

A collaborative, one-team approach to infrastructure projects in the South East

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In London and the South East, a one-team approach is helping infrastructure consultancy AECOM to deliver projects more efficiently. Speaking to RBD, regional rail director Shadi Shekarrizi explained why collaboration – between infrastructure owners, operators, local authorities, and suppliers – must become a priority for the industry.

Can you give some examples of what's worked well in your region during the current Control Period?

One of the successful portfolios we have is as part of the South Rail Systems Alliance (SRSA), where we recently delivered a very large switches and crossings renewals project at Lewisham. The driving force behind the successful commissioning was the whole life cycle approach that was taken. There was one committed team on the project from GRIP Stage 1 through to GRIP Stage 8, made up of individuals, hand-picked for their experience of working in particularly constrained railway environments.

The team of Network Rail, designers from AECOM, and the Colas Rail construction team were well known to each other and fully committed to the onward pipeline of works. The ability to review constructability options and constraints all the way through design development resulted in the right solution, which fit the available access for construction and commissioning.

Are there any lessons learnt from current Control Period to take forward to CP7?

Southern Region is moving forward with a new delivery model, replacing the SRSA but collaboration is still at its heart. We believe we've set a high standard and legacy of collaborative working for the incoming parties, leaving a delivery model that can be picked up and run with in the next control period.

I believe the industry should be more focused on transportation, rather than standalone projects and requirements. To optimise our existing transport network in the South East, we need to look to transport hubs. Whilst these ventures can seem more complex and daunting from the outset, they will be much more transformational in nature. That cross-transport mode, with better interconnectivity and accessibility, including closer working between Network Rail and Transport for London, for example, is going to be key.

Local authorities will also be more interested in transportation schemes going forward, and the industry needs to adjust to dealing more effectively with third party funded schemes. The supply chain is ready to provide more of a 'whole systems offering' – transportation planning and place making, as well as infrastructure design.

We know that issues arise when organisations don't talk to each other. Leadership from a senior level in terms of implementing a more collaborative, working-group arrangement is the most effective way to drive communication. Do not build two transport offerings next to each other; build one that meets everyone's needs.

How can we build on efficiency realised during CP6?

We need to remain agile and continue to prompt our clients to do the right thing at the right time. Beyond just minimum viable product we must push for outcome-orientated requirements. This output-orientated view, rather than lots of very specific standards and requirements, will allow us to challenge standards and come back with innovative solutions, drawing on our international expertise.

It is about asking, right from the outset, why they are doing the project, what the problem is, and how it will benefit passengers and the local community.

The design/construction interface will also be important – pulling construction into the design phase to ensure that issues don't arise further down the line and that's part of the new model Southern has put in place for CP7.

What are the priorities/objectives in your region?

Due to the levelling-up agenda, other areas of the country are being prioritised for funding, and Network Rail Southern is open about the constrained enhancement budget in the next control period. They will be focused on implementing their renewals delivery model and continue their increased supplier engagement – something Network Rail Southern, with its supplier events, is already good at.

More widely for London, the South East, and anyone involved in infrastructure, the priority must be proving the business case for public spending in our region, particularly, in terms of alleviating the housing crisis.

What does the industry need to do to achieve them?

Infrastructure operators and owners need to work with local authorities and developers to unlock development opportunities. The industry needs to be savvier with land value capture, and how they make the business case for projects in certain areas by linking them to onward economic and social benefits.

Ultimately, I think an effective route is Network Rail and Transport for London engage directly with developers. That is where AECOM comes in, as a conduit – we have the skills to do land value capture, build business cases, and tap into third party pots of funding.

What new ways of working are you looking forward to implementing over the next few years?

Our work in the digital space is geared towards continuous learning; taking processes that can be digitised and doing them more efficiently. There's room for us to make more use of that technology to take designers and maintainers off the track and build interactive and sophisticated virtual infrastructure models.

Then there is our approach to the environmental impact of our projects. We have had a couple of great pilot studies with Southern, delivered through Network Rail's Managed Services Framework, during which we looked at ways to measure and replace aspects of biodiversity where works were going to impact the natural environment.

CP6 was an extraordinary period, particularly with the impact of the pandemic, has this changed your view of the benefits of rail?

Pre-pandemic, we assumed we'd be building railways forever – but we rarely stopped to ask why. With passenger demand increasing, there was justification to keep building.

During the pandemic, patronage fell significantly but the network remained the lifeblood of the country,

moving key workers around. That brought into focus both how important the railways are, and why we needed them in the first place.

Previously, there was a view that we needed to run the railways for commuters. Now, with more people travelling for leisure, we have an opportunity to evolve the operation and accessibility of the network, and to provide a service that works for everyone.

It also reminded us about the economic benefits of rail, as an affordable, green form of transport. And finally, there are the huge social benefits; it can unlock housing opportunities, link communities, and link jobs to people.

Photo credit: AECOM