

## **Play England: whither and what for?**

by Bernard Spiegel

This is a critical time in Play England's history. There are fundamental questions to be addressed that touch on its role, authority, priorities. Its members have taken one key, and much overdue, decision: to make Play England an independent charity thus ending its formal organisational ties with its host body, the National Children's Bureau (NCB).

The move to independence could be represented as a radical break for Play England, but this assessment may be premature.

Organisationally, Play England is fairly typical of its sort. Key features are that its membership comprise in the main other organisations connected to or in the 'play sector'. In terms of funding, it is utterly reliant on Government (historically, at least), charities/lottery and sponsorship from commercial firms. It now appears that it is to sell services of one sort or another. As currently conceived, in the absence of funding, Play England would cease to exist. It should not be assumed that this matters. The justification for an England body for play might usefully be revisited. In so saying, no particular conclusion is foreshadowed.

The danger for organisations utterly dependent on external sources of support is that their attention and energies are directed towards securing funding, such that organisational priorities can become mere reflections of others' priorities and interests. Of course there are occasions when the interests of funder and recipient coincide, and where this occurs, it is well and good. But the temptations to follow the money are great. In such circumstances organisations can lose themselves, justify every twist and turn under the banner of pragmatism, as though this is a free floating virtue divorced from the need to take account of wider, and perhaps difficult, considerations. Too greater commitment to pragmatism carries with it the danger that the assessment of past policies and actions rely upon a form of post hoc reasoning such that what are considered gains are 'celebrated', and the costs associated with those gains either not mentioned or obscured. Roads not travelled become roads that never actually existed, so we become the victims of inevitabilities, rather than choice-makers.

Where such a culture takes hold, difficult questions are avoided, and questions of principle succumb to the exigencies of the moment.

### **Collateral damage**

One gets the sense that Play England is at present essentially reactive to the rather complex, and not terribly supportive, funding and policy environment in which it finds itself. In response, it no doubt rues the loss of government funding and the sense of authority it believes was conferred by that funding. Whatever the merits of the previous government's programme for play, there are strong arguments to suggest that notwithstanding the successes claimed for that programme, it created collateral damage along the way, perhaps most grievously in being seen by its detractors as an essentially centrist, top-down, monitoring and controlling sort of organisation that addressed 'communities' - whether local or play - but was not of them.

Currently, inevitably, its focus is on securing funding. It is not clear how much attention has been paid to considering the type of financing that might be appropriate for a national body with social goals. There appears to be a drift towards selling services, potentially placing itself in competition with at least some of its members, and commercial entities large and small<sup>1</sup>.

Play England could become - perhaps is becoming - simply one supplier of services among many. This can easily lead to a position where organisational interest is no longer promoting or identifying what might be best, or pointing to different ways of doing things. Instead, the service provider becomes protagonist in its own cause, supporting and promoting the 'excellence' of its services, one competitor among others. These are activities distinct from promoting a social goal, in this case, promoting the importance of play.

A competitive environment tends not to foster co-operation, except at a minimal level.

An admittedly bleak assessment suggests that Play England is in danger of cutting itself off from its own potentially supportive constituency. In such circumstances, knowledge and experience become not freely shared, but held close within the confines of individual organisations and groupings. This leads to a position where relationships – formal and semi-formal - between like-minded, locally-based organisations and individuals flourish. These relationships are essentially trust-based and therefore possess the internal resources to resolve difficulties. And running along a parallel, but disconnected, track will be Play England.

Another source of funding is sponsorship - an ethical and practical minefield. To take one example, Play England is currently in effect promoting a propriety brand - Savlon - of gels, hand creams and related products. Savlon is manufactured in the UK by Novartis Consumer Health. Novartis UK is the UK affiliate of Swiss based Novartis AG which, in the words of its web site is, 'one of the largest and most widely respected pharmaceutical companies in the world'. Wikipedia, however, records a number of 'controversies and criticisms' of the company, touching on areas such as it seeking patent protection in relation to India's wish to manufacture cheaper generic drugs; its overstating the efficacy of some of its products and other matters ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novartis#Controversies\\_and\\_criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novartis#Controversies_and_criticism)).

It may be thought that none of this matters. Nor that there are questions of principle involved in making children product promotional vehicles such that they are invited to download a 'Savlon Playday badge' to wear, presumably on Playday.



