outline key areas to focus on to ensure the best results for our children and our wider communities.

### The API's Top Tips for Delivering a Successful National Play Strategy:

1. Deliver a **mix of play facilities** in each area. Research has shown that an exciting, challenging and diverse mix of equipment will keep children returning again and again.
2. Strike the **right balance of the landscaping of the play area and the equipment** contained within it. Although it is important that the play area fits in with the environment, it is not a substitute for exciting equipment.
3. Good community consultation needs sound evaluation. The **decision-making process should be retained by play professionals** to ensure sound, workable design.
4. **Get ahead with early planning of sites.** Early planning and timely delivery allows teething problems to be rectified and landscaping to begin to mature.
5. **Work together with other Departments.** This ensures that the wider social benefits of good play are delivered.
6. To ensure true sustainability, **source products that are not only environmentally-friendly, but have longevity and are low maintenance.**
7. **Keep procurement and liability simple. Where possible, use purchasing and distribution consortiums.** This ensures cost-effectiveness as well as providing a source of advice and expertise.
8. Encourage high quality design by requesting that fewer companies respond to tender. **4-5 should ensure a good quality response.**

## 1. Deliver Diverse Facilities

**“The variety of high-quality equipment on sites was central to parents’ and children’s positive impressions and were the main reason why children wanted to visit.”**

DCSF Research Children’s and Parents’ Experiences of Recently Improved Play Areas, March 2009

Ensuring a diverse mix of play facilities is delivered within the area of each Local Authority is vital to the success of the National Play Strategy. Research conducted on the experiences of children of recently improved play areas, by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in March 2009, found that building play facilities with a wide variety of equipment has led to children and families spending “longer periods of time on the sites due to the increased variety and appeal.” Local Authorities have also reported higher numbers of users following improvements. **It is crucial that the design of the equipment ensures maximum benefit to those children and families using them and keeps users coming back to the facilities time after time.**

Children play in many different ways and there is a variety of factors affecting the way in which they prefer to socialise and play. Boys play differently from girls, as toddlers do from teenagers. It is known that teenage girls are notoriously difficult to engage in physical activity and equipment with movement where they can face each other or sit beside each other appeals to teenage girls.

The Strategy specifically focuses on ensuring the inclusion of children with disabilities and those from minority groups. The Play Strategy states that play spaces should be “attractive, welcoming, engaging and accessible for all local children and young people, including disabled children, and children from minority groups in the community”. **API companies have a detailed knowledge of how to best meet the demands of various groups of children and young people to ensure best delivery.**



An element of risk and challenge is important for children's development

The DCSF research also found that parents specifically mentioned that play areas that cater for all age groups are “the best aspect of the park”. Children aged 8 to 13 (the target age group for Play Pathfinder and Playbuilder investment) tended to visit play areas with their families, and encouraging use among this group is therefore likely to mean catering for a wider age group.

It is also important to consider what kind of equipment will introduce wider social and developmental benefits for children, such as helping them to develop their sense of risk, learning how to interact and share as well as incorporating elements of challenge.

The research also revealed that there are consistent themes in terms of children's preferences across all the sites. The feedback was that:

- **Equipment that allows more than one person to use it at a time was popular.**
- **Equipment that offered a sense of risk or challenge proved popular with children;**
- **Play features and equipment that could be used creatively in a variety of ways was also popular; and**
- **Play space and equipment for ball games were also well-received.**

## 2. Achieve a Balance Between Landscaping and Equipment

Creating playful landscapes is high on the agenda with the Government, open space planners and playground manufacturers keen to provide children with a place to play that both fits in to the locality and brings children closer to nature.

A key aim of local authorities, when improving play areas as part of Phase One of the National Play Strategy, has been to create an area that complemented and 'fitted' within the surrounding natural environment. The DCSF research found that Local Authorities described taking two kinds of measures to achieve this: landscaping, including adding natural features to create a more 'playable' environment; and building equipment to blend into the environment.

