

## A community engaged approach

June 7, 2021



*Customer Relationship Manager, Diane Rowe, talks to railbusinessdaily.com about how Spencer Group becomes a part of community life*

**Spencer Group** has delivered large-scale and challenging infrastructure projects across three decades.

The company is an experienced principal contractor in many sectors including rail and bridges (over rail, roads and water). From designing and building new platforms to constructing whole stations and depots, the company has established an industry-wide reputation for successful delivery of innovative rail infrastructure projects.

An important part of the company's work is its desire to immerse its people into surrounding communities – those who are affected to varying degrees by the work the organisation is tasked with undertaking. Strong and effective community engagement has always been an essential and central part of delivering projects – construction can be, by its very nature, impactful in the short-term. Keeping disruption to a minimum and engaging and educating stakeholders and local residents is no longer a nice to do – it is a game entry requirement.

**Spencer Group's** Customer Relationship Manager Diane Rowe, said: "It is imperative that we recognise the

complexities and sensitivities of stakeholder and community relationships in order for us to complement and enhance lives during the delivery process.

“We see our projects as an opportunity to help support rather than be a negative experience – communicating positively with and caring for those who will see short-term impacts associated with our work.

“Our aim is to add value to the communities we work in, whether that’s through using local services and amenities to employing local people and supply chain partners – particularly small to medium enterprises (SMEs).

“We maintain a continuous dialogue throughout each project, ensuring that our teams are always working to optimise what they are delivering and that each and every stakeholder is informed every step of the way.”



*During Union Chain Bridge project Spencer Group gave redundant timber to residents to be used as firewood.*

Community, for Spencer Group, means all key stakeholders associated with a project, from designers, engineers and the local supply chain, to those living in close proximity to sites and those who will go on to

benefit from the project in the longer-term.

The company's unwavering commitment to the local economy starts with building what it refers to as its 'extraordinary supply chain'. Spencer Group clearly recognises that small businesses are the engine room of the economy. To that end, the business puts time and effort in to forming collaborations with the right companies, investing locally and building strong, long-term, sustainable relationships that deliver significant value through a collaborative approach.

Wherever work on a major project in the UK is taking place, the business is aware that it also has a unique opportunity to benefit the place in which it is working, and its economy, particularly by engaging SMEs and building robust, open and honest partnerships.

At the same time, bespoke, contract-by-contract approaches to community engagement build trust and confidence with the public.

Diane Rowe explained: "Every project is unique, so we constantly work to establish objectives and refine what we do for everyone concerned. There isn't a one size fits all model to community engagement - there can't be, because every project and community is different. So we adapt our approach to suit the needs of residents and everyone else.

"What is consistent is that we have dedicated team members on site who address the concerns and worries that may come from the community. We constantly monitor performance, relay issues back to our central team, and implement any change that is needed. We are also in regular contact with clients, operating a traffic light system to make sure everything is on track from a community engagement perspective. It is a constant cycle of improvement.

"Our client charter places client relationships at the heart of our projects and clearly we work hard to deliver our work to the best possible standard and safely. Ultimately, we want to be the best and most considerate neighbour, that's always our aim. We want all interactions with us to be as professional and pleasurable as possible."

Community engagement on the Stevenage Turnback project highlights Spencer Group's solid approach. A two-year project to deliver the design and construction of a Turnback Facility including a new platform at Stevenage Station to accommodate six-car trains, along with associated new railway infrastructure including a new S&C unit, resulted in a host of initiatives, including site visits for local stakeholders.

Already a complex project, completing work during a pandemic presented further complications. Yet the public remained on-side via door drops and update notifications placed at community hubs across the town.

Similarly, a positive relationship has developed with the neighbours of Spencer Group's Union Chain Bridge project, which involves the refurbishment and rebuilding of one of the world's oldest suspension bridges, which crosses over the River Tweed from Horncliffe in Northumberland to Fishwick in Berwickshire.

Key to opening up channels of communication was liaising closely with the Friends of Union Chain Bridge,



while those in close vicinity of the 200-year old bridge were also gifted redundant timber for use as firewood.

Spencer Group workers also carried out several extra jobs in their spare time and at their own cost, including building a disabled access ramp, improving footpaths and repairing a storm damaged roof.

Redundant materials taken from the Union Chain Bridge were also used to create a sculpture for a local historical society, a bar for Horncliffe Village Hall using spare timbers, and workers have even provided emergency first aid during a medical emergency near the site.



*The bar created for the local community during the Union Chain Bridge work.*

Diane added: “On every project we work hard to understand what the community thinks of our work and to build relationships and trust. We will respond to any concerns that people have, document all comments and react positively in order to be a considerate neighbour. We want the community to be happy and the way we will achieve this is by listening to them and responding accordingly.”



*Spencer Group created a fish sculpture.*

In addition to securing the services of supply chain partners from the local area and the investment that provides, Spencer Group’s on-site teams are encouraged to provide a boost to the local economy wherever they may be working via the company’s ‘Eat Sleep Local’ initiative.

This programme sees the business taking long-term leases on properties for accommodation and its people eating and buying locally. During the pandemic, at the Union Chain Bridge project, Spencer Group team members have been actively encouraged to take holiday lets as accommodation – properties that would otherwise have remained empty.

Other activity includes open evenings, public forums, regular newsletters, project updates, advanced letter

drops warning of works, school presentations and competitions aimed at young people. In areas of high residential numbers there will be an equally increased level of community involvement, whereas work in rural or isolated areas will be tailored to suit residents.

This approach is grounded in the inventive 'can-do' attitude of privately-owned Spencer Group, and the company values that run through its people, to 'think together' and 'think extraordinary'. Combined, this cultivates the strong belief that every single person is as important as the next.

"Within the business, everyone feels as if they are cared about," says Diane.

"That sense of pride and belonging is conveyed when we go out and meet the public. We want to create a great impression and wherever we are we want to shine. We're aware that infrastructure projects have a temporary impact on people's lives so we keep them informed every step of the way and they can get in touch with us whenever they need to. We always provide someone to talk to, not an automated system.

"You really have to take the time to understand people if you take community engagement seriously. That's what we do. What's good about that approach is that we don't just hear about issues that people are having, they also contact us to provide us with praise, tell us they're pleased with the way that we're working and are impressed with the quality and high standard of our work.

"We interact differently with local communities and our clients, but we are always striving to keep the community's best interests at heart. If we are trusted to do this, then delivering a quality complex project safely becomes much easier."

For more information about Spencer Group, visit: <https://thespencergroup.co.uk/> or <https://directory.railbusinessdaily.com/directory/spencer-group/>

*Photo credit: Spencer Group*