

Getting the balance right in Play Space

by Mike Heath, API

“If you want to get there, this is the wrong place to start from” - that humorous line has been attributed to many a local being asked directions. It applies here! No joke!

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. The double-whammy is that the procurement process becomes the major obstacle to the mutually shared objective of communities, play providers, designers, manufacturers and installers. They all seek to provide the best of play for every child. Jointly they fail. Redden blames nobody. Instead, he says everybody now jointly has an opportunity to develop a better way to achieve the best in play spaces for children.

According to Mr Redden, there is a clear process in play space design and purchase by local authorities. The outcome is that designers and suppliers, who must comply with the tender requirements to be appointed, end up delivering less than their best - despite their wish to do better. 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, CABE 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, CABE 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 audience 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’s 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

From that, tender documents emerge. While lengthy, they simply prevent exceptional excellence and become sausage-machine formulae for mediocrity. Typically, tender document advice is so couched that not following the prescribed approach to eg. fencing, safety surfacing and space development will eliminate a designer/constructor’s bid. At a rough estimate perhaps eighty percent of procurement by local authorities and 12,000 parish and town councils, at an estimated £70-100 million annually is done this way. It is dictated by procurement tenders which are mainly informed by guidelines. They are not informed by the needs of children and their families’ even where these are well expressed in a tender’s opening comments. The resultant play space is an inadequate outcome of a restricted specification and procurement process.

By comparison, API members when enabled, with their clients in local authorities, schools or the commercial sector have created some exceptional excellence in play space design but only mostly outside the 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”.

Meanwhile, he invites critics of play spaces to consider the processes by which they are designed and to contribute to the debate on a better solution. He concludes, “Remember, play spaces are for children to experience. Without the opportunity to practice, the mental and physical mechanisms and techniques involved in assessing risks and nature, children will fail to develop the necessary skills in later life. We are all responsible for providing the best for them. I predict a little change in the next five years if the present play space guidance status quo remains. This should be a big concern to all involved in the process.”

