

GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT IN PLAY SPACE



"For more imaginative play spaces, change the tender process"



Taking a hard look for the API at the drivers in play procurement, Paul Redden is clearly of the view that the whole play space design tendering process and its drivers start in the wrong place.

Guideline Adherence

According to Mr Redden, there is a clear process in play space design and purchase by local authorities.

Redden states, "Play space design by local authorities is driven by guidelines and lack of adequate user consultation." He says there is no shortage of guidance on the role, meaning and importance of play. It is available from: The Children's Play Council (CPC), Playlink, Play Safety Forum and the NPIC. Guidance on play space design is available from: API Members, NPFA, RoSPA, ILAM, CPC, Playlink, CABA and the HMSO. He maintains, "While guidance abounds, major influences in it come from RoSPA and the NPFA's Laps, Leaps and Neaps – and they

are more about statutory planning than children's play. "Wouldn't it be great if these two drivers NPFA and RoSPA teamed up with Play England, CABA and the API to smooth out the present guidance and define EN1176 and Play Space design so the right influence and outcome on tenders, specifications and post inspection can be achieved?"

The audiences for all this guidance are the stakeholders responsible for play space design and outcome. They include; the public, local authority procurement/purchasing managers, parks managers play officers, landscape architects and API members in their role as equipment manufacturers. API members tender to build the play space and install play equipment. For Redden, in just four steps, the guidance is dictating the tender and thus it

outcomes. He says, "The play space design is so specifically prescribed in the tender there can only be one result. That is what the equipment suppliers must build."

- His four steps are, for example: -
- Section 1 – The Benefits of Play.
 - Section 2 – Playground Policy - Play Design.
 - Section 3 – Playground Classifications – LAP – LEAP – NEAP.
 - Section 4 – Public spaces and Play area Guidance

On average, play area budgets split 50:50. Half is for play equipment. Half is for ground works and providing safety surfacing, fencing seating and paths. This means a £7,000 multi-play unit may need a £14,000 budget for its purchase and installation.

Change does happens, but ...

One now-obvious change is seen in the role of play manufacturers who do most of what local authorities used to do themselves. Play manufacturers tender for turnkey contracts. Most decisions on location, budget, timing and specification have already been made by local authorities. Despite that change, play manufactures are not part of design and specification process. They seek to be because they have valuable knowledge and experience, know how and skill and expertise to offer. Despite the huge changes in who does what, there has been little or no change in play area design process of how play areas are specified or installed.

For the manufacture avoiding the now seriously substantial costs of tendering and submitting proposals offers real savings – available in part, through partnering, to be passed to the authority increase Best Value.



Partnering is legitimately seen and used to avoid repetitive duplication in the procurement process. That is worthwhile but has not resulted in changes to the play area design process of how play areas are specified or installed.

The API suggests that part of improved procurement processes would be for local authorities to select suppliers based on their

capability to assist the authority and develop its specification processes. The manufacturer and authority would jointly start with a clean sheet with an outcome based on the best from both.

Paul Redden quotes API Executive Member, Robert Goss. He says, "For more imaginative play spaces, change the tender process. Most play facilities specifiers and purchasers work for local authorities in a predominately

risk-averse world. They seek to reduce the purchasing of the provision of play settings to the lowest common denominator. This tends to limit creativity. Unless they change their procurement techniques we should not expect to see imaginative, risky or natural facilities. At the API, we recommend authorities shortlist and select a play provider then, once selected, there is much more possibility for creativity to be set free." Redden says this happens but not widely with local government.

Where API members are enabled by their clients in local authorities, schools or the commercial sector they have created some exceptional excellence in play space design largely outside of the local authority process Redden describes. While Redden is not pointing the finger and blames no one, he does say, "As the problem becomes recognised we should all, as a sector and being responsible for future generations of children, prepare to focus on the real problem of place space guidance that fits the common agenda. The process at present needs to be reviewed urgently or we will continue with the type of play spaces that are inadequate"

To advertise contact Kelly Jones on 01952 200809

www.api-play.org