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<sup>1</sup> PLAYLINK puts its hand up here. It is in the commercial sector. It will be for readers to judge the degree to which this influences the points being made.

The criteria by which companies judge who they will sponsor will be based on business criteria. In principle there is nothing wrong with that. But it requires the potential beneficiary of any sponsorship to be hard-nosed, to see the implications - the 'meaning' - of a sponsorship on the audience it wishes to address, and on those from which it would want to draw support.

What is to be done?

Although a somewhat overused phrase, Play England needs to undergo a 'cultural shift'. It aims now to be an independent body, with its own governance structure led by newly elected trustees. (The AGM is on Monday, 7 November).

## **Membership**

The first call on its attention should be the nature and scope of its membership. I would like to see the membership based on individual subscription. In effect, this is a call to all of us who claim play as central to our concerns to connect our protestations to our individual wallets, our time and our energy.

Organisations should not be voting members, though they should be able to be supporters. All voting members should make brief declarations of interest such that I, for example, as a new and eager personal member, would have to declare my connection to PLAYLINK. Fellow members will then be in a position to judge whether my membership is but a mask worn to promote personal or company interest.

As part of this cultural shift, Play England needs to wean itself off thinking that it is utterly reliant on external funding for its existence. This may mean it needs to shrink still further in terms of employing paid staff. At a personal level, this is to be regretted. Genuinely regretted, but Play England's proper focus should be on influencing policy and campaigning, not service delivery. To achieve this it needs to work at generating unencumbered funds.

As the funding base shrinks, the organisation will need to harness its own energies, evolve into a 'bottom-up' organisation, owned by its individual members, deriving its strength and durability from members, subscribing local play associations and other bodies. It is likely that trustees will need to be an active presence in the organisation; and individual members should be ready to fulfil remits in relation to specific areas of policy or organisational development. 'Our' resources are ourselves - if not, we are but funding groupies with no independent will or capacity. This does not mean that funding is not required, or should not be pursued. But the focus would be different.

## **Popular support**

There has for a long time been a key and yet-to-be-fulfilled agenda - much spoken about, never implemented - and that is an agenda directed towards building popular support for children and teenagers' play. There are now accumulating intimations that the time is right to pursue this: one can look at the work done on supporting street play, for example, in Bristol; one can see it at the very local level in parental support for adventure playgrounds - certainly when threatened with closure; at a more informal level one can see it in those

housing estates that welcome 'playable spaces' - that is, not designated, hide-in-the-corner playgrounds - as part of a shared communal realm; and of course there is Playday.

It is instructive to look at how the campaigning group Citizens UK<sup>2</sup> conceives of itself:

*'Citizens UK is funded by its affiliated Chapters, member institutions paying annual dues to join its Chapters, grant giving bodies and by individual donors. **We do not receive or seek public funds, which has given us a critically important independence over many years. Sustaining our work financially is not easy.** Trustees, staff and members are grateful to the varied individuals and organisations who give generously to us. Donating to Citizens UK is a direct investment in participative democracy and in stronger, cohesive communities.'* [Emphasis added]

'Put not your trust in princes' is, I suppose, part of the essential message of this article. This stance is not born of a lazy cynicism. Rather, it is the logical outcome of play being understood as a form of freedom embodied.

This freedom inhabits a realm that is outside and beyond the quotidian urgencies that clutter our - child, teenager, adult - everyday lives. It is a realm within which no predetermined outcome is required, and the instrumentalist requirements of, for example, work, formal education and sport are held at bay. As such, given the politics and dominant ideologies of our times - output/outcome orientated, instrumentalist - it follows that the national and local state, and indeed the institutional, charitable funders that so often merely echo the dominant discourse, will not be other than occasional friends, ones upon whom we must not come to rely. If this is correct then, if there is to be a Play England, it needs to reorient itself to become a campaigning body, deriving authority and potential power from its members. Once this is established, it can look more closely into what structures<sup>3</sup>, and which activities, are implied by such an orientation.

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<sup>2</sup> Citizens UK 'is the national home for community organising. Our goal is to build the power of communities to work together for the common good'. <http://www.citizensuk.org/>

<sup>3</sup> The organisational and financial structure of, for example, Liberty will be of interest here.