

BSF – a pointless exercise?

Simon Loveday, Partner, Vizards Wyeth Solicitors gives SiteLines readers the lowdown on the Government's Building Schools for the Future programme and asks whether the scheme is already fatally flawed

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Launched in February 2004, the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme is the Government's largest single investment in education over the last 50 years.

The aim of BSF is to modernise every one of the 3,500 secondary schools in England and to improve the educational experience for every pupil – this is to be done by improving school buildings either by rebuilding or refurbishing them. The programme is to run over 15 years and funding has been provided on the basis that nationally, 50% of schools will be rebuilt, 35% will require major refurbishment and 15% will require minor refurbishment.

The role of local authorities in the BSF scheme is paramount. A "readiness to deliver" assessment was recently implemented and this has to be passed by a local authority before they can enter the BSF programme.

Local authorities also now need to sign a "memorandum of understanding" with Partnership for Schools (PfS) to ensure that all parties agree with what needs to be done. Each participating local authority will have to understand the current educational set-up in its own area and decide on an 'education vision' – how they can move education forward.

They will be supported from the outset by PfS, who together with local authorities, oversee and assist in the delivery of the BSF scheme. After developing a vision, local authorities then have a

statutory duty to consult local stakeholders (eg local educational establishments, parent groups, teachers, local councils) on their views on the implementation of the BSF project.

The next stage is for the local authority to find its Private Sector Partner (PSP) by procurement and for them to work together to deliver the project. These PSPs will be utilised to build/renew school buildings and to maintain them. A Local Education Partnership (LEP), consisting of the local authority, the PfS and the PSP, is the body that then has responsibility to deliver the project using traditional methods.

The DfES has insisted that sustainability lies at the heart of the renewal programme and that all BSF projects have to meet a set of environmental targets well in excess of normal Building Regulations.

The Government has made it a requirement that all new build and refurbishment projects will have a Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment (BREEAM) carried out. This assesses a school building's impact on the environment on a local, national and global level and considers such factors as carbon emissions, energy efficiency, water consumption and location. New schools and refurbished schools built under BSF will have to achieve a minimum BREEAM standard of "Very Good".

BSF has been the subject of heavy criticism recently and much of this has been due to the potentially flawed competitive procurement

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process to find a PSP. The process is seen as complex, lengthy, expensive and bureaucratic, and has been blamed for the BSF programme falling behind targets.

There are a number of major weaknesses. First, the three consortiums shortlisted for each project must produce detailed designs in only 12 weeks. Second, they must produce three designs, which seems to be a waste of money, time and effort. Third, unsuccessful bidders could be left with little enthusiasm for future projects – the number of bidders is already falling. Fourth, bid costs are seen to be too high, although Tim Byles (Chief Executive of PfS) states that these should only be 1%-2% of the total value of the project. Finally, there is the danger that the lowest cost option will be chosen, rather than the best design.

There is the danger that this and the other drawbacks could make the whole BSF programme pointless, with little transformation of the educational experience.

This would be a shame, as without flaws, this radical programme could most certainly be a great success for the future of education in England.