

The **Learning and Skills Council** (LSC) has nine Regional Property Advisers throughout England. The Property Advisers all have surveying backgrounds and their role is to “facilitate colleges to refurbish, renew or rationalise their estates by a target date of 2013”. To do that the LSC has a national budget that will reach £750 million per annum in 2009/10, this is a continuation of previous budgets, and an increase of £250 million on the budget for 2006. The LSC is encouraging colleges to come forward with ambitious projects to renew their estates.

In terms of design, there is no set criteria for a ‘correct’ design as such, this is left to the individual colleges but there was a report produced in January 2006 to – *‘Review the Relationship between Building Design, Cost and Quality in the Further Education Sector’* funded by the LSC and produced by Turner and Townsend (Construction and Management Consultants), Bond Bryan (architects), ARUP (Consulting engineers, designers, planners and project managers). This report is being followed in summer 2007 by a more detailed report covering design issues and reviewing schemes that have already been completed. The LSC is currently looking at giving more ‘hands on’ guidance on issues such as spaces for particular curriculum and also the use of social spaces. According to the January 2006 report;

“Although sometimes subjective and anecdotal...” the principal benefits of undertaking learning space projects are:

- “A notable improvement in the facilities available. Whilst the base line may have been low, many students have already benefited from these improvements.
- Higher levels of recruitment, decreased vandalism and a strengthened “sense of ownership” from students.
- Levels of achievement have improved concurrently with the occupation of new facilities.”

With regard to how an individual college’s project will look the Property Advisers take a ‘loose touch’ approach. Taking into consideration any local planning constraints colleges are given a free rein but always encourage interested parties to look at good examples in the sector of other capital build projects for inspiration.

Property Advisers do get very involved in the space requirement aspects of a project, to ensure that space is tailored to particular curricula and Guided Learning Hours (GLH) analysis.

There are also specifications for buildings that the LSC requires, including minimum dimensions for corridors and quality of finishes, e.g. hardwood doors and skirting and so on. With the budget available the LSC wants to see quality schemes with better specifications and continuous improvement. The summer 2007 report will offer structured advice to the sector and cover these issues and look at projects that are completed with an emphasis on “what we did right, what we did wrong, how we can improve” aspects of experience in the sector.

For the success of any capital project there must be a sound educational case for it and the institution must be able to prove that it is viable financially and the education provision is appropriate.

The LSC Property Team takes more of a co-ordinator role in any capital project. The finance and educational teams, as appropriate, from the local and regional offices and the Property Adviser all need to be involved and to sign up to a project from the outset in order to ensure that it will be successful before it goes forward for recommendation. It is important that the Property Adviser is on board and given regular feedback on progress, this type of relationship helps to minimise any problems later. The value for money (VFM) element of any project is particularly important and the Property Adviser has to be satisfied that there is evidence to support this. Questions that may be related to this include:

- Should a college spend money on building an extension to a property or would it be more cost-effective to demolish and re-build?

- Should a college sell land to finance a project – and perhaps relocate elsewhere?

The Property Adviser can advise colleges on strategies with regard to what is the best solution for their estate. The Adviser can give advice on how to maximise funding but the priority is always based around getting the right scheme with regard to the educational element.

Colleges are expected to be in a healthy position financially as they are required to provide partial funding (borrowing 30-40% of their turnover and using up any cash reserves) for any project. The LSC asks for a minimum of three options from the college, with detailed financial strategies for each. Net present value is an important element to support the financial case and the criteria for this is currently being reviewed to take into account those colleges with less straightforward finances who may offer more intangible benefits – for example urban regeneration. Further information on capital projects and the application process can be found in the LSC Capital Handbook available at <http://propertyservices.lsc.gov.uk/CapitalHandbook/>.

The LSC liaises with other bodies involved in the developing of Learning Spaces including RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects), RICS (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors) and CIC (Construction Industry Council). In 2006 RIBA and LSC sponsored the first FE Design Awards ([http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/National/81635-LSC\\_Great\\_buildings.pdf](http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/National/81635-LSC_Great_buildings.pdf)). The LSC and RIBA also have a joint client forum, available at [http://www.architecture.com/go/Architecture/Debate/Forums\\_2048.html](http://www.architecture.com/go/Architecture/Debate/Forums_2048.html).

The LSC does not give recommendations for particular architects or other professional services but they are working on providing a framework agreement with a list of architects, consultants and contractors. There are issues in the sector with regard to capacity, given the amount of activity that is going on in the area the availability of experienced consultants and contractors able to do the job is limited.

Most colleges procure schemes via a two stage design and build process which is a big commitment of resources for the contractor, given that the second stage is entered into without any certainty that they will be selected for the work.

There are large numbers of projects being undertaken throughout England currently. The investment runs into hundreds of millions of pounds over the next few years. This investment is as a result of lack of investment previously, large parts of FE estate are made up of buildings that have fallen into disrepair over the years and are no longer fit for purpose. The return on investment for the LSC is favourable given that funding is on a shared basis with the individual colleges themselves. Education is a priority area nationally, hence the investment in the regions.

Post-project reviews take place approximately 12-18 months after completion of the project and are a requirement of the LSC for any funded project. The reviews are made available internally to the LSC. Review is ongoing and the forthcoming Design report will include a more comprehensive overview of some of the post project feedback received so far. It is not expected that any gaps should be identified in a college's post project review but if there are it would only be in exceptional circumstances that the LSC would be able to provide any additional funding – it would be on a case by case basis.

Any maintenance costs after a project is completed are expected to be met by the college's revenue budgets, no additional funds are made available for this. Maintenance costs is a particular driver for of the whole programme, a lot of estates are currently over-sized and the costs involved in maintaining them are also high, new projects involve better use of space and therefore should lower maintenance overheads. Colleges are also expected to benchmark their maintenance services. It is a condition of any LSC capital project that colleges participate in the eMandate estates project established by the LSC, the National Council for Education and Training for Wales and the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (further

information available at <http://www.emandate.co.uk/>). Estates is a particularly important issue for colleges as it is the major running cost after staffing.

The LSC is trying to get rid of any subsequent 'value engineering' of projects and introduced a new process in 2006 which involved a detailed approval element – with at least 80% tendered costs certainty, this should get over the value engineering problem. The LSC offers support to colleges for additional work resulting from meeting this requirement; further details are available in the LSC Capital Handbook. There have been instances in the past where projects have been value engineered and the result has not been what the LSC had hoped to see.

Sustainability plays a major part and the LSC are looking for over and above Building Regulation Part L compliance from college projects to qualify for an extra 10% on Value for Money criteria. A more detailed report on sustainability is currently being produced by the LSC.

#### David's Top tips!

- Keep the LSC fully informed and make sure everyone's on board throughout the project – you don't want any surprises!
- Think ambitiously – this is very important!
- Steer away from tailoring a project to a specific budget – it can be a recipe for disaster!

Further details on FE Capital projects and the LSC can be found at <http://propertyservices.lsc.gov.uk/FECapital/>.

JISC infoNet will highlight the new Design report as a link to the Planning and Designing Technology-Rich Learning Spaces infoKit.