

MEDIA COVERAGE

PUBLICATION: PREMISES & FACILITIES MANAGEMENT (PFM)
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PROJECT: UNITED UTILITIES (WARRINGTON)

IndoorEnvironment

Transparency Rules

The challenge facing United Utilities PLC was to relocate a team into existing company premises in a magnificent setting, utilising simple but effective design principles that embraced a brief focused on transparency.

HAVING DISPOSED OF AN EXISTING BUILDING IN WARRINGTON, Dawson House, United Utilities PLC wished to move a key team to the main campus site at Lingley Mere Business Park, also in Warrington. Interior design specialist Claremont Group Interiors was invited to prepare a design bid to carry out the feasibility study and planning proposals. The company was subsequently appointed as planning consultant and interior designer.

In October 2006, Claremont was one of three companies tendering for the work. The design period was very quick – four weeks – and installation took place over 16 weeks. The tender to manage FM at the site was awarded to Overbury PLC.

United Utilities PLC was created from the merger of North West Water and Norweb in November 1995. Principal activities are managing and operating the regulated electricity distribution, water and wastewater networks in North West England, a region with a population of around seven million. In August 2000 United Utilities sold its electricity and gas supply business and as a result no longer has any significant exposure to the competitive UK generation and supply market.

However, as well as operating its water, wastewater and electricity networks in the North West, the group also utilises its core utility skills to manage other infrastructure assets, through its United Utilities Contract Solutions business. The company is a member of the FTSE 100 group of leading UK listed companies and employs over 8,000 people in its core utility activities.

At the outset, two alternative buildings were considered to provide suitable accommodation for the team. Lingley Mere is located in a fabulous setting, abutting marshland complete with resident wildfowl, natural fauna and a lake. In short it is an environmentalist's dream. Six buildings are set into what amounts to a nature reserve, approached over a meandering driveway having entered through the entrance lodge.

Philip Green, the new Chief Executive, required a smart, warm but efficient environment as benefits a top 100 Company in the utility sector. A particular key feature to be deployed universally was transparency. The brief indicated that the workplace should support the aspirations of a culture of excellence and performance and create an immediate impression of a customer and people-focused business. For operational reasons, Haweswater House was selected as the new home for the organisation. Of particular interest is that it was intentionally designed to function as an open plan building.

Up to 160 people were to be located in Haweswater House, across the ground and first floors, taking the total occupancy of the building to 1,200. On the site overall there are 4,000 people. Each building is two storeys high, and blended into the natural surroundings. "It was a small section of Haweswater House that was to be occupied by Philip Green's team," said Ken Bundy, Associate Director of Design at Claremont.

Although Haweswater House is designed for open plan working, the new occupants did require some cellular space. There was also a need for support meeting rooms and conference or training rooms. Storage facilities would be needed. There had to be visibly defined break-out areas, and print areas (in service pods). A new access point including a dedicated Group PLC reception area would have to be included.

A key feature of the scheme is the provision of different, effective and creative ways of dividing space between Companies, Directorates and Sections. The benefits of the predominantly open plan space include good communications and openness, notwithstanding requirements for some cellular space and enclosed work areas for sensitive functions, for example, the 'Dealer Room' in the Treasury Section of Group Finance and Salaries/Wages/Pensions administrative areas.

The workplace had to support the aspiration of a culture of excellence and performance, and create an immediate impression of a business that is customer and people focussed.



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To provide a suitable customer journey, a new entrance and reception has been established. Boardroom and executive facilities are provided on the first floor with 'the kitchen table' providing the heart of the home. A more open plan setting is provided on the ground floor, both floors containing relaxed interactive meeting spaces located around the atrium or 'village green'.

"The reception area itself in the building is not dedicated to Philip Green and his team, but there is a reception point to which you are only invited," says Bundy. "Security clearance is handled at the entrance lodge, and the reception area is forewarned that a visitor is coming. People then come to greet their guest."

The registration point is very business like. At that point people are either internal to the group or new to the space. The impression generated is one of total naturalness, in a setting with a country park feeling.

"It's very clean and fresh, with the colour scheme introduced inside reflecting what's happening outside," said Bundy. "We've used green and other cooling colours. The key design element deployed was that space must relate to function."

The kitchen table is (deliberately) long and simple, with some seating provided around it. The room is also equipped for wireless internet connection, and there are kitchen facilities too. People can move onto more formal surroundings if desired or to project/team space.

"The chairs are restaurant style in white acrylic, simple, exterior grade and of plain design with no seating fabric," says Bundy. "Indeed it must be the most inexpensive furniture installation I have ever been involved with – but makes a strong design statement nonetheless."

Looking at the cellular office spaces, each one has a sliding door. If a door is slid open, it means any person can come in and use the space, or make a private phone call.

The team has been divided between the two floors. The board room and kitchen table are on the first floor. Directors are to be found on both

floors, each office being glazed to promote the issue of transparency, the same size, and being equipped with a meeting table. Each office can then be used as a meeting space whenever the need arises and the office is empty.

"It is very simple, involving no major technology," said Bundy. "There's careful placing of doors and glazed sections, emphasising Philip Green's requirement that transparency throughout the business is very obvious."

Claremont has built up extensive experience of looking carefully at the relationship between people and their space. "It's about using space and the right products to go with it," said Bundy. "It's also about placement and how people use furniture and systems that have been specified."

In this project, Philip Green re-used all the existing furniture, including the workstations and task seating. New furniture was provided for the common spaces. In the (glass-walled) boardroom, a 15-year old table was utilised at no extra expense, and some Osborne and Little fabric was used on the chairs – producing a surprisingly pleasing result, acclaimed by all who see the room. "We wondered whether it would work at first," said Bundy. "But it did, superbly."

Chief Executive Philip Green says, "It has been a considerable project to move part of the Group Corporate team from its long-standing base to Lingley Mere, and I have been impressed with the way the project has been managed and delighted with the design of the offices."

Transparency was achieved with the generous use of glass panels in the open plan workplace.

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