

## CASE STUDY

# Managing a local authority multi-project programme

Hertfordshire County Council appointed Mace to manage an annual capital works budget of approximately £20m split between five key areas of responsibility, for a five-year period. It also funded the implementation and continued use of a web-based communication platform to manage project-related information. Framework contractors managed by Mace now deliver projects using more consistent working practices; paper-based processes are being replaced by more transparent and auditable electronic communications; and project and programme information is more accessible to all stakeholders.

### Key benefits

- Reduced paper (previous courier service between client offices and Mace was scrapped in favour of electronic transfer of information)
- Greater accessibility (online information is instantly accessible from anywhere by the whole project team)
- Faster design access (framework contractors have direct access to project information)
- Greater management transparency (key project approvals are made online by project sponsors)
- Greater standardisation on design approaches, methodologies, documentation, etc
- More efficient storage (traditional boxes of filed archive material now replaced by electronic system, which also functions as archive facility)

### Background

In September 2002, Hertfordshire County Council announced that construction and project management consultancy Mace was its preferred bidder to manage a capital works programme lasting an initial five years (extendible to ten years) from March 2003. The council's programme covers five main areas of responsibility:

- Children, schools and family services (eg: schools, children's homes, etc)
- Adult care services (eg: day centres, etc)
- Fire and rescue
- Corporate and property
- Community information (eg: libraries)

As part of Mace's initial brief, six strategic framework agreements were drawn up to cover the full programme, and six experienced contractors were appointed to partner with Mace and be responsible for undertaking the construction work. Three regional contractors (Elliott, Mansell and Dean & Dyball) and three local firms (Ashe Construction, T&B and J Grehan) were appointed, alongside several design consultants (including Faber Maunsell, Hawkins Brown, Ruddle Wilkinson, Cundall Johnson and Fulcrum).

In March 2003, Mace took over responsibility for some 60 ongoing projects, some of which were already on-site, while others were still at various stages of planning and design. Individual projects ranged from new-build schemes to extensions and building refurbishments, and ranged in value from £100,000 upwards. During the first 12 months, a further 60 projects would be added to the portfolio.

### Key challenges included:

- Project team management: Mace needed to manage dozens of fragmented, multi-disciplinary teams working in multiple locations
- Information processes: Existing methods tended to be paper-based - slow, inefficient, expensive, and difficult to track and/or audit
- Information quality: complex, often late, inaccurate, and incomplete and/or inconsistent

Clearly, successful delivery of the capital works programme posed a considerable information challenge. Drawing on its experience elsewhere of using web-based collaboration software, Mace proposed that the roll-out of the council's projects should be managed using an electronic communication platform: BIW Information Channel, from BIW Technologies.

## The approach

BIW Information Channel is a sophisticated web-based collaboration platform, capable of managing individual projects or major multi-project programmes of work. Information is made available (from a single, shared central repository, hosted in a secure environment) to authorised council staff and project team members, with the amount and type of information tailored exactly to fit each user's security profile, role and responsibilities.

Mace appointed an experienced user to act as 'Project Information Coordinator' (PIC) - the focal point for training and local support across the council's framework structure. The PIC provided initial training for key staff in each of the partnering organisations. 'Company Administrators' were nominated within each business (able to respond to simple queries such as lost passwords). The PIC (and, if necessary, BIW Technologies' help-desk) was available for additional strategic support and advice.

Simultaneously, Mace began to populate the BIW system with all the drawings and other documents associated with projects yet to start on site. Protocols were devised so that project naming conventions, and drawing and document naming and numbering, were consistent across all council projects.

By April 2005, after some 25 months in operation, the system was employed on 147 live projects, by 328 users from 30 different organisations, who, between them, had accessed the system over 58,000 times, publishing around 7,700 documents and 3,000 drawings. The BIW standards section (an area of the site available to all and used to house standard documents such as guidance notes, procedure handbooks and best practice information) was also incorporated within the first 12 months

The availability of a single, accurate, up-to-date repository of all project information led to demands for access from other council staff and from other project stake-holders. The council's planning and building control departments were granted access to relevant projects, as were lawyers involved with a forthcoming Private Finance Initiative (PFI) project within the county.

## Management issues

Mace tried to be realistic about the introduction of collaboration technology to the Council's capital works programme. Instead of a 'big bang' roll-out to every scheme, it focused on projects which had yet to start on site (schemes already on site were felt to be too far forward to justify additional costs of set-up and training). However, in some instances, this still involved a considerable effort to a) populate the system with pre-existing data, and b) to train team members who had already started

working with more traditional communication processes. Roll-out was more effective when projects were only just starting on the planning or design phases. Other issues that the roll-out successfully overcame included:

- Accommodating differing attitudes to the use of the technology. For example: in-house teams needed to be persuaded of the benefits in using this system as opposed to more traditional methods used in previous roll-out projects; and on smaller projects in particular, where there was little or no on-site access to the internet, team members were reluctant to adapt their working practices to suit the more innovative techniques.
- Connectivity. For example, within the council, firewall settings placed considerable constraints on bandwidth making the system seem slow (some affected users overcame this by working from home where domestic ADSL broadband gave much faster access).
- Managing multi-project, multi-stakeholder programmes. While Mace staff had considerable experience of using the BIW technology on large, single projects, a multi-project programme imposed different pressures. Accordingly, it requested that BIW provide new areas of functionality. For example, Mace wanted individual users to be able to see a single overview of all the projects with which they were involved. And it felt occasional or infrequent users (eg: school head-teachers or governors) would appreciate a simpler, more intuitive user interface than the one routinely used by regular professional users.

## Key lessons

- People collaborate, not systems: it is more about people and processes - effective implementation and training are vital
- Start early: the earlier a project team starts to use the technology the better.
- Client leadership is key. By paying for the system, the Council was demonstrably committed to more efficient sharing of its project information.
- Avoid major changes. Start simply and let teams adapt to the technology before introducing new functionality.
- Share best practice and agree common standards (training, naming/numbering conventions, etc) across all projects.
- Internet connectivity and IT availability can be an issue. In large organisations, poor network performance can hamper access; smaller businesses and/or projects may not even have internet access.
- Keep the technology provider abreast of end-user needs. Web-based systems are easier to upgrade than traditional software solutions and newly-identified requirements can be quickly developed and rolled-out to ensure continued buy-in.

## BIW Technologies Limited

21-25 Church Street West, Woking, Surrey GU21 6DJ

T 0845 1300 800 Int +44 (0)1483 712620

F 0845 1300 900 Int +44 (0)1483 756325

E [info@biwtech.com](mailto:info@biwtech.com)

[www.biwtech.com](http://www.biwtech.com)