

# Spend, spend, spend?



The Chancellor's Spending Review towards the end of 2015 announced £23b to be spent, over the course of this Parliament, on the creation of extra school places.

We speak to Jeff Alexander, the chair of Construction Alliance North East (CAN), Rachel Davis, Business Development Director with Premier Modular, and Neill Werner RIBA, Head of Architecture at Pellings, an integrated design, project management and property solutions consultancy, about their reaction to this, and what it may mean for the education sector of our industry.

**£23bn capital investment over the course of the Parliament is partly to open 500 free schools – do you think that free schools are the answer to the shortage of places, or better maintenance and extension of existing establishments?**

**Jeff:** Not in isolation. I believe it is a combination of the two approaches that is more likely to produce more immediate improvements, since delivery of extended and/or refurbished existing facilities can be achieved much more quickly. If I was to take the cynical view, I think that establishing and constructing new free schools does of course allow the government to make an announcement without committing to expenditure until much later.

**Neill:** It's not a question of either/or and any new build schools developed by Academies may simply be branded as "Free Schools" to achieve political promises.

However there are no easy solutions. Expanding existing schools can be extremely complex, and quite unpopular with parents. If not designed and managed correctly, the levels of disruption can be severe, particularly in the tight urban areas where the need for places is greatest.

Equally it can be extremely difficult to find appropriate sites for new schools, especially when academies or free schools are competing with residential developers for sites. However, the organisations behind free schools do have the freedom to be somewhat more creative in how they deliver school places and that can be positive. For example Pellings has recently worked with Harris Academy on converting a former council office building in Haringey into a free school. This delivered much needed school places for the local community quickly and cost effectively.

**Rachel:** Free schools offer an alternative form of education, which is more community- and parent-led and less standardised in its offering to parents and children. Whilst this may suit some families, I feel it should not replace other forms of education as everybody should be free to choose the route their children take.

Whilst the establishment of free schools has undoubtedly been a quick route to providing thousands of urgently required school places, and many of the schools are being run efficiently and producing amazing results, there may be downsides to decentralising the control of schools; headteachers and teachers having to run a school rather than teach, difficulties monitoring success, increased building costs due to difficult sites rather than using existing education stock.

Maintenance and extension of our existing schools has not been forgotten though, with several funds striving to improve the education environment through refurbishment and rebuild. The past few years has seen the construction of additional classroom blocks in many schools, but there has to be a limit on this as creating mega schools can cause its own set of problems.

Therefore though free schools should not be the only answer, they are a necessary part of the solution.

**Are you working on any projects that may be affected by this Review?**

**Neill:** Pellings is a significant provider of architecture and project management services for education clients throughout London and the South East. We don't anticipate that this announcement will materially affect the school projects we are currently working on in Bexley, Bermondsey, Hackney, Hounslow, Surrey, Bromley and Hertfordshire, however it may release funds for projects which have stalled due to financial concerns from clients.

**Rachel:** The need for additional school places is very time sensitive, and as an off-site constructor this is one of our greatest strengths at Premier Modular Limited. We are currently working on several projects which have to be delivered in very short timescales, including seven Local Authority schools in London and two free schools in the Manchester area.

The Review would not affect our current projects, but may going forward. However, as long as school improvements, replacements, and extensions are required and we continue to provide a high quality, quick and affordable solution, the type of school or direction of funding will not play a huge part.

**Jeff:** CAN members have limited opportunity at present with regard to educational projects due to the procurement methods being adopted and the limited amount of public sector spending in construction generally. We are hoping therefore that the review will improve this situation.

**Do you think that this amount will be sufficient to make up the ground that was lost when the BSF projects were cancelled?**

**Rachel:** The multiple funds available today under the EFA for free schools, priority schools and UTCs, capital funds through local authorities, and condition improvement funds for academies, appear to be having a big impact on the creation of new schools, enlargement of schools, and the improvement of the built environment.

The BSF funds, though large, were wasteful in terms of fees, designs and materials. Newer funding is achieving much better value for money through standardisation, careful design management and economies of scale. More emphasis is now being put on investigating different forms of construction and finding cost effective solutions whilst providing brilliant teaching environments – and off-site construction delivers on all fronts. Therefore I feel we have already covered a lot of the lost ground.

**Jeff:** No, the BSF programme was far more wide ranging!

**Neill:** All additional funds should be welcomed, however BSF was an extremely inefficient programme and looking back I don't believe it delivered value for money.

It is also true to say that whilst poor quality school buildings are a hindrance, it is teachers that make good schools. Ultimately demand for school places is driven by demographics, and the state has an obligation to provide places. Educational architects need to be part of the solution by providing the best

possible quality within these constraints. Sometimes difficult choices have to be made, and part of our role as architects is to manage expectations and clarify the 'must have' non-negotiable elements of any new school buildings.

**We all know there's not an endless supply of money, but what would be your argument for an increased budget for the education sector's built environment?**

**Jeff:** Construction expenditure generally is a very 'quick win' when it comes to increasing and maintaining significant employment opportunities, both directly and through supply-chains. Many existing educational facilities, particularly those in the North East, are of such a poor standard that they have a direct negative effect on academic achievement. Increased spending in this sector can therefore, potentially, have a double benefit.

Whilst an increased budget would help, at CAN we believe that by changing the way public sector projects are procured, by giving greater opportunities to tender for work to smaller regional contractors - many of whom undertook a lot of education sector work some years ago - would make far better use of any available budget. It would also help the local economies in which the schools are located.

**Neill:** School design is about delivering efficient, flexible space that responds to the requirements of the site, the asset owner, staff and students, and makes a positive contribution to the local community. Increased capital investment that improves usability and reduces day to day running and long term maintenance costs of the building is always money well spent.

Additional elements that make a difference are the areas that allow for schools to go the extra mile in attainment. For example Pellings has been involved in the delivery of international level sports facilities, and professional level performance spaces.

The other key area for additional investment is in areas that give pupils, parents and staff pride in the school. This can be quite simple such as creative use of graphics that give the school a strong local brand, and spaces that allow for a wide range of working practices. Striking design, investment in external space and good connectivity all add value to a school and engage the community, which may be a good thing.

**Rachel:** Having the right environment around us as we work, learn and live can inspire us, support us and motivate us - therefore making our schools the best place to learn is essential. Giving children and teachers a quality environment with all the spaces required to teach and learn makes them feel valued and builds confidence.

An inspired, confident and motivated culture breeds; when we look back on our childhoods the subject we tend to love is the one with the teacher that captured our imagination and made the learning come to life.

Therefore creating inspiring buildings which teachers, students and the surrounding community can be proud of will take our education forwards, maintaining it as one of the best in the world.