



Are traditional models of procurement for major capital infrastructure projects about to make a serious comeback in the public sector? Some may argue they never really went away. But over the past ten years, such models have been deemed unfashionable – with PFI grabbing all the headlines.

However, with the economy floundering, rumors rife that the flagship Building Schools for the Future programme is struggling to deliver and with PFI becoming an increasingly expensive borrowing mechanism, is it time for the current and any future governments to look backwards in order to move forwards.

One of the main problems with PFI has been the amount of influence bankers and investors have had over design, which means flexibility has been limited in a bid to minimize risk. Whilst this may have brought some savings to the process, it has also brought about a fierce debate with architects and designers wishing to maximize benefits for the public purse and for end users.

Time is another factor. With over 300,000 construction job losses predicted in the current recession, the Government really has to act fast. But the time taken to get PFI deals over the finishing line is a growing frustration.

Big has been beautiful and anecdotal evidence suggests that in the past deals have been packaged on a scale that makes them attractive to investors. Is this really the best deal for the taxpayer? And does it not add complexity, and therefore time, to the process?

Those who argue against a greater role for traditional procurement point to the 'patch and mend' mentality that existed twenty years ago and use this as a stick with which to beat the public sector. In my view, this was more to do with lack of funds. The huge investment programmes of the past ten years have changed public sector clients' perspectives – and the lessons learned in design, build and asset management could just as easily be applied by them for the public good to non-PFI models.

Maybe the time is now right for ministers to look to invest through public sector clients in order to roll out an enhanced public works construction programme. This would allow concentration on issues such as smarter, more flexible building on a variety of scales with an enhanced focus on low carbon sustainable design and promotion of training opportunities such as apprenticeships. Such a move could put quality at the forefront of the thought process; rather than profit.

What's the alternative? Trusting banks and investors to secure our future? Haven't we already tried that one.

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