

Stand and deliver

Partnerships for Schools (Pfs) co-ordinates the national rollout of the £45bn Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme to rebuild or renew every one of England's 3,500 state secondary schools by 2019. Here its Chief Executive Tim Byles talks to Anthony Woodburn about some of the challenges that lie ahead

Tim Byles is more than aware of the massive responsibility he has in delivering what is the single biggest regeneration project ever undertaken in England.

He said: "Building Schools for the Future will have an enormous impact: every secondary school in England will be affected. That's more than three million schoolchildren now – and countless more for years to come, not to mention the wider communities that benefit from the extended school facilities.

"The programme is well resourced and supported. The responsibility is huge, but then so is the potential, and I am relishing the challenge."

As the former Chief Executive of Norfolk County Council, he also understands the challenges that BSF presents to local government.

"The scale of the investment is unprecedented, and the responsibility of procurement lies firmly with local authorities – with the support of Pfs and the DfES, of course. But I also understand how exciting it would be to have an opportunity like this to totally transform the entire educational estate of a local authority."

He continued: "As chairman of SOLACE, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, I have met and worked with most of the Chief Executives in England, and these relationships will be important as we move forward in BSF. Mutual trust and commitment is paramount, which is why I have signed a memorandum of

understanding with all wave 4 local authority chief executives, and will do the same for all future waves."

But it's not all about his experience in local government. Before taking up his position at Pfs, he was chair of the Local Government Chief Executive's Taskforce, the Local Government Construction Taskforce, and also served as National Procurement Champion for the then ODPM.

Byles' first priority will be addressing the delivery issues which have been the subject of much criticism ever since the original timetable was announced three years ago.

"In the short term, there were 14 projects that had slipped against the original timescale. Today there are less than half that number, and I expect to reduce the number further by the end of the financial year.

"The Pfs team have been working hard to address issues and problems wherever they occur, and I've been impressed with their expertise and commitment.

"We have also been looking closely at the original programme timetable that was put forward in 2004, and we've compared the actual timings of completed BSF projects, such as Bristol and Bradford, against the original targets.

"Experience so far suggests that local authorities will take 30-32 months from entering the programme to reaching financial close.

"We are hoping to reset the original timetable based on this, so that the programme is delivered against more

"BUILDING SCHOOLS FOR THE FUTURE WILL HAVE AN ENORMOUS IMPACT: EVERY SECONDARY SCHOOL IN ENGLAND WILL BE AFFECTED"

realistic targets."

These issues aside, he insists the long-term delivery targets are on target to be met.

"More than 30 of the 39 local authorities in waves 1-3 will open their first schools on the expected date – which is, after all, the most important target to hit."

He describes progress in the initial waves as "slow and steady".

He added: "We have taken the longer view that it is better to get things right first time rather than to rush them and make mistakes."

The pace of delivery is picking up though – five local authorities who joined wave 4 in January 2007 are on second or third phases of BSF, having already been involved in waves 1, 2 or 3, and the procurements of these schools will be considerably faster than before, as the LAs already have a working partnership in place with a private sector partner.

And Pfs reaches an exciting milestone this year in that the first school delivered through a Local Education Partnership (LEP) will be opening in the summer: Speedwell Technical College, in Bristol.

At a programme level, wave 4 local authorities are just embarking on their BSF projects, and Pfs expect to launch wave 5 in September this year.

"Several wave 5 local authorities are so well prepared for their projects that we hope to be able to bring them forward earlier than September, to speed up the



Tim Byles (photo courtesy Eastern Daily Press)



Tim on a recent site visit to Speedwell Technical College in Bristol. Speedwell will open in September, and will be the first BSF school delivered through a Local Education Partnership. From left: Tim Byles, Chief Executive, Partnerships for Schools; Mark Giltsoff, Construction Manager and Steve Cooper, Education Director, both of Skanska, Bristol City

pace of delivery in the overall national programme even more," he added.

This said, he admits there is much room for improvement, and much of this comes from learning lessons from those who have gone before.

He explained: "I have made it a point since my arrival to meet and engage with the primary stakeholders in BSF – Ministers, the DfES, local authorities and bidders, in order to harness the experience of everyone who has worked on BSF and use their knowledge and the lessons they have learned to help inform the programme's development. People are keen to share their experience, which will not only help to build capacity in local authorities, but will improve the programme as a whole, too."

Another key issue for Byles, and also subject to much criticism, is design – and especially sustainable design – which Byles believes is a vital piece of the BSF jigsaw.

"CABE's increased involvement in BSF gives us an important opportunity for

consensus on design quality as the schemes and designs are developed.

"We should utilise the benefits of standardisation where it makes sense to, such as the design of toilet blocks, and ensure that innovative and flexible design has the opportunity to flourish.

"Sustainability is becoming increasingly important in all aspects of life, and it has a high profile in BSF. It's not just about ensuring that we minimise carbon emissions or build in renewable energy supplies through sustainable school designs, but we must also look at the wider contexts: the carbon footprint of building projects; the public transport links that will deliver children to schools; the potential for using sustainable design elements as teaching and learning tools – these are significant and wide ranging issues."

While most of the 'big players' in the construction market are already signed up as partners to pathfinder and wave 1 local authorities, Byles believes there are still many opportunities waiting to be

"WE ENCOURAGE LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND BIDDERS TO USE LOCAL COMPANIES IN THEIR SUPPLY CHAIN WHEREVER POSSIBLE"

exploited by the wider construction sector.

"We encourage local authorities and bidders to use local companies in their supply chain wherever possible: BSF projects need the same skills as all construction projects: design, quantity surveying, etc."

He added: "We encourage local companies to market themselves to both the private sector bidders and to local authorities – which are the procuring agents in BSF. LAs usually hold Bidders Days once their schemes have gone to market in OJEU. Attending a Bidders Day can give an invaluable sense of a project, and can be a useful networking opportunity."

And while Byles' experience of Building Control is minimal, he understands how important the Building Regulations are in the construction process.

"We are still at the very beginning of delivering schools through BSF. We do, however, rely on the Building Regulations and School Premises Regulations to ensure that statutory minimum standards are met."