

Case Study – Raising Construction Skills in Ashford Borough

This case study demonstrates how Ashford and its main construction partners leading on the regeneration project, Denne Construction and the Leadbitter Group, invested in skills and apprenticeship using a voluntary approach on a contract that was already let.

Background

The Stanhope Development Project to deliver 450 new and 332 refurbished dwellings is a £65m PFI housing regeneration project managed delivered by Denne Construction on behalf of Ashford Borough Council and the Chrysalis Consortium (created by PFI-focused Gleeson Capital Solutions to bid for the Housing Revenue Account PFI-funded scheme).

The approach

The challenge was to secure maximum value for money from the project by improving the skills base of the construction industry and reducing unemployment. Contractors and Ashford Council have worked in a collaborative, voluntary way, post contract award to establish skills and training opportunities for young people.

Working with Ashford Council, Denne developed an employment and skills plan for the Stanhope project to support local training and employment. This is included as a requirement in all its orders with its trade sub-contractors (ie construction specialists – including electrical installers and plumbers). Key components of the employment & skills plan are:

- a dedicated project training coordinator; and
- a site-based Skills Centre to facilitate its delivery.

The Employment & Skills Plan

The Employment & Skills Plan provides a schedule of anticipated training activities arranged on a monthly basis. It covers Work Experience, Apprenticeships, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS). It also covers other activities including school visits and workshops, CPD events, health & safety testing etc.

Subject to performance, trainees on work experience are taken on as apprentices which enables them to complete their NVQ and gain key literacy and numeracy skills. The apprentice will either be employed directly with the trade contractor or by Denne Construction acting as a “Host” Employer. Under this “Host” employer arrangement the apprentice is employed by the

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main contractor and is supervised by a trade contractor. In addition to the main contractor's apprentice, some trade contractors will have their own apprentices.

The other training arrangements include NVQs for the existing workforce and applications for CSCS Skills cards. Assessments for the NVQs are arranged through an approved NVQ Assessor and are undertaken on site. Health & Safety testing is carried out at the Denne Skills Centre, and the Centre also arranges for applications for CSCS Skills cards.

The skills centre

A site-based skills centre has been established to manage the delivery of the Employment & Skills Plan. This is the first National Skills Academy for Construction in the South East and the first for a housing project in the UK. The programme of training and assessment is managed by a dedicated training coordinator.

The Stanhope project is accredited by the National Skills Academy for Construction and receives a £40k grant from ConstructionSkills for training. This helps cover some of the £80k costs towards the facilities, the coordinator, and equipment including IT and tools.

Other training costs include apprenticeship wages, on-site assessment and CSCS card applications. Apprenticeship costs are generally covered by grants and the value contributed by the apprentices. Funding and grants also cover some areas of on-site assessment which means that generally these cost elements do not impact on the cost of the delivery of the project.

The response

Between October 2007 and April 2009 the housing project has delivered work experience for fifteen 14-16 year olds and twenty one 16+ year olds. It has also delivered 18 apprentices, 7 of whom were trained in the Skills Centre. In addition there have been 4 other trainees and 137 CSCS H&S accreditations and 155 on-site assessed NVQs.

The apprenticeships in the first year covered bricklaying, carpentry, electrical, plumbing and plastering. All 7 Skills Centre-trained apprentices come from within 2 miles of the site, with two of the apprentices living within the regeneration area.

The majority of these apprentices had already completed a year of training at college and worked with the trade contractors on work experience before being signed up as apprentices. They were able to provide value to their

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employers immediately. The apprenticeships also provide a framework for supporting young local people into skilled employment, so supporting the housing project's regeneration objectives.

Benefits

The voluntary approach adopted to meet the skills and employment aspirations of Ashford Borough Council are yielding a wide range of on-site training for young local people, helping them to gain qualifications and experience in construction skills. It is also supporting the trade contractors who are delivering this challenging regeneration project.

Next Steps

In addition to NVQ, Apprenticeship and Work Experience training, Denne intend to support the development of the Basic Skills (Literacy and Numeracy) of the construction workforce including the delivery of a course for supervisors. Also they will be helping to tackle local long-term unemployment and NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) issues by working with training providers and trade contractors to train and recruit individuals affected.

For more information, contact:

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