

N L G N

NEW LOCAL GOVERNMENT NETWORK




Founded on Local Vision

Reforming Building Schools for the Future

Nigel Keohane and Grant Cohen

www.nlgn.org.uk



New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this report as part of its programme of research and innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

The authors would like to thank Clive Gilbert for his input into the research and thinking for this research paper

© NLGN December 2008
All rights reserved
Published by NLGN

Prepared by NLGN
First floor, New City Court, 20 St. Thomas Street, London SE1 9RS
Tel 020 7357 0051 . Email info@nlgn.org.uk . www.nlgn.org.uk

Contents

	Building Schools for the Future and Local Vision	4
1	Introduction	5
2	Potential for transformation	7
3	Challenges facing the BSF programme	9
4	BSF and the Pre-Budget Report	10
5	The need for local education vision	12
6	How resource is prioritised and allocated	15
7	The procurement process	17
	Bidding	17
	Local Education Partnerships	18
	Competitive dialogue	20
	Alternative models for procurement	21
8	Designing the right buildings	23
9	Conclusions and recommendations	26

Building Schools for the Future and Local Vision

Building Schools for the Future (BSF) is one of the largest capital projects ever undertaken by any peacetime government. It involves the renovation and reconstruction of all 3,500 secondary schools throughout the country by 2020 and is the most significant single capital investment programme in fifty years.¹ Yet although total investment in BSF will reach as high as £45 billion, the initiative has thus far met with mixed success.

With a £7 billion Primary Capital Programme on the horizon, there are timely lessons to be learnt for other rebuilding projects.

However, sitting at the juncture between local and national decision-making, the BSF programme also offers a powerful method of analysing whether local vision can thrive under the auspices of a national framework.

¹ DCSF, 4ps, *An Introduction to Building Schools for the Future* (2008), p. 1.

1 Introduction

Education became one of the main priorities of the new Labour Government in 1997. The physical element of education featured strongly:

If our schools are to educate for the needs of the 21st century economy they must themselves become schools that are fit to learn in and equipped for the 21st century.²

Subsequent research indicated that capital investment impacts positively on pupil performance, particularly in terms of improving teacher morale and motivating pupils.³ These factors promoted the redevelopment of schools as a means of improving educational standards. The BSF programme promised unprecedented levels of capital investment ‘to deliver much higher standards of education and to transform learning and working environments in schools’.⁴

Previous education programmes focused on the maintenance and repairs of school buildings, such as updating the heating systems, repairing roofs and installing new computer software. BSF emphasised that it was ‘much more than just bricks and mortar,’ and that the construction of new facilities was merely one aspect of a multi-faceted programme expected to facilitate a personalised, modern style of learning.

At the time of its launch, the programme was heralded as an initiative that would transform education through the construction of buildings that take into account current and future developments in education and technology, inspire new ways of learning, and serve as a practical resource for the community at large.⁵ As David Blunkett argued in 2000:

“We are determined to improve the quality of the environment in which teachers teach and pupils learn, and address the

² Chancellor of the Exchequer, HC Debate, 2 July 1997, col 316, cited in *Sustainable schools: Are we building schools for the future?* House of Commons Education and Skills committee, 9 August 2007, P. 10

³ DfES Press notice 18 January 2001, cited in *Sustainable schools: Are we building schools for the future?* House of Commons Education and Skills committee, 9 August 2007, P. 11

⁴ David Milliband, cited in *Sustainable schools: Are we building schools for the future?* House of Commons Education and Skills committee, 9 August 2007, P. 12

⁵ *An Introduction to Building Schools for the Future*, p. 4 (DCSF, 4ps, Pfs, 2008)

scandal of crumbling schools. This investment will go a long way to providing the right conditions and at the same time play a part in regenerating local economies and boosting the surrounding communities.”⁶

In response to the nation’s ageing secondary school system and buildings, which prior to the introduction of the programme were rated as “poor or average”, BSF encouraged innovative school buildings which could offer personalised services by linking up educational, psychological, social and recreational services for children.

The BSF programme was also designed as a national programme delivered at the local level. It therefore portended merging a national vision with the local vision for education. As Tim Byles of Partnerships for Schools has argued, the balance is crucial between broad national guidelines that rule out poor design and local discretion to use schools in innovative ways appropriate to their local areas.⁷

This has made new demands on local policymakers, on local education leaders, on private sector partners and on central government to make this shared vision a success. Therefore, BSF is not just unique in its scale of investment but also unique in supplanting such a national framework onto local services.

⁶ Rt Hon David Blunkett MP, DfES Press notice 11 April 2000.

⁷ House of Commons, Children’s, Schools and Families Committee, Uncorrected Evidence, 14 July 2008.

