

The Joined-Up Approach

Northern Ireland's Programme Delivery Support Unit is providing a joined-up approach to infrastructure delivery, as **Ciaran Cunningham** explains

It's been a year in which UK plc has had to deal with more than its fair share of economic ups and downs. Add in the political upheaval and uncertainty on a scale not seen for at least a generation and one could be forgiven for thinking that the ships of government, industry and the economy are all in the sort of doldrums where nary a trade wind is likely to bother them again.

Northern Ireland has not been unscathed either. It's been a very lively few months here with developments and scandals on the political scene to rival those of Westminster. Given all of this, it's rather a feat that the Northern Ireland Waste Infrastructure Programme continues to steer a steady course.

The last 12 months have seen the programme advance in line with an already very tight set of timescales and all three of the waste management projects that comprise the Waste Infrastructure Programme are now well advanced. But how has this happened? Surely political instability combined with the general public's (supposed) in-built aversion to all things waste-related means that such projects are doomed from the outset?

So is it just down to good luck or is

there something happening on a more fundamental level that's driving the projects on? Alan McVicker, director of the Waste Programme Delivery Support Unit (PDSU) explained: "Certainly, we've been fortunate in the quality of people that we've attracted to work on the projects, but this current situation hasn't happened by accident. The point we've arrived at is the result of a lot of hard work and careful planning. When you consider the hectic pace at which we've been working, it's no surprise that much progress has been made over the past two years, since the first of the three procurements went live."

With all three of Northern Ireland's waste management groups now at the Invitation to Submit Detailed Solutions (ISDS) stage of competitive dialogue, it's easy to see the reasons for his optimism.

A Supporting Role

IN HIS role as director of PDSU, Alan is responsible for ensuring that Northern Ireland's three waste management groups have access to all the specialist support they need to deliver their projects... and it's clear that this approach is paying off.

The North-West Region waste management group is approaching the end of its ISDS phase with three bidders. Formal ISDS submissions were received by the North-West Group at the end of June and will be evaluated over the summer period.

Arc21 (which covers the Eastern region) looks well placed to enter ISFT in early 2011 while SWaMP2008 (covering the southern swathe of Northern Ireland) kicked off its ISDS process in April. All three groups are expected to reach contract award in 2011.

Alan explained: "The collective experience that PDSU brings to the projects is crucial. The entire infrastructure programme operates under a huge amount of pressure where even the smallest problem can result in weeks of delay. Given our target dates, and the potential for fines if we miss them, we simply cannot let that happen. Our job is to help remove or minimise all these potential barriers to delivery. We're doing that not just by providing expertise in crucial areas such as planning, communications, complex procurements and finance, but also by driving bidder confidence. These are all essential success factors and PDSU continues to deliver on them. However,





A recycling centre inside (above) and out (below left): just one result of the joined-up approach in Northern Ireland

our remit also calls for us to share best practice and learning. This is another way in which we're helping to drive the Programme."

He cites the Programme's governance arrangements as a major factor in its progress to date: "No-one should underestimate the significance of the three waste management groups," he added. "That local councils, with competing needs and political differences, were able to put aside these issues to form the groups speaks volumes of their commitment to the projects and, in fact, created the template for the collaborative approach that underpins everything we do."

"There is no doubt that the overall Programme board structure is key to our success", he says. "The leadership provided by both the Department of the Environment and Strategic Investment Board at all levels has been instrumental in the good progress to date. We have a Minister who very quickly got hands-on with this programme and went all-out to ensure that momentum was maintained."

But there is another factor that is often overlooked that has nonetheless been integral to the project. "We benefit from a very flat, and therefore accessible, government structure here," said Alan, "which makes it much easier to reach key contacts right across central and local government. One can see how valuable this is when time pressure

is mounting and a fast turnaround or decision is needed."

Share And Share Alike

GIVEN THE dynamic nature of the Programme and its key stakeholders, it's no surprise that Alan is keen to share the Unit's experience. The Northern Ireland procurements are using the competitive dialogue route and he is keen to share the learning that has resulted from the dialogue meetings.

For those unfamiliar with the term, competitive dialogue is "a procedure in which any economic operator may request to participate and whereby the contracting authority conducts a dialogue with the candidates admitted to that procedure, with the aim of developing one or more suitable alternatives capable of meeting its requirements and on the basis of which the candidates chosen are invited to tender" [Article 1(11) of Directive 2004/18/EC].

"The competitive dialogue process is there to work for both client and bidder. Clearly then, credibility is central to a successful procurement using this method," Alan explained.

"From that point of view, getting the composition of the client team right is essential. More important than the size of the team is getting the right blend of

skills. A strong client team with advisors skilled in the financial, legal and technical worlds will benefit the entire process. Just as important is maintaining the cohesiveness of the team and, of course, keeping the relevant joint committees very involved along the way, so that they can provide approvals on key issues from an informed perspective. That's where appropriate and timely communications will help the process along," he added.

As Alan sees it: "We've got to keep in mind that, in this type of project, uncertainty equals risk and risk equals cost. So it's vital that, right from the outset, we understand the linkages between these factors. From a bidder perspective, they will want to see good, clear decision-making on key issues by the authority and adherence to a project timetable. The competitive dialogue process is there to work for all participants so, by all means, don't shy away from dealing with the big issues up front and articulate enough in principle to allow risk positions to be considered".

And it's on this last point that Alan waxes most eloquently: "There's no such thing as a risk-free procurement but, with careful planning, the right people and a commitment to working together, that risk can be greatly reduced. That's how we've driven this programme to date and I'm confident that we'll succeed". **CIWM**