

indoor
play

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The magazine
for the **indoor**
play sector

A young child with short brown hair and blue eyes is sitting on a colorful play structure. The child is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and dark pants. They are smiling and looking towards the camera. The play structure has red vertical bars and a yellow and orange base. In the background, there is a blue and white play structure with a green scalloped edge.

The centre of everything

Take a peek at tips and advice on running a successful centre

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Tuck into our most centre-focused issue

Welcome to another issue of Indoor Play magazine.

This is the 48th issue of the number-one magazine for your sector and I can honestly say there has never been another that has focused so strongly on the art of running a good centre – and hopefully making a quid or two.

There are two fascinating features: one on Hobbledown, the award-winning multi-tiered centre in the Kidspace family that scooped the top prize at last year's BALPPA Awards for the indoor-play sector; and the other checks out managing director Aaron Othman's appraisal of the process involved in making an Ipswich centre the latest addition to the Partyman World empire.

We've also featured at least two more recent award winners – Roarr! Dinosaur Adventure Park and Ruxley Manor – where, as at both Hobbledown and Partyman World, indoor play is just part of the equation. There is comment and advice on subjects as varied as alcohol, safeguarding, social media, nutrition and the law, as well as another insightful contribution from Ellis Potter of Riverside Hub, who outlined the pros and cons of scale when hosting a recent BALPPA event in Northampton.

Of course, there's also plenty of news and views from around the industry, with the odd new product thrown in for good measure.

There certainly seems to have been plenty of rain and cold weather around to get the tills ringing in the last few months, though the unreliability of the weather is never going to please everyone. More than a few of you whom I have spoken to were still disappointed by the precise timing of the wettest and coldest days. It would be nice if we could live and learn, but unfortunately we just have to take whatever the skies throw at us!



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4 Centre News

Kidspace basks in customer recognition... Market play for Little Ducks in Stoke... Hayes speaks out in defence of trampoline park safety... Hove centre forced into closure

6 No Ninja whingers

The UK's largest Ninja course has opened in Preston, to a raft of ecstatic reviews

8 Next generation support

Mattel Play! Liverpool is playing a big part in six-week 'work readiness' scheme for local youngsters

10 Search engines optimised for indoor play

Online searches for indoor play outstrip all other attractions at certain times of the year

12 The long and short of it

We talk to Hobbledown's David Long about the centre scooping the Attraction of the Year over 12,000sqft BALPPA Excellence Award 2017

16 SkyRider takes off

Rupert Oliver's Ideas Factory's zip coaster is finally hitting dizzy heights

18 Anomalies of scale

Ellis Potter of Riverside Hub says there are ups and downs to being large

20 Legal eagle

Flip Sandell advises operators that they may not always know the extent of the law

22 Better safe than sorry

Find out your safeguarding responsibilities with the Child Protection Company

26 Soft play goes mainstream

For the first time ever, the industry enters the ONS basket of goods list

28 Aaron's Ipswich tale

Partyman World's Aaron Othman talks you through the process of buying a new centre, his group's eighth

34 Kent's fairy tale

Ruxley Manor in Kent adapted its Christmas Grotto concept to introduce pixies in the summer months

36 Roarr-ing success

We go down to a Norfolk dinosaur park to find out why it attracts so many accolades

40 Bad taste

Can the sector shake off its shaky nutritional reputation?

42 Club hubbub

A nearly new app to connect activity providers and users is making waves

44 Do you choose booze?

We ask leading operators why they do or don't have an alcohol license

46 Policy Watch

Morton Michel's Dan Weir takes a peek down the corridors of power



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News in Brief

CHALLENGERS play centre in Guildford has reopened after a devastating blaze gutted the premises last September. The freshly renovated Challengers now has a state-of-the-art sensory room, art facilities and a brand new soft-play area. The charity is dedicated to providing disabled children and other youngsters with play and leisure facilities.

ONE OF EUROPE'S largest indoor-adventure playgrounds opened for business in the North East over Easter. Funshack Newcastle has adopted a pirate's theme and this is best exemplified in its Cannonball Cove area, which features a 12-canon pirate ship replete with canons, launch tubes and ball blasters.

LINCOLNSHIRE'S FIRST dedicated imaginative-play destination has opened in Scunthorpe. The immersive Piggy Tail Lane can be found at Pink Pig Farm. It comes with a street of play pods that include a farm shop, a café, a kitchen, a tractor workshop, a vet's surgery and more. Entrance to Piggy Tail Lane is included in the admission to Pink Pig Farm.

TALKING OF FIRSTS, a new children's centre in Ardrossan, Ayrshire, is the first in the area to offer flexible childcare support for those with additional support needs. Ko-Nekt comprises four areas – outdoor- and indoor-play facilities, a sensory space, IT and tech and a kitchen.

AFTER SUCCESSFULLY opening the 'children's nightclub', VIP Kids, in Skelton, Cleveland, owner Steve Richardson is now looking to open two more venues in Middlesbrough and Stockton. VIP Kids aims to give kids a taste of exclusive clubbing with an array of lasers, UV lights and a chill-out area for parents.

ROCKY'S FUN HOUSE has closed its Chelmsford operation and relocated 50 miles away at Stonham Barns Leisure, just outside Ipswich. The Rocky's Fun House sites in Brentwood, Billericay and Hornchurch are unaffected and remain open for business.

TINY TOWN in Carlisle reopened its doors in February just over a month after its abrupt closure left many families shocked. New owner Lesley Tranter was a former employee at Tiny Town.

Kidspace feels the customer love

Indoor-play pioneer Kidspace said being named the UK's most-loved sport and activity attraction is recognition of the hard work it has put in over the last year. The award was presented by dayoutwiththekids.co.uk as part of its DOWTK Loves campaign.

"The award is significant," said John D'Cruze, general manager of the Croydon branch of Kidspace. "We've been making big improvements over the last 12 months, with money put into new equipment. The aim has been to improve customer satisfaction and I'd like to think this award demonstrates we've achieved that."

Kidspace, which has a sister venue of the same name in Romford and is also in the same group as Hobbledown in Epsom (see feature on pages xx-xx), has been consistently praised for an innovative



and futuristic approach to soft play. It combines traditional apparatus like climbing frames and slides with a high-tech approach, featuring gadgets and other state-of-the-art tech.

Lisa O'Keefe, brand manager at dayoutwiththekids.co.uk, believes this gives Kidspace an edge on its competitors. "The integration of technology and the range of activities make it an absolute haven for both kids and parents," she said.

D'Cruze said the award meant a lot to his dedicated team. "We find even being nominated an achievement but to win an award means a lot for us as a company and team as it recognises the levels of work we put in."

Market traders invest in play

An indoor market in Stoke-on-Trent has opened a soft-play area for children in an attempt to encourage young families to shop in the market.

The Little Ducks play area in Hanley Indoor Market opened in February and has been hailed as timely by traders eager to attract more customers to the site. Costing £16,500 and fully funded by traders, the soft-play area features steps, a slide, wobbly characters, rockers, padded walls and floor, and educational panels.

Stoke-on-Trent city councillor Daniel Jellyman said markets have to adapt to reflect the times. He commented: "We have to make sure our markets are not



only fit for the 21st century, but also places people want to visit and spend their time and money. New attractions like the Little Ducks play area help towards achieving that."

It follows a £1.5m investment by the City Council in refurbishing the market site to make it a more attractive place to visit. Trader Dave Bryan runs a grocery stall at the market. He stated: "Any investment in the market is a good thing. Hopefully the new play area will attract more shoppers in."

The play area will be open at the same time as the market, 9am to 5pm, Monday to Saturday.

Hayes bounces to parks' defence

Public trampoline parks defended their safety record after a new hospital audit suggested children suffer worse injuries at public venues than on private, residential trampolines.

Last year, ambulances were called out 1,181 times to attend to incidents at trampoline parks across the country. Sheffield Children's Hospital claimed that injuries sustained at indoor public venues required 'more treatment' than those recorded at home.

Dr Catherine Rimmer, paediatric emergency medicine consultant at the hospital, said: "I think the bigger parks are far better, but I know anyone can open a trampoline park in any kind of big open

space and they're the ones parents need to be particularly careful of."

Chris Hayes, owner of Jump-INC in the city's Meadowhall retail park, said it is important to put the injury figures into perspective. "If you compare the very small proportion of bouncers sustaining injuries to the statistics for football and rugby it's probably much lower," he told local Sheffield paper, The Star. "But nobody's kicking and screaming about those sports."

Of the 250,000 people that had attended Jump-INC since it opened in December 2016, only 168 injuries had been reported, he added. Only 48 required professional medical treatment.

Currently, there are no statutory safety regulations aimed specifically at trampoline parks, although the British Standards Institute, working alongside the IATP, RoSPA and British Gymnastics, introduced a voluntary safety standard last year.

Hove's Westows forced to close

After a forlorn hunt to find a new venue, Westows soft-play centre in Hove reluctantly closed its doors at the end of April.

David McLaughlin, the manager of Westows, had spent the last few months looking for a new location after planning permission was granted last July to demolish the Westerman complex, with new houses and offices to take its place.

"I've searched everywhere from Worthing to Brighton for a new building," a disappointed McLaughlin told Indoor Play, "but there are no new commercial buildings going up in the area and all the empty premises have been snapped up by property developers already with the intention of turning them into flats."

The closure brings an end to Westows' 16-year operation in Hove; a sad fact for



the 24 staff McLaughlin has been forced to lay off and local parents alike.

"Last year, 50,000 children came through our doors," McLaughlin said. "There's nowhere else for them to go. I've had parents ringing up thanking us. It's a real shame. Over our lifetime we've seen children grow up to the point that they are now bringing their kids in."

McLaughlin intends to put all the soft-play equipment in storage over the summer months in his continued hope that new premises can be found.

News in Brief

ROCHFORD soft-play centre, The Fun Factory, has reopened as Monkey Bizness after it was bought by the nationwide chain. A refurbishment was undertaken before Monkey Bizness opened its doors for business.

A KENDAL community group is well on its way to securing the £100,000 it needs to open a new indoor-play centre in the area. Kendal Outside In has already raised over £25,000 thanks to a significant contribution from South Lakeland District Council.

A SIZEABLE NEW soft-play centre is to open in Gloucester. Based in the vacant upper deck of Gloucester Quays shopping centre, the 1,000sq ft facility will look to fill the gap left by the closure of the much-missed Trumbleland. It's thought the opening could create 10-20 jobs.

SISTERS Claire Hayes and Jenny Peacock opened The Bridge House, a new children's play and learning centre in Stourbridge, launched by two sisters. The facility in New Road, aimed at under 5s, provides classes and activities for children and parents. Claire and Jenny previously worked as a paediatric occupational therapist and paediatric speech and language therapist respectively.

SQUIGGLES PLAYDEN has expanded its team, just a few months after opening its doors in Hucknall, Notts. Richard Sharp opened the children's soft-play area back in December after taking over his first venture, Playmania in Mansfield, in 2014. He's now looking to expand the team's staff to account for the increased interest in the business across both locations. He is looking for a general assistant to work at the Hucknall location as well as in its sister play centre Playmania, and hopes to grow the number of staff he employs at both facilities from 25 to 40-50 over the next few years.



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Ninja Adventure

opens to rave reviews in Preston



The UK's largest ninja course has opened in Preston, Lancashire, to a raft of ecstatic reviews. Ninja Adventure is a state-of-the-art, 20,000sq ft leisure attraction that combines fitness, fun and the ancient art of ninja skills for all ages.

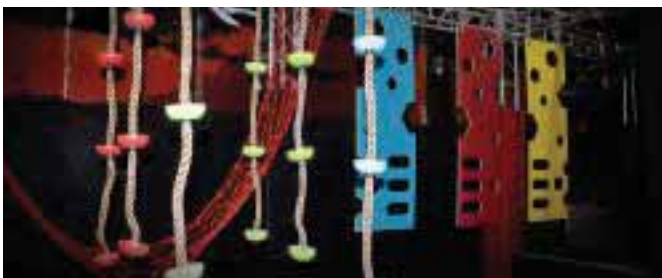
The destination, which opened on the outskirts of Preston city centre at the end of March, contains two adult courses - the biggest in the UK - and two routes aimed at younger children.