2 *Potential for transformation*

Schools sit at the heart of the local community. They interact with neighbourhood life, have links with community organisations, business, sports and leisure; they impact on new housing; they act in family break-ups and have a role in managing anti-social behaviour.⁸

Previous research, meanwhile, has highlighted the negative impact of living in a poor neighbourhood that includes poor facilities (such as libraries, computer facilities and safe play areas).

BSF has the potential to contribute to local regeneration, development, community assets and access to learning. By offering this range of benefits, there is scope to utilise the projects as a catalyst for other transformations within the public sector. As a project director for BSF in Hull said, 'I think BSF has huge potential to change the face of public-sector professional roles in delivering services to children in a genuinely seamless way. We'll respond to the whole child.'⁹

BSF has the promise to rejuvenate local communities, to define and shape the next generation of personalised educational techniques and environments, to contribute to wider social and economic goals and to ensure that schools fit within the wider demographic future of the local area. The programme, therefore, has the capability of initiating more joined up policy-making. It runs in parallel with the Government's extended schools programme and for neighbourhood / community schools. The next generation of schools should contribute to adult learning opportunities, travel to learn and transport policies, the wider skills agenda and long-term sustainable communities.

The schools programme can kickstart local economic regeneration both through the boost to the local economy through the construction industry and employment, but also in the longer term. Schools can upskill the future workforce, and raise ambition, social capital and aspirations of local communities.

Success stories have seen BSF integrate IT into schools system and

⁸ Ruth Lupton, *How does place affect education?* (IPPR, March 2006)

⁹ *The Insiders*, *Guardian*, 29th January 2008.

educational resources much closer than possible previously.¹⁰ The BSF programme has also provided the opportunity for more personalised learning. Recently, the programme witnessed its largest contract so far with Kent County Council planning £1.8 billion of investment.¹¹

The question remains – how far is it able to fulfil its original objectives of creating innovative physical education environments that can shape their local area in this new climate. How effective has BSF been in driving these broader goals and what reforms would facilitate the development of local strategic visions? Do the underlying mechanisms cultivate or hamper new schools relevant to the challenges at the local level?

¹⁰ *Schools IT is a "dictatorship"*, *The Times*, 22 April 2008.

¹¹ PFS Press Release, *Contracts signed for largest BSF project to date*, 27 October 2008

3 *Challenges facing the BSF programme*

So far the challenges concerning the BSF programme have focused on the capacity, ambition and delivery of projects. These have included:

1. Allocation and prioritisation of resources.
2. Complaints concerning delays, contractual dysfunction and partnership issues. Despite the localised approach and ambitious effort to reform education in the UK, there have been a slew of delays and setbacks since commencing in 2004. Recent reports show that two-thirds of current BSF projects are behind schedule, with just 42 schools expected to be complete by the end of the 2008 – compared to the original 200.
3. Concern that the buildings are insufficiently ambitious and do not seek to broaden out the benefits from education to the wider community.
4. Anxiety that the schools are making insufficient contributions to long-term public sector sustainability and climate change policy. These fears have been partly assuaged by news that new schools are moving to zero-carbon by 2016 (ahead of the 2018 deadline for all public buildings).

Below these issues have rumbled broader and more nuanced questions of sovereignty over the:

1. breadth and place of vision in the programme;
2. who should decide the design and role of schools;
3. condemnation from DCSF of some local authorities for their ‘lack of innovation’ in planning new schools.¹²

¹² *Central Grip on New Build*, 30 October 2007, *The Times*.

4 *BSF and the Pre-Budget Report*

In his Pre-Budget Report on 24th November, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that £3bn of capital spending will be brought forward from 2010/11 to 2008/09 and 2009/10. The recipients will be:

- the motorway network,
- social housing,
- renewal of primary and secondary schools,
- energy efficiency measures.

However, despite the belief among commentators that BSF would be a prime beneficiary of this policy, the PBR promised additional money only for the Primary Capital Programme and the refurbishment of secondary schools. BSF was left out.

In fact, the Government reported that, under the ‘Public Value Programme’ (PVP), the DCSF would be “assessing the value for money of Building Schools for the Future”:

‘Building on the success to date of BSF and Academies, the PVP will inform decisions on the cost effective delivery of key strategic objectives through the schools capital programmes, including the roll-out of Waves 7 to 15 of BSF.’¹³

The House of Commons Select Committee has subsequently asked for ‘a clear statement’ from the Government as to what this means for the future of the programme.¹⁴

There can be no doubt of the ability of BSF projects to help revive local economies. The downturn in the economy has seen construction companies stretched financially along with significant job losses.¹⁵ BSF programmes offer a route to drive local economies and also invest in the future of an area, boosting local industry and employment.

¹³ HMT, Pre-Budget Report: *Facing global challenges: Supporting people through difficult times* (November 2008), p. 121.

¹⁴ House of Commons, CSF Committee, *Public Expenditure* (July 2009)

¹⁵ *Construction shrinks at fastest pace in 11 years*, *The Times*, 2 December 2008.

