

# A life in rail: Sally Shellum on her role helping to transform the railways

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When Sally Shellum started working in the rail industry she was told she'd probably either last a fortnight or be here forever.

Starting in Railtrack during its final days, spending over a decade at Network Rail and currently Divisional Director at Mott MacDonald, it is fair to say it is the latter that has proved to be the case.

"I think it is one of those industries that grabs you," she said. "I've always counted myself incredibly lucky and incredibly honoured to have the opportunity to make a difference through the work I've done in the rail industry."

"I'm really, really proud of some of the projects I've worked on. When you go over a junction that you've worked on, or you look at a station that is different because of something you've done, there is a great sense of pride in making a positive difference."

The rail industry was not an obvious career path for Sally. But a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and European Studies has stood her in good stead in her roles helping to transform the railways.

"That's the great thing about working in the railways," she said. It is such a diverse and inclusive industry that you don't have to be an engineer or a STEM focussed person.

"I've always gone the languages, sociology and arts kind of way and that has actually stood me in good stead when dealing with the engineering environment around being able to talk to people, communicate and get ideas across and write proposals."

Over the last 18 years Sally has undertaken a range of roles including Project Management and Sponsorship for Network Rail. She has also found time to achieve a Master's degree in Transport Planning and is currently completing a MSc in Major Programme Management.

"I've been very lucky and I've done project management in the traditional delivery sense and I've done sponsorship in the Network Rail sense of really early development works scoping requirements, securing funding and working with stakeholders," she said.

"In my last few years at Network Rail I did a lot of strategic planning associated with getting the signalling business ready for CP6.

"One of my proudest achievements has been working on the West Midlands re-signalling programme. I spent a lot of time working for Network Rail in my hometown of Birmingham.

"I was basically centralising all the 1960's signalling in the West Midlands area in modern operating centres. That was my first real introduction to the world of project management in the world of railway work.

"We did so many different projects within that programme and I think I had about 4 different roles at various times. I learnt so much from such a great group of people. That has to be one of the highlights so far."

Sally is currently Account Lead for Network Rail within Mott MacDonald and also heads up the rail account within APD.

Like every business, new working practices have been adapted overnight with a view to remote distancing and, remarkably, in the case of Mott MacDonald, without any real drop off in terms of work.

"It is about getting really close to the client and talking to people involved in the projects on a day-to-day basis just to understand the likelihood of the work and the changes," she said.

"I think overall it is such an exciting time for rail at the moment. Just look at what is coming in the next couple of decades with Northern Powerhouse Rail, HS2, East West Rail, and the Transpennine route upgrade.

"It is such an exciting thing to be able to watch and to be at the beginning of some great, great things for the UK rail industry.

“With the current situation it is really interesting to try and guess which way things are going as it is hard to understand the role of rail going forward from an infrastructure perspective.

“You have to cling to what you know is going to happen as a baseline and then you can start adding on the unknowns a little bit and start playing the contingencies and the planning side of it.”

Looking to the immediate future, Sally is looking to build on the success of the last few months in delivering in these unprecedented times.

She said: “We have a common vision around really wanting to provide good social value and social outcomes in everything we deliver and to make sure the projects we are involved in are shovel worthy as well as shovel ready.

“Mott MacDonald is able to offer that combination of huge engineering experience combined with the advisory project management/ commercial management world so the future looks promising.

“I have a focus very much on the Network Rail side of the client world and the opportunities that we are starting to see come through the design services framework, which we won earlier this year.

“We are seeing some of the frameworks really start getting underway with CP6 well into its second year, plus we are working with partners in the world of HS2 and hopefully East West Rail in the future. There is also the work we’re doing to support Northern Powerhouse Rail as part of Network Rail and Transport for the North.

“So overall it just feels really exciting and the ability to be able to inform some of these huge infrastructure projects as part of my role in Mott MacDonald just feels amazing.

“I really believe that rail infrastructure has such a huge part to play in the socio-economic future of the UK and the wider levelling up approach.

“We have a major part to play in that by either working on projects directly or making sure that we have good people to be able to provide their experience, knowledge and support to these programmes of works.”

*Sally Shellum, Divisional Director at Mott MacDonald, [www.mottmac.com](http://www.mottmac.com)*

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