

Case Study: Willmott Dixon



Tell us a bit about Willmott Dixon. Why was accrediting as a Living Wage Employer important to you?

Willmott Dixon is a privately owned construction company. We've been around since 1852 and our CEO is Rick Willmott. We are a family business. Willmott Dixon has always wanted to give back to the communities in which it works. We originally did this through what used to be called **community works**. For example, we'd fix a scout roof hut whilst building the school next door.

Over the years, that commitment evolved and the Willmott Dixon Foundation was created, with the mission to coordinate the company's social value work. In 2013, the Foundation put in place a target: to enhance the lives of 10,000 young people by 2020. We hit that target early, so as part of our Building Lives Theme in our Now or Never strategy we've just launched a new strategic target to support people into good careers.

Supporting careers means paying the Real Living Wage. We started looking into accrediting before the pandemic, which has only heightened the need. We can help people get jobs, but to help people get a proper *career*, that's worthwhile, pays fairly, is rewarding, that people want to get out bed and go and do, that's something different.

Where does your commitment to social value come from?

Our CEO Rick is a major driver of our purpose. We do the right thing because it's the right thing to do. But one of the perks of doing the right thing, is the commercial benefit we receive. **Doing good means people want to work with us and for us.**



Rick Willmott, CEO of Willmott Dixon

For the last three years we've been ranked as top five employer in the Sunday Times Best Companies to work for in the UK list. Cited time and time again is the fact that people like working for a company that is responsible and gives something back. Especially for young people entering the workforce, people now have a *choice* about who they work for, and pay forms a key part of this.

When we looked around our direct workforce, it was only a handful of people who were *not* being paid the Living Wage before we accredited. But accrediting makes you hold a mirror up and say, okay, let's resolve that situation and make sure we are living our values to their full.

Can the Living Wage help address the challenges faced by the construction industry?

We need to recruit more people from all parts of society into the construction industry, so signing up to a Living Wage will further show we are an industry that pays well and provides good career prospects. As an industry, we are building back the nation's future through the projects we create and the outcomes they provide which enriches lives and supports community wellbeing and prosperity. We want people to aspire to work in construction, to be part of creating this better place for everyone to live, and in the process enjoy a fantastic and well paid job. A real Living Wage is an important part of helping us realise that vision.



As a construction company, you hold hundreds and hundreds of contracts. What made you feel so strongly about the Living Wage that you wanted to accredit, despite the scale of the challenge?

Doing the right thing isn't always easy. But it's important. We spent over 12 months talking about accrediting before we became accredited, because we needed to make sure it was the right thing to do. We didn't want to put added pressure on the small businesses we work with, that we want to support to grow, or other organisations in our supply chain that do a lot of other great things, such as employing local people. We needed to think about how we could help them reach this goal too.

One of the things that really helped us was the timescale the Living Wage Foundation supported us with. It gave us the leeway to work with our partners and support them to become Living Wage employers over the next few years. Ultimately, paying the Living Wage is going to be something that will be a deciding factor, determining who we choose to work with in the future.

How are you planning to communicate the Living Wage to your supply chain?

It's about engaging people and giving no surprises.

First of all, we wrote to every single supply chain partner, letting them know it was something we were thinking about doing and gave them an opportunity to raise concerns. We are aware that as a contractor, most of our direct employees are in the kinds of careers that are already being paid the real Living Wage or above. Where low pay is more of an issue, is on our sites within our supply chain.

Secondly, we needed to do some work highlighting the differences between the minimum wage, national living wage and real Living Wage. When we initially contacted our supply chain partners about our intention to become accredited, a proportion thought they were already paying the real Living Wage. A key bit of learning we would share with other companies considering accrediting, would be to make sure everybody in the wider business is aware of the difference.

Finally, we've made it clear that we're on a journey. We've set the Living Wage as our expectation and told our supply chain we'll work with them to help them get there.

What impact has the pandemic had on your view of the Living Wage?

The pandemic has made it more important to pay the Living Wage. It's creating an environment in which people are so desperate to get a job, our responsibility as an employer is greater than ever. When there are economic forces saying 'you can pay people less because they'll be willing to work for less', it's important that we say no to that.

The whole point of the real Living Wage is that you're paying people enough to live. At Willmott Dixon, we do things like support food banks and charities that support people who are right on the cusp of being able to survive. But as an employer, we have the power to help prevent people falling into crisis in the first place. The more difficult thing to do, but what is crucial, is embedding social value into the mechanics of how you do business.

We talk about the ripple effect: the ripple down the supply chain of paying the Living Wage is massive. We'll never be able to measure that in the way that we could measure and showcase a donation to a charity. But we know that somewhere down our supply chain could be a child with a new pair of school shoes because of the real Living Wage.

What would you say to another company in the construction sector who is thinking about accrediting?

It's important to make sure you understand the different stakeholders in your own business that need to be engaged with the accreditation, and to have the opportunity to address any concerns. Willmott Dixon's accreditation was driven by the Willmott Dixon Foundation, but it couldn't have happened without our people team; our supply chain team or our regional Managing Directors.

But our best advice would be to just pick up the phone. The prospect of accrediting can be daunting for businesses in our sector. But the team at the Living Wage Foundation made it so easy for us to understand what we needed to do.



If you could sum up the Living Wage movement in a sentence or two, what would you say?

Over the years, and still today, workers across the UK are subject to a lack of safety, discrimination and very low pay. Why are we waiting to do the right thing?

Ask yourself, if you aren't paying the Living Wage, and influencing those in your supply chain to do the same - why not