The centre was inspired by the cult Japanese TV show, Sasuke (screened across the world as Ninja Warrior), in which competitors attempt to complete a four-stage obstacle course. It boasts the UK's first free-roaming wireless virtual reality experience, and a high ropes course to take your ninja skills to the air.

After watching hundreds of customers pass through its doors on the opening weekend, Samir Patel, the director of Ninja Adventure, was buoyant about the opening - in particular people's reactions to the venue.

"After months of hard work, it's fantastic to be open and seeing people enjoying the activities," he said.

"If you've ever watched the Ninja Warrior TV show and thought 'I could do that' this is your chance to prove yourself on the UK's largest courses," he said. "Ninja Adventure will test your strength, balance, stamina and



speed and is a great way for adults and children to improve their fitness while competing against friends and family."

Other attractions include Snookball, a large-scale snooker experience for all ages with football-sized balls that you kick into place, and a huge Virtual Reality Arcade called Multiverse featuring 10 action-packed experiences across three separate VR zones.

Multiverse is home to the UK's first, free-roaming VR experience where visitors can take on a variety of immersive multiplayer games with friends. Add in the high-ropes section, where guests clip on a safety harness to test their balance and head for heights across a multi-level course and it's clear Ninja Adventure aims to take indoor-play centres to dizzying - quite literally in the case of the high-ropes course - new heights.

Initial reactions have been overwhelmingly positive. From parents who booked the centre for children's parties ("All kids and parents had a fantastic time") to regular family outings ("Amazing place and staff couldn't be more helpful. Kids are already asking when we can go back").

The refreshments have also been a hit; something Patel said is central to Ninja Adventure's offer. "Our café overlooks the main arena, offering parents somewhere to relax and enjoy a range of hot and cold refreshments, while watching the action on the courses below."

The venue has also two party rooms, allowing Ninja Adventure to cater for children's parties and corporate events.

The venture has so far cost £500,000 and created 20 new jobs, which was welcomed by the Mayor of Preston, Councillor Brian Rollo, who officially opened the venue. "This is a wonderful addition to Preston, increasing the options for people of all ages who want to get active and have fun with friends," he enthused. "I wish the centre every success."

Ninja Adventure is open 10am-8pm, seven days a week.



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Mattel Play! joins scheme to help local youngsters into work

Mattel Play! Liverpool has teamed up with the Albert Dock Charitable Foundation to provide a six-week 'work readiness' scheme. The interactive indoor-play centre is offering young people aged between 19-25 the chance to gain invaluable workplace experience on a pioneering new course. The programme is aimed at youngsters currently not in education, employment or training. We spoke to Mattel Play! Liverpool's commercial manager Zachary Roberts-Kendall

What's involved in the 'work-readiness' scheme?

"We will be supporting cohorts of young people aged 19-24 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), through a programme that will provide training and experience with the intention of helping individuals from across the region to become 'work ready'.

"Participants will then be better equipped to pursue and undertake work placements or traineeships, either within Albert Dock Liverpool (where we're based) or elsewhere. Each Work Readiness Programme will run for six weeks, with young people learning and working in and around the dock for one-and-a-half days a week throughout this time. This is a fantastic opportunity for skills development, run in partnership with Merseyside Youth Association. It is also the first course of its type in the UK.

"From our previous experience setting up work experience schemes for young adults we found that drop-out rates are high, which got us thinking... How can we help these young adults be more prepared for work experience and daily work, while really finding out what they are good at and passionate about in the workplace?"

"This is why the course has been created. To give that extra level of support to help NEET young adults be prepared for the working world."

What will participants be expected to do when working in your centre?

"Throughout the programme young people will have the chance to experience lots of different areas of work from customer services and interaction, health and safety, marketing and much more."

How many people will be involved in the scheme?

"As part of the programme, around a dozen young people will engage in interactive training and work placements over a six-week period at Mattel Play! and other areas of the Albert Dock. It promises to be a real journey of finding who they are and where they could fit into the working world.

"We want to genuinely help them find something they are passionate about and to fill our young adults with confidence to get out into the world and into the workplace. We are here to guide and help, with no pressure, in order to create an environment where our young adults can better succeed.



"We are very excited to get going and hope that our first cohort of young people are too. This programme has been completely reliant on the commitment, generosity and flexibility of our delivery partners and without them we would have struggled to provide such an interactive and meaningful programme for local young people to benefit from."

Why has Mattel Play! got involved?

"Because we feel we have a duty to help our local community. At Mattel Play! we have created a very inclusive atmosphere with a great mix of people from all walks of life, all with different experiences and skills. We feel that, with a great team behind us who are passionate about their work, we can give something back to other young adults at the start of their careers and show them what it is like to work in a happy and aspiring environment."

Would you look to hire any participants?

"Yes, this would be the best outcome to the course. When the course is coming to a close, and if people have shown interest or aptitude in the workplace, we would love to be able to take some of the students on into full-time or part-time work."



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Soft play tops activity search charts



Beth Osborne

Online searches for soft play are on an upward curve and outstrip all other attractions at certain times of the year. The indoor-play sector could become more trend-savvy to gain the full benefit, according to Beth Osborne, marketing partnership manager at dayoutwiththekids.co.uk (DOWTK)

In the last three years, there has been a 120% rise in the number of searches for soft-play centres on the DOWTK site, which features 90 BALPPA members and 1,015 soft-play centres. That mirrors the wider trend on Google Trends, said Osborne and also reflects a greater interest in soft play above alternative activities.

"Interest in soft play peaks in the first three months of the year, before the inevitable drop in Spring as more parents head outdoors," she said. "There is another spike in the first two weeks of the summer holiday and then in October half term."

"In Q1 this year, we have registered more than 700,000 page views for soft play, which is considerably higher than the closest competition – interestingly that was museums and art galleries. In February half term, there was a 58% year-on-year increase and 100,000+ visitors to the site searched for soft play."

Inclement weather helps as a general rule, but not every time. When it snowed in February, she added, there was a 578% upsurge in searches for 'things to do indoors', but interestingly that coincided with a drop

in interest in soft play specifically. "During the snow days, there was a 45% decrease in the page views for soft-play attractions compared to last year," Osborne said. "Places like safari parks, stately homes and trampoline parks benefited." "Our audience is your audience," she told delegates. "Predominantly, that is mums aged 25-34 with two kids under the age of eight. Around 40% of our audience has pre-school children."

"There has been a real shift in how parents decide what to do with their children," said Osborne, before illustrating the last-minute nature of many of the decisions being made. "The majority of our searches are for something to do in the next 24 to 48 hours. During term time, 10am on Saturday is peak-period on our site and during the holidays, it's around 11am on Wednesdays – that point when the parents have just about had enough of their kids!"

"It follows that that is the time you need to be talking to your social media network."

The way in which people access their online information has changed dramatically too. "Seventy-five per cent of people are searching through their mobile and if your site is not mobile optimized, this will have a negative impact on your potential customers," Osborne said. "On average, there is a lot less time spent on websites if they are not mobile friendly, particularly amongst smartphone users. They are much less likely to call you, make a booking or visit your website again if you don't give them a good experience. And Google now looks closely at the mobile experience, so it will also affect your Google rankings."

She also said that facebook remains the go-to social media platform for the core 25-34 mums audience at this point, but there are definite signs that the next group of mums will be more engaged with platforms such as instagram.

DOWTK is soon to launch a full members' section to its offer, which will allow operators to upload kid-friendly incentives to the site to drive greater footfall to their centres at quieter times. Members will be rewarded for offering these incentives through DOWTK and experience to date suggests that enhanced membership delivers a 150% uplift and premium membership delivers as much as 450% more visitor traffic for the member.



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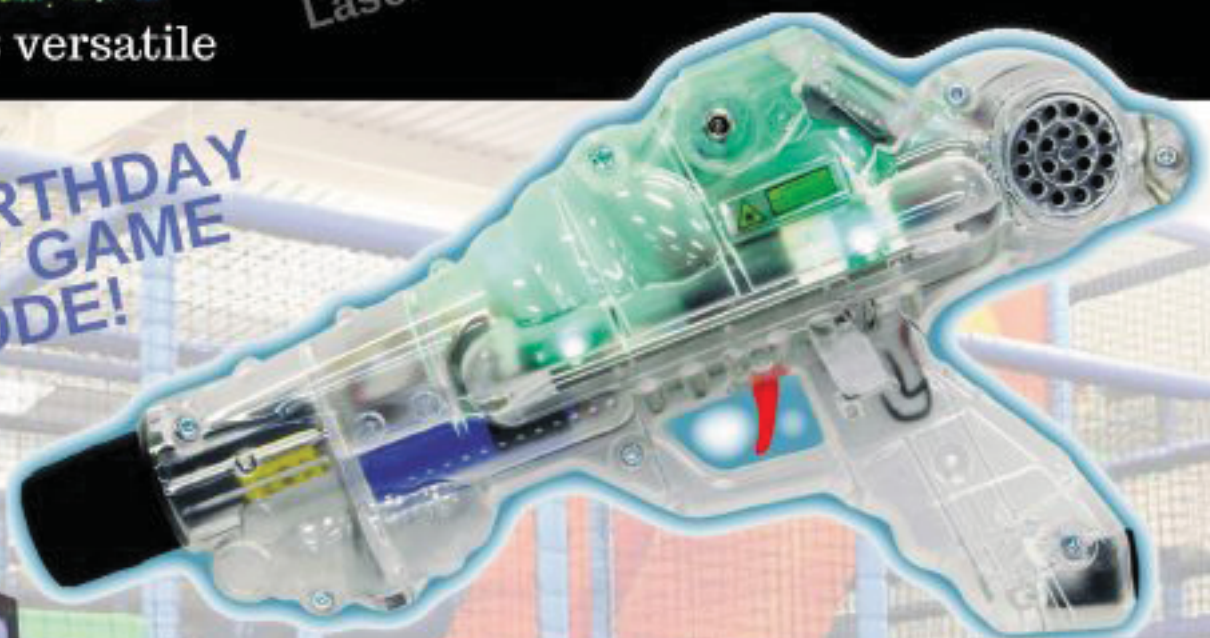
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Goblin up the awards



David Long

Awards have been no stranger to Hobbledown or parent company Kidspace over the years, but the Attraction of the Year over 12,000sqft BALPPA Excellence Award in November 2017 was Hobbledown's first awarded by the industry in which it excels. We went to see David Long, general manager at the Epsom site and Kidspace's area manager

When your office is littered with trophies, does a peer-driven award taste all the sweeter? "We absolutely love it," says area manager David Long. "The best thing about it is that I could give [the team] this award and they know that they have won it. I can tell them that we are one of the best adventure parks you will find and to be that we need the best team, the calibre has got to be so high."

When the Play Providers Association ran the last industry awards several years ago, Kidspace Croydon was adjudged the best indoor adventure park over 22,000sqft, and Romford came second. "In our inductions and especially at recruitment events, I was able to tell the people they had chosen to apply for a job with the best two indoor adventure parks in the UK – the only two that we own. You can only reference things from a few years ago for so long though, so it's great to have this award to talk about now!"

"We are extremely proud of winning again and I can tell the team that no-one is going to come to one of our centres if it wasn't for them. It can't be all about the facilities; if you've got money, you can win awards by purchasing the best equipment you can find, but when it comes to the mystery shops and the customer feedback, to a large degree it's got to be about the experience they get."

Winning the award reinforces the value of the core customer-service messages drilled into the team at Hobbledown. "You need to want to be here – don't smile because I asked you to, smile because you want to. Don't pick up litter because you might be in trouble if you don't, pick it up because you don't want thousands of people seeing your second home looking messy."