Whilst landscaping of play areas is important, it is vital to the success of the facility to strike the right balance between the landscaping of the play area and the equipment contained within. Landscaping can really add appeal to areas, but care needs to be taken that this appeal is not all "adult" focused. We must remember that these areas are first and foremost for children. For example, if not careful, a fantastic ornamental garden could be built, which whilst being hugely attractive from an adult perspective, has little play value and appeal to children. **The research from the DCSF clearly highlights that it is the equipment that excites the children and keeps them returning to the facilities again and again.**

**"...the variety of exciting equipment made the sites appealing and helped maintain children's interest for long periods."**

DCSF Research Children's and Parents' Experiences of Recently Improved Play Areas, March 2009

Play England's 'Design for Play' guidelines offers one golden rule: "a successful play space is a place in its own right, specially designed for its location, in such a way to provide as much value as possible". It is therefore important to get the balance between landscaping and equipment right. It is the equipment that signifies that it is a play area and that children are allowed to play there. A play area full of natural features with little or no equipment will not succeed and will not be sustainable.



Play allows young children to develop their imagination, indulge their curiosity, to create, pretend, learn and explore their world.

### 3. The Importance of Good Community Consultation and Evaluation

Community consultation is an important component of delivering the right equipment and facilities as part of the National Play Strategy. However, along with effective consultation there needs to be proper evaluation, and **the decision-making process should be held by the Local Authority and responsibility not handed to the community.**

Decision-making should be retained by Councils for a number of reasons. Often, only a handful of the public responds to community consultations, and therefore the views of the neighbourhood are not always adequately represented. Secondly, the reasons for choosing a particular mix of play facilities and equipment are not always apparent to those who are not play professionals. One design, which the public might think looks attractive and would suit the needs of local community, might in reality not be adequate or suitable, for example it may not have access for those who are disabled or may not be easily maintainable. Therefore, if the Strategy is to be delivered effectively, it is important for trained professionals to translate feedback from the community into workable design and retain the decision-making process.

Many API member companies are actively involved in the consultation process and have developed their own approach to successful community consultation. We understand the importance of attracting and engaging the key target groups and are specialists in getting

valuable input. Our real value comes from being able to translate input from the community into excellent, workable design. Below is a case study of a successful community consultation, which helped deliver the best design with exciting, challenging results.

#### **Case Study: Successful Community Consultation**

An API member recently helped organise an event as part of an ongoing large project for the area.

Their primary aim was to attract the key target group. For this project they sought feedback from the 8 – 13 age group, through an organised “Wii Championship”. They knew that this event would attract the key age group, and many parents would also attend. Drawn by the possibility of retail voucher prizes, they hoped that attendance would be high and they could consult with a maximum number of people on the proposed designs.

The village hall was decked with images of the play area design and proposed equipment, set up a laptop with video of the equipment in action, and of course the all important Wii console!

A number of different ways to record people’s opinions were developed, including, “Design your own BMX track”, Graffiti wall and Parent Questionnaires. The event was advertised in the Council Magazine, fliers in windows, and word of mouth.

The response to the event was fantastic; over 30 children attended. Both children and parents were eager to inspect the designs and share their opinions and comments. They came away from the event with vital feedback for the designers and the Council.

#### **4. Timely Planning Ensures Smooth Delivery**

With so many Local Authorities now entering Wave Two of the National Play Strategy, and being allocated the remainder of the £235 million to spend from April 2009 to March 2011, each Council will want to ensure that its implementation of the scheme runs smoothly and is delivered on time and to maximum benefit.

Whilst many Councils will be waiting for feedback on the success of Phase One of the Strategy - and there is a place for evaluation of success and failure - it is important not to delay implementation of the Strategy for too long. **Our experience shows us that the period from the European Journal notification to awarding the contract can take up to 5 months, and this is before any holes are dug!**

With Local Authorities refurbishing or building over 20 play areas each over the next 24 months, there will be a very real requirement for the play industry to work with Local Authorities to deliver the Strategy within the prescribed timescale and to a high quality. Getting ahead with starting community consultations (which take time to be done well) and early planning of sites, will not only assist in delivering the best possible results, but will give

time to rectify any teething problems and will allow landscaping to begin to mature. API members are experts in helping to deliver these kinds of play schemes on time, on budget and to meet expectations.

Most importantly, if Local Authorities were able to get ahead with their planning, then children could be using some of the facilities this summer!



