

Public Consultation for Children's Play Areas

The API asked public consultation consultant Mike Heath for a generic overview

It can be a shock to realise that the outcome of public consultation may not be what the designers, local authority planners and stakeholders expected. And that is the first rule of public consultation: The outcome of consultation is whatever the outcome is.

The second is that it needs time. It takes time and must be included in the schedule. Thirdly, like anything that takes time, public consultation costs money and needs to be budgeted for from the outset. In its publication "Guidance on the Code and Practice of Consultation" the Government says consultation planning is essential and needs a time plan and schedule.

Clearly, public consultation needs to be done well and seen to be done well. When done well, residents and respondents feel involved and can feel some ownership of the agreed outcomes. One very good outcome is that after installation, residents and play area users make use of the facility without post-installation arguments or anger at not having been consulted.

The unpredictability, time and cost of public consultation may be anticipated to be at its greatest when the ideas of designers, local authority planners and stakeholders are a bad-news bombshell for local residents. Where community workers, like youth workers, friends of the park or residents groups, are all involved in a communications continuum defining needs, problems and opportunities, the full public consultation programme may be the concluding step towards installing mutually sought facilities.

In a quick straw-poll survey of a few local authority officers who are involved in parks and play areas, I asked them a question:

"What does 'Public Consultation' mean to you/offer you?"
Here is what they said.

a) Engaging with the community - by whichever method(s) work best and identifying the key stakeholders involved/affected by any scheme. Successful public consultation provides direction and a basis for a scheme to succeed by eliminating things that the community does not want.

b) Public Consultation means many things:
Something we have to do - Corporate requirement, Play Strategy, District Public Consultation
Something we should do - opens up new ideas, and reflects all interests and decision making, puts the onus on the users.
Something we shouldn't have to - Expensive and we often have some, not necessarily all the answers.

c) A way of getting community views about our proposals, to ensure a better chance of meeting local needs.

d) Public consultation means consulting the public on designs of playgrounds when I am refurbishing playgrounds. It also means customer satisfaction surveys on playgrounds.

e) Public consultation is important especially for capital projects and with community-led projects, especially for play areas, for use of Section 106 Agreement funds and with Friends of Parks groups.

g) We take public consultation seriously.

We may assume that is fairly typical which indicated local authority officers know that public consultation is here to stay. That it takes time, costs money and can have unpredictable outcomes is something that they will know based on how much experience they have it.



API - Reader Enquiry: 47

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