Hobbledown is, in fact, the third 'home' for Kidspace, which opened its first soft-play site in Romford in 2005. "I'm 95% sure that when Kidspace Croydon opened 11 years ago, we were the first adventure park to go to all wood," David says. "And then we had the opportunity to mix the two when we opened Hobbledown in July 2012."

What makes the third site such a stand-out proposition from an indoor-play perspective then? Its 14,000sqft indoor playbarn is split into two, with wooden frame complete with mock doctor's surgery, grocery shop etc. The other half is a traditional soft play with Eye-click motion activated floor games.

"Hobbledown is unique. Look at our competitors and they have all got a bit of us; we have a mixture of everything. We're an indoor-outdoor adventure park, with a zoo. We're based on a storybook and the characters from that book are actually here to meet them," David says.

Roaming book characters, often to be seen walking with animals, complement the venue's quirky and challenging equipment. At peak times, the characters wake up to see the wonderful people who have come to their land to visit them, interact with them through the storybook and shows and have fun with them.

A lot of schools locally use the book as part of the syllabus for a term and then organise trips to the centre. "Where they used to base it around key stage skills of English and drama," says David, "we're now going down the route of nature, wildlife, mini-beasts, rainforests, to really give the schools more opportunities to use us as an educational tool."



He adds: "What gives us the edge is that we can cater for a wider range, which allows for a family day out, not just a play for the little ones. We have lots of soft play and animals for the youngsters, and for the older children we have the high ropes course, underground tunnels, zip-lines, zorbing and more.

"The aim each year has been to add value. We have mainly evolved outside so far, adding zorbing for example, and increasing the number of species in the animal enclosure. We've gone down the route of walk-through enclosures. Our first one opened three years ago and you're literally on a footpath straight through the homes of our wallabies. At the back-end of last year we did the same with our rabbits and guinea pigs."

This year is all about ramping up the indoor-play offer. "The indoor area is pretty much as it was when we opened. We already have a maze labyrinth, but this year we are spicing it up with different lighting and making it a real draw. Whilst you are always going to get new children, the aim is to keep them for as long as you can, so we need them to remember how good it is for when a younger sibling comes around and then the family keeps coming for a longer timespan."

So how do the myriad activities bounce off each other? David says: "It's difficult to measure as so much depends on the weather. We've just had the lovely photo opportunities of people sitting outside with their coats on having a picnic in the snow and that's what makes Hobbledown great." The dwell time switches from indoors to outdoors on a sunny day and vice versa when it rains, he adds. "The in-between time is when we really come into our own. Because of the indoor and outdoor elements, dwell time

here is anything from four to six hours. You can come and spend a whole day if the weather's on your side, with breakfast lunch and dinner, whereas they are paying for a two-hour entry at Romford and a 2.5 hours entry at Croydon. We wouldn't enforce that when it's quieter, but that is what they are paying for."

Kidspace operates a successful annual pass-holder scheme, which ensures that the really quiet times are kept to a minimum. "Kidspace is more even across the year, but here, there is a much higher percentage of annual pass-holders in the winter months. Today [March 16] we'll probably have about 60% annual pass-holders at Hobbledown whereas at Kidspace it will be 45-55%. However in the summer when Kidspace goes down to about 40% annual pass-holders, Hobbledown will be at about 20%. One thing our annual pass-holders have learned very well is when to come, and when to walk rather than bring the car."

There are competitors closer by with celebrated annual passes, of course. "One of the biggest compliments we ever get is when people turn up here with their Merlin annual pass and get upset when we can't accept it," David smiles. "Even though, when the roads aren't busy, Chessington is five minutes drive away, we generally don't see it as competition because I don't think we're comparable. If you want rollercoasters we don't have them, and if you want to see an elephant or a giraffe, don't come here. What we have is much more intimate and personal and as for the equipment and activities, we're a lot more family-oriented and interactive."

The two are comparable as a day-out choice, he says, but days out have changed so much. "Somehow, our guests have a one-week



half term and they will go to five different places in five days. I don't know how they can afford it, but I'm glad they can. You can't be complacent, that's why Kat's [Katherine Newton] here for the marketing and why the team and I have to make sure that people want to come back, but people do go out more and if they've been to Chessington one day, they can come here the next day. We often find that when they are full, customers come here, and vice versa. We've also got farm parks close by, but again I don't think it's an issue to us."

Romford is a little further removed, but Croydon is only 20 minutes down the road from Hobbledown, and in the same county. "The demographic is different, in terms of the different type of customer, the different reasons they come into the sites and how they use them," says David, "How we deal with that is not just about the types of guest though, it's also about the overheads of the business and what the locations naturally dictate to us. While the sites have slightly different price brackets, because you have to market differently to each area, that also reflects things like business rates, which are higher in a more affluent area. Logically when that's the case, the day ticket will also cost more."

Every other car might be a Range Rover at Hobbledown, but at Croydon and Romford, parties are a bigger part of the business," says Kat. "In Croydon, they spend a huge amount on parties and there are so many extras that they add on. We have great parties at Hobbledown too, but they have amazing parties. Because the centres have been around longer, people do come back year on year on year – we did a story about one child at Romford recently who was 10 and had held eight of his birthday parties there."

David adds: "We challenge ourselves constantly – we want to have

those 10 parties for every child who comes here, which is why we've introduced different types of parties, tested them across our different sites and in 2018 at Hobbledown, this has got to be our party year. In 2016, we launched archery-tag parties, last year it was laser-tag and this year it's going to be the Teddy Bear workshop parties that take off, which are so cute and really magical.

"The postcode that children go into for a party might be the same, but what they experience has got to be different to keep them interested and keep them coming back. It's a big competitive area for us because it's so important – you can't relive a fifth birthday party."

New focus

Maximum staffing across the Kidspace group is around 220, most of whom are part-time. The group also has a central support team, which is David, Kat in marketing, PR, accounts, party bookings, HR and project-based roles.

The area manager role was created in July 2017. "The owners Nic de Candole and Richard Farley have always had that hands-on overview of the business," says David, "but it was growing and looking to move on operationally. The introduction of the role has been great for the combining of ideas, sharing best practice and also improving a lot of the internal systems. Rather than us inventing three wheels, we can share learning across the sites and have one person quality assuring all three."

The benefit of the cross-group perspective is beginning to show itself already. "We're able to explore more exciting things. It's the first time since we've had all three sites that we have offered members at Kidspace the opportunity to come to Hobbledown and vice versa, for example, and we have rolled our Hobnosh menu out to all sites after

it launched so successfully at Hobbledown,” David says.

Hobnosh

The Hobnosh menu was relaunched after the BALPPA Excellence awards application went in and represents a significant change in focus for the group on the F&B front.

Hobbledown surveyed about 350 guests and asked them what they like, what they wanted to keep, what they didn't like, then created a new menu from that feedback.” David says: “Our colleagues at Mark Harris Consultancy helped us write the menus, then when it came to menu design and taster sessions they worked in our kitchen, making the new dishes with our kitchen team, so that whilst we had already decided on the menus, we listened to the team and made tweaks as and where necessary. We had to get the balance right between operationally practical and a high-standard end product and involving the team in that was really important.”

It's also the first time a brand has spread across the three Kidspac sites. “Hobbledown is very earthy as a brand and Kidspac is exciting and futuristic,” explains David. “The menu is the first thing we've done like this and it has gone down very well. What's interesting is that both the biggest complement and the biggest complaint about the menu are about the lack of greasy nuggets and chips! No disrespect to anyone who does that. We've still got chicken Huggets – they're chicken thigh with hidden vegetable inside, so a healthier and more nutritional, we still have things like pesto with pasta and broccoli, so the kids still think they are getting their normal food. The mums love it.

“Our theme is Hobnosh around the world and our tagline is No Fussy Eaters, as we're trying to educate children about the different cuisines and different tastes rather than being fast-foody. We're running an incentive for families to win a trip to Florence by filling their loyalty cards with different items from different countries of origin. Whilst they get different rewards throughout, if they fill the whole card in, they are entered into the prize draw.”

At the time of the interview, Romford had been using the same menu for a few weeks, with great success, and Croydon had introduced it just the day before. “The longer something has been in place, the less people tend to like change. I'd be lying if I said there has been no resistance, but we've held taster sessions, been educating our guests and already you could do a survey and most of them would have forgotten what the menu was like previously.”

The menu upgrade has been a big shift for the kitchens too, David admits: “It changes the kitchen dynamic. It puts more pressure on them, there's no questions about that, and you need their buy-in. We've got a new head chef and we've had to change the design of the kitchens, adding in a new oven and a new fryer. Just adding sweet potato fries extended the need there. It's changed around the way they do things – it's a lot more about prep and making meals to order and a lot less is ready and waiting. Of course that's more challenging.



“It was an expensive change to make, with the investment in new equipment, new menus and menu boards and new team members, as well as the Florence holiday, however, the immediate spend per head increase was the light-bulb moment where we knew we'd done the right thing. The difference between here and Romford was it took longer to see the spend per head increase. It's done it now though.”

The confidence derived from seeing the spend per head going up has secondary benefits. “What it also allows now is for us to really work on the satellite stations we have around Hobbledown and to increase the income from those by having more stations, some of which will take on the Hobnosh items, others like the converted horsebox from which we sell top-of-the-range ice creams and we've invested in our coffee machines so we can sell high quality bean-to-cup coffee.

“We have so many picnic areas – we paid £50,000 for a heated canopy area so that people could eat their own food because they can't eat it inside. Last summer we saw an increase in the picnics, and that's where your portable items come in – if there are 200 people sat on the grass having a picnic, well of course I'm going to plonk the ice-cream kart right in the middle of them!

“No one wants to queue for a second coffee or an ice cream when it gets really busy. It took longer for the spend per head to increase at Romford. It's done that now though.”

Zip in for the ride



Twenty years after its invention, the SkyRider “zip coaster” is flying high for inventor Rupert Oliver’s Ideas Factory

The first SkyRiders were installed in two play areas Go Kids Go, Wolverhampton, and Big Sky, Peterborough, and both are still operating today. However, it is overseas where the real breakthrough has arrived. In the last 12 months, a deal struck with a leisure operator in Texas has led to 53 designs and installations across America and the exposure this business has brought with it has given the rollercoaster/zip wire cross new momentum.

Lesley Knight at Ideas Factory says: “We’re working with a trampoline park / adventure centre franchise in the USA and they really see SkyRider as an integral part of their offering. We have not only rolled out across the USA with the customer, but we will also be moving into Europe. The franchise is growing quickly and the operator only goes for buildings that can fit a SkyRider. He then sells it to the franchisee and really recognises the value in it.”

After seeing some customers fail to use the product to its full potential, Idea’s Factory is looking for operators in the UK who are prepared to show the same commitment as they have seen Stateside. “We have spent a lot of time and money engineering the simplicity into the product and that’s not easy to replicate,” says Knight. “So when we work with someone who is really committed to it, then the ride is extremely low maintenance and can work anywhere. It works indoors or out – we’ve got one that’s been running outdoors for three years and has needed no significant maintenance work.

The ride can run with two staff, but if you really want to maximise throughput then three works better. We’re currently designing twin racing tracks for one centre, which allows two people to set off at the same time from the same platform and ‘race’ each other, which will increase capacity even more.

“It takes two weeks to install, which is obviously no problem with a new-build. But we also install while centres stay open – at Energi Trampoline Park in Preston for example, we worked with them on a part-closure programme and found a guy who could take out 60 trampoline springs in a minute so we could remove a few trampolines while we did the job!”

The results are already coming through for operators. “The SkyRider at Energi was installed in October last year and they charge £2 a head for each child. They are regularly putting more than 1,000 children a week through the ride and can quite comfortably run it at 60 children per hour. They will get payback in less than a year and obviously that depends on the centre. Adults can use the ride too, so it really can pay back very quickly.”