Delivering play areas early allows landscaping to mature. This playground is in Horsham

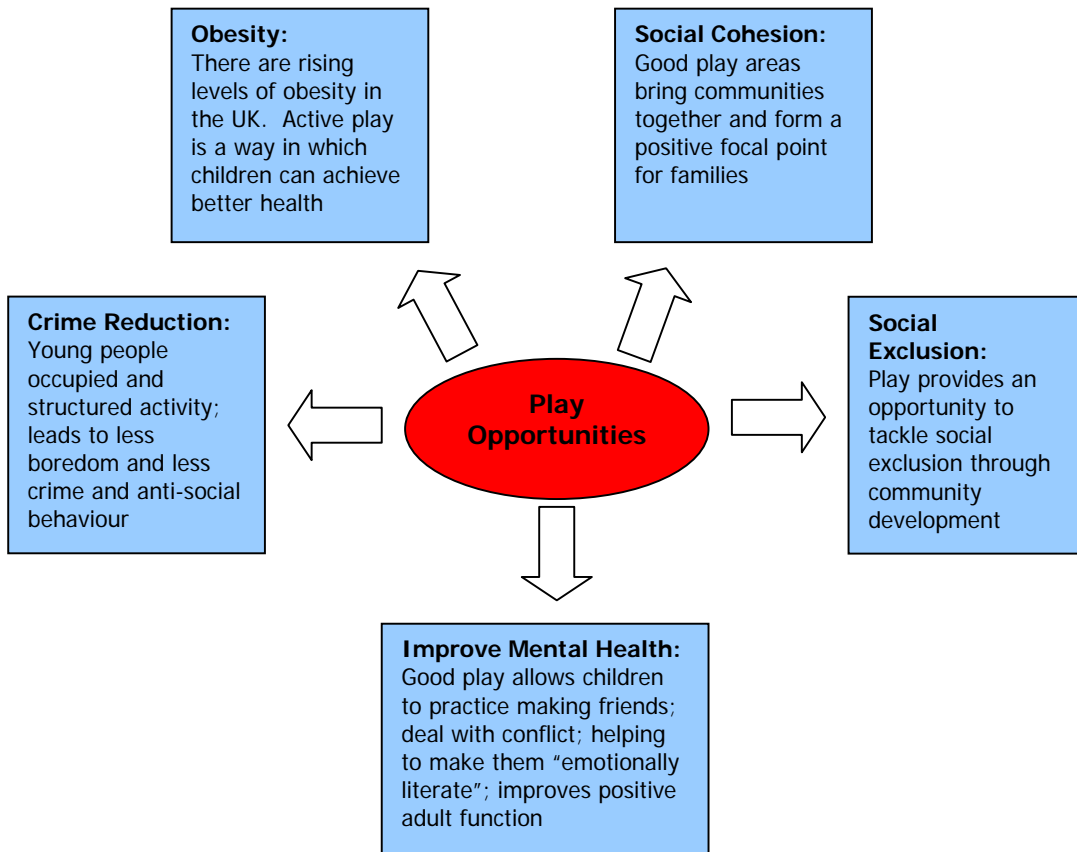
## 5. Work With Other Departments

"The right to play is a child's first claim on the community. Play is nature's training for life. No community can infringe that right without doing enduring harm to the minds and bodies of its citizens."

**David Lloyd George**

The broader benefits of children's play are now well documented. As mentioned earlier, play not only keeps children active, positively affecting childhood obesity (rates have more than doubled in the last decade, with one in four children now being classed as obese) but also helps with their physical and emotional development and their ability to interact well with their peers. Indeed, 95% of those respondents to the Government's consultation on the Play Strategy said that Primary Care Trusts could promote healthy play by informing communities about the importance of play. Respondents also noted potential links between the Play Strategy and the Government's strategy to reduce obesity in young people.

As well as having a positive effect on our children's physical and mental health, the Play Strategy presents an excellent opportunity to improve our communities and neighbourhoods. It is proven that positive play experiences can help to reduce anti-social behaviour and levels of crime. Good play facilities can also offer the opportunity of improved social interaction and community involvement. The diagram below demonstrates the wider social benefits of play.



The DCSF research on parents' and children's perceptions of recently improved play areas focused beyond the play areas themselves and looked at surrounding issues such as safety in travelling to the play area. The research found that although most local authorities focused on on-site safety issues, in some areas road safety around the site was taken into consideration, often as part of a wider regeneration plan. However, some local authority staff mentioned introducing specific measures as part of their play areas improvement. One Local Authority Officer was quoted as saying "... (previously) it was quite a busy road and cars sped down the road, so we worked with our county council and they altered the road layout, they put traffic calming measures down and a couple of mini-roundabouts which

slowed the traffic right down.” In other areas, where little or nothing had been changed about the roads surrounding the play area, many parents and children had their concerns. Parents were generally reluctant, or unwilling, to let their children go to the parks independently if they had to cross a main road or travel some distance to access the site.