The Government's decision not to expedite the programme, therefore, represents significant uncertainty that the programme can deliver under a tighter timescale.

Nevertheless, the prospects for the programme to deliver an important and transformative agenda must not be forgotten. Now is the time to reframe how the BSF programme is delivered so that individual projects can contribute to local economic revival as well as the future of long-term education. There is scope for reform to the underlying processes and dynamics so that transformative investment can take place.

5 *The need for a local education vision*

The BSF programme has already travelled a considerable distance since it was launched. Along the way many lessons have been learned. Yet, it remains questionable whether the programme encourages sufficient local vision for education and wider community goals.

The new generation of schools can only fulfil their potential if they sit comfortably within their local context and if they can contribute to wider local needs. It is only by incorporating local requirements and aspirations that we can understand what sort of education we want in the future and how can we provide this whilst also addressing sustainability, and social and economic ambitions.

As the architect and BSF consultant Philip Watson commented recently, 'schools are the only community beacon that we have left'.¹⁶ However, the BSF process has so far struggled to marry the national standards with thriving local education visions.

Where councils have established a coherent vision for their local education and exploited the opportunities of BSF in this context, there has been the potential for significant gains.

Case Study 1: Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council

Starting the visioning process early has led to success in Barnsley Council where the strategic thinking started two years before the council received BSF funding. The aim was to produce schools that were 'advanced learning centres', which could be open 8am to 10pm offering a range of community and educational services.¹⁶ The schools sites are to house welfare officers, police, PCT workers, and the youth service.

¹⁶ BBC Radio 4, *The World this Weekend*, 19 October 2008.

¹⁷ House of Commons, CSF Committee, *Uncorrected Evidence*, 14 July 2008

Case Study 2: Wokingham Borough Council's Education Vision

Wokingham Borough Council finds itself in Wave 15 of the BSF programme. Although this means that the investment will come later than in some areas of the country, it has meant that the council has been able to develop its own vision for education. The vision ties in closely to the Council's core strategy, to its view of sustainable communities, to its need to reduce congestion and cut travel to learn times and the long-term demography of the area.

In 2004, the council held a borough wide consultation on its 'Vision for Secondary Education', including all parents of school children, early years parents, school staff and governors. Since then the council has earmarked £100 million of investment over ten years into its secondary schools. Funding for the programme is coming not only from BSF but also from reallocation of capital used to repair existing school buildings. Developer contributions (S106 payments) have also been aligned, keeping the vision rooted in the local communities.

Some BSF projects, conversely, have been hampered by a fragmented approach and a lack of wider vision on education. One private sector provider noted that the initiative is still seen as money for building structures not as a potential instrument for wider educational improvements. Neither are these transformations sufficiently integrated into wider community strategy.¹⁸ As one local authority officer commented, 'the key question is how does your education strategy relate to your core strategy?'¹⁹

The lack of attention to local vision was identified by the House of Commons Education Select Committee as a factor in reducing quality in its report of 2007. The Committee found that 'there is a very strong argument that the initial "visioning" phase should be lengthened.' The report went on to argue that:

'it does not look much like devolving resource and power to local level if there is a detailed check list of Government

¹⁸ Interview.

¹⁹ Interview.

objectives which have to be addressed to allow a project to be signed off. The Government should have the courage of its convictions, and allow local authorities greater flexibility to develop local solutions within a clear framework of priorities, such as the need to promote innovative approaches to learning and the need to embed sustainability.²⁰

DCSF has emphasised that all schools in BSF are required to develop a 'schools strategy for change'.²¹ The 'Readiness to Deliver' Guidance requires that local authorities should consult their key partners in developing their local vision including opportunities for regeneration, joined-up funding and co-location of services. The question is how best to tie the vision in with local priorities and strategies. How can we ensure this strategy is tied in with the Sustainable Communities Strategy and other local community visions and priorities such as Local Area Agreements? How can local authorities be encouraged to bring together thinking across the corporate body and link strategies and knowledge?

Following the parliamentary select committee's advice that the initial 'visioning' phase should be extended, the Government encouraged local authorities to begin the strategic thinking process well before they enter the BSF process.²² However, parliament has continued to voice its concerns over the lack of vision in the individual BSF programmes, describing them as 'patchy' and at times 'pragmatic'.²³ Key to successful visioning is the integration of schools design, transformative educational changes and the wider local vision for assets and regeneration.

Whether developed through the BSF process or outside, the next generation of school buildings must stem from a local integrated strategic vision for education and the community.

20 House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, *Sustainable Schools: Are we building schools for the future?* (August 2007).

