



Monmouthshire Schools Programme

When Monmouthshire County Council needed to roll through its schools upgrade programme it quickly realised that the key to gaining real financial and delivery benefits would be to establish a framework agreement with the supply chain. This would help the council stretch its budget by being able to guarantee its main contractor and the rest of its supply chain continuity of work over a number of years. It also needed the school projects funded by £200 million earmarked for new build and refurbishment schemes to deliver against another key driver, that of sustainability.

Initially the £200 million cash fund seems generous, but it is due to cover projects stretching back as far as 2003 and will continue to pay for education projects in Monmouthshire until 2015 and the fully signed up main partner Willmott Dixon will need to continue to build upon the good work it has delivered already.

"We have been partnering with Willmott Dixon for the past 10 years or so," says Monmouthshire County Council's head of property services, Derek Downer, *"it started with them working with us on one major project and moved on from there. But the*

Welsh Assembly Government's education review in 2003 has targeted bringing all school buildings up to standard. That meant we had the continuity of work to be able to really push the partnering approach."

There were concerns that the resources available to the council at the time would not enable it to deliver the sort of improvements that the WAG review specified. But by following the single partner route with Willmott Dixon, who won the contract through the open OJEU process, the council has been able to bring in expertise as and when it is required through its supply chain, helping to relieve some of the pressure on the authority's resources.

"It means we can use our supply partners to help deliver in areas where we might be stretched. In many ways we are fortunate to have a relatively small yearly budget, it means that one main contractor is enough and we can nurture an extremely close working relationship," says Mr Downer.

By bringing in this continuous, non-adversarial approach across a succession of projects the team has been able to deliver those schemes to a high standard, on time and on budget thanks to the policy of bringing all project team members together during the earliest stages of a scheme.



The three major partners in that team framework – Willmott Dixon, Monmouthshire Property Services and Monmouthshire County Council's Lifelong Learning and Leisure Directorate – work closely together to make sure the projects do not depart from delivering their key requirements which have included energy efficiency and a BREEAM rating of 'Excellent' as well as delivering against cost, time, health and safety and client satisfaction requirements.

Working this closely is not easy though and needs constant attention and input from all parties to help smooth the process along and although it does not necessarily mean that site teams will not change the management process and management team have stayed stable over the years. That continuity means that although individuals throughout the team can change there is a core of staff members running through which means new projects can be developed with an up to speed team even before a scheme is properly bought into a programme. Every member of the team knows what to expect and can help smooth the preparation process.

Generally the team is alternating between delivering a new build school and then an extension or alteration to an existing facility, it is a system that so far has delivered well designed, well built schemes and is constantly being measured to ensure it continues to deliver not only against the systems own guidelines but also end user requirements. Performance indicators have been established which will enable

the education authority to judge the effects the projects have on educational performance. These will help ensure that the final building that is delivered is one which performs exactly how the end user requires it to rather than against design ideals which can lose sight of the actual requirements. By being wrapped up in a long term relationship the contractor is in a better position to help deliver and develop those indicators and Willmott Dixon has been key in producing those performance indicators.

But in the end it is the close collaboration, communication and teamwork that is really fundamental to the programme's success and that is deliverable only because time is available to develop those close relationships thanks to the long term nature of the Monmouthshire Education Strategic Review.

"It is very easy to make everything sound wonderful, but the truth is that it is very difficult to get people to work closely together for a long time. We work in this way and it suits us. It is extremely hard work but the end justifies the means," says Mr Downer.