

Top of the class

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continued from page vi

panies and LAs, has led to a necessary modernisation of how the business tenders and manages its contracts with IT playing an increasingly important role.

"The amount of paperwork required in tendering for major projects presents a challenge to contractors," says Bryant. "Councils, in particular, have very exacting reporting standards and invoicing has to be carried out every 14 days. We have developed our own digital pen system which allows us to receive handwritten forms from engineers in the field directly into e-mails to speed up our estimating and invoicing process."

The KPIs expected by council clients has driven the standards setting process right across the DSL business and created a discipline the firm can apply to all of its work. "The great thing about service and maintenance contracts is that they guarantee stable cash flow – as long as you can get your invoicing right," says contracts director Ian McGregor. "Payment is usually within 21 days."

There is a downside to having large local authority contracts, however, says McGregor who is

the new vice-chairman of the HVCA's Service and Facilities Group. "There are quite a few businesses which have effectively become single contract firms built completely around a large maintenance project," he says. "A number are now finding it hard to meet the requirements of LAs and if they lose the work their whole business is in jeopardy."

"For example, Kent County Council says it would prefer to only employ contractors which recruit and train apprentices. We are in a good position there as we currently have three apprentices on our books, but generally in our industry recruitment is down."

**Industry standard**

LAs also insist on firms working to industry best practice standards. The HVCA's guide SFG20 is the main industry standard and, while most LAs have their own versions, they tend to use SFG20. "Our strong links with the association serve us well," says McGregor. "It shows we are up-to-date on legal and technical developments."

"Most of the people running school buildings do not come from hvac backgrounds so they rely on us to point them in the right direction," he adds.



DSL manages all the school buildings in East Kent

"However, we also have to be sensitive to their priorities which are, clearly, ensuring the school keeps running and is safe."

A recurring safety issues in schools is the presence of asbestos. DSL reports some kind of encounter with asbestos almost every day across the large estate of buildings it looks after. "We try, as much as possible, to carry out essential works during the school holidays," says Bryant. "However, if we encounter asbestos – which we frequently do – that will add hold ups and requires very careful management. Having said that, we have managed to re-pipe com-schools during the holidays and

the more experience you have of that work, the easier it gets."

Another regular cause of delays is the confusion around the issue of CRB checking. However, the main cloud on the horizon could be the priorities of any incoming new government after the election. "The money for improving schools has been allocated and any trimming by a new administration would be very damaging," says Burton.

"There was a moratorium on spending that last time the Tories came into power, and it would be disastrous if that happened again."

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