

Romford station upgrade – managing the impact of COVID

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Network Rail’s construction works at Romford station continue to move forward to deliver step free access, a new entrance and a fully refurbished and improved ticket office, ready for the opening of the Elizabeth line.

In any normal year, keeping a station open to passengers while upgrading it presents a significant challenge, but doing so while maintaining safety for the construction staff and observing all social distancing guidance in a confined area has been exceptionally challenging for the team delivering the works.

Maroof Hossain, Network Rail’s project manager for the Romford station upgrade has been overseeing the works being undertaken by contractor VolkerFitzpatrick, since late 2018. Maroof explains how his team and VolkerFitzpatrick have been able to maintain safety for the workforce, station staff and passengers.

“When we first started to upgrade Romford, we had little idea of the challenges that we would encounter in March 2020. The team was already on site, working to modify an existing lift shaft and convert it into a lift usable by the public.

“Then in February last year, the situation with COVID meant we had to start taking measures on site to address the recommendations coming from the Government – to maintain distance and regularly wash our hands. We installed hand wash stations and started to implement social distancing, but it was clear that some planned work activities would be difficult to complete.

“We took the decision, with VolkerFitzpatrick, to shut down the site in late March 2020, for six weeks. We knew this would have an impact on our construction programme, but safety comes first. Thankfully, we were able to use this time to understand how we could resume work in a COVID safe way once we were allowed to restart.

“We’ve had to change the way we work to adhere to social distancing guidelines, for example how we carry out our briefings, working at a safe distance and in different shifts, and ensuring personal protective equipment (PPE) was made available for all staff in line with public health guidelines.

‘Working inside the station, these measures were so important to protect each other. But we also had to consider the safety of TfL station staff and those passengers and key workers who needed to still use the station.

“It’s been a very steep learning curve over the last 10 months and I’m really proud of how the team has pulled together and taken personal responsibility for everyone’s safety on site.”

VolkerFitzpatrick’s project manager, Adrian Pettigrew, has worked alongside Maroof since the project began, and has helped to implement many of the new procedures both teams are now working to, to ensure everyone goes home safe every day.

“The team has met the challenges brought by COVID-19 brilliantly. Romford Station is a very tight worksite operationally, and there is a direct interface between our teams and the general public – on a daily basis. This interaction has needed a strong attention to detailed planning from the very start.

“Our focus on completing this project only increased when COVID-19 impacted us. With the support of Network Rail’s project team, we introduced robust social distancing measures that not only impacted activities but holistically impacted the sequencing of our works. This meant that activities we’d previously planned to deliver concurrently were adapted so that we could manage contact between operatives, as well as the number of personnel on site.

“We have also had to overcome complications with the delivery of plant, materials and equipment to areas within the station. This was challenging as we could only perform some of our main works whilst swapping from operational to non-operational periods (i.e. day to night) and vice-versa.

“During our stand down period, we were afforded the opportunity to review our designs and ensure that the simplest of things, such as combined (two person) manual handling could be either reduced, or, if possible, eliminated. We also worked quite closely with the station’s franchise operator, MTR Elizabeth line, who provided ample access to ensure our teams could work effectively 24/7, which has allowed us to maintain the programme, whilst limiting social contact.

“Over Christmas, the existing ticket office was closed and all the ticketing facilities transferred to a temporary location inside the station. This has allowed the works to continue while providing the required ticketing facilities for passengers.

“The recent Christmas period was the most important phase for the project. We successfully migrated all MTR Elizabeth line staff into their new temporary ticket office and delivered the main station demolition works.

“The programme ahead sees us completing our main civils works by March 2021, with the intention of progressing the main fit-out and building services through to project completion. To do this we will maintain the same diligence - as we have done since restarting in May 2020 - and monitor the impacts of COVID-19, so that the works can be completed in the safest manner possible. This can only be achieved with the support of our stakeholders, who recognise the challenging climate we’ve all found ourselves in, and who have shown us great support throughout.”

Romford has already seen significant changes in recent years in preparation for the Elizabeth line, including the extension of its platforms and changes to the platform edge in 2018. This change was to accommodate the new full-length Class 345 trains, which are due to be introduced on the route later this year, and the installation of cameras to allow the trains’ drivers to safely see all the way down the platform.

When the current works are complete, the station will have lift access from ground level to the mezzanine level and platforms 3, 4 and 5, a fully refurbished ticket office and a new entrance onto the Battis Walkway, providing better access to the station.

The Romford station upgrade is expected to be completed by the end of 2021, though it remains under review and subject to future guidance on social distancing.

Photo credit: Network Rail