

Social conscience

— how construction can be a force for social well-being

▶ The 21st-century property sector might well be becoming increasingly used to tackling its responsibilities towards the Sustainability agenda, but – as the report detailed in the previous article suggests – it is often only seen to be addressing them in respect of environmental concerns: primarily, adopting resource-efficient policies on such as land-use, water, waste and energy. 'What about the social sustainability issues?' asks **DR PAUL TOYNE** – Head of Sustainability, Bovis Lend Lease UK. Have these been forgotten or simply hidden due to the greater visibility of environmental issues?

The social components to sustainable development for a company are as least as broad as their environmental counterparts. They include how it looks after its employees – health, wellbeing and safety – how it manages its relationships with external groups, and how it maintains and develops social capital by investments and services. These latter actions create the framework for society, including relationships and organisations, shared values, shared knowledge and can include volunteering, mentoring and charitable giving.

Given the breadth of the topic and restriction on space, I have chosen to focus this article on the specific areas of employment, training and skills and show how actions in these areas relate to the social components of sustainable development.

THE KEY DRIVERS

The drivers for employment, training and skills are varied. At a company level, it is essential that it attracts and retains talent, and invests in that talent through training to help fulfil its potential. From a public-policy and national economic perspective, it is expensive to support the unemployed, so low unemployment is desirable as is social inclusion – by which I am describing the ability of a company to recognise that there are parts of society who for various reasons are marginalised (the long-term unemployed, the homeless, economic migrants, ex-offenders and

the disabled) and include them in their business.

Building on from this is diversity – people diversity and supplier diversity. Again, these are key drivers. How do these drivers manifest themselves in construction? Both public-sector and private-procurement criteria typically include questions that ask for evidence on how a company engages with the local community and provides employment opportunities. Planning permission within Section 106 requires that contractors use 'best endeavours' to employ local people. This can be strengthened by making practical suggestions, for instance all vacancies with a public-sector local-jobs broker such as 'Workplace' in Stratford. Developers win contracts, in part, based on their ability to deliver into a local or regional plan, for example the London Plan which is the special development plan for London. This Plan has policies and objectives to promote social inclusions and tackle discrimination. So it is beneficial if the major contractor and its supply chain deliver outcomes to these policies, thus assisting the developer in fulfilling its obligations.

Construction can support inclusion by considering what employment opportunities it can provide for the local community. This can be by direct employment or through the use of local supply chains. An example is Bovis Lend Lease's not-for-profit company BeOnsite which provides employer-led training to address skills shortages in the construction industry. BeOnsite identifies industry-training needs, develops bespoke training for all those involved before then employing the trainees as they make their transition back into the workplace. This allows them to

IMAGE: Burnley Campus – 18 school leavers from the Burnley area are starting new careers with seven contractors working on the £250M Burnley schools project



gain the qualifications and the confidence needed to work in the modern construction industry and to develop the necessary skills for a sustainable career in areas such as drylining, prefabricated building techniques, smart buildings, sustainable development and environmental technologies.

BeOnsite is the culmination of 11 years of linking local people to construction training and jobs, resulting in over 10,000 people finding construction employment, and a further 11,000 people going into retail jobs, for example at Lend Lease's Bluewater retail centre. It has been formed in partnership with Jobcentre Plus, Construction Skills, the London Development Agency and the Learning Skills Council and again demonstrates an investment in social capital.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

BeOnsite meets the 'inclusion' requirement as the training scheme targets all of the socially disadvantaged groups, including prisoners and ex-offenders, as well as the long-term unemployed. It provides some very touching stories of how it can help people. One real-life example is Meurika Stewart. She is serving a prison sentence for drug offences, and said that before the governors put her in touch with the BeOnsite scheme: "Life wasn't great, I was doing a lot of drugs and got into trouble. But about a year ago I decided to turn my life around – I had had enough." Now training as a dry-liner with a Bovis Lend Lease subcontractor, Stewart leaves the prison for



A bright future – ex-offender Meurika Stewart is taught how to dryline



practical training and attends West Hertfordshire College. She began earning money in January, half of which will be saved after her release from HMP East Sutton Park in a year's time. She said: "Not a lot of people want to give you a chance, but it's not looking at the past, it's looking at what, given the support, you can give in the future."

UPSKILLING THE WORKFORCE

BeOnsite works directly with specialist contractors to identify training gaps within the industry and will then source both the funding and training provider to deliver bespoke training. Candidates can then be recruited through Job Centre Plus and, following their training, will be employed by BeOnsite to begin working on site for the specialist contractor on a 'try-before-you-buy' basis.

According to Val Lowman, Managing Director of BeOnsite, "The aim is for BeOnsite to eventually grow so that it can offer trainees to the construction industry across the country, not just London. This is a long-term solution to the issues of skills shortages and inner-city unemployment".

Elsewhere, the Government's programme of school rebuilding, Building Schools for the Future (BSF) is also enabling Lend Lease to demonstrate its approach to social sustainability. Specific outcomes include 18 school leavers from the Burnley area starting new careers with seven contractors working on the £250M Burnley schools project. Catalyst

Lend Lease, Lancashire County Council's private-sector partner in the development of the new schools, has found them jobs through its contacts with the project supply chain. This local employment scheme is a key part of a long-term community plan being implemented by Catalyst Lend Lease, as part of the 25-year BSF contract.

Ten of the jobs are with Bovis Lend Lease, the contractor heading construction of the nine schools that form the first wave of the county's BSF building programme. Six of the other jobs are with local contractors and suppliers working on the first three schools now under construction. All 18 are signed up for training courses or further education that will provide the qualifications needed to successfully progress their careers in their chosen sectors. Most of them left school this summer, so it's their first taste of full-time employment – the skills they will learn range from construction management to plumbing and electrical installation.

"Job creation is one of the top priorities of our community-engagement plan," explains David Snowden, Lend Lease's General Manager in the Local Education Partnership with the county council. "Wherever possible, we use local contractors and suppliers on the new schools and we want to encourage them to take on more local trainees. That way, we begin to develop a skills legacy in the community, passing on the knowledge, experience and learning to future generations and helping their

employers to maintain full order books as they expand and upskill their workforce."

BUILDING SOCIAL FABRIC

Part of the BSF's programme remit is to act as a lever for a better educated and more prosperous community – upskilling and providing employment opportunities.

Delivering real outcomes in employment and skills training strengthens Lend Lease's case on future bids for future BSF projects, particularly in the Lancashire area where it has built up a strong local supply chain and has excellent links into schools and colleges. So there is a compelling business case for this.

These examples demonstrate that social sustainability can have very measurable outcomes and provide enormous benefit to a wide range of people. Lend Lease has the long-term aspiration of providing sustainable social outcomes at all its developments – leaving a legacy of local employment, training and upskilling is not a bad starting point from which to deliver that aspiration. Others within the construction sector are also addressing social sustainability issues, for example Balfour Beatty is helping schools to find funding as well as offering pre-apprenticeship training. Similarly, Carillion has a number of schemes across the UK to encourage interaction with local schools.

There is the opportunity for construction to help build not just the infrastructure to enable society to function, but build its social fabric – its social capital. An opportunity that it can't afford not to take **Q**

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