

Delivering over £200 million worth of new railway stations in the West Midlands

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In the North West and Central region, infrastructure consultancy **AECOM** supports clients including Network Rail, Transport for Greater Manchester (TFGM) and Transport for West Midlands (TfWM). Director Conor Linnell told RBD how he and his team were helping to deliver over £200 million worth of new stations for the West Midlands – and why the industry must change its approach to innovation.

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

I oversee AECOM'S joint venture with SLC, via which we're delivering seven new stations in the West Midlands as part of the West Midlands Rail Programme, which is led by Transport for West Midlands and the West Midlands Rail Executive.

The first of these seven stations, Perry Barr, was completed last year in time for the Commonwealth Games. It was used by tens of thousands of people per event during the games themselves, which wouldn't have been possible if we hadn't opened it on time and within budget. It was a huge achievement.

Key to our success was all the stakeholders coming together as equals in what's called a Partner's Leadership Board, and there was no client hierarchy in the classic sense; we've built quite open and honest relationships. The games also provided a point of focus. Now, we're reflecting on how we can create that kind of impetus for the remaining six stations.

I'm in my third year at AECOM, and we've secured several other contracts through the Design Services Framework (DSF) with Network Rail. We're successfully delivering several key elements of the Manchester North Transformational project and have helped Network Rail under the DSF broker an agreement between the four suppliers. We've led the way with Network Rail and the procurement team and reached a point where we agree about how the work should be shared. Smart resource management is creating greater efficiency and certainty for the framework supply chain partners whilst demonstrating value for money to Network Rail.

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

One of the biggest lessons relates to the implementation of SPEED and PACE. The industry needs these innovations but can't ignore experience and context as this could result in conceptual designs which, despite meeting the requirements of the relevant GRIP stage, prove unviable when they reach the next stage. The principles of SPEED, PACE and MVP should be supported and lauded – but we need to be cognisant of buildability and risk as we seek to speed up and optimise design and delivery.

How can we build on efficiency realised during CP6?

The emerging innovative approach to consultant selection on the DSF is promising. Every time a client is faced with a different type of scaled opportunity, they have a whole host of procurement decisions to make, and a range of variables to consider. And we don't have a mechanism for determining who's best placed to deliver programmes – it's something that needs to be addressed if we're to operate more efficiently.

We also need to think about how to take the principles of SPEED and PACE, reinforce them, and build out from there. We've seen pockets of success and can learn from that. There are some benefits to autonomy, with every region doing things slightly differently – but it's about getting to an equitable state, where the core part of Network Rail is in balance with the five regions. The industry is striving towards that and looking to share best practice – especially around concepts like MVP. If we're going to see an improvement in terms of delivering more for less, at speed, organisations need to stop over specifying and embrace robust requirement driven solutions.

What are the priorities/objectives in your region and what does the industry need to do to achieve them?

Eoin O'Neill, Network Rail's Capital Delivery Director in North West and Central, has launched a new delivery model, which should prove smarter, better, and faster. It's been developed to address inefficiencies at handover points, and Eoin used the analogy of a relay race; individuals will focus on their own roles, while simultaneously looking back upstream and ahead to the end goal. For AECOM, the priority is understanding where we fit in, and how we can adopt and respond to what Eoin has instigated in a way

that makes us more responsive and agile.

Because of the way procurement will change in CP7 (with frameworks focused on D&B rather than specific design led frameworks, and lots targeted at contractors), AECOM also needs to change its approach. It will be about building lasting partnerships with contractors, whilst also ensuring that we maintain a relationship with Network Rail – and can warn them when potential risks arise.

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

One of rail's other big agendas is decarbonisation. The industry has set itself a target – but, when offered solutions in the form of new technologies, it is too risk-averse to adopt them. It can take an exceedingly long time to introduce something new to the network. Ultimately, UK rail wants innovation, and the associated savings and efficiencies, but could look to other sectors in terms of leveraging best practice in risk management.

The industry also needs to look at digitisation, which goes beyond train control. BIM is becoming the norm, but it's not the be-all-and-end-all; there's room to think more laterally about our approach to digital. In the Wales and Western region, AECOM is looking at manufacturing and automotive thinking, and how it could be used to drive efficiency.

We must think about digitisation – not just as a way of managing infrastructure – but in terms of how we design and deliver projects.

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

Prior to COVID, patronage had been increasing year-on-year – and, with investment and the introduction of Great British Railways, it would have continued to grow, or at least plateaued. Then the pandemic hit, and all the norms and travel patterns we'd become used to were disrupted. I am a train user myself and have noticed that patronage has steadily increased since lockdown measures were dropped. It also seems that Birmingham and Manchester recovered more quickly than London, which the industry didn't expect. Whether that trend will continue remains to be seen – but hopefully, train travel will become more stable soon.