

Keeping play safe for all

The Association of Play Industries explains what has to be taken into account with playgrounds

At 50+ you last played in a play area about 40 years ago. Times have changed. Where experience is limited, knowledge is everything. Knowing where to get informed help and asking for it is one key to success. Experience takes longer – and you cannot go back. The good news is that the work has been done. For play areas, the Association of Play Industries (API) has an excellent standard form of contract, freely available at www.api-play.org. It requires suppliers to meet industry guidelines and European standards for play areas and equipment designs and installations. An API member company, listed on the API website, will only operate to these guidelines and standards, or better, and to any individual contract demands.

Once built, the play area must pass a safety inspection. Members of the Register of Play Inspectors International (RPII) will inspect and approve play areas as safe only when they comply with the appropriate guidelines and European standards. This best practice is deemed to be health and safety compliant. However, inspections are an on-going requirement. All play areas require regular inspection at varying intervals and a mandatory annual safety inspection by, for example, an RPII inspector. Their website: www.playinspectors.com lists them. Job done? No! The devil is in the detail.

The contract

The API contract, Section 1, Definitions and Scope says this: "All playground equipment and surfaces shall be fully described by manufacturer's name, product

number and necessary words in the tender documents and will be installed in full accord with manufacturers designs, if applicable, and specifications with layout and spacing in accordance with relevant standards."

The key point here is that for a manufacturer to be an API member, their equipment must be certificated to meet the current industry standards and European guidelines by a qualified independent third party. Manufacturers with this certification, expensive for them to acquire, will readily point out their achievement. Where it is not apparent, beware!

An added bonus of using an API member is that in the unlikely event of a dispute, both the client and the API member have access to API's little-used Independent Mediation Panel Service. It is free to API members and their clients.

To select a play equipment supplier there are a number of options. By selecting a play equipment manufacturer, proposed designs are included. Alternatively landscape architects and freelance play area designers will design and project manage a play area development for a council, but for a fee.

Funding may be tight so explore grants and assistance with for example, county councils and community schemes. Normally local councillors, council officers and their contacts will have good grasp of available funding. The watchwords are: look everywhere. Play equipment and its proper installation are not cheap. They are designed to last a long time – ten years or more – and must meet all the standards and



Inspections are key for measuring health and safety.

guidelines. Quite simply, that costs money. One rule of thumb is that for something like a top-of-the-range multi-play unit with a fall height of up to three metres, the ground works and safety surfacing underneath may cost as much as the equipment. So for a multi-play unit costing £10,000, a budget of £20,000 may be needed to buy and install it to pass safety inspection. Thus getting well funded is the place to start.

Health and safety

Inspections are vitally important. The first priority in design and installation standards and guidelines is children's safety. It does not either compromise play value, excitement, challenge or thrill for kids, nor does it mean there will not be accidents or injuries. Children can get hurt. The aim is to minimise accident likelihood and limit damage seriousness. So regular inspection is essential. Remember: play areas are remarkably safe. So the guidelines and standards are working but there are no free rides. Play areas have costs in installation and inspection and maintenance.

The best-designed and most robustly made play equipment will wear, it may be damaged accidentally by, for example, a grounds maintenance vehicle or worse, vandalised. Tree branches may need trimming. Surfaces may become slippery. Flooding can cause problems and anti-social debris of dog mess, broken glass, drug injection needles and graffiti are common problems. They must be cleaned up. Pretending they will not happen is head in the sand

stuff and CCTV and manning the screens may have sky-high costs. So councils must regularly inspect equipment and play areas for children's safety, play value, enjoyment and to comply with likely demands of insurers or claims managers. Litigation is an area for planned cost avoidance. Both demand a structured, managed and well-recorded approach.

Play areas need maintenance, repair and replacement of broken or worn components. What is needed is defined by inspection. It must be done. Grounds maintenance staff or sports field users or 'friends of the play area' can do the daily or weekly routine inspections. Damage can be reported and dealt with. Every few months, typically quarterly, depending on usage, an operational inspection by a more informed inspector should point out any other requirements.

The annual safety inspection by an approved inspector is a mandatory requirement. The council must attend to its findings. However if the play area was recently installed to current guidelines and standards and passed its first safety inspection, with regular inspection and proper maintenance it should also pass its annual safety inspection.

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It is very important that councils look at the details of contracts carefully.