It’s been a very busy year, she admits, with the small team designing a huge amount of tracks in a short space of time. “We’ve also installed our first through-the-trees SkyRider at Woody’s Play Barn in Ware, Hertfordshire, and InflataSpace in Newcastle has put one over the top of its huge indoor inflatable play equipment.”

“Each building is different, so each track is different and every time we design something unique. Sometimes we see the site first, but we also work off Autocad plans. The average ride length is 65-80 metres, but we’re developing a 105m track for one customer. We’ve also done one in Sharjah in the Emirates which is 20m high and runs above an indoor-play park’s rollercoaster – the opportunities to differentiate are limitless.

“It’s a great 30-second experience,” she laughs. “And everyone comes off with a SkyRider smile.”

With trademark applications lodged in the USA, UK, Europe, Dubai, UAE and India, finally the brains behind the ride are smiling too.



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The ups and downs of scale



Ellis and
Valentina
Potter

Ellis Potter, who with wife Valentina sponsored and hosted the BALPPA Spring regional meeting at their Riverside Hub centre in Northampton, illustrated why big is not always beautiful in a presentation to delegates.

Widely reputed to be the UK's largest indoor-play centre, the 30,000sqft plus site offers all the upsides of a large facility. As well as the self-evident capacity and potential income advantages, Potter said it also delivers on: sheer physical presence; a wider reach achieved by attracting people intrigued by the size and variety of the offer; the additional word-of-mouth promotional work done by a bigger band of customers; the increase in dwell time that a wider range of activities can bring; and the space and scope to add and experiment.

Despite being successful, however, the Potters have discovered that the size of Riverside Hub has several downsides. Higher rents and rates, additional staffing requirements, possible lack of atmosphere at quieter times, limited parking and managing visitor expectations were amongst the negative aspects listed by Potter.



Perhaps most telling though was the huge swing between peak visitor numbers and the lower end of the scale.

In February half term, the 750-capacity business recorded its highest ever visitor numbers for one day when more than 1,800 people came through the doors. On June 18 last year, by contrast, there were less than 150 people in the huge building across the day. "The sun came out and you can't blame them for going outdoors when they hadn't seen it for six weeks," said Potter. "The average spend per customer on that day was way up – I think they felt like they'd got a private hire! Obviously, I'd much rather have 1,800 customers spending £3 a head than 150 spending £16 a head, but that's the way it is and we just have to get on with it."

The unpredictability of the job has Potter admitting that he's not one for over-analysing figures and he and his wife are very much in the camp of gut instinct when it comes to making decisions. "We felt we weren't making enough profit in the kitchen, so we analysed the hell out of it, only to find out that our gut feel was exactly right – we weren't making any money out of it," he laughed.

"So we do invest a lot of money and sometimes it is on things that we know won't really make us any money back. But we're trying to build relationships with our customers," he said. "Valentina has the crazy-mad ideas, I then ration them down to the ones that appear affordable, realistic and practical and Lorraine, our general manager does all the things we can't do to make the ideas work in safe and enjoyable ways.

"We make constant changes and our customers buy into that. They love the fact that every time they come, they find something different."

As a parting comment, he told delegates. "We're all in the same game and we've got to get as far away from the terrible places in the grimy industrial estates as we possibly can. Prices have to go up because the costs below are rising all the time. If you're not charging for adults, then you've got to do that. Farm parks are a far easier sell [to customers] than indoor-play centres, so we need to be on our game – we have to offer a consistent high-quality experience."

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Understanding the law



Melvin 'Flip' Sandell

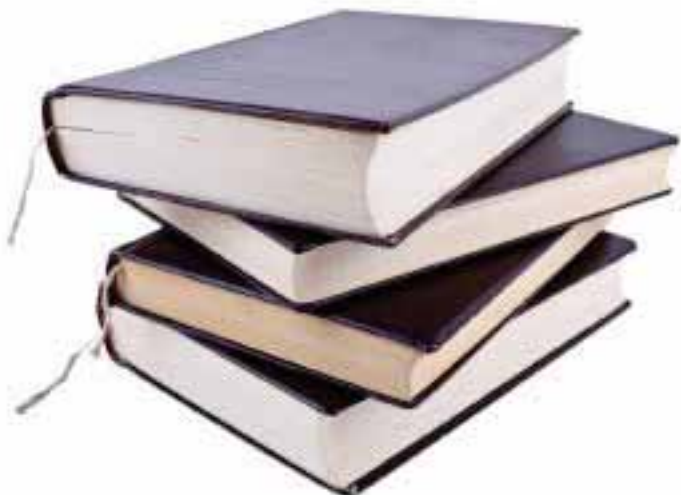
It was good to meet everyone at the BALPPA FEC meeting at Northampton on March 19. Tommy asked if over the next couple of issues, I could expand on some of the things I spoke about; let me know if it's useful.

This time then, I'll analyse 'who says what the law means'. It's always written in a particular way, which is often difficult to interpret, indeed many lawyers make whole careers out of trying to convince judges and juries that it means what they want it to! For instance, the main piece of law giving you duties for the public in the soft-play business says:

'It shall be the duty of every employer to conduct his undertaking in such a way as to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that persons not in his employment who may be affected thereby are not thereby exposed to risks to their health or safety.'

Not an easy read and it's phrased in that way so it covers every workplace and situation; you then, as the person with the legal duty, have to understand what it means for you and find a way to comply with it.

It's vital when you do that, that you don't try to find ways to make the legislation say what you want or need it to say. Always think about what the drafters were trying to achieve when they wrote the legislation because that's exactly what a judge will do...



Paraphrasing then, this legislation gives employers legal duties to protect people they don't employ from the risks of harm in their business. A few important points from that:

- *The legal duty is with and stays with, the employer. They cannot give it to someone else, sign any part of it away with disclaimers or claim they didn't know about it.*
- *Employer is a simple concept. We all know what employment means and courts will interpret it broadly.*
- *Undertaking is ALL of the business and the courts interpret this broadly too. The car park, the building and its services, the fittings, the equipment, what and how the activities are run, hygiene, food safety, staff and so on.*
- *'So far as is reasonably practicable' means you can make a judgement about how far you go to protect people. Keep in mind the courts expect you to meet industry standards and if you choose a lesser level, you may have to justify that in court. Always look at this sort of thing from the position of a juror deciding whether you could have done more to prevent the harm to a child...*
- *'persons not in their employment' means everyone that comes into your business that you don't employ; customers, tradesmen, delivery drivers, contractors and so on.*

Because your industry mainly deals with children and the law regards them as less able to appreciate danger and risk, you are expected to go extra miles to protect them from themselves. This will often mean doing more to protect them from the actions of other children and the well-meaning actions of their parents and carers too! Parental responsibility/irresponsibility is not an easy concept to argue in court and you would be well advised to find ways not to have to resort to it.

I'm not saying everything is your fault; nothing in law prohibits accidents but you must do what you reasonably can to stop them happening when they may cause harm. If someone trips and hurts themselves on a well maintained set of stairs, that's part of life, but if the stairs were damaged and that contributed to the fall then you could be in trouble!

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Your legal safeguarding responsibilities

Every child has the right to be and feel safe at all times, especially in an environment that is designed to encourage learning and play. But it is an uncomfortable truth that some people intend to bring harm to children, and indoor-play centres are one of the many locations targeted by such individuals because of their guaranteed access to children and young people.

For this reason, if you own or work in an indoor-play centre in the UK, it is your legal responsibility to put measures in place to safeguard the children on your premises. Failure to do so could cost your business its reputation, and worse still, it could bring serious harm to an innocent child.

There are many important features of an effective safeguarding policy in an indoor-play centre. Safeguarding policies should be accessible to all staff and must be reviewed regularly to ensure that they include all the necessary information, clear outlines of the various safeguarding processes and procedures, and current contact details for all relevant agencies and named professionals in your organisation.

However, to uphold your legal responsibilities as an employer, it isn't enough to simply create a safeguarding policy and leave it sitting on the shelf. You and your employees need to demonstrate best practice every working day. These are just some of the main safeguarding responsibilities you should consider:

Safer recruitment and DBS checks

Every UK employer recruiting for a role that involves contact with children should take responsibility for following safer recruitment procedures. You should evaluate every role to determine whether it is necessary to request a DBS check from the candidate. Even if a criminal record check is not essential, the following information should still be collected from every member of staff before their employment begins:

- *Photographic proof of identity*
- *Evidence of any relevant training and/or qualifications*
- *Recent written references from at least two people who are not family members*
- *Proof of age*
- *Current address, and previous addresses within the last five years*

For candidates, you should give an accurate description of the main responsibilities and provide a clear person specification for each role. There should always be at least two people on the interview panel during the selection process.

Safer recruitment practices should be reviewed frequently to ensure that there is absolutely no room for an individual with an intent to harm to be employed to work in your centre.

Safeguarding training

Staff working in indoor-play centres are in a prime location to spot potential safeguarding issues, so it is absolutely imperative that they are trained to understand how to recognise such incidents and know the correct way to report any concerns.



Delivering safeguarding training to all staff is an excellent way to promote discussion about your workplace's safeguarding processes and procedures, and to help everyone understand the importance of their role in relation to keeping children safe. It is advisable that every member of staff in an indoor-play centre has at least an introductory level of safeguarding training that can be evidenced with a verifiable certificate.

The good news is that safeguarding training doesn't have to be a time-consuming or costly process. We recommend our Introduction to Child Protection online training course for a comprehensive overview of safeguarding suitable for all staff working in an indoor-play centre. Employees with additional responsibilities for children and young people can also take our Further Child Protection online training course. Each online course takes between 1-2 hours to complete online and certificates valid for two years can be downloaded immediately upon successful completion. All our online safeguarding courses are written in line with current government legislation and guidance. Please visit www.childprotectioncompany.com or call the Child Protection Company on **01327 552030** for more information and to arrange immediate safeguarding training for staff in your centre.

Named professionals

Every indoor-play centre should identify a named professional at senior management level or equivalent who will take overall responsibility for safeguarding on your premises. This person should be known to all members of staff and their contact details should be available to everyone. A deputy named professional can also be identified to cover safeguarding responsibility during any absence.

Named professionals should have a good understanding of safeguarding processes and procedures, and should have taken at least an introductory safeguarding training course. This person will be responsible for making referrals in the event of a safeguarding concern, and they should know the correct agency to contact in an emergency.

You will need at least one named professional on your premises, but larger indoor-play centres may find a need for more.

Child focus

It is important for all employees at an indoor-play centre to maintain a child focus. This means that every child visiting your premises will have the opportunity to get their voice heard, and children should be encouraged to speak out if ever they feel threatened or uncomfortable. In the event that a child discloses information about abuse or neglect to a member of staff, their disclosure should be treated seriously and responded to in a timely manner, following the appropriate procedures.

Named professionals and senior managers should pay close attention to the way all staff interact with children visiting the



indoor-play centre to ensure that a child focus is maintained at all times.

Local Safeguarding Children Board

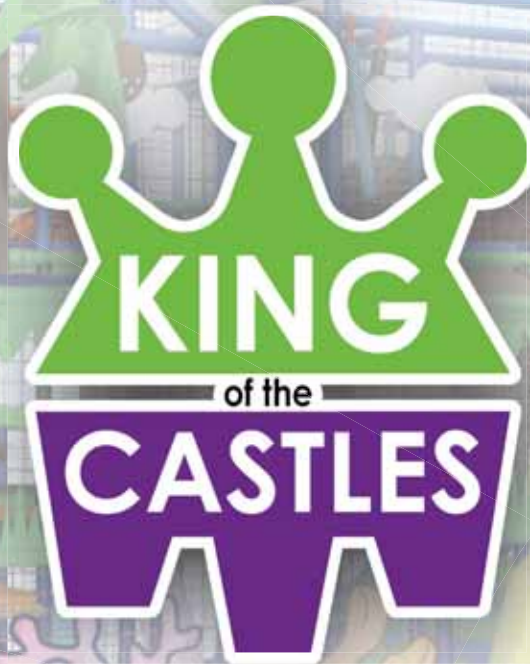
Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) are multi-agency bodies with a responsibility for safeguarding children and young people in each local authority. LSCBs coordinate between agencies and professionals including the police, probation services, health services, local youth offending teams, and education providers, to promote the welfare of children in the local area. Contact details for every LSCB in the UK can be found on our website at www.childprotectioncompany.com.

