

A Chief Construction Officer: a view from the Royal Institute of British Architects

Introduction

The RIBA is one of the most influential architectural institutions in the world, and has been promoting architecture and architects since being awarded its Royal Charter in 1837. The 40,000-strong professional institute is committed to serving the public interest through good design. It also represents 85% of registered architects in the UK through its regional structure as well as a significant number of international members. Our mission statement is simple – to advance architecture by demonstrating benefit to society and promoting excellence in the profession.

The RIBA is very supportive of the introduction of a Chief Construction Officer and encourages the Government to implement this.

Joined-up thinking

The main value of the Chief Construction Officer role would be to help government to achieve joined-up thinking and action on the role that the built environment plays in delivering public policy. 16 of the 30 policy areas across government are delivered mainly or partly by the built environment. The development, construction and operation of the built environment also represent approaching 20% of GDP and half of carbon dioxide emissions. At present departments do not fully appreciate this or act in a co-ordinated way, missing many opportunities. The Chief Construction Officer should be mandated to enlighten and persuade departments, with the authority of the Treasury behind him/her. Public spending reviews should include joined-up policy for built environment programmes in support of public policy, with the Chief Construction Officer responsible for preparing this analysis.

Best practice

The Chief Construction Officer should use both persuasion and enforcement tools in helping the public sector to buy effectively. Mandation of best practice can perhaps best be achieved by the formation of a framework for public client advisors who would be deployed to support clients in using best practice and achieving best value, including achieving appropriate design quality and sustainability. Gateway review of projects, especially the use of Gateway 5 to obtain feedback on value achieved, should be facilitated by the advisor cohort. The body of knowledge so gained will assist in better brief-making and budgeting. The National Audit Office and Audit Commission should receive the Gateway 5 reviews as source material for monitoring the effectiveness of public procurement. The revised Treasury Green Book procedure for assessing whole-life value and cost, including CO2 cost, needs to be part of the armoury and to be continuously improved to take full account of developing understanding of the value of public policy delivery through construction.

Sustainability

The Sustainable Construction Strategy Delivery Board should be chaired by the Chief Construction Officer, as a vehicle for developing joined up thinking in government and the industry. Sustainability needs to be interpreted here as Social and Economic as well as Environmental.

It would be preferable for Planning and Building Control systems particularly on sustainability to be more joined-up. The Chief Construction Officer could ensure that there is a joint strategy on this.

Clienting

The Chief Construction Officer can help the construction industry to become more attractive to clients, investors, staff and the public, and more innovative, by focussing on the actions of the public client. These actions should include demanding high standards from the industry, such as stated in the 2012 Commitments, with high Corporate Responsibility goals and good reporting of achievement. Qualification for public works contracts should require high standards right down the supply chain. Selection of teams should be driven by the search for best value in all policy terms.

Innovation

The Chief Construction Officer should also foster innovation in the industry by broadening the official understanding of what innovation is. At present it is seen as essentially about use of new technology and the Technology Strategy Board holds the public purse strings with no allocation reserved to Construction. Innovation in delivering policy outcomes through construction occurs across a much wider field than technology and the UK has an international (rather than a home) reputation for it. Innovative client briefs, innovative design solutions, innovative development, procurement and delivery methods, innovative facility management concepts, are all vital components of innovation. Technology can facilitate these innovations but rarely drives them. The Chief Construction Officer should also be able to sponsor research directly, in support of developing understanding of how built environment creates and destroys public value.

Planning

The Chief Construction Officer can add value to the planning of public construction spend in the UK through his/her fostering of joined-up thinking about the built environment. Development of national infrastructure and sustainable communities should flow from a balanced assessment of long term programmes and medium term levels of simultaneous demand for skills and capacity.

Role

The Chief Construction Officer should be based in the Treasury. This is the centre of power in government and the focus of spending departments. The construction industry sponsor role, played now by BERR, has insufficient ministerial attention or staffing. Power to change the industry now lies mainly within the spending departments as guided by Treasury and the regulatory departments as they try to achieve sustainable development. In the private sector it is client wishes which cause consultants and constructors to change and innovate. So it should be in the public

sector. The call for a Chief Construction Officer is in part a response to the weakness of the role of industry sponsor.

The Chief Construction Officer must have weight and seniority so that they can act as a true champion of the industry.

Stakeholders

The Chief Construction Officer must have effective links with a number of key organisations. This should include a strong link to the industry itself through the Construction Industry Council and its constituent institutes.

Resources

The resources required by the Chief Construction Officer must be sufficient to support the main roles outlined above. The Treasury already has staff concerned with some aspects of the Chief Construction Officer's remit, as do BERR, CLG, DEFRA and others. Some of these staffs could be brought together. The payback from more effective public procurement should render the Chief Construction Officer's office self-financing in the midterm and a net saving in the long term.

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