21 Government's response to the Seventh Report from the Education and Skills Committee, Session 2006-07.

22 Government's response to the Seventh Report from the Education and Skills Committee, Session 2006-07.

23 House of Commons, CSF Committee, *Uncorrected Evidence*, 14 July 2008.

6 *How resource is prioritised and allocated*

In the early stages, while giving priority to those areas with high deprivation and low levels of attainment was appropriate, “these local authorities typically had a number of other challenging issues to tackle in their area. As a consequence the degree to which these authorities were sufficiently prepared and resourced for BSF was not always ideal.”²⁴ The LGA believes that this contributed to the slow start to the BSF programme.²⁵ Since Wave 4 in 2006, there has been a ‘readiness to deliver’ criteria, which has subsequently been amended. Although DCSF will continue to emphasise social and educational needs, the Department recently announced it will not grant approval to any project until Partnerships for Schools (Pfs) is content that the local authority is ready to deliver.²⁶

This is symptomatic of an initial failure to allow for sufficient time to develop local strategies for education. Since implementing BSF, local authorities have been granted approval to begin new projects based on the social and educational needs of its schools. Yet, while it is commonly recognised that a minimum of 12 months is necessary for successful project delivery, many authorities have not always had sufficient time to think about what was needed or desired – in some cases it was as little as 12 weeks.²⁷ The BCSE has argued that resources and time for effective stakeholder engagement at the design stage is crucial.²⁸ This short and “frenzied” time period is clearly undesirable for successful delivery of BSF.

The Government has sought to respond to this problem and ensure that local visioning is given due time and space.²⁹ The new ‘readiness to deliver’

²⁴ Tim Byles, cited in *Sustainable schools: Are we building schools for the future?* House of Commons Education and Skills committee, 9 August 2007, P. 19

²⁵ *The diligent can jump the queue*, 31 July 2007, *The Times*.

²⁶ *Guidance for Local Authorities on Revising and Resubmitting Expressions of Interest for Projects in Waves 7 to 15 of Building Schools for the Future*, p. 7 (DCSF, September, 2008)

²⁷ *Sustainable schools: Are we building schools for the future?* House of Commons Education and Skills committee, 9 August 2007, P. 17

²⁸ *Letters*. (*Guardian*, September 23, 2008)

²⁹ *Government's response to the Seventh Report from the Education and Skills Committee, Session 2006-07*.

assessment of local authorities prior to entering BSF ensures that authorities start their thinking earlier. All authorities in Wave 5 were asked to prepare an early draft of their “Strategy for Change” before they entered the programme formally, so they should already be fully engaged in the visioning process. However, the Government also concluded that the visioning period should not be extended but rather that local authorities should be encouraged to do earlier preparation.

Meanwhile, although the focus has rightly been on trying to ensure that teachers, governors and pupils can have a meaningful input into design of the schools, there are also wider needs to ensure that the strategies contribute to wider social, economic and cultural goals of the community.

The programme presents a unique opportunity for central government to meet its priorities not only through DCSF but also for the economy, regeneration, community cohesion and a whole raft of other policy areas. It is questionable whether the Government is exploiting this opportunity to deliver on its wider PSA targets. For a programme driven by DCSF it is perhaps unsurprising that the delivery of schools has been the over-riding focus, and this has resulted in less commitment and cross-over with other central government and local government strategic policies.

At the local level, new triggers should be introduced to ensure that local vision can flourish through the preparation stage and beyond.

7 *The Procurement Process*

‘People often succeed in developing their visions in spite of the present procurement process, not because of it.’

‘We seem to be almost besotted with the process of the process, rather than allowing latitude.’

Ty Goaddard, BCSE³⁰

Bidding

If the Government must tread very carefully in terms of shortening the window for local areas to define their needs, other proposals to speed up the process are more generally to be welcomed.

At the heart of BSF’s problems lies the procurement process, which has come under fire for its excessive length, cost and complexity. According to a mid-2008 report by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), it takes approximately 30 months from the start of the process until reaching a financial close.³¹ PfS figures suggest that these numbers are now improving and that the average is now 102 weeks, with shorter spans for those processed after a Procurement Review was carried out in mid-2008.

Such delays are not mere frustrations for managers or private providers, but can have a real detrimental impact on the quality of education, with pupils stuck with sub-standard facilities because of contractual disputes.³² An Assistant Headteacher leading a project spoke with frustration that it was becoming a ‘building and a procurement exercise rather than an educational exercise.’³³

The complexity of the bidding process has meant delays as has the inexperience of local authorities. The BSF criteria required that three consortia were taken into the procurement process and that each generate three designs. Schools ended up being torn between competing consortia

30 House of Commons, CSF Committee, Uncorrected Evidence, 14 July 2008.

31 Thomas Moran, “More than Bricks and Mortars,” p. 10 (CBI, July, 2008)

32 ‘The futuristic new school that is stuck in “stupidity” of the past’, 15 January 2007, *The Times*.

