

The Future of UK Construction Hire: Digital Marketplaces in Action

4 months ago



By Tom Shorten, CEO, [HSS ProService Marketplace](#)

For most of my career in the UK construction sector, equipment hire has relied on phone calls, emails, spreadsheets and a fair amount of guesswork, as well as mountains of paper. That approach has worked, up to a point, because people know each other and relationships matter a lot, but it has also left the industry carrying inefficiencies that are becoming harder to justify.

After several challenging trading years, with budgets under pressure and projects scrutinised more closely than ever, the traditional model is being questioned. Digital marketplaces are starting to move from the edges of the sector into the mainstream. This is because they offer contractors, facilities managers and procurement teams a different way of accessing equipment, materials and services, with far greater visibility and control.

As the industry looks ahead, the question is no longer whether digital procurement has a role to play, but how quickly it will become part of everyday operations on site.

Construction has lagged behind other industries when it comes to digital procurement with industries such as retail, travel and logistics having built platforms years ago which transformed how goods and services were bought. In the construction world, many teams are still exchanging PDFs across long email chains and trying to reconcile costs weeks after the work is done.

That lack of real-time information creates a number of problems including waste, as equipment sits on sites way longer than needed and orders are often duplicated. Site managers spend time a lot of their time chasing equipment instead of managing work, and procurement teams struggle to get a clear picture

of what is actually being used and where. Inefficiency unfortunately becomes the norm.

Our digital marketplace tackles the problem at its root by creating a single point of access. Hire, materials, fuel and consumables can all be ordered through one platform, with full visibility from the moment an order is placed to the moment it's closed. That visibility changes behaviour because when people can see what they are hiring, how long it's been there and what it's costing, decisions can be made much quicker and sharper and productivity booms as a result.

One of the biggest shifts we are seeing is away from measuring strength by fleet size alone. Owning more equipment doesn't automatically mean better service, especially when demand fluctuates and capital costs continue to rise. Asset-light, platform-driven models allow the industry to focus on utilisation and efficiency instead. They bring together high-quality national and local suppliers in a single digital ecosystem, and marketplaces give customers access to the right equipment at the right time, without the inefficiencies that come from duplication or underuse.

For suppliers, this model improves utilisation and opens up new routes to market. For customers, it means greater choice, faster access to equipment and consistent service standards, whether the job is planned months in advance or needs a rapid response. This is how other industries have scaled sustainably and construction hire is now catching up.

As businesses grow, control becomes harder, not easier. I see this time and again with contractors and facilities teams operating across multiple sites where the challenge isn't just cost, it's understanding. Do you really know what you're procuring, at what price, and how effectively it's being used?

Digital procurement gives teams that control at scale and allows site managers to act quickly. It allows procurement teams to manage spend intelligently, and leadership teams to make decisions based on facts rather than assumptions. Moreover, it reduces waste in a very practical sense. Off-hiring equipment on time, avoiding unnecessary re-orders and spotting inefficiencies early all have a direct impact on the bottom line. In an industry where margins are tight, those gains really do matter.

Looking ahead 12 to 24 months, data and AI will start to play a much more visible role in day-to-day construction operations. This doesn't mean replacing people or overcomplicating procurement but instead, using data to anticipate demand, flag anomalies and support better decision-making. AI will help platforms recommend alternatives when availability is tight and it will highlight patterns of overuse and streamline how information flows between contractors and suppliers.

My concern is not that this change will happen too fast, but that it won't happen fast enough. There is still a lot of talk about innovation in construction, but not always enough action. To move forward, the industry needs to be open to new skills and new ways of thinking, alongside the deep operational knowledge that already exists.

Digital marketplaces are no longer an experiment; they are becoming a core part of how construction hire works.

As platforms mature and integrate with nationwide operational networks, they are proving they can deliver reliability at scale, not just convenience. Over the next couple of years, I expect digital procurement to become the default expectation, particularly for larger contractors and facilities managers who need consistency across sites.

Those still relying entirely on manual processes will find themselves under increasing pressure, not because technology is fashionable, but because it delivers tangible advantages.

Change in construction doesn't come easily, and I understand why. When deadlines are tight, it's tempting to stick with what you know.

Digital marketplaces don't require a leap of faith or a major upfront commitment, they are tools designed to give people time back, reduce friction and make work much simpler.