

Playgrounds?

New and refurbished:

So much to do? Help is at hand

The Association of Play Industries (API) announces its new publication: 'National Play Strategy, Phase Two; Ensuring Best Delivery, A practical guide for local authorities' and answers the questions "Where is the best information on building a new play area? Is there an API checklist of what to do? What is best practice? What else to consider?" The good news is there is plenty of excellent information and although there is a lot to do, help is at hand, especially from API Members.

Time may be of the essence

The first step is to confirm the location, budget and timeframe - dictated by when a playground is to be finished, noting key dates, especially school holidays.

- Quick Alert: If a local authority is now entering phase two of the National Play Strategy, its important not to delay. API experience is that the period from the European Journal notification to awarding a contract can take up to five months, and that is before any holes are dug.

With an eye on deadlines and project timelines, the numerous other vitally important matters can be considered to develop a play strategy and decide on play area design. Successful play provision can be part of wider council policy for healthy communities and an opportunity to be creative - and even brave.

Help is at hand

To learn about play in appropriate depth for a local authority, the API suggests two guides from Play England; 'Design for Play' and 'Managing Risk in Play Provision' and also important, as it focuses on children and ensuring inclusivity is the DCSF's, 'Every Child Matters'. New from the API is, 'National Play Strategy, Phase Two; Ensuring Best Delivery, A Practical Guide for Local Authorities'. Its twenty pages include the API's Top Tips for delivering a successful play strategy. It is a good starting point and it is free from www.api-play.org.

Consultation is king - but is not a designer

Key to getting it right for a community is public consultation. This will include engaging with children, families, and schools, local groups and organisations like residents association, 'friends of the park' and play workers. Local authorities should make no mistake; good consultation needs planning and publicising, takes time and costs money. Local authorities may do this independently or make use of an API Member company to assist. While consultation will inform play design, it should not dictate it. From consultation can come a strategy for a real focus on children, their families and the community within the wider local society. Indeed the consultation process may reveal how to reach children who do not come outside to play and involve all parties in a successful outcome ensure it is looked after by the community thereafter.

Balancing equipment, landscaping and the existing area

Whether a new Greenfield site or a refurbishment of an existing play area, it is important to consider how to redevelop the whole area. Landscaping and planting can make a play area more attractive however, in 'DCSF Research of Children's and Parents' extracts state: "Parents mentioned the improved appearance of play areas that had been regenerated. New equipment was seen as more aesthetically pleasing, more modern looking, and for some parents was associated with better safety than the equipment it had replaced. Parents and children were positive about the recent improvements made to play areas; they felt they spent longer periods of time on the sites due to the increased variety and appeal. Local authorities reported higher numbers of users following improvements". The new API publication (above) has more on this topic.

The Budget

In addition to the initial capital investment, ongoing maintenance costs should also be considered. Typical minimum requirements of local authorities are for a twenty-year life with minimal maintenance or repair and passing annual safety inspections. One cost saving can come from the API 'design and build' approach to procurement. This offers a one-stop-shop solution and can include consultation, design development, proven experience and twenty-year guarantees on equipment.

Picking Winners

To select a shortlist of play companies, authorities should ask them to present a portfolio of previous work at a similar budget, then select one or two to work with and have them do a free site survey and design proposal. API member do this and are listed at www.api-play.org.

