



# SWIMMING WITH THE BIG FISH

A new service is helping Cumbrian SMEs to deliver major projects at Sellafield alongside major international players. **GILES BROWN** reports



Construction under way at Sellafield



**J**ust over £2 billion is spent on the decommissioning and clean-up work taking place at the Sellafield nuclear site each year.

For decades, those running the site, along with local businesses, politicians and academics, have grappled with the challenge of ensuring as much of that money sticks

in the local region as possible – or “sticky pounds” as they are commonly referred to – whilst complying with public and European Union procurement regulations.

SMEs in the region believe they have been held back by common practice procurement routes that have offered limited access to the huge frameworks in place – access to the long-term contracts that would allow them to grow, invest and deliver meaningful social impact in the region.

However, a new scheme is under way which aims to change this.

Programme and Project Partners (PPP) is a 20-year framework of major projects which aims to transform project delivery at the Sellafield site, its supply chain and the socioeconomic landscape of Cumbria.

Sellafield Ltd has adopted the Multi-Project Procurement (MPP) commercial strategy, which encourages the creation

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of long-term supply chain relationships and measures success on enterprise outcomes.

This will see PPP’s lot partners procure key delivery partners who, in turn, are required to set out a predetermined supply chain for the work they will deliver.

According to Brian Davidson, PPP representative and head of lot for Doosan Babcock, the MPP model will help build trusted relationships with key

suppliers to drive success.

“We are confident that this approach will deliver benefits on certainty of costs and schedule, plus importantly delivering wider social impact through the supply chain in West Cumbria and beyond,” he says.

Quantity surveying practice and procurement specialists Solomons Europe, which has offices at Papcastle, near Cockermouth and Crooklands, near Kendal, has developed the Swimming with the Big Fish (SWTBF) concept to help SMEs deliver work at Sellafield.

It is a rallying cry for large contractors and anchor institutions – the “big fish” – to recognise the collective power of SMEs – the “little fish” – when it comes to both successfully delivering major projects and social impact.

“SMEs yield huge economic power,” says Solomons Europe’s managing director Dominic Doig.



Brian Davidson, PPP head of lot for Doosan Babcock





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“Given the huge focus on the UK’s Covid recovery and post-Brexit economic readjustment, the emphasis on the Northern Powerhouse and ‘levelling up’ agenda, and the Government’s recent relaxation of public sector

procurement rules allowing SMEs to get a bigger slice of the pie, the stars appear to be aligning.

“SWTBF is all about how SMEs can capitalise on this. It’s about clearly articulating to the big fish placing large contracts that they’ll get much more bang for their buck if they use SMEs – and that if they can provide the security of a long-term contract, they’ll get even more.

“Their agility, flexibility

and absolute focus on clients make SMEs a real asset to any project they’re helping to deliver. At the same time, they’ll create local jobs, apprenticeship and training opportunities, invest in new facilities, and give back to their local communities. It’s a win-win situation.”

However, he stresses the scheme is about asking for a “hand up, not a handout”.

“The hand up from big fish is giving SMEs the long-term

contracts that will give them the confidence to invest and deliver all the good stuff they want to do,” he says.

“It’s not a handout, because the SMEs must earn the right to get these opportunities. They have to rise to the challenge.”

This is where the Swimming with the Big Fish SME Matchmaker Service comes in.

Solomons Europe has created the service to help



The Sellafield site

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PPP achieve ‘critical success factors’. These include cost savings and management, certainty of delivery timescales and rewarding supply chains that achieve stipulated project outcomes.

Huge emphasis is also placed on local employment, upskilling the local workforce, along with financial and social investment in the West Cumbria and Cumbria region – whether that is in existing or new offices and facilities, or committing to community-based initiatives.

Businesses looking to secure these long-term and valuable key delivery partner contracts will have to demonstrate how these success factors will be met. In turn, they will expect the same from those within their supply chain.

After registering and completing a questionnaire based around PPP’s expectations, SMEs are graded by the Matchmaker Service team. Those who score well are then profiled and introduced to businesses chosen as preferred bidders for the specific contract. The Matchmaker Service then brokers meetings, with the aim of forging a relationship between the two and ultimate inclusion of the SME in the preferred bidders’ tender.

“PPP’s approach to procurement is very different,” says Dom.

