

Achilles helping Sir Robert McAlpine and British Land to tackle Modern Slavery

Ethical issues in construction supply chains are only invisible if you choose not to look for them. This is a widely accepted truth in the industry, but the structure and sheer scale of today's supply chains mean that labour issues and their causes can be extremely hard to identify, understand and eradicate.

Overview

British Land and Sir Robert McAlpine have been using an Achilles service to find out more about what's really happening in their supply chain from those with first-hand knowledge – the tradespeople contracted to work on their sites. As responsible developers and building contractors, British Land and Sir Robert McAlpine have a strong and lasting interest in the social value that their projects deliver – both during construction and when completed. So, when Achilles launched Labour Practice Audits in 2015, British Land and Sir Robert McAlpine were keen to pioneer their use.

Challenge

British Land was due to start work, in partnership with Sir Robert McAlpine as lead contractor, on the next phase of the 32-acre Broadgate campus, creating a world class, mixed use destination for London. At the same time, the Modern Slavery Act (2015) entered UK law, requiring companies to take responsibility for understanding the ethical performance of all businesses in their extended supply chains.

British Land's Sustainability Manager, Karina Williams, explains: "We quickly recognised the need for a service to give us certainty around our suppliers' labour practices. When we found that Achilles had developed one, it really resonated with us. It was obvious that we had to test it in on a live project to see if it could help us identify precisely where the risks lay and how we should address them."

So, when the 10-year Framework agreement between British Land and Sir Robert McAlpine was signed, the two companies agreed to carry out a pilot project with

Achilles to assess the effectiveness and value of the Labour Practice Audits.

All parties were very aware of the scale and depth of the challenge that faced them.

Sir Robert McAlpine's Head of Ethical and Sustainable Procurement, Alice Hands, comments: "In terms of seriousness, forced labour and modern slavery represent the extreme end of a very wide spectrum. There are multiple lesser issues, all of which we wanted to address to ensure people are treated correctly, to counter any negative attitudes to our industry and to help ensure that Sir Robert McAlpine is recognised as a great place to work."

Issues can include a lack of thorough due diligence, poor access to grievance procedures and failure to appropriately translate health and safety briefings into workers' native tongues. The high proportion of self-employed workers can also give suppliers the opportunity to issue business-to-business contracts instead of contracts of employment, losing all the protective and other legislative measures they include.

Karina Williams adds, "As a responsible developer, we are able to support other businesses in our supply chain where needed, helping them understand and address the ethical, human resources and safety challenges they face. Working in partnership enables us to reach suppliers further down the supply chain and support them where they have challenges."

Process

In determining the scope of the Labour Practice Audits, it was vital to both companies that onsite interviews were non-intrusive, unannounced in advance and anonymous (although identifying immediate employers). Only then would workers feel sufficiently at ease to share how they really felt.

It was also important that interviewees were never taken away from their work, as this would mean they could be identified and thus lose anonymity. Instead, the Achilles interviewers settled in site canteens and asked workers on a break for a few minutes of their time. In an overwhelming number of cases, workers were happy to help.

Following the interviews, the findings are analysed by both companies and Achilles to establish areas that need to be prioritised and sub-contractors who need help most urgently. The outcomes of the interviews have been enormously helpful in enabling the partners to identify and start addressing potential issues.

Inevitably, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted delivery of the Labour Practice Audits programme, along with everything else. Visiting sites remains a challenging task. To continue engaging with the supply chain, the programme therefore moved to virtual Management System Audits with key supply chain partners and trades. These audits continue to grow awareness of potential supply chain issues, build good practice and raise standards for ethical employment.

Results

As Alice Hands puts it: “Some audits are simply about ticking boxes – as such, they are completely useless. The Achilles Labour Practice Audits are proving to be the opposite of that. We are constantly uncovering new findings and learning more, and as long as the audits are providing us with increased knowledge and enabling us to fix issues we find, we will continue to carry them out.”

Karina Williams highlights how this partnership supports British Land’s wider goals: “We are committed to promoting safe and fair working conditions throughout our supply chain, along with strong performance on social and environmental priorities. Working collaboratively with Sir Robert McAlpine and Achilles, we are pleased to have pioneered this audit programme, promoting better working environments and helping spread best practice across the industry.”

“The audit approach we have taken with Sir Robert McAlpine and Achilles is proving very effective. I hope that more developers do the same, so that together we can make supply chain issues a thing of the past.”

Karina Williams, British Land

Key Benefits

By taking a partnership approach to implementing Achilles Labour Practice Audits, developers and key contractors can gain:

- Improved visibility and awareness of issues and risks in the supply chain
- Identification of specific instances of poor practice for immediate resolution, empowering positive action to address vulnerabilities
- Fairer treatment of potentially vulnerable workers and enhanced health, safety and working conditions on site
- Better understanding of the issues involved, making it easier to identify them in the future
- Improved trust and collaboration between developers and contractors, creating a more positive approach to addressing issues together
- Enhanced ability of all parties to achieve positive social impact at all stages of a development’s life
- The opportunity for contractors to improve their operations and win more business
- An improved public image for the construction industry.



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