Indeed, when the National Play Strategy was announced, a joint letter was sent from several Government Departments, to the Chief Planning Officers and Directors of Transport in every Local Authority taking part in the scheme. The letter highlighted that “evidence demonstrates not only the range of benefits for children’s health and well-being, but also the wider beneficial impact that more child-friendly built environments and transport can have on public health, residents’ satisfaction with their local areas as a place to live, social capital and cohesion, and sustainable community development.” It went on to say **“we are asking you to ensure that the spatial needs and road safety of children playing and travelling to play areas are fully reflected in the decision-making of your departments.”**



Delivering good play facilities, benefiting the entire community, needs cross-departmental/agency planning and involvement. This multi-agency approach needs commitment from all those involved, at every level. The play facilities above, demonstrate how the whole community can enjoy the facilities.

Play England has designed the Play Shaper Training Programme, which is “a cross-professional training programme in improving opportunities for children’s play in public space”. The programme brings together professionals who plan, design and manage public space with children’s delivery partners, including the play sector.

The API’s expertise backs up this call for a joined-up approach. Our knowledge tells us that in order to translate the broader social potential from the National Play Strategy, Local Authorities must look beyond the gates of the play facilities and work together with other local departments and bodies, from planning to transport and from Primary Care Trusts to Housing Associations. **It is vital that not only is this joint-working a top-down approach, but also that those on the ground, delivering the projects, work collaboratively.**

## **6. Ensure Sustainability**

‘Design for Play’, Play England’s guide to creating successful play areas, asks “Have you considered the environmental impact of the proposal, from a design, construction and management view? For example, what types of materials are to be used, protection of wildlife, landscape enhancement, and energy use in construction and maintenance. Can recycled materials be used, or if not, can sustainable materials be sourced?”

It is also important that Local Authorities should take into account issues such as choosing the right surfacing for new play facilities and it is essential to ensure sites can be used all year round. In the DCSF qualitative research, four of the seven areas were waterlogged and muddy. Some representatives of Play England are advising Local Authorities not to use wetpour rubber surfacing, however, API members understand that each type of surfacing has benefits for usage in different situations.

Along with environmental considerations, it is also important for Local Authorities to consider whether the equipment being fitted is environmentally-friendly and sourced sustainably. **One item which is frequently over-looked in environmental considerations is the maintenance implications of these new play areas and equipment and the lifetime of the products being used.** Longevity of a product and its ease of maintenance is vitally important, and API members can use their expertise to advise on these issues. Each Local Authority should use their experience of a particular area to know what type of play area will work and be sustainable.



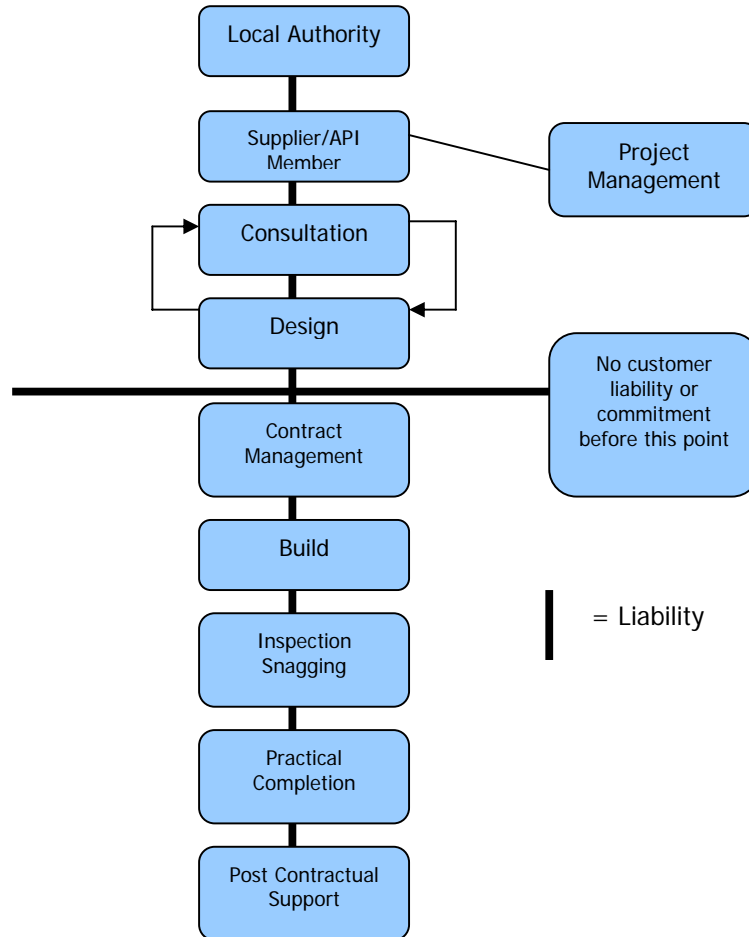
API members are at the cutting edge of environmentally-friendly equipment. This play area balances natural zones with exciting equipment, combining both timber and metal materials suitable for varying levels of ability and different age ranges.