33 ‘The futuristic new school that is stuck in “stupidity” of the past’, 15 January 2007, *The Times*.

and confused by the many designs. In turn, the tender process meant that construction companies have had to spend between £1 m and £1.5m bidding for each project.³⁴ Fundamentally, the costs of setting up BSF projects must be proportionate to their scale, and smaller businesses should not be excluded from the bidding process unnecessarily. The British Council for School Environment has argued that the procurement process is too complex.³⁵

Other reports highlighted the flaws that existed within the bidding process: “where bidders should come in for criticism is that many are overly commercialising the partnering and design process, to the detriment of communities and the local education partnership...Many councils are simply not geared up to manage this level of complexity.”³⁶

A review of the procurement process published in May 2008 has amended the number of bidders down to two and the number of designs per bidder also down to two.³⁷ These changes in process are to be welcomed and have resulted in a reduction of nearly two months and bid costs reduced by 30%.

It should also be noted that BSF must operate within the context of national and European law and that, for long-term partnerships, investment in time and money may be a necessary cost. However, there may be merit in exploring methods for flexing the system.

Local Education Partnerships

LEPs are the preferred method for delivering BSF and are joint-ventures between a local authority, the private sector, Partnerships for Schools and Building Schools for the Future Investment (BSFI). Local Education Partnerships (LEPs) are established at the point of financial close.

Policymakers contend that LEPs ensure the maintenance of BSF buildings by a private sector partner for the length of the contract, promote local investment and market revitalisation, integrate structural design with ICT provision, and enhance design quality through collaboration between LEP members. Local authorities and the private sector act as partners by planning, building and

³⁴ *The futuristic new school that is stuck in “stupidity” of the past*, 15 January 2007, *The Times*.

³⁵ BBC Radio 4, *The World this Weekend*, 19 October 2008.

³⁶ Paul Foster, ‘We’re not just building schools here’, *Building*, 2007

³⁷ PwC, *Building Schools for the Future Procurement Review* (2008)

maintaining BSF schools together with funds obtained either through a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) or conventional 'design and build' funding. The long-term nature of LEPs further incentivises private sector partners to deliver efficiently and cost-effectively from beginning to end.³⁸

Although many local authorities, schools and stakeholders agree that LEPs are a good idea in principle and have the capacity to serve as an effective model, the theoretical advantages have not always come to fruition during the early years of BSF. On the contrary, key stakeholders such as community representatives and pupils can go ignored while high-ranking authority staff members dictate the course of the project, and some remain sceptical about what LEPs can contribute.³⁹

LEPs also function where there is an economy of scale. New BSF guidance advises that LEPs are only appropriate for authorities with an overall BSF programme capital value of at least £150 million.⁴⁰ Local areas with smaller programmes - particularly those under £80 million - are advised that they will benefit by using traditional funding schemes or merging with other local authorities, and a significant minority of projects progress without a LEP.

A third concern is the role and influence that local authorities possess within the partnerships. There have been suggestions that councils are undermined by their 10 per cent minority ownership in LEPs, which may lead to central government and private sector interests carrying the most weight.⁴¹ School leaders, teachers, students and parents have all complained that their influence is relegated to the interests of local authorities and private sector partners that control the outcome of a project.

Due to these shortcomings, some schools have worked outside of the scheme. One example was Minster School in Nottinghamshire. The Headteacher said:

If we had become part of a BSF scheme, we'd never have had the opportunity to influence what we were getting as

38 Thomas Moran, *More than Bricks and Mortars*, p. 6 (CBI, July, 2008)

39 Interview.

40 DCSF, *Guidance for Local Authorities on Revising and Resubmitting Expressions of Interest for Projects in Waves 7 to 15 of Building Schools for the Future*, p. 12 (September 2008)

41 *Evaluation of Building Schools for the Future - 1st Annual Report* (PwC, 2007), p.32.

much as we did. We learned hugely from our contact with the architects. And they were really listening to what we said and translating that into design.

Working outside of the BSF framework proved beneficial: Minster was presented with an Inspiring Design award from the British Council for School Environments (BCSE) because it placed the interests of teachers and pupils at the heart of the design process. It was the product of a lengthy consultation process undertaken by the architects, the staff and pupils over a 12-month period, more than was allowed for under the government's BSF programme.⁴²

New methods should be explored for giving local authorities a greater stake in the ongoing visioning and design. This would reduce the risk that vision-changing decisions would be deferred to national bodies or private sector partners. Where LEPs operate, partners should give early, concerted and continued attention to developing and delivering on Collective Partnership Targets, which can clarify and broaden out the strategic compass of an LEP.

Competitive dialogue

Competitive dialogue is a key stage of the procurement process during which the local authority can put its imprint on the outcome of a particular BSF project through engagement with private sector partners prior to beginning construction. However, local authorities, private sector partners and the wider community have expressed varying concerns regarding competitive dialogue. In order to make the costs proportionate and expedite the remainder of the programme these concerns must be addressed.