At the very least, your named professionals and senior management team should know immediately where to find the contact details for your LSCB should a safeguarding incident occur. It is your legal and professional responsibility to report any safeguarding or child protection concerns that you have in the workplace, and your first port of call if not reporting a crime to the police should be to contact the LSCB.



If you are worried about a child, or the behaviour of an adult towards a child, please remember your local children's social care services are always available to help. If you think it is an emergency, always dial 999.

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Soft play makes the ONS list

Pork pies! Edam cheese! Tricycles! Leg waxing! Nectarines! Bottled lager in nightclubs! Camcorders - can you hear me, camcorders? Your boys took one hell of a beating! Your boys took one hell of a beating!

OK, maybe the news that soft-play sessions are in the Office of National Statistics' (ONS) 'basket of goods' list while the aforementioned items have been knocked off their perch doesn't quite mirror Norwegian commentator Bjorge Lillelien's memorable piece of hyperbolic commentary from 1981 when Norway beat England 2-1 in a World Cup qualifier. But the comparison is instructive.

The ONS' 'basket of goods' list is an annual round-up of 700 things the UK populace regularly spends money on and is used to measure the inflation rate, and this year, for the first time, soft-play sessions have made it into the nation's shopping basket, thus reflecting their significance in daily UK life.

Philip Gooding, an ONS consumer price statistician, explains that the basket is annually updated so that it remains representative of the sorts of goods and services people buy. "If we didn't do this, it could very quickly become out of date," he notes. "Taking this to extremes, we might still include rabbit meat which was removed in 1952, and household mangles for drying clothes, removed in 1962."

So does the inclusion of soft play herald long overdue recognition of the sector? Tracey Bancroft, the Family Entertainment Centres (FEC) consultant of the main leisure and attractions trade association, BALPPA, certainly hopes so.

"It's really interesting that soft play has ended up in the ONS basket," she affirms. "I would like to think this means that the positive impact of indoor play and soft play is being recognised, although you would need to ask the ONS why soft play was selected."

We did, and Gooding's explanation of why items are chosen will hopefully answer Bancroft's query. He outlines that a number of factors are taken into account when choosing new items: practical ease of finding and pricing a product; availability of the product throughout the year (though there are some notable items that it only prices for part of the year such as BBQs); the amount spent on a particular item; and the variability of prices within a particular part of the basket - the more variable prices are, the larger the sample of items needed to ensure we have a good measure of price change.

So, why were soft-play sessions chosen? Gooding says that in order to improve the ONS' overall measure of price change, it needed to increase the number of items in the recreational services part of the basket. "The items in this area show differing price movements over time," he points out. "Soft-play centres were chosen because the item enabled us to better cover recreational services for children."

So while soft play's addition doesn't necessarily measure what money these centres bring in to the nation's economy (Gooding notes they don't have an estimate of consumer spending for this), it can be argued that its indicative of a trend within society - that the sector's rise over the last two decades is being recognised.

"The decision was supported by an investigation into the number of centres around the country and the availability of price information needed to produce a price index," Gooding affirms.

The national media certainly thought soft play's presence noteworthy. The Daily Telegraph ran a slightly humorous, certainly tongue-in-cheek, article in which the journalist, Rosa Silverman, outlined the basics of a soft-play session to the uninitiated of Middle England.

"We're told children should learn through play, and amid the giant plastic shapes they genuinely do," she wrote in one of the more





jocular passages. “They learn that if they lie at the bottom of the slide, someone will promptly land on their head; that if mummy disappears to very quickly buy a coffee, she definitely – almost definitely – will come back; that other children have just as much right to be on the bouncy castle, even if they’re making it “too bouncy”; and that it’s never OK to eat anything you find on the floor in there.

“Your kids are unlikely to learn much about modern art during a soft-play session, but they’re going to climb, jump, tunnel, hide, laugh, crawl, explore and interact with others – all of which beats watching Peppa Pig. To my mind, anything that gets you and them out the house is a good thing.”

Bancroft does strike a note of caution, though. Despite being a key part of family life for the last 15 years, she’s not sure that soft play’s presence on the list alone is actually recognition of the positive impact of the industry.

“Many of the great benefits of soft play are not being noted,” she warns. “The hidden physical benefits of indoor play are not recognised. Neither are the social benefits and developmental benefits.”

But she does recognise that just by making it into the nation’s shopping basket - and with the attendant publicity afforded this inclusion - there is potential for this to mark the importance of soft play to UK life.

“Its inclusion might not necessarily mean any more money comes into the industry,” she says. “But the UK leisure industry is continually growing and expanding, it is constantly evolving. Investment in the UK leisure industry is significant this year with BALPPA theme park members such as Thorpe Park & Blackpool investing heavily.”

Gooding, on the other hand, argues that soft play’s appearance in the list can and should be seen as some sort of recognition.

“Items are chosen for inclusion purely with a view to improving our overall measurement of price change,” he clarifies. “But to achieve this, they have to have gained a degree of longevity in the market, so that we do not expect them to disappear shortly after being added to the basket. They also need to be a widespread service as measured ideally by consumer spending, but in some cases based on shelf-space if we are talking of products bought in shops or availability if we are thinking of services.”

So what does Bancroft think is the future for the nation’s soft-play and indoor-play centres? She sounds optimistic, arguing that she expects the industry to continue to grow and evolve, but counsels that there is more to be done in educating the public about the benefits this industry provides to the nation’s children.

“Centres are moving away from the focus on just the large playframe,” she says. “Today’s centres are [generally] Family Entertainment Centres, with more than one leisure activity within their space. There is now a blend of services that offer more for the wider family; services and activities that can allow the whole family to play, have fun and spend time together, all under one roof – or in one play space.

She concludes that it’s an exciting time for the sector.

“But it has to help educate individuals, families, carers, professionals, operators and suppliers about all of the positive benefits indoor play can bring and the positive impact of play overall. These resources that are in the centre of many communities can help encourage children to become more active. But moreover they can just let children do what is intrinsic to them – just play.”

Aaron explains the Partyman process



In early April, Indoor Play went to Ipswich to meet Aaron Othman, executive director of the Partyman Group of Companies. In the first of a three-part series, Aaron talks us through the process involved in taking over, then rejuvenating, the group's eighth indoor-play venue

“In December last year, an agent contacted us [Aaron and James Sinclair, his partner in play] to tell us a venue was closing down. They've announced that they are closing down and it could be an opportunity for you guys to negotiate with the owners to take it on', he told us. We asked for more information and he told us it was Snakes & Ladders in Ipswich.

“I can't speak for Jim and I reckon he'll get a good few more than me, but I personally get between 2-4 opportunities a month – anything from an empty unit to a new retail development or shopping centre, to existing businesses that are closing. We've even had trampoline parks.

“But we knew this one already, we knew the owners and we knew of the site. We first visited Ipswich eight years ago when it was Jan's Madhouse, privately owned by a lovely lady called Jan who had run it for a period of time and wanted out. We met with Jan, spent half a day with her and tried to negotiate a deal, but it fell through and we walked away.

“Snakes & Ladders took over, again operated for a period of time and then they decided to close. That's when the agent called us. We got in touch with the guys and they were interested. So Jim and I popped down and looked around the venue – we actually said we were from the insurance company and wanted to have a look round, so the on-site management team weren't aware.

“Nothing had changed really since we'd seen it as Jan's Madhouse and immediately we had that fire in our belly – we thought 'do you know what, we could turn this around and make it work for us'. We could see we could put a stage in to enhance the entertainment, improve the café area to increase food & beverage spend and where they had a science and discovery area for school trips was a

perfect square footage for childcare, meaning that the longer term view was that we could put that a day nursery in.

“I think Snakes & Ladders had just lost interest in this site – a lot of competition had opened up in the area and they lost the fight. And they were smart because it's a lot of effort and to this day, we are battling to turn it around just for the leisure. In fact, we won't be able to turn it around just for the leisure – we have to put childcare in to turn this business around. It's branded up already to get a bit of buzz and word of mouth going around, generate enquiries and awareness, but we're planning on opening up the day nursery in the next 3-6 months, depending on the level of investment we need to put in and how we trade between now and then.

“So, once we'd agreed the deal with Snakes & Ladders we had to let the staff know, which was a bit trickier because they had already had their redundancy packages agreed and knew that the business was due to close just before Christmas. A number of them were already looking for new jobs, some had secured new jobs, so that was one of the main difficulties coming in as a new owner with 20-odd staff members and telling them they were not now closing down, but being taken over.

“Some of the staff had been here with Jan too, so for eight, nine, 10 years, and the first thing I did personally was call a staff meeting at 6.30 one evening and give a presentation about Partyman World, what the business is, who I am, who James Sinclair is etc... I wanted to show our passion for indoor play and entertainment. We want to make a difference in Ipswich like we do everywhere, and I gave them all a view of our vision, our belief that staff satisfaction is important to us (we have more than 400 staff now) as is customer satisfaction. I want the mindset of our staff to be positive 24/7; even if a situation is bad, I want them to look at it in a positive way.



Partyman's Ipswich team

"I personally needed to do that, I didn't want to hand it down to anyone in our management team to do that speech. I needed to meet with all of the staff members, let them get to know me and I wanted them to go away after that evening and want to work for this guy and for Partyman in Ipswich. After that, we set up a private Facebook page, with the presentation on there, more visuals, links to our website, stuff about our day nurseries, our farm park and about

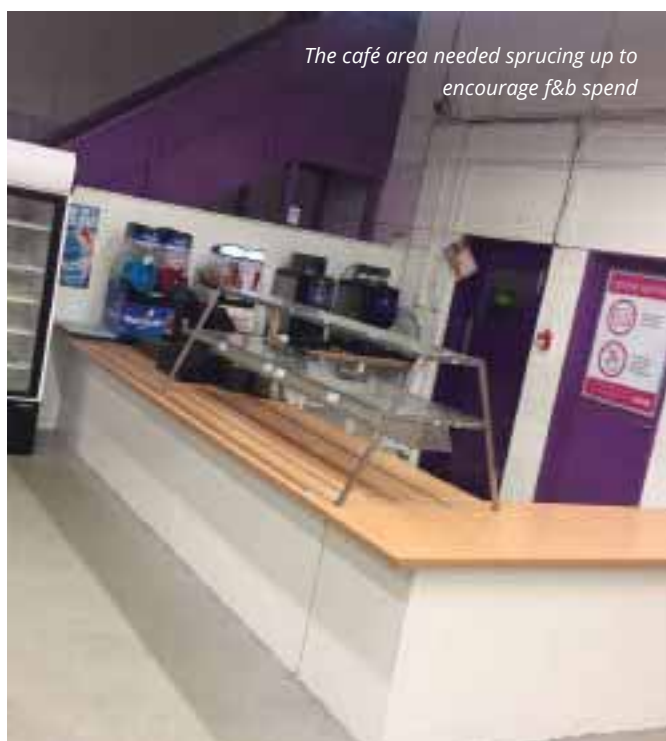
the bigger picture – our charity, our business and how passionate we are about it.

"I needed them to come aboard, move away from Snakes & Ladders and get on-board with our journey here. And I needed that to happen quickly. I then secured another three meetings with the senior management team in Ipswich to go through with them one-to-one to address any concerns and also as a group to make sure they were behind the vision and fully supportive of the transition from Snakes & Ladders to Partyman World.

"I told them 'I'm not going to be here every day, I've got another 10 venues to run – you're going to see me once a week and then once we have re-opened as a Partyman World, you're going to see me once every month, then perhaps every two months. You're going to have to take ownership of this transition.' And they did.

