

## In five years time will we come to regret or applaud the Government's Playbuilder programme?

### Getting Serious about Play

Like many others in the children's play industry I welcomed the Government's review in 2001 of Play and in particular, the subsequent survey of the nation's outdoor, publicly accessible, unsupervised, equipped play areas. The report following the review '*Getting Serious about Play*' merely confirmed what some had been thinking for some time: *Children's play areas could, and should, be better!* Following the review £200 million from the National Lottery's New Opportunities Fund was made available to local authorities with the proviso (among many) that the bulk of the money around 80% should support "*exemplary projects that follow and promote good practice*".

### Enter Natural Play

Another requirement of the NOF funding was that local authorities should form Play Partnerships that would be responsible for drawing up proposals that added to existing provision and focussed on areas of play deprivation. Although £200 million was never going to be enough to solve all the issues I believe some good practices were established with the NOF programme that raised the awareness of play to a much wider audience. It highlighted what could be achieved at District, Town and Parish council levels, the main play providers.

*But then along came the concept that Play had to be Natural Play with the Playbuilder programme and county and unitary authorities became involved.*

### KFC playgrounds

As a member of the Register of Play Inspectors carrying out annual inspections for RoSPA Playsafety I suppose I could be accused of bias towards the Play industry particularly as I seek advertising from the suppliers and manufacturers of play equipment in my role as Editor of this newsletter, but I am not. I try to stay impartial where ever there may be conflict.

*Roger Davis, Editor of The Playing Field and the Community Development Officer for the Oxfordshire Playing Fields Association questions whether or not the Playbuilder programme is delivering play spaces that are actually sustainable in the long term but more importantly, are they really what children want?*



However I do not subscribe to the theory that play equipment manufacturers have ruined children's social and physical development in the past by providing *KFC-type* playgrounds. KFC, by the way, stands for Kit, Fence and Carpet referring in derogatory manner to play spaces featuring play equipment, fences and safer play surfacing but surely the play companies were only responding to the play provider's instructions?

It is interesting to note the Police refer to children's play spaces using the same acronym - KFC - standing for Kid Friendly Corners.

### Play England

One of the great successes of '*Getting Serious About Play*' was that it led indirectly, in my opinion, to the creation of Play England - a five-year project that has revitalised how we all look at Children's Play. Unfortunately it is now well into its third year and no-one knows whether it will continue or not.

Play England has done a fantastic job in promoting a variety of play projects across the country and has produced two highly informative guides to designing play spaces and managing risk in play in conjunction with the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Both publications contain essential advice, information and guidance to anyone considering a children's play space be it an adventure play area, playground or open space.

Unfortunately there is an emphasis on play providers, mainly town and parish councils, to use the services of landscape architects and designers when planning their next play area. This is surely a mistake and does the play equipment industry a great disservice.

More damaging I believe is the fact that it has created unnecessary worry and expense for the vast majority of play providers lucky enough to have secured Playbuilder funding.

### Equipment versus Boulders

In my role, as a RoSPA Playsafety inspector, I have already seen the results of employing landscape architects and whilst the vast majority of play equipment designers have lots of knowledge of landscaping it is clear very few landscape architects understand basic play principles!

I have seen some really exciting and challenging playscapes where play equipment enhances the natural environment. Where boulders, to climb and sit on, are to be found within play equipment that really stretches 8 to 13 years old children.

But I have also seen Playbuilder play spaces where the landscaping and the adult perception of a play area have resulted in an unsustainable and boring play area. Are sand or pea gravel really the play medium for 8 - 13 years old children? What about the extra maintenance required for such materials?

Playbuilder suggests play areas should not be static and that they should evolve and change rather than stay put for 10 or more years. There are not many parks managers or play providers I've met recently who are too keen on that but there are plenty of landscape architects and playground companies who like the suggestion! I would be interested to receive details of Playbuilder projects that are successful and to know that I am going to applaud the programme in five years time but I have my doubts.

*Roger Davis*