



PHOENIX FROM THE FLAMES

Following a devastating fire, Sinfin Community School, Derby, has undergone a huge rebuilding project. **Matthew Jane** met business manager **Mike Parker** to discover how they turned their adversity to triumph

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As the winter sun penetrates the large glass frontage of Sinfin Community School in Derby, it is hard to imagine that only three years ago the school was devastated in a fire. The impressive new building that visitors see on pulling into the carpark is a testimony to the hard work, dedication and forward planning of a group of staff and project managers.

As if by some twist of fate, business manager Mike Parker has a first hand account of the fire, even though he was not employed by the school at the time. “I was driving down the A52 and I could see the smoke. It was billowing up from the school. I was

stuck on the dual carriageway and everybody could see the fire from there. I wasn't even planning to join the school at that point.”

Mike was brought in as business manager in 2007 and got involved with the new building project. “Immediately after the fire, the school put in place a decant strategy which involved moving all the pupils into temporary accommodation, with the school split across two sites. Once the ground had been cleared, the steelworks went up in September 2007. It has been a really accelerated process and the end result has been fantastic.”



FACTBOX

SCHOOL: Sinfin Community School

TYPE: 11-16 community school

LA: Derby

PUPILS: 950

BUDGET: £4.5m

SPECIALISM: Engineering

SUPPORT STAFF: 55

TEACHING STAFF: 62

NAME: Mike Parker

POSITION: Business manager

TIME IN ROLE: 2 years

BACKGROUND AND TRAINING: Worked in ICT before joining Sinfin as business manager in 2007

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ALL SYSTEMS GO

Once the building project got underway, it was planned to coincide with the school holidays, to avoid lengthy spells away from school. “We timed it so that the students left two days early for the summer holidays. The contractors came in and removed the Portakabins that had housed the pupils. We then decanted into the building that was to be demolished last, which involved BT coming and getting our systems installed. It was then a case of ensuring the building opened on time. Eventually we got handed back wings of the building as they were completed. We were around five working days late moving back in, but if you look at the overall timescales it is a phenomenal achievement.”

The main objective was to ensure the building was opened on time. “It was quite a challenge, especially given the pressures of National Challenge and the LA responsibility which was around at the time. Three of us lived here over the summer to monitor the project and liaise with the builders. Builders are as honest as they can be with timelines,

but we had to get some realism to report back to the community on when the project will be completed.”

The project was funded largely through the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) scheme. Mike explains that the school was in line for funding, but the money was brought forward, given the unexpected needs of the school. “There was some insurance money from the old school, but it was largely BSF that funded this. It is a design and build, not a PFI project. It was designed, built and then given back to the school.”

Derby City Council was the principal customer, so they were in charge of the project management. “One of our deputy heads was involved with the visioning of the project. He helped with creating the learning areas and identifying how each room will support the needs of our students,” explains Mike.

Mike's role in the project has been largely in ensuring the smooth running of the different agents and keeping unexpected costs to a minimum. “The finances and project management was owned by the LA. We had to ensure any costs we managed,

such as when contractors accidentally dug through cables owned by BT. As the building was then handed over I worked with the support teams to ensure it can actually be maintained through a realistic budget.”

INNOVATIVE AND GREEN

“There is plenty of innovation in the new school and really well designed use of space,” explains Mike. Part of the innovation has been to employ cameras throughout the building, as the school tries to avoid a repeat of the fire. During our tour of the school, Mike explains that there were a few concerns to begin with regarding having cameras in a school, but these fears have been alleviated as staff get used to the idea and are reassured that the cameras are not used to monitor them.

“With it being a new building, there are building management control systems. We have got air and heating systems throughout the building. The way we use light in the building is also quite technical in that the roof vents need to be kept clear. →



The light drops from the roof to the ground floor," Mike says. These innovations have ensured that the school recently received an A grade in its environmental rating.

"It is not without its challenges," adds Mike. "We use biomass fuel for heating once we reach a critical mass. Although the biomass boiler is good, there is not a lot of competition out there for biomass fuels. This means the suppliers can hold their prices, which is an issue."

