

Case study: Willmott Dixon

Willmott Dixon Site Managers Empowered to React Faster



WILLMOTT DIXON

SINCE 1852

Summary

Willmott Dixon is a specialist residential builder, operating since 1974. It creates nearly 2,000 homes each year for all types of tenure: affordable, care residential, retirement villages, housing for sale and private rent, plus student accommodation. The homes it creates come in all shapes, sizes and scales, ranging from stand-alone care homes to multi-phase estate regeneration projects, to create a new 'destination' for communities.

Willmott Dixon has recently standardised on Powerproject for its planning platform. It is utilising Powerproject to bring site managers closer to the planning process. They can be more directly involved in programme planning, and react and respond to rapidly changing demands from clients and home-buyers.

Planning excellence is very important to Willmott Dixon, which is driving a programme of culture change which aims to connect every employee with planning and the effective use of time. The leader of the Fiit Time (Focused Innovation and Improvement) team for



time, see case study: elecosoft.com/willmott-dixon/fiit-time) is National Planning Manager Paul Hoskins. He spoke to us about how this increased accountability for time and involvement in planning is working in the residential construction sector, which has some specific challenges. These include the highly repetitive nature of planning and progress management within any development, and the real-time changing of completion deadlines that comes with sales to home-buyers throughout developments.

Willmott Dixon's residential teams work across the country from local

construction offices in a 'one company' approach. Its customers benefit from a consistent team, with full access to their range of skills, expertise and know-how for delivering housing projects.

At the time of writing Willmott Dixon is managing 27 simultaneous live projects spread all around the UK. Its projects vary in scale and scope from large apartment blocks to traditional housing developments and estates, as well as care homes.

Changing pressures

Every construction site and project manager is under pressure, because there is always a customer in the picture. Managing changing needs is a normal part of construction project and progress management. However, in home-building additional stakeholders come into play, as Paul outlined. "What makes residential construction different is that there are numerous homeowners involved, as well as the development customer. This creates lots of competing influences,

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so commitments and demands can change very quickly. Project leaders will be asked to focus on one part of a development, then a new need will arise from the developer's assessment of the marketplace – perhaps being asked to accelerate completion of one part of the scheme over another, or bring forward completion of a show home. Or, change can come from new homeowners themselves, who have requested something specific, or a little different, on a sale that has just been made.”

Demand from different stakeholders creates a site environment of rapidly-shifting priorities. As well as creating a need to quickly re-plan resources and reschedule work, it also has a direct business impact because the house sales are intimately tied to cashflow. Therefore, Site Managers at Willmott Dixon have been empowered to take more control of planning, to enable them to react faster to change. Paul explained: “We ask our people on projects to be accountable and responsible for their time on their projects. A lot of them will do the planning, the thinking and the scheduling that goes with it. We have equipped them with Powerproject so they have the ability to do the things they need to do, without waiting for a planner to come along and update the programme. We used to use MS Project before moving over to Powerproject a couple of years ago. Site managers could use it but it was a lot less accessible and it was more clunky – now it is much more intuitive.”

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Fit for the job

Powerproject has a number of features that are designed to support house-builders with the high degree of repetitive work they face, including templates and the ability to view multiple house-builds on a single screen. Paul said that “because of the repetitive work elements, what is particularly useful is the way you can put multiple tasks per line then repeat them in Powerproject. It makes it very simple for the team.”

After moving over to the software, Willmott Dixon has worked with Elecosoft to ensure that it is perfectly tuned to their needs, including creating a custom template. Paul said: “The time we spent on the consultancy element with Elecosoft to develop the template was worth it as it's now very tailored to the needs of our internal customers and our project leads. It means they can just use the tool, instead of having to know everything that goes on behind the scenes.”

Although the software has a Line of Balance feature which helps house-builders to optimise the flow of resources, Willmott Dixon has also worked with Elecosoft to develop an interface that enables information to be extracted easily from Powerproject into its internal LOB tool. Paul believes that it works well as a system: “It allows us to take repetitive works, where we might have hundreds of homes, and easily repeat the trades and optimise their

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resource efficiency. We do it natively in Powerproject first, then take it into our tool to add different dimensions, then we can extract the information back into Powerproject where it joins up with the rest of the development.”

Grassroots acceptance

Providing a tool is only useful if the people who need to use it find it easy and helpful. On a house-build, the only people who can react fast on the ground are the site managers, who can't always wait for a planner to come along to update a programme.

Powerproject has been in recent use by Aaron Pearson, Operations Manager at the Aberfeldy Village multiphase regeneration development at Tower Hamlets in East London. Aberfeldy Village will create more than 1100 new homes as well as shops, healthcare and community facilities over its 12-year development

Aaron says: “The presentation of Powerproject is much better than our previous software. This really helps us when talking with our supply chain, customers, and team. It feels like Powerproject has been built for the job in hand, and works with me rather than me having to struggle to get what I want from the software. I found I could control the re-scheduling more easily, and it was great to be able to quickly filter the programme by a particular trade, or a specific home, instead of having to flip back and forth. The information I want is easy to get to, and it's simple to use. I could not only run ‘what if’ scenarios easily, but trusted what it told me. I've now got all my site managers on board too, and they are using it for the short-term programmes.”