## 7. Simplify Procurement and Liability

Procurement is notoriously complex and time-consuming, not only for Local Authorities, but for all those involved.

However, with our wealth of experience of delivering over 2,000 play areas a year, mostly to Local Authorities, the API has one over-arching piece of practical advice to those who will be purchasing under Wave Two of the National Play Strategy. That is to keep it simple. **The key is a contract with short, direct and clear lines of responsibility.**

The diagram below highlights a straight-forward project outline:



This model of delivery not only simplifies the process, but also the line of responsibility and liability. Understanding the liability lines is essential as the delivery process is a contractual issue. As responsibility for delivery of play spaces ranges from authorities' contracts departments, open spaces and parks managers, procurement officers, and play workers through to volunteers in community groups (all of whom are likely not to be contract specialists) it is easy to appreciate why a simplified 'liability line' is highly desirable.

In addition to liability issues, when Local Authorities are choosing a provider, there are numerous other considerations which need to be taken into account. The box below highlights a list for selection criteria. It is by no means comprehensive, but in regards to play space design and delivery, the API considers that these are possibly the most important areas to consider. Financial capacity and company security are obviously critical and it may

be useful to note that all applicants wanting to become Members of the API undergo stringent financial checks.

When choosing a provider factors to consider are:

- Design – are they experienced in play area design?
- Do they endorse the principles of the DCSF Design for Play guide?
- Do they offer a free design service or do they charge?
- Can they manage consultation?
- Do they understand HSE, BSEN1176/77 & CDM requirements?
- Do they act as Principal Contractor?
- Do they have a strong credit rating within the industry?

Further assistance in simplifying the procurement process may also come from using purchasing and distribution consortiums.

**As well as the cost effectiveness of using purchasing and distribution consortiums, there are also benefits such as pre-agreed terms and conditions and safeguards to underpin all contracts placed under the framework; access to suppliers who between them offer a comprehensive range of products and services for outdoor playground provision; and professional procurement support is always on hand.**

Smaller/local playground companies you may want to use can work in partnership with companies in the purchasing and distribution consortiums.

The procurement process can also be simplified by requesting a limited number of high quality companies tender for each project. Many councils request tenders from a large number of companies, which does not always ensure the highest quality designs. We recommend that Local Authorities invite 4-5 experienced play companies to submit designs for each project. This would help to ensure a high quality design is chosen which suits the needs of the end-user.

## In Conclusion:

The API's Top Tips for Delivering a Successful National Play Strategy:

1. Deliver a **mix of play facilities** in each area. Research has shown that an exciting, challenging and diverse mix of equipment will keep children returning again and again.
2. Strike the **right balance of the landscaping of the play area and the equipment** contained within it. Although it is important that the play area fits in with the environment, it is not a substitute for good equipment.
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8. Encourage high quality design by requesting that fewer companies respond to tender. **4-5 should ensure a good quality response.**

The Association of Play Industries (API) operates under the umbrella of the Federation of Sports and Play Associations (FSPA); the national trade body responsible for representing 18 Associations in the UK's sport and play industries.

The FSPA has a long history of serving the trade and this year celebrates its 90 year heritage. Ideally positioned at the heart of the industry the FSPA is known as the voice of the UK sports and play industry and acts as the first point of contact for its associations and 400+ member companies, spanning across four main sectors; Play, Sport, Golf and Angling.

Uniting industry the FSPA's mission is:

**"To work in partnership to represent and promote expertise on behalf of UK sports and play businesses"**

Member companies gain a great deal from being part of their trade association whilst also benefiting from being a part of the wider FSPA umbrella body, with its broad representation, expertise, and partnerships with government and national associations, on behalf of the industry.

The FSPA's voice is also heard in the EU parliament in Brussels, being a member of both the Federation of the European Play Industry (FEPI) and the Federation of European Sporting Goods Industry (FESI).

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