Private sector partners have been disappointed by the strict nature of competitive dialogue, as BSF's high bid costs and the risk of losing bids can force businesses to reconsider the value of participating in the programme.⁴³ It can cost as much as £2 million to complete the bidding process. Such costs can be prohibitive and discount smaller companies from consideration. Meanwhile, rising costs may see Dudley MBC withdraw its commitment to BSF amid concerns that it cannot cover upfront costs.⁴⁴

⁴² Veronica Simpson, *This Will Be Your School*, *Guardian*, 16 September 2008.

⁴³ *Evaluation of BSF*, p. 30.

⁴⁴ Jim Dunton, *Fresh fears over rising BSF costs*, *LGC*, 12 November 2008.

Private businesses are therefore encouraged to be clearer with local authorities about realistic outcomes at an earlier point in the process, thus reducing timeframes and expenses.⁴⁵

CBI members have also claimed that due to time and cost pressures, competitive dialogue often only works well up to financial close. Yet, once construction begins and partners are satisfied budgetary and time constraints have been met, companies can lose sight of their primary responsibility to maintain the facility and transform education. As a solution, CBI members and school officials have encouraged localities to engage community stakeholders earlier and throughout the length of the BSF programme.⁴⁶

Although competitive dialogue is seen as a way to encourage innovation, unprepared local authorities often waste time with uniformed enquiries. Many localities cannot manage the process efficiently, whilst stakeholders have called for supporting departments and agencies such as the DCSF, 4ps and PfS to make training more widely available.⁴⁷ Some authorities such as Leeds have formed dedicated procurement teams with sufficient expertise, while a majority have slowly adapted to their new responsibilities. Stakeholders from the private sector assert that well-trained local authority staffs have proven to navigate this segment of procurement more quickly and cost-effectively.

As the parliamentary committee concluded, ‘the problem here is that...this is the first big capital project that most of the clients have ever run. They are going to oversee perhaps a £20 million new school build and are they a design savvy client? Are they going to get the most out of the process?’⁴⁸ Local authorities must take greater advantage of expertise and support from central government and appoint designated procurement teams with chief members that communicate with all partners in its LEP. Meanwhile, training and assistance need to be more effectively promoted by central leadership

Therefore, preparing local authorities to carry out the procurement process is fundamental to expediting future BSF projects. PfS has a number of workstreams in place to assist councils including regional briefing sessions,

⁴⁵ Moran, Thomas. *More than Bricks and Mortars*, p. 9 (CBI, July, 2008)

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 9

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 10

⁴⁸ David Kester, Design Council. Cited in *Sustainable schools: Are we building schools for the future?* House of Commons Education and Skills committee, 9 August 2007, P. 16.

BSF open days, case studies and a BSF online community. New forums to spread best practice within the local government community might also include cross-working with the LGA.

Alternative models for procurement

Alternative procurement models may be able to provide part answers to these challenges. Pre-qualification questionnaires (PQQs) could be used more widely to assess which private sector representatives are most likely to win the competitive dialogue stage, and the number of bidders could then be reduced at an earlier point than in past negotiations. The Gateway Review Process, which examines government programmes and projects at key points to provide assurance they can progress successfully, should also be used in a wider sense to ensure local authorities do not make unnecessary changes to tenders during the dialogue stage – this practice inhibits their chances of passing the review.⁴⁹ The CBI has suggested methods for better utilising the Gateway Review Process to ensure preparedness in terms of capability.

There is evidence that ‘Smart-PFI’ can deliver results – for instance, where the design for a school is drawn up prior to being put out to the market.⁵⁰

However, it is as much the universal and mandatory element of the procurement element that needs refreshing rather than specific components of the process themselves. It has been suggested that the government could issue guidance allowing a number of models of procurement to be used.⁵¹ Nevertheless, this is likely to remain too top-down.

BSF projects range from £80 million to £1.5 billion. Flexibility of process in more aspects is key to unlocking the gate to the right commissioning pathway depending on the size of the project. In addition, there are messages here not only for the BSF programme, but also beyond. The approach of Partnerships for Schools sits within EU and UK procurement legislation. However, as the most significant ongoing capital project in Britain, lessons should be learnt from this programme to inform wider approaches to, and possible revisions to, procurement regulations.

⁴⁹ Thomas Moran, “More than Bricks and Mortars,” p. 10 (CBI, July, 2008), p. 12

⁵⁰ PCSFC, Uncorrected Evidence to PCSFC, 14 July 2008.

⁵¹ PCSFC, Uncorrected Evidence to PCSFC, 14 July 2008.

8 *Designing the right buildings*

*'Design still needs to have a stronger weighting in the selection of local education partnerships than it has at the moment.'*⁵²

Richard Simmons, CABE

The goal of the programme is to construct buildings that transform learning, serve the local community, possess sustainable features and are easily accessible to users and the general public. Structural design is, therefore, fundamental to success.

However, school design has come under scrutiny.⁵³ Initially, this centred on condemnation around environmental sustainability.⁵⁴ Subsequent criticism has focussed also on overall design as educational and community buildings.