"We've got a really good team here, we retained the management team and we took them on that journey. Before we rebranded Ipswich as Partyman World, we took them to Basildon, our very first site and showed them how we operate as a centre with the entertainment on stage, the face painting, the balloon modelling etc... It was an eye opener for them, as they'd never experienced another play centre being operated.

"The key thing has been the attitude. If they weren't embracing the change, it would have been a real challenge for everyone. However, the mindset of the management team and the staff – we only lost two staff members – was brilliant, they saw the vision and bought into it and they did embrace that change. We don't look for experience or qualifications [when we recruit], it is all done on attitude. We had to change attitudes here because we had some



The café area needed sprucing up to encourage f&b spend



Now the café has a more rustic feel

staff expecting a decent redundancy package just before Christmas, as I said, but we jumped in to do that and it worked.

“Once that key job was done, the main thing we had to do was to enhance the toilets; the flooring wasn’t to a high standard and the baby change facility wasn’t great. So there was a little bit of spend on that. The f&b counter was also dated and uninspiring, and we experienced the consequence of that when we operated it under the Snakes & Ladders brand, because the f&b spend per head wasn’t great. Customers didn’t really want to eat here or buy a coffee here, so we knew we needed to improve their experience. A new counter went in, new products went in and the visual counter was a big thing. Now, it’s got a very rustic feel, with wood cladding, wooden displays. We also enhanced the reception counter and area, so the first impressions when coming in were better. There was carpet in reception, so we ripped that up and put in a polyscope vinyl floor. We’ve also put in a small stage for our entertainment, where we also do face painting and balloon modelling.

“The kit is the same, but we’ve added a few signs and health and safety reminders and rebranded everything. We’re big on communicating more with our customers. We had some maintenance work done within the play frame, but generally, the play frame was good, it just needed some enhancements. There was a lot of vinyl theming and drapes covering parts of the play frame so they all came down to improve visibility and also to make it look better.

“To be perfectly honest though, if we’d have had to spend even £20,000 or £30,000 on the play frame, the return on investment

wouldn’t have been there. If we’d spent £10,000 on a new piece of equipment, we couldn’t have increased our income by £100,000. So what’s the point of spending that money? The main objective is that we had to ensure everything was safe, but Snakes & Ladders were very good at that and great at maintaining their venues.

“All in all, with the mezzanine and the area they use for science, the centre is 22,000sqft. It’s one of our largest indoor-play sites, but there’s a lot of wasted space here at the moment. The day nursery is going to take up a huge part of that and the leisure zone will be 14-15,000sqft. The rest will be offices. They had their party rooms upstairs, which we still have, but that’s going to be converted into day nursery, and the science area will also be converted. At the moment, we’re not using that space, but it’s ready to go when we’re ready to do it.

“When will that be? Once we have good trade, then we can re-invest in our business. We need to see some good trading days and months before we do that.

“It’s going to cost us about 35 grand to put it in and we have to fund the staff, so it costs plenty of money.

“We have five Twizzle Tops day nurseries, four at play centres and one at our Marsh Farm headquarters. And we would not have taken Ipswich over if there was no potential for childcare. It takes time to break even with a day nursery. It takes around two years but with any day nursery, you need to build that reputation, you need a good manager in place who can sell a day nursery and you really need

amazing practitioners who understand care and the quality of care required. You have to build the confidence to get the first customer to place their child with the nursery and then say 'it's really good at Twizzle Tops' and start referring and recommending you.

"The Partyman World brand has been around for 11 years. We have eight indoor-play centres, but to us, it doesn't feel like we've expanded all that quickly. We're really hard on ourselves; we look back and think we could have done this a lot quicker and sooner. If I'm honest, we should have had 25 [sites] by now. But we've made mistakes over the years. We didn't do monthly memberships when we first opened and that was my mistake. My background was gyms, so I knew monthly memberships worked, but I thought it was hard work and aggravation. If we'd done that in 2007 though, it would have been game-changing for us as a business.

"But, if we'd put childcare in then and if we knew more about marketing in 2007, that would have been game-changing too. Core blimey, when we first opened, we didn't know about marketing, we didn't really understand [the value of] awareness or PR. We have learnt that as we have grown as a business.

"Over the years, we've had several investors come to us and offer to invest some money into the business, so we could open up another 20 or 30 sites this year. We want to grow organically, when it's right for us. Even with Ipswich, we didn't plan to take this site on in November last year, but within 48 hours of finding out it was an option it just happened.

"We've obviously seen lots of sites and usually it's on location, but with Ipswich it was a little bit different because we'd already tried to do a deal way back when and it had fallen through. Because it had come round again, as I said earlier, it lit that fire in our bellies.



The toilets were given a complete overhaul

"We knew we could take it over and make it successful, so why not do it?"



The kart track has also been given a facelift



"That had happened before. In Oxford, we looked at it before it was iKidz, tried to negotiate a deal with the landlord and it just didn't work out. But when it came around again after iKidz closed, the landlord called us up and we said we weren't interested in going to see him until it was on our terms. He said 'it will be on your terms' and we had opened it up within five days. We said we want to be paying this rent, we don't want to pay a service charge and we want x amount rent-free and we want to be here for the long-term. And we have, it's five years now. We want to invest in our sites; if it's not up to our high standards, then we'll put in new furniture, new flooring, a new café area. Oxford is probably running at a five or six out of 10 at the moment, but we've just had the café area redone and soon it will be running at an eight out of 10. Then we'll be happy with it.

"That's the furthest site from Marsh Farm, it's about a two-hour drive. We have looked further afield and I'm sure we will go further afield still. But it is all on the deal. We know what we will pay per square foot, we don't want to be paying service charge, it depends on what rent-free period we will get. It also depends on the landlord. If they're after a long-term partner, rather than a quick buck then we're interested."

Lorica joins Morton Michel in PIB fold



Robert Kluth

PIB Group (PIB), which bought Morton Michel in the final quarter of 2017, has now made Lorica Insurance Brokers its thirteenth investment in 21 months

Lorica is a leading independent insurance broker focusing on property, casualty, motor fleet and professional lines. It is well-known already within the indoor-play sector as Lorica Leisure. With a predominately SME client base, key specialisms include theme parks and amusement arcades through its Leisure division, plus real estate specialising in Property Owners Business.

Lorica will continue to be led by joint CEOs Stefan Puttnam (who leads the broking and finance operations) and Carlo Marelli (who oversees the operations side of the business including compliance, claims, IT, HR and marketing). They are supported by an experienced management team and approximately 100 employees located across a network of nine UK branches from Cornwall.

According to Brendan McManus, CEO for PIB, the move reflects the group's continued focus on attracting businesses who are experts in specialist and niche markets to deliver against its 5-year plan to achieve significant organic and acquisitive growth.

McManus says: "We are very selective about who we welcome into the fold and I'm delighted that Stefan and Carlo have chosen to continue their success with the support of PIB Group. Their team has earned an excellent reputation in their chosen markets and I'm impressed by the strong relationships they have built with clients and insurers as well as their respective trade associations. I'm confident they will complement our existing Property and Leisure divisions very well."

With Lorica coming onboard, PIB's total headcount has risen to almost 1,000 employees compared to 340 at the start of 2017. Headed by Robert Kluth, Lorica Leisure is a specialist insurance broker to the leisure and visitor attraction industry, providing expertise to amusement parks to zoos and everything in between. "The leisure industry is dynamic and presents different risk exposures when compared to other industry sectors, in particular the challenges in the public liability area," says Robert. "Our team has amassed extensive knowledge and experience within the leisure

sector and of the unique challenges that are presented together with the increased exposure to potential liability claims.

"We are actively involved with various trade associations and strong supporters of the leisure industry. We are able to tailor solutions for all visitor attractions including activity centres, amusements arcades, family entertainment centres, theme parks, wildlife parks and zoos."

Robert has more than 20 years' experience within the leisure arena. He sits as chair of the Amusement Device Safety Council (ADSC), which oversees the Amusement Device Inspection Procedures Scheme (ADIPS), the fairground and amusement park industry's own adopted standard for inspection and certification of fairground rides and amusement devices. In addition, he is also chairman of the Health & Safety Committee for British Association of Leisure Parks, Piers & Attractions. (BALPPA).

Visit www.loricainsurance.com or find Lorica on Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter [@loricabrokers](https://twitter.com/loricabrokers)



About PIB Group

The PIB Group comprises the business of PIB Insurance, Cooke & Mason, Sigerson Associates, Fish Insurance, Channel Insurance Brokers, QPI Legal, Thistle Insurance Services, TFP Schemes, DE Ford, Franklands, Morton Michel, aQmen underwriting, Citynet Insurance Brokers and Lorica Insurance Brokers. The group offers a range of specialist teams, products and services to clients throughout the UK and Channel Islands and operates from a growing network of offices currently in London, the Midlands, the North, Scotland, East Anglia and the South West, as well as Guernsey.

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Pixies perk up summer profits

A garden centre that makes hay when the bells ring out for Christmas tells Indoor Play how the success of its festive activities has brought the fairies out for summer



Ruxley Manor, in Kent, is famous locally for its Christmas Grotto. Santa's arrival sees people queuing down the Maidstone Road to get into the centre – often delaying the great man's arrival. An ice rink, real reindeers and the Christmas themed menus all add to the atmosphere and the grotto was awarded Joint Gold in a national awards scheme for grottos in garden centres.

"The grotto brings 44,000 people into the centre from November 11 to December 24 and that footfall is probably the most important part of our year," says Alex Field, marketing manager. "It is critical to our business plan and sales increase dramatically across every element of what we do in that period. It really is a big deal for us, as well as the parents and children around us."

That perennial success got visual merchandising manager Cathy Parkinson and Andrew Evans, Ruxley Manor's managing director, thinking. "The Grotto is phenomenally successful at Christmas and I suggested that we could use the grotto area for something else; something that would bring people in during the summer months," she says.

"We liked the idea of a fairy world and we heard that another garden centre, in the north of England, was doing something similar, so we went up to have a look. We loved it and we knew we could do it so it was a bit of a no-brainer in the end."

The concept took a little while to take shape, as the job titles of each fairy and the storylines that surrounded them were developed. Essentially though, Pixie Manor was a 45-minute trip through a fantasy fairyland that took visitors into three different rooms, to find six fairies, make a magical wand and listen to a series of tales along the way. Then, they were off into the final room to meet the Fairy Godmother and be given a gift; a pair of fairy wings or magical hat. There was a dragon theme involved too and effects such as smoke rising from the pond gave the experience its mythical touch.

"It was beautiful to look at", says Cath. "We all worked really hard at

creating something visually stunning, from the backdrops, fairies and displays to the tiny detail within the themes. Jenny Tye and Emma Underwood, who are also part of the display team, created some amazing displays. The feedback we got throughout was fantastic. We had a fairly decent budget to work with last year and we will be re-using some of the props, so we can invest more this year on our new smoke-breathing dragon.

"We used proper actors to play the fairies, to make it more entertaining and believable for the children, so there was a cost attached to that too. But the marketing team did a great job attracting people in."

The company's award-winning on-site nursery, Grace's, was used for the dress rehearsals. For the week running up to official opening, the team running Pixie Manor and the actors involved were visited by children from Grace's, so they could fine-tune the flow of activities and get used to the nuances of having children and adults around.

Ruxley manor also involves its chosen charities in everything it does, and last year Demelza, a Kent children's hospice, was able to bring children in free for four dedicated sessions during the six weeks.





Sessions were also provided for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). “We will do the same again this year of course,” says Cath. “While we don’t create and design Pixie Manor specifically for SEND children, we do bear their needs in mind while we are in the design stage.”

Kate Winslet’s sister, no less, was the Fairy Godmother, though nothing was made of that quirk of fate. Nothing came either of the call from a mother in Mexico, who enquired about bringing her children along. “I tried, but I’m not sure my Spanish was quite good enough,” jokes Alex.

