

PROCUREMENT

developing an accord

Exeter City Council has helped its suppliers address sustainability issues by establishing a carrot and stick certification system that ties eligibility for contracts to green credentials

In the autumn of 2007, suppliers of Exeter City Council in the west of England were pleased to find themselves invited to a hearty breakfast at the council's expense. But while the bacon butties and tea went down exceedingly well, the message the council delivered at the breakfast table proved rather less palatable.

'We told them we were introducing an accreditation system that would measure their green credentials, and that if they didn't achieve accreditation then they wouldn't be working for us,' says Mel Jones, the council's contract development manager. 'You could feel the shock go through the room.'

The frisson didn't last long, however. Once the invitees has digested the news, enthusiasm bubbled to the surface. Exeter told its suppliers that the new system – called the Green Accord – would not only help the council achieve its sustainability goals but could improve the participants' efficiency and cut costs. The council would also provide lots of help. Since then, says Jones, the response has been heartening.

Under the Accord, suppliers are required to fill out an online self-assessment form that asks them questions about areas such as energy reduction, waste management and recycling. Once they've completed the form they send in evidence to back up their assertions. The council then audits the self-assessment and, if it feels the company is making sufficient efforts to improve its environmental impacts, issues a certificate and enters the firm onto an approved suppliers database.

Certified suppliers are rated at three levels, from the lowest red ('select' status) to yellow ('superior') and green ('premier'). They are then encouraged to move through the traffic lights by making continual

improvements, using advice and training provided by the council.

Jones says a hallmark of the system is its 'inclusivity', with the labelling of the tiers deliberately positive even at the lowest level – and goals set so that the smallest of companies can become involved. 'It's about doing things, not talking about them,' he says. 'Suppliers are really interested in going from red to green, especially if their competitors are higher than them. And once they get to red that doesn't mean they stop. We give them extra training and support, and a few have even embarked on trying to get other social responsibility accreditations, such as SA8000.'

Companies that are certified to the Accord, which the council developed with the government-backed environmental consultancy Envirowise, are allowed to use publicity material to display their compliance. Some suppliers have begun to use the accreditation to demonstrate their credentials to other customers.

Bernard Keogh, managing director of construction company Arque, one of the first contractors to be accredited with the Green Accord, says the scheme has helped him, and many others, change attitudes to the environment. 'Most of us suppliers are interested now in being a bit greener, and the Green Accord was the kick up the backside that we needed,' he admits.

Further information: www.exeter.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=7533

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comment
EXETER CITY COUNCIL

The saying has it that there's no such thing as a free lunch – or in this case, breakfast. But everyone here appears to be a winner – suppliers, ratepayers, the council and the environment. And what's more, the scheme looks replicable in both the public and private sectors.

Points to note:

- The scheme includes a progressive element to enable contractors to reach higher standards
- It is self-assessing and seems straightforward to operate

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