A report by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) found that 8 in 10 design proposals were either “mediocre” or “not yet good enough,” to which CABE chief executive Richard Simmons responded by saying, ‘What we need is a design threshold which will prevent bad schemes from continuing through the system...It should not be acceptable for public money to be used to procure poorly designed schools.’⁵⁵ Recently, although CABE has welcomed ‘measurable improvements’, they have stated that ‘we do not think the quality is yet good enough’.⁵⁶ Ty Goddard, Director of the British Council for School Environment, argued that ‘the schools we are creating may be schools of the past rather than schools of the future’.⁵⁷ With school curriculum and technology changing, it is how the new schools can serve those changing needs that is most crucial.

Part of the answer is to invest in better training. However, it should be more than a mere matter of training.

52 House of Commons, CSF Committee, Uncorrected Evidence, 14 July 2008.

53 *Schools design scheme comes under attack*, *Observer*, 30 November 2008.

54 *Schools rebuild project “ignores green initiative”*, *The Sunday Times*, 24 June 2007.

55 *Threshold needed to halt poor school design*. (CABE, July 21, 2008) <http://www.cabe.org.uk/default.aspx?contentitemid=2643>

56 Richard Simmons, CABE, House of Commons Committee, Uncorrected Evidence, 14 July 2008.

57 BBC Radio 4, *The World this Weekend*, 19 October 2008.

Government constrains local authorities in their designs. The danger remains that projects may lose sight of the unique, locally-driven vision. Jim Knight, Minister for Schools, alluded to this in a mid-2008 speech:

“A recent criticism has been that schools are increasingly homogenized locations for delivering the same, centrally agreed product, in the same, centrally-directed fashion and that we have moved to a Starbucks-style outlet delivering pre-packaged learning.”⁵⁸

As Knight went on to note:

‘as we continue to build that infrastructure, it is crucial that people get to make those decisions locally, and choose what best works for them in the context of their communities.’

Such commitment is not always forthcoming from the centre. The Government’s vision of what a BSF school should look like has been promoted through a series of design guides that are essentially blueprints for how it sees the transformation of education.⁵⁹ When the DCSF condemned local authorities in late-2007 for their lack of innovative planning, the department issued ‘standardised solutions for a range of building elements that [they] expected to be adopted in BSF’, increasing the likelihood of a centrally-driven, one-size-fits-all approach.⁶⁰

At the same time, the Government has emphasised that it must provide help in order to avoid “reinventing the wheel”. The standardised specifications, layouts and dimensions that the government considers should be included are toilet blocks, partitions, floor finishes, sprinkler installations, lighting, doors, stairs, roof coverings, classroom dimensions, relocatable classrooms, windows and mechanical installations.⁶¹ It is questionable how this sits with the parliamentary committee’s request that ‘greater flexibility on building standards, emphasising that they are guidance rather than requirements,

58 “Jim Knight Speech – Partnership for Schools BSF Conference.” (DCSF, 18 September 2008)

59 DCSF, *Guidance for Local Authorities on Revising and Resubmitting Expressions of Interest for Projects in Waves 7 to 15 of Building Schools for the Future* (September 2008), p. 13.

60 *Whitehall Must Remain Involved in local Building Schools for the Future (BSF) projects because councils’ plans showed a lack of innovation.* (LGC, October 24, 2007)

61 *Government’s response to the Seventh Report from the Education and Skills Committee, Session 2006-07.*

would allow authorities at a local level a greater degree of choice over their schools estates, and allow them to find the most suitable ways of making schools in their areas more sustainable.⁶² Plans were recently announced to introduce a Minimum Design Standard (MDS) that will take into account insight from CABE, teachers, parents and pupils.⁶³ This is to be introduced in 2009.

But, the danger goes beyond this. While few are suggesting that the standardisation of the schools could ever be so poor as to replicate the ‘clasp’ buildings of the 1950s, the potential dangers remain real. It was argued recently that, given the number of schools and the timetable, ‘an amount of standardisation has to be explored [because] there is no need to design a unique toilet block every time we design a school’. Indeed, whole faculties could be standardised.⁶⁴ Such comments threaten to stamp out local innovation and potential for transformation.

More welcome are the intentions to provide case studies, action research projects and new guidance to promote creative thinking during the design process.

Given the amount of expenditure which is being authorised, it is right that the DCSF should satisfy itself that funds are being spent appropriately. And due to the vast number of schools and strict timetable, “an amount of standardisation has to be explored.”⁶⁵ On the other hand, a detailed checklist of central government’s objectives undermines and constrains the devolvement of resource and innovation at the local level. If the government is serious about wanting BSF to transform education, it should be encouraging local authorities to be more innovative and reducing excessive limitations or regulation.⁶⁶

Underpinning many of these discussions is the need for greater trust of local decision-makers.

62 *Sustainable schools: Are we building schools for the future?* House of Commons Education and Skills committee, 9 August 2007.