Notwithstanding the Mexican stand-off, take-up was, indeed, exceptional, he adds. The target was to take 16,000 people through the experience during its six-week run in the summer holidays. By the time the doors shut on Pixie Manor’s debut season, more than 18,000 customers had been bedazzled.

The knock-on effect on the rest of the business was immediate. From day one, for instance, takings in the Mulberry Tree restaurant were up. Helped by fairy-themed teas, they peaked at 72% higher and were more than 40% up year-on-year across the summer. “Other areas of the business also benefited – the toy department also increased sales and the pet department was busier because all the children wanted to go and look at the rabbits,” says Alex.

One slight drawback was that predominantly, the fairy theme meant that Pixie Manor attracted little girls, says Alex. “It’s not that we specifically targeted girls, in fact the boys who came were no less impressed by what they experienced,” he adds. “We certainly didn’t market it in that way, but there’s no escaping the fact that less than 20% of the children were boys last year.”

He has been tasked with creating a less girl-dominated audience this year and dragons will play a larger part in affairs. “Obviously the fairy theme was a big draw for girls and also their mothers and it’s

still going to be fairy-centric. But we want boys to come too – the main issue we found was that parents didn’t let the boys take the fairy wings, even though they wanted them.”

A huge 3-metre long dragon has been ordered, which puffs smoke out of its nose, and an activity based on dragon’s eggs is being planned. “There will be more adventure in this year’s show, but we are not going to pretend that it’s an entirely gender-neutral experience. It’s quite difficult to find the balance – we don’t want to be promoting a girls-only experience, but neither do we want to promote violence by introducing knights and swords, even if it is just fantasy violence,” Alex says.

When anything is a success, the first question is usually, ‘why isn’t there more of it?’ – so you won’t be surprised that Indoor Play asked exactly that question! “We have talked about extending the length of time it’s open for,” says Alex. “But we think we need to spend more time building the Pixie Manor brand and maybe we can also look more at the pre-school crowd rather than focusing on the school crowd.”

Cath says: “Last year was a learning curve for us, but this year we’ll know exactly what we’re doing. Alex managed to engage with more than 300,000 people on Facebook last year, so we really did a good job of getting the brand out there. Now we’ve established that, we can build on it.”

The price will change slightly as a response to the types of customers who came through the doors. It was pitched at £9.99 a child, with adults free in 2017, but the numbers of groups that turned up with one child and five (mainly female) adults has forced a small rethink. “Adults will be charged £1.99 this year,” says Alex. “It’s not a big change and it still represents fantastic value, but this is predominantly aimed at children.

“I am however looking to introduce a few Prosecco nights, which will give the many adults who came to Pixie Manor dressed as fairies last year the opportunity to do that in the evening. I might even get my own dress out for that!”

Dinosaur wonderland on the up and up



The prospect of meeting a few dinosaurs is guaranteed to immediately capture the attention of any child – which is why Roarr! Dinosaur Adventure Park has long been one of the most popular family destinations in Norfolk

Wherever you go within the Roarr! boundaries, there are dinosaurs to be found, from the extremely realistic life-size models encountered along the woodland trail, to the smaller versions in the Lost Maze and the fun versions in the playground. There is even a massive Dinomite indoor-play area.

For kids, it's a veritable dinosaur wonderland and that status has resulted in numerous awards. In 2016, Primary Times magazine readers named the park its: Indoor Play/Activity Winner; Family Attraction Runner Up; Outdoor Play Runner Up; and Overall Runner Up. The following year, the same magazine named it Family Attraction Runner Up and Indoor Play Runner Up. In 2018, the park has already won the Best Large Visitor Attraction award from Norfolk & Suffolk Tourism.

Managing director Martin Goymour comments: "Winning the tourism award is a fantastic boost. It makes us work even harder to maintain standards and we have to show our visitors why we won the award."

Many families return time and time again. Many also take out annual tickets commenting that it is a safe, clean site and a good place to bring kids, comparing very favourably with other destinations in the area especially, they say, soft-play centres.

There can be little doubt as to the popularity of Dinomite and the outdoor-play areas. Within minutes of the park opening, kids were rushing onto the various play activities. Dinomite opened in 2011 and is the largest undercover play area in Norfolk, measuring 60m x 30m. It has an actual capacity for 550 children, but operates at a



maximum of 350 so as to provide maximum comfort and safety for all. Setting it up involved £1.2m worth of investment, enabling the park to become a year-round destination.

The range of activities is extensive. Dinomite incorporates three levels of play activities. There is a two-level section devoted solely to under 5s, as well as a vast array of climbing nets, bridges, ball pools, spinners, rotary bags, climbing frames and slides. Mostly these facilities target children up to the age of 8, but older children often take part on the slides as do parents. The slides are undoubtedly a big attraction. Every child Indoor Play spoke to said the same thing – they came for the slides and the dinosaurs!

There are several slides throughout the centre, including one linked to a dinosaur model and a ball pool. The other three are not for the faint-hearted as they range from gentle slopes to a terrifying vertical drop slide with two options of 5m and 8m.

Attractions manager Alex Brightman says: “Dinomite has been a phenomenal success. We want to keep an open, airy feel to the centre rather than having too many background images. We are planning to use some vinyl wraps on the walls but don’t want to make it too claustrophobic.”

Staffing levels are high, Alex indicates. “A team of four is always on duty in the centre with staff supervising key areas like the vertical drop. When you add in areas like the Ice Age food & beverage and the Stone Age Racers we can have up to 17 people employed just in this area.”

Park manager Adam Goymour adds: “Staffing can be a challenge at times. We can get sudden surges in visitor numbers exceeding expectations and this can affect staff numbers. People can be a problem when they don’t read or obey the rules in Dinomite and [we know] this could lead to [potential] accidents. We take Health & Safety very seriously and want visitors to enjoy the experience, and come back time and time again. But parents are still expected to check on their children and ensure their safe play. Some do think we are a crèche and we are not.”

Thorough safety and cleaning checks are undertaken daily. “If something needs fixing, we do it immediately and often work is carried out overnight. RoSPA recommends other parks to look at what we are doing and our standards of operation,” says Alex.

Dinomite has already been extended to provide additional seating, and an outside-play section known as the Pterodactyl’s treehouse. The adjacent adventure playground includes a 75ft Climb-a-Saurus. Dippy’s Splash Zone containing 31 water features and a giant tipping bucket that was completed in 2016.

The park was only recently rebranded as Roarr! Dinosaur Adventure Park. It is a family owned business, part of Goymour Properties, which also owns two other sites Banham Zoo and Africa Alive. Both of these sites are in the process of being turned into charities so



as to preserve the zoological and conservation aspects and are operated separately to Roarr!

However, Roarr! is set to be the focus of attention for the foreseeable future. One of its more unusual aspects comes into its own at Halloween, when other buildings on the site become an adult only, terrifying scare attraction known as Primeval. Children are not forgotten as Roarr! operates a special daytime Halloween family friendly trail around the grounds. “It is the busiest half term of the year for us,” says Alex.

More expansion is planned, says Adam. “We are working on a multi-million pound revamp and development plan. A new Steampunk style café has just opened in the Secret Animal Garden. This spring we will be opening a Predator High Ropes experience designed for visitors aged 8+, which will include the longest fixed line tandem zip wire in the UK. We currently have over 300,000 visitors a year and we are aiming to cater for up to 400,000 a year. Visitors come from throughout East Anglia and the East Midlands, and we are looking at ways to expand our reach.”

Heat pump delivers roarr-some savings for Dinomite

Dinomite – Norfolk’s largest indoor-play area – is benefitting from cost and energy savings thanks to a heat pump installed by renewable heating expert Finn Geotherm

Dinomite’s indoor-play offer is split across three levels and the facility also includes a 200+ seat café and guest services for the entire park. Heating in Dinomite was previously provided by two LPG boilers and with Roarr! Dinosaur Adventure open 363 days a year, costs for keeping the building warm were proving extremely costly.

Adam Goymour, park manager at Dinosaur Adventure, says: “As well as housing our indoor-play area, the building is also the main hub for the park so it’s essential to keep it at a comfortable temperature for all our visitors and staff. The existing LPG boilers were overstretched and we wanted a solution which would also save us both money and energy. We’re continually reviewing our operations across all areas of the business to reduce our environmental impact so it was important for us to choose a heating system which was in line with this.”



Finn Geotherm specified and installed a Lämpöässä T120 ground source heat pump with 2000 litre superheat thermal store to provide all the building’s heating and hot water. The system was linked to 6km of horizontal collector loop, installed in the main car park. A combination of Jaga LST radiators and roof mounted warm air heaters circulate the heat around the building.

The cost of heating in Dinomite is now less than half what it was with LPG and the building remains at a constant, warm temperature all year round – even when the outside temperature is below freezing. Emissions have also been halved and energy consumption significantly reduced.

Goymour sums up: “We have been more than impressed with our ground source heat pump at Dinomite. The installation was completed in January 2013 and, five years on, it continues to provide the perfect heating it has delivered for us from day one. The system is very low maintenance and has made a considerable impact on both our costs and energy use.”

Since installing this system, Finn Geotherm has also completed further heat pump projects for Martin Goymour, managing director at Roarr! Dinosaur Adventure and CEO of Zoological Society of East Anglia, with two at Banham Zoo and one at his own home.

The installation at Roarr! Dinosaur Adventure is also benefitting from the government’s non-domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI), a government financial incentive, which rewards businesses for opting for renewable energy.

About Finn Geotherm

Finn Geotherm is East Anglia’s leading supplier and installer of ground and air source heat pump systems for domestic, commercial and industrial customers. Ground and air source heat pumps use the latest technology to generate heating and hot water from renewable sources. Established in 2006, Finn Geotherm is the only approved installer of award-winning Lämpöässä ground source systems in the UK and one of only a handful of expert installers for Dimplex Renewables. For information on ground and air source heat pumps and Finn Geotherm, visit www.finn-geotherm.co.uk

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The nutrition reputation



The problem with a reputation is that it's easier to acquire than it is to relinquish. So it is with the notion of nutrition in the nation's indoor-play centres, as an adverse reputation has unfortunately attached itself to the sector

Despite his best efforts at rectifying this unsavoury image, Gordon Forster, managing director at Safari MK, concedes the point. "On the whole I would say the reputation among many parents is pretty negative. But I think that's not just indoor-play centres, but leisure venues full stop. We were at Disneyland Paris recently and the service levels and the quality of food across the site wasn't high."

Andy Hixon, managing director of Edinburgh-based soft-play centre TimeTwisters, argues that historically, expectations surrounding food at indoor-play venues was low. He believes that many operators merely catered for the lowest common denominator without trying to improve either quality or the variety on offer. There's also the perception that visiting an indoor-play establishment is a treat, and therefore this should be reflected in the food offered at these venues.

"Speaking to some operators (and parents) they think it should be 'treat' foods on offer," he explains.

However, in 2018, with everything we've learned about nutrition and with the rapidly escalating problem of childhood obesity and the wider societal challenges this poses, is this enough? A recent Health and Social Care Information Centre report found that one in five children starts school overweight or obese.

The Early Years Nutrition Partnership, which launched in 2016, states: "Over the long-term childhood obesity is a strong predictor of obesity in adulthood, which is a major risk factor for several chronic conditions and premature mortality."*

Forster believes that in many cases the will among soft-play centres to provide healthier meals is there. Unfortunately, the rising costs involved in operating a profitable indoor-play venue can often preclude this. "You can't just suddenly double the size of your kitchen without compromising your play facilities," he notes.

Hixon agrees. In the 12 years TimeTwisters has been operating, he argues a number of operators have adopted healthier and higher

quality approaches to their food offering. "It is by no means universal," he says. "But I perceive that increasingly the forward thinking play centres see food as an important way to differentiate themselves from the competition. So even where the range of food on offer is still limited, some operators are paying more attention to the quality of what they produce."