The school also installed a wind turbine, which it is hoped will generate 15KW – although it has not yet been brought online. "We are still working through some of the teething issues with the new building, which I would say takes up a fair portion of my time at the moment. We need to ensure we get the attention and service we deserve now that the main contractors have left the site," says Mike. Other green initiatives in Sinfin include the use of rainwater collection to flush the toilets.

TEETHING PROBLEMS

Working with a brand new building presents certain challenges as people settle into the new surroundings and the building beds in. "It can be quite daunting when we look at the issues log and see there is a fair bit of reinstatement work that needs to be carried out," says Mike. "The other issue is that we have gone from being reactive with the building to proactive. The support staff have to be trained sufficiently to deal with the issues of a specialised building"

A lot of the suppliers have had to change as a result of having specialised systems in place. "As far as project management goes, I have a background in IT, so I was able to come in and support the deputy on ICT systems. We already had a learning gateway, so I had to ensure we had the internet access and other services when the school was demolished."

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

One of the challenges of managing a project of this magnitude is that the community need to be kept informed of progress and plans. "Everyone wanted to come and have a look," says Mike. "It was tricky as parts of the school were still classed as a building site."

"Another challenge was inducting the children into the new building. We had a phased return so that we could induct them gradually, show them around and explain the new 'scary' features of the new building. The redesign of the toilets means they are now open plan, with the wash sinks at the front. There were also elements of health and safety issues surrounding where pupils go in a fire. The old school buildings were still being developed, they were on the land where the new car park is."

As a community school, Sinfin actively encourages community involvement through afterschool clubs and summer activities. One of the more unusual activities the school offers is the cyclo-cross track which runs around the playing field. "That came about from a conversation about all the soil we had left over →



from the building works. It was suggested we build a cyclo-cross track, which is similar to cross country cycling. I am keen cyclist myself, but cycling has really taken off across the school. We have had people like Cycle Derby come in and train people. We have even had British Cycling show an interest in running some events here," says Mike.

There is an extensive extended schools programme, with a couple of local hockey teams holding club nights at the school. "They offer opportunities for the students to join in too. We also have two badminton clubs who use our sports and again, they run sessions for the students. Derby County run football coaching on a Monday evening."

Leasing out the school facilities brings a small revenue for the school. Mike explains that the school is not for profit, but any money raised will help offset any deficits. "We make sure that they link in with the pupils. If people want to use our facilities then we welcome that, but it has to worth our while in terms of getting pupils involved. We have been able to attract some really good groups into the school."

It is not only sports that Sinfin encourages, as Mike explains there has been an upsurge in music groups. "We have some really good music and arts facilities. The LA run dance sessions, and we have music tutors from Birmingham Conservatoire who are happy to come and teach the students in the evenings."

The school has used its facilities and extended schools programme to help build links with the local primary children. "During the summer, we held events for younger children in the mornings. Typically, teenagers don't get up as early as the younger children, so we held the children's sessions in the morning and then the older classes in the afternoon. It helps with the transition to the secondary school too."

SOUND ADVICE

In the light of the success at Sinfin, Mike is well positioned to offer advice to other schools in a similar position. "Communication was an important factor. During all the meetings, we were very prudent to minute everything so that we were robust on our procedures. As a team we worked well. There are times when we didn't see eye to eye with contractors, but we all fell as friends and we still talk on the phone occasionally."

"From a financial point of view, we were very strict in that we didn't allow staff to change things. If these changes don't come through the project board, it could mean something is put in the wrong place or we could be at risk of going over budget. We had a project team in place so that they were the only channel of communication. While everyone is enthusiastic and we encourage people to have their say, it has to be done through the appropriate channel."

Sinfin Community School is a good demonstration of how adverse situations can be overcome. Teamwork, forward planning and a continual eye for detail have ensured the project has been a huge success, with a building that students are proud of and facilities that allow the school to underpin the community values upon which it is built. **EE**