“There needs to be a mutual trust between preferred bidders for KDP contracts and the supply chain companies that will support them. They will need to develop proper relationships and be able to deliver on what they commit to. They’re in this for the long run.”

The Matchmaker Service team has already brokered several discussions between SMEs and preferred bidders for the first package of work up for grabs – heating ventilation and air

conditioning. It is currently doing the same for others, including building interior fit out and finishes; fabrication and manufacturing; electrical and instrumentation and mechanical pipework.

“It’s been really positive so far,” says Dom.

“Those bidding for KDP contracts have been eager to engage with us and help them to identify the SMEs that can deliver on both the work and socioeconomic side of things.

“The SMEs we’re working with are also embracing this fresh approach. They recognise they have the chance to secure the long-term contracts they’ve always wanted that will enable them to realise their ambitions and at the same time, the ambitions of the local region.”

John Grainger, director at Britain’s Energy Coast Business Cluster, says the service represents a great opportunity for SMEs.

“We’re breaking new ground here and it will benefit everyone,” he says.

“This is an exciting initiative that benefits the contract holder and supporting companies within the supply chain.

“The Sellafield supply chain has an excellent track record of coming together to bid for framework contracts. The desire for the future is to have contracts extended, so that enables the SMEs within a chain to plan for workforce expansion and give them the ability to consider, then deliver, measurable social impact.

“The SWTBF SME Matchmaker Service will deliver even more efficiency and drive down true costs within contracts. By engaging collaboratively with local SMEs, targets are met, trust is engendered, and reputations gained over years of working in a collaborative fashion. It is both innovative and sustainable.”



# COMPANIES REAP BENEFITS OF MATCHMAKER SERVICE

Hopes process could lead to long-term growth and increased employment

One West Cumbrian SME that has been through the match-making process is Egremont-based Delkia. The company is a specialist integrator of safety-related and mission-critical systems, with clients across the defence, automotive, space and nuclear sectors.

As well as providing industry-leading services to numerous big name clients, it has a strong commitment to the socioeconomic health of the region it calls home.

Backed with the security of a long-term contract with Programme and Project Partners (PPP), it wants to create up to 20 new jobs, start recruiting apprentices and further expand its offices and workshops. Not only that, but it also has plans to develop a STEM facility in Egremont to promote the understanding of advanced control system technology including cyber technology and machine learning advances.

Delkia received the highest grade possible, gold, after it was assessed by the Matchmaker Service team – the first company to do so.

Its business development director Dick Monaghan says: “They score SMEs against criteria that will dictate your chances of success when it comes to securing work on a PPP package. Nothing else comes into it. It makes the assessment clean and clear.

“It’s really powerful that the companies bidding for KDP status are getting an honest overview and endorsement from an independent source.”

Dick encourages other companies to register with the service but says full commitment is needed.

“The Matchmaker team want to help SMEs, but at the end of the



Kurt Canfield, managing director of Delkia, Copeland MP Trudy Harrison, Robin Oliver, projects director and Rebecca Canfield, head of finance celebrate the unveiling of Delkia’s new premises at Bridge End Industrial Estate in Egremont

day it’s really down to the SMEs to help themselves,” he says.

“We put a huge amount of work into completing the questionnaire and had to juggle that with the large numbers of tenders, PQQs and other documents and forms that you need to constantly need to do to compete for work.

“But it’s been more than worth it. We’re over the moon with the outcome and really hope it will lead to the long-term work we need to grow and invest in the region.”

Liftech Engineering Ltd, in Lilyhall, which provides a wide range of mechanical, industrial installation and engineering services, has also been through the process.

Managing director Nick Robinson says: “It’s helping to raise the profile of local SMEs, what we do and who we’re collaborating with. And they already have the contacts with the big players to help make

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introductions and set up meetings, which we find really hard when cold calling.” He says one major outcome of a long-term contract for Liftech Engineering would be the creation of up to nine new jobs, representing a more than 50 per cent increase in its workforce.

The ambition would be for most of these new recruits to be ex-armed forces personnel, demonstrating its commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant, which has been recognised with Employer Recognition Scheme bronze award.

It has recruited three ex-service personnel over the last 12 months and offers comprehensive support to those who have displayed signs of PTSD or who are struggling with adapting to civilian life.

Nick, who is ex-armed forces himself, says: “It’s a real struggle to adapt. We want to give them the right support, a stable environment, and the opportunity to learn skills and develop a career.”