And while both Safari MK and TimeTwisters have won awards for the quality of their food, do Forster and Hixon believe indoor-play centres should adopt stricter nutritional guidelines in their venues? Forster admits that things like childhood obesity do play on his mind, and while his chefs make the food as healthy as possible, taste is still the overriding objective.

"Every proper, really good chef will be thinking about health these days," he explains. "Particularly when they're in a kids' environment. That's our responsibility. We have all the options available to ensure parents have a choice."

Unfortunately, in his estimation there's still a long way to go in educating society at large about the benefits of healthy eating.

"This is just an observation and might not be fact," he offers, "but it's amazing how many parents are not bothered by nutrition in the slightest. Therefore there is still a long way for schools and the government to go on challenging parents' and children's behaviour."

Hixon concurs: "We always consider the health aspects of the dishes on our menu, but we don't try and force healthy food on our customers. We offer such a wide choice of food options that we think that everyone, no matter what their preferences, will find something they like."

It may be some time yet before the indoor-play industry rids itself of its deep fried reputation, however much some venues improve. But it's beholden on all of society to change.

*Public Health England



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Tessa's club is a hub of activity



What is Club Hub and what inspired you to set it up?

Club Hub UK is the only service to locate a full range of kid's activities for newborns to 18 years in the whole of the UK. Our service is a mobile app and web search engine that allows you to search for nearby kid's activities by using your postcode or town.

You can refine the search by child's age and interests to make sure you find the kid's activity that's right for you and them. The activities vary, from maths clubs to cooking classes, martial arts to language-learning, and dance classes to large attractions.

I created Club Hub because I found it incredibly difficult to advertise my own musical theatre kid's club "Tessa's Jazz Hands". I was only gaining pupils by word-of-mouth as I had no marketing budget at the outset, so it was difficult to be included in magazines, newsletters and paid-for social media options. I thought 'what if there was a way where parents could input their location, child's age and interest and find all of the relevant results within a few taps of their fingers'. And from that thought, Club Hub was made.

How long has the site existed now and how many activity providers and users have signed up?

The developers started working on Club Hub in April 2016 and I launched the app on Google Play and the App Store and the website on August the 3, 2016. We now have nearly 7,000 activities for newborns to 18 years on our directory covering the whole of the UK. We receive more than 25,000 monthly views on our app and website, which I am pretty pleased with in just a year and half of business!

Have you managed to achieve wide geographical coverage?

Yes, we list locations across the UK from Dorset to Aberdeen, including Northern Ireland. Of course we still have a lot of work to do to make sure there is the widest possible range of activities for the entire age bracket we're aiming at, but we hope to reach the milestone of 10,000 activities by July 1 and I am so proud of my team for taking Club Hub from strength to strength.

We do have plans to branch out and people have already contacted us from Spain asking to collaborate - so watch this space!

How do 'Club Owners' and 'Club Seekers' get involved?

'Club Owners' can upload their activities completely for free by visiting our website or app. There is just one page of details to input so it is very user friendly. 'Club Seekers' can search on the directory via the website or app to discover all the amazing kid's activities happening in their area. We are keen to help small businesses and keep things local.

How can professionals offering activities into the early-years sector gain maximum value from the Club Hub offer?

For kid's activity providers, we have lots of low-cost packages available to help them with whatever needs they have with their business. Whether they want parents to book and message them directly through Club Hub or feature at the top of the list of activities within 15 miles of their location for two weeks, we can do that. We love talking to providers and giving them that extra support they need. We can also share news articles on our news page for them and feature them nationally on the homepage of our website for two weeks.



How can professionals in the indoor-play sector gain maximum value from the Club Hub offer?

I suggest getting in touch with me so I can see what type of advertising would be best for you. I run a Facebook Live session on the first day of every month at 8pm which gives providers all the latest tips, offers, competitions and news that Club Hub has collated over the previous month. It's called "Club Hub's Catch Up"

What feedback do you get from the activity providers – is your site making a difference?

We can proudly boast that we have a 100% Customer Satisfaction rating and we love hearing from providers saying we are making a big difference to their business. We often get told that every parent that has contacted them through Club Hub has signed up or visited their activity.

How has it changed your life, particularly in terms of Tessa's Jazz Hands?

My life has changed dramatically as I honestly do not stop working. I love it though as I am very passionate about Club Hub and can see the difference it is making to providers and parents lives. In terms of

my kid's club, both of my classes are fully booked and I don't need to constantly advertise it. Club Hub does that work for me!

I am also now the ambassador for the Entrepower Academy in London and am in regular contact with Ash Ali (Just Eat), Theo Paphitis and James Caan (Dragon's Den stars), Richard Woods (The Apprentice), Kanya King (The MOBO Awards) and Junior Ogunyemi (founder and director of the Entrepower Academy).

You're talking to Morton Michel about working with them – what does that involve?

Oh, well you'll have to watch this space with that! I can't give any details away but we are in talks with them to see how we can help each other grow. Morton Michel is a fantastic company and I have been insured by their 'Out of School' policy since my kid's club started back in 2014. I admire their company a lot and hope Club Hub can help them grow and develop hugely in the near future.



Contact Tessa on tessarobinson@club-hub-app.co.uk or **07984 000300**, or visit Club Hub UK's website www.clubhubuk.co.uk

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Do alcohol and play mix?

If there's a subject bound to raise the, hic, spirits within the indoor-play sector it's the issue of serving alcohol. Legitimate ancillary revenue stream? Or inappropriate given the proximity of children and the need for parents and carers to closely observe their behaviour? Jim Butler drinks in the atmosphere



A quick online search on family focussed message boards to gauge public opinion doesn't so much resolve the dilemma for indoor-play providers as muddy the waters. Many parents will joke about how having a glass of wine would enhance the experience and yet a similar number will vociferously complain about how unsuitable it is to drink alcohol in such venues.

Andy Hixon, managing director of Edinburgh-based children's play centre TimeTwisters, firmly falls into the latter camp, his thoughts swayed by a couple of considerations. "Parents in indoor-play centres are required to supervise their children," he suggests. "Drinking alcohol will almost certainly impair their ability to do that effectively. And given that the vast majority of visits to soft-play centres occur during the day then it seems to me that offering alcohol is simply encouraging parents to start drinking early."

Unsurprisingly, Hixon has never applied for a licence. Space dictates that it's not even a consideration, although he concedes even if he had the room available he doesn't think he would be in a rush to offer alcohol on the premises.

For Gordon Forster at Safari MK in Milton Keynes, his decision to not serve alcohol when he opened the soft-play venue was trickier. With a background in hospitality he clearly states he had no moral objection to selling alcohol at an indoor-play centre – and still doesn't – but felt that as a new business it might have sent out the wrong message.

"I guess it was a question of perception," he explains. "We were a new business and we thought we'd be fielding questions about the appropriateness of serving alcohol. Not even necessarily from enabling adults to get drunk, but more from allowing children to see adults drink. We felt a lot of people might not have thought it was right."

Forster also concurs with Hixon's call regarding adults being responsible for their charges while in the indoor-play establishment. "If you want to have a glass of wine, do you take your child out of the soft-play area?," he asks.

Moreover, and as Hixon also points out, most people that visit indoor-play venues have to drive to get there. In his words, Forster felt that it was maybe irresponsible giving parents the opportunity for them to be less responsible.

With that in mind, though, Forster still admits that he's on the fence when it comes to applying for a licence in the future. He's spoken to Ellis Potter at Riverside Hub and Janice Dunphy at Web Adventure,



Andy Hixon

two of the UK's leading indoor-play centres, both of which do sell alcohol. So even if his mind hasn't been swayed at this juncture (questions about an increased spend per head and whether those that are against it would be more vocal than those that would quite like a nice beer or glass of wine to accompany their visit, have to be resolved), he's not ruling it out completely.

Maybe he should speak to the aforementioned Dunphy again. Because she says that since taking the decision to sell alcohol at Web Adventure in York 10 years ago, it has brought more money in.

"We charge a premium," she explains unapologetically. "It is really expensive compared to a glass of wine elsewhere. So our customers do pay more for it, and it makes it worth our while."

So what made Web Adventure decide to offer alcohol? Interestingly, it wasn't men looking for a beer, rather the women requesting a glass of wine. "It's true," she laughs. "It was the mums' asking if we sold wine that persuaded us to get a licence."

Because Web Adventure has a great reputation for food – it has an award-winning 160-seat restaurant onsite – selling alcohol to accompany a quality meal became something of a no-brainer. "It seemed natural that we'd offer a premium lager or a small bottle of wine," she reasons, although Web Adventure draws the line at selling spirits.

And with a new beer pump about to be installed and a fresh range of wines about to be unveiled to improve its offering, Dunphy is expecting alcohol sales to only increase. But are there any downsides? Do staff have to be trained in dealing with alcohol and to ensure they're vigilant with unattended glasses and only serving a minimum amount to one person?

"Yes, we limit how much people can drink," she explains. "We have supervisors who monitor the alcohol side of things and they're told when there's an alcohol sale. We have very mature supervisors who walk around the floor. We ask the customers not to leave drinks unattended."

To that end, customers are warned at the point of sale that any unattended drinks will be taken away and poured away. Dunphy says that word of caution does make them behave responsibly.

So would she persuade other indoor-play centres to follow Web Adventure's lead?

"I think it depends on the offering," she responds. "We are known for food. Our turnover comes more from food than on the price of entry, so we're like a restaurant with play. If it's just a small play centre whose food offering isn't substantial I don't know whether I would. If you're somewhere that people will eat full meals and you've got the staff - well-trained staff at that - in place to monitor it, then it's not a problem."



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GDPR experience holds clues to the future



Dan Weir

One result of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) coming into force has been that businesses, like children's activity providers, who never before considered themselves to be data-heavy organisations have now found out just how much data they hold. From files and databases of children's names and parents' email addresses, to medical conditions and financial details, the volume of personal information can be huge. For many, organising it has proved to be a major challenge – and one that they would rather not have to repeat on such a scale for some time!

It is worth considering how this happened. Before the GDPR, many businesses had taken their data for granted. They were aware, in a general sort of a way, of the importance of making sure their computers were protected, and leaving laptops on buses should be avoided, but actually taking stock of what data they held was a task rarely if ever undertaken. As a result they came in for a rude awakening when the GDPR demanded they account for what data they process. Lessons can be learnt from this however. Firstly, of course, of the importance of data protection itself, but secondly on why it is a good idea to always aim for best practice, whether it is a regulatory requirement or not.

Government policy can change at any time, and even with warning, it can be hard to keep up. But governments tend to be led by industry, rather than the other way around and it is rare for a new regulation to reflect much more than best practice. Indeed much of the point of regulation is to ensure everyone is on a level playing field, doing things the same way. Taking the GDPR as the case in

point, businesses whose data was already well organised, who knew what they held and the legal justification for doing so, had to perform barely more than accounting exercise to comply. Similarly many years ago when health and safety legislation was first seriously enforced, or when anti-discrimination laws first kicked in, businesses who long ago had prioritised their staff and customers' wellbeing had to make hardly any changes, while those who had undertaken the bare minimum to comply were caught on the hop.

Some businesses are more vulnerable to being caught out by regulatory changes than others, in fact sometimes it can be those who are most passionate about what they do. Often people who work with children, whose *raison d'être* is their happiness, do not want to get bogged down in what can feel like unrelated administration. A detailed revision to a data protection policy is not going to bring a smile to an eight-year-old's face, and it's unlikely a child's mental and physical development will be much improved by a clear SRA procedure, but the absence of either can have a tremendous impact on your business's long-term sustainability. The most successful businesses are those who find the balance between their passion and administration.

The GDPR is not going away. May 25 2018 may have been burnt into the minds of data controllers across the country, but it is only the beginning. Data protection will soon be as integral to a business as stock control and financial security. With this paradigm shift will come new business practices and new norms. Those who keep up, and even more so, those who forge ahead, will be the businesses that prosper in this new environment.



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