63 CABE Press Release, *CABE welcomes minimum design standard for schools*, 18 September 2008.

64 BBC Radio 4, *The World this Weekend*, 19 October 2008.

65 BBC Radio 4, *The World this Weekend*, 19 October 2008.

66 *Sustainable schools: Are we building schools for the future?* House of Commons Education and Skills committee, 9 August 2007, p. 40

9 *Conclusions and recommendations*

BSF has the potential to contribute to integrated local regeneration, development, community assets and access to learning, and there is scope to utilise the projects as a catalyst for other transformations. However, the programme still fails to encourage sufficient local vision for education and wider community goals.

BSF will always remain a national programme. But, like so many other central government policies, it is delivered at the local level and only effective if it responds to specific community needs.

Currently the mechanisms for delivering the policy hamper the vision and strategic integration that are necessary to make these new buildings transform their environments and their pupils. Government should look to remove central prescription so local input is allowed to come to the fore. Under these new conditions, BSF could thrive and meet the demanding timetable set of it.

Developing local visions

Local vision is fundamental to establishing the right foundations for the next generation of schools. Current guidance requires local authorities to consult their key partners in developing their vision, but more explicit triggers should be introduced:

- The principal factor to determine ‘readiness to deliver’ criteria should be based on an authority’s local vision for education which must demonstrate that it contributes to wider community goals.
- The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) should be given a focal role in setting out the local vision for BSF projects and for scoping and integrating strategic local requirements into the vision. Where appropriate the LSP should co-opt additional partners such as Sure Start and local employers into the visioning and the future steering boards.
- The local authority, LSP, and school leaders should be given greater status in the LEAs and the Leader of the Council should chair the

Strategic Partnering Board which oversees the instructions to the LEP.

- New roles being explored for LEPs to act as procurers of other services and assets should be developed and best practice disseminated.
- As BSF represents co-delivery of facilities between national and local government, all bids for BSF funding should have to make reference to how this new investment will contribute to the achievement of their Local Area Agreement targets, the goals of their Multi Area Agreements (where relevant) and demonstrate a “golden thread” through to their Sustainable Communities Strategies.

Procurement process

Despite the significant revisions already introduced by PfS, which are to be welcomed, there remains scope to free up the procurement process and, in so doing, enable local authorities to procure their new schools through methods appropriate to their capacity and geography.

- A ‘BSF Best Practice Forum’ should be developed - to include Partnerships for Schools, CABE, BSFI, the LGA, other private experts and leaders in local government procurement - to formulate and share best practice and advice. This body could also offer additional up-skilling on the procurement process.
- Local authorities should have the freedom to design their own procurement models and to pilot or prototype these alongside other peer councils. These may include the current framework for considering designs or may be through more flexible arrangements with partners, or methods such as Smart PFI.
- Opportunities should be explored for external partners to commit to long-term wider economic, social, health and educational strategies and targets, such as worklessness. This local visioning should occur prior to the start of the procurement process.
- MAAs possess the strategic capacity and the critical mass to agglomerate the necessary partners. Where MAAs are in existence, local authorities should consider using these as the partnership mechanisms to align educational and wider community strategies and deliver BSF projects.

- The BSF process should be reviewed with a view to shed more light on EU and UK procurement regulations and where reforms may be required in the future. NLGN intends to look in more depth at public sector procurement and commissioning in 2009.

Design

The Government should not seek to expedite BSF projects by introducing more standardisation of design. Rather, it should encourage innovative design built on the foundations of local vision.

- To this end, any Minimum Design Standard should only cover poor designs weeded out so far through the processes rather than attempt to fulfil central ambitions for the look of the new schools. There should also be opportunity for in-depth and ongoing consultation with the LGA and other local authorities. Where views of local schools, governors, councillors, students and residents have been developed into a coherent vision for school design, these should take precedence over any national standard.
- PfS and CABE should continue to develop case study examples for successful schools in different contexts and environments. These should be developed not only from schools built through the BSF process but also from those that have fallen outside of the programme.
- Design should take into consideration not only the future of personalised learning, and involve curriculum designers, teachers, pupils and governors, but should also draw on the expertise of employers and be informed by the local policy on vocational education, worklessness and community health and well-being.

***Building Schools for the Future* has the potential to contribute to integrated local regeneration, development, community assets and access to learning. By offering this range of potential benefits, there is scope to utilise the projects as a catalyst for other transformations.**

However, the programme still fails to encourage sufficient local vision for education and wider community goals.

BSF will always remain a national programme. But, like so many other central government policies, it is delivered at the local level and only effective if it responds to specific community needs.

Currently the mechanisms for delivering the policy hamper the vision and strategic transformation that are necessary to make these new buildings transform their environments and their pupils.

Government should look to remove central prescription so local input is allowed to come to the fore. Under these conditions, BSF can thrive and meet the demanding timetable set for it.