



What next for partnerships in education?

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Mark Johnson considers the post-election landscape for partnerships and outsourcing in education.

Within days of taking office the coalition government has its sights on the Building Schools for the Future programme, looking to rein in capital spending and apply it instead towards the new "free schools" concept.

While in opposition, the new education secretary Michael Gove made no secret of his desire to review the effectiveness of Partnerships for Schools and the BSF programme. There has been no official announcement as yet, but it is understood that the Department plans to freeze all BSF projects that have not yet appointed a preferred bidder.

The detail of how this will work is crucial. Precisely what is the test for having 'appointed a preferred bidder'? Many councils are at a critical stage in their procurement process to appoint a local education partner, and consortia are busy assembling bids and incurring design fees, commissioning surveys, and other bid costs.



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At present there are approximately 24 schemes in procurement across England, if they all continue to progress at full pace pending a review, authorities and their partners could incur hundreds of thousands of pounds of abortive costs. Urgent clarity is required on this issue.

The Conservatives plans for free schools will continue under the coalition arrangements, as will the academy schools programme. Groups of teachers, parents, organisations and charities will be allowed to set up 'free schools', funded by the Government, with the freedom to offer what parents want. Headteachers will have the flexibility to do what they think works – whether it's smaller class sizes, strong discipline, or longer school days.

This is likely to create a dynamic new market for school places and supporting services. Critics have claimed that the vision of parents having the time and energy to set up new schools will be the preserve of "yummy mummies operating from gastro pubs".

However, it is understood the Government has been actively courting a panel of companies eager to provide the necessary infrastructure and support to the local promoters. These include companies like Edison Learning, and Swedish school operators IES and Kunskapsskolan, who were recently named as sponsors of two new academies in Richmond.

The Department for Education is to bring forward new legislation quickly to allow any school that wishes to convert itself into an academy, enjoying new freedoms and privileges.

In a new landscape of independent providers, the role of local education authorities is likely to change into commissioner and market-maker. This will have an impact on future procurement policies: Council-wide contracts for support services, such as curriculum advice, ICT or school meals will no longer be the norm.

Purchasing power will be fragmented amongst different groups. The relentless pursuit of efficiency savings will encourage schools to work in clusters with shared back-office services.

In-house support functions in LEAs will also need to consider carefully their strategy. Recently I worked with the inspection and advisory team of a large LEA to prepare them to become a trading business operating across the regions with a diverse range of education provider clients.

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