

Child's play



In this play area, sand makes an excellent safety surface, offers natural play, is an environmentally-friendly material and aids Best Value

Deborah Holt talks to PSB about The Association of Play Industries' (API) function in the UK's specialist play construction industry and its extensive, developing role for public sector clients

Whilst the rate of change may have seemed slow within the construction industry, the extent of change is huge. Companies which once manufactured play equipment for supply-only contracts now undertake total turnkey multi-site play area contracts for the same public sector customers. Funding is one area which has changed even more!

Some 15 to 20 years ago, a local authority would have had its own landscape architects and park designers, direct services and ground maintenance operatives to decide and carry out all aspects involved when building a new playground, refurbishing or relocating an existing one. Using their local knowledge and experience they selected equipment either from catalogues or by visiting trade shows displaying the latest in play equipment. The equipment was paid for from the capital reserves and all of the other time and material costs were absorbed as 'revenue' costs paid for by funds

received from the Government, local rates and council tax. But times have changed and these changes affect all to some extent, be they local government public sector buyers or their suppliers.

In a typical local authority there maybe little or no play funding from capital reserves. Many rely on PPG17 Section 106 Agreement funds, i.e., 'planning gain' and other available sources of public funding for most new play provision. That means the tender could, and most likely would, require the contractor to run a design proposal public consultation programme, publicise the results with the final design and, with the agreement of stakeholders, receive an order from the local authority. The order may specify: a further site survey; security fencing around a construction site, which is subject to HSE CDM regulations; the provision of drainage, ground works, paths, fences, benches, picnic tables – with wheelchair access, gates, dog mess and litterbins, and parking areas; laying of concrete

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foundations; safety surfacing in rubber with fantastic graphics or loose fill, concrete areas, tarmac and turf; and finally, may even be responsible for signage and white lining the parking area.

When a playground is built, it should comply with the DDA and provide full and inclusive accessibility for children of all abilities while also meeting all relevant European and British safety standards and guidelines. The equipment and play area should provide children with challenge, excitement, appropriate risk and, in the very suitable words of RoSPA, 'be as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible.' The site should then pass its post-installation inspection and report when carried out by an RPII play inspector. When all the works are completed, the supplier-contractor may even find they are invited to sponsor the opening event, press photo call and children's party – something else to remember in the tender submission.

For the local authority, all and more may be paid for by 'Section 106 money' and none paid for out of revenue. In summary, the change is 'from equipment supply' to 'total construction turnkey projects' often funded by developers or other sources, not by residents, council tax or business rate payers.

The future of play holds many challenges which API Members are more than capable of meeting and could in some instances even assist in attracting available funding.

One source of funding is the Big Lottery Fund via the Play England project with a very welcome £124m for England, with a minimum allocation of £200,000 to local authorities. Help is also at hand from Play England – a five-year project of the Children's Play Council, part of the National Children's Bureau – funded by the Big Lottery

The API's new *Guide to Playground Layout and Design* is available now. This ten-page 'highway code of playground design' is free to download or print from the website. Easy to understand, the content clarifies and explains in plain English, the UK's agreed position on playground design and layout, a subject the European safety standard EN1176 does not cover in as much depth.

Fund. It has the very clear objective to promote strategies for free play and create a lasting support structure for children's play in England. To this end, Play England has published local strategy development guidance *Planning for Play*, has development and support teams in each of the nine English regions, and has employed some 40 enablers to assist 'as required'.

The API's Chair of Outdoor play, Richard Lumb sees the API's role as very extensive, asking questions such as, "How can we help and ensure best value from available funding?" He goes on to state that, "As the play industry's specialist constructors, we would like to be involved from the outset with discussions on design as well as being the builders."

For supplier-contractors who are API Members, the change in industry has bred a wealth of experience, capability and competence. For local authorities using API Members means life is simple. This is evidenced by the trust and confidence of complex multi-faceted contracts, often for many different play areas, being awarded to API Members. They are commissioned because they prove time after time they can do it. And do it well! **PSB**

Deborah Holt is association manager of the API. For more information on the API, use enquiry number 061.

- ▶ www.api-play.org
- ▶ www.playinspectors.com
- ▶ www.playengland.org.uk



Modern play equipment is transforming a children's play area in a traditional park setting at Wicksteed, Manchester