

INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW

Swansea University faces an issue familiar to many in property management – how best to maintain tired estate infrastructure at a time of rising end user expectations and tightening cost constraints. Four years ago the university set up a contractor and consultant framework on its Singleton campus to tackle the key challenges of clearing a large maintenance backlog and making sustainability improvements through a combination of careful refurbishment, environmental upgrades, strategic relocation of space and targeted construction.

More challenging still, was to implement on a live campus environment where disruption to studies could not be tolerated, and where a culture of mistrust existed between end users and the estates department. With student satisfaction a primary focus, the framework team set out to build strong relationships between all parties through the development of intelligent and non-confrontational approaches to the complexities of campus refurbishment.

PROCESS

The framework was set up as part of a clear strategy to enable long-term planning and relationship-building. Projects are planned within a five-year capital programme that links to the university's estates and corporate strategies. Project delivery starts with a quickly assembled project management team followed by the introduction of a single framework contractor on the campus. Flexibility is built into the process; for example, the framework can call on three architect teams, ensuring variety in design.

Communication and collaboration are central to the process. When a project is initiated, a communication strategy is developed along with a plan to involve stakeholders and everyone involved. Projects are overseen by a project board with sponsors, executives and suppliers all represented. Students are kept informed and given the chance to participate where this could benefit their studies. Exam officers advise on exam timetables to ensure minimal interruption. Disability officers are consulted to ensure that accessibility issues are addressed. On one recladding programme, the project team engaged with 26 separate end user groups to promote the benefits of the works and minimise disruption.

Post-project evaluations are collected from end users and lessons learnt sessions are held with principal stakeholders. The introduction of the framework structure exposed a number of underlying

problems and flaws that had gone unaddressed. For example, early projects suffered from poor coordination of survey information, particularly relating to services infrastructure. This was flagged up and a gateway protocol has been developed that tests the robustness of as-built information before projects begin. Framework core groups have been set up to deal with the clusters of issues captured in lessons learnt.

The framework has also enabled a more coherent and committed approach to community engagement. The main contractor, has a dedicated community liaison manager who has coordinated an extensive programme of local activities. One initiative gave 12 homeless local people six weeks of structured work experience, for instance, while another helped to refurbish a charity shop in Swansea.

RESULTS

The framework has already delivered a dozen projects on the campus, from a £500k refurbishment to a £20 million new build. It has succeeded in establishing a culture of continuous learning, as lessons learnt continue to translate into innovation and better practice. For example, stakeholders are now involved at the prestart phase of a programme to ensure the project is aligned with user requirements. This has already led to the reconfiguration of a recladding project following early consultation with the end users.

The procurement process has been streamlined and shortened, positive practices such as open book tendering have been embedded, and standardisation of project management information is well under way. Bespoke KPIs have shown continuous improvement. For example, health and safety compliance now exceeds the standard required by professional and best practice guidance.

Perhaps most importantly, given the stated focus on student satisfaction, the framework has transformed the way maintenance and construction projects are viewed by university end users. The existing culture of mistrust has been turned around by early engagement, continuity of key staff, intensive communication strategies and structured feedback and consistent delivery. More than 20 department heads have confirmed that the new processes are a marked improvement on the past.

At the end of one project, Professor John Spurr of the College of Music & Humanities told the team: 'I would like to thank you for your cooperation in terms of managing disruption, changes to the sequence, observing quiet times etc. It has helped considerably in ensuring that we minimise the inconvenience to all staff concerned. The end results speak for themselves.'