

SHARE AND CARE

‘Customer First’ is the latest buzz phrase doing the rounds in major projects. Maybe it should be implemented first in infrastructure planning. Jackie Whitelaw reports.

Customer First

Here’s a tale of two tunnels. One is wanted by local people but is not being offered; another is being driven forward, but with mixed local response and significant national and international opposition. Both are attracting approbation because of a perceived lack of consultation.

In February, plans for the A5036 Port of Liverpool Access Road were kicked into judicial review following an objection by Sefton Council which accused Highways England of failing to consult on a tunnel option for a £250M road that was planned through Rimrose Valley country park.

The second is at Stonehenge where proposals to dig into the archaeologically rich landscape of Britain’s greatest ancient asset and a World Heritage site to boot to create tunnel portals are causing uproar.

“We think Highways England needs to review the way it consults on road schemes to ensure that a full range of options is included,” says local

KEY FACTS

47,000
Number of responses to one highway project in 2016

£250M
Estimated cost of the controversial Port of Liverpool Access Road

groups campaigner for Campaign for Better Transport Chris Todd.

“Not once has there been public discussion on whether there should actually be a tunnel at Stonehenge or perhaps a sensible alternative scheme that moved the trunk traffic away,” says former highway engineer and one-time mayor of local town Amesbury Andy Rhind-Tutt.

“The trunk element of the road could be re-routed to support the south Wiltshire economy as well as the West Country, with the road unlocking daily gridlock on the A36, A338 and A30,” he adds.

What is being demonstrated here is that, however laudable the end game

“Highways England needs to review the way it consults on road schemes to ensure that a full range of options is included”

Road protesters immobilise construction plant at Twyford Down



of major infrastructure, if the ultimate customer – the public – feels it has not been consulted early enough, that it has not been offered alternatives and that it has had no involvement in the development of the idea, it will kick back. And the feeling that infrastructure is being done to them, not for them, will grow.

There are countless other examples, not least the UK’s biggest current infrastructure project, High Speed 2, where the intended end game has already been re-written at least three times in a bid to quell public opposition.

This matters particularly right now. In the summer the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) will come out with its first assessment of the nation’s future infrastructure needs. No-one knows yet what it will include (except perhaps its new chairman, past ICE president Sir John Armitt), but power stations, reservoirs, railways, roads and airport runways could well be at the forefront of the public’s consciousness following its publication.

And the impression that the country operates a “we know best, it’s good for you and don’t worry your heads” approach to infrastructure



Public engagement must happen early and provide opportunity to influence decisions

understand the process.

Road investment strategies, rail enhancement delivery plans, water industry asset management plans, and so on provide more detail but consultations do not really engage the general public, however hard project promoters may try.

It is not until the individual projects that will deliver national strategy arrive almost fully-formed for public consultation that communities really notice what is going on.

By then it is too late to have the debate about whether a scheme should be a road or a railway, or whether it should go north or go south rather than through, say, a World Heritage Site.

It is true that there are very lengthy public consultations before projects apply for planning permission and there is a six month examination by the Planning Inspectorate once applications have been made where voices for and against can be heard. The Planning Inspectorate then makes recommendations to the relevant secretary of state. But increasingly there are arguments that the public – the ultimate customer – feels like it is being involved too late to make a difference.

“Consultations are vital to a project’s success, but are fixed periods in a programme,” says Martin McCrink, a director of specialist communications and engagement consultancy Copper.

“Our proprietary research shows when the public is presented with an individual project, it feels it has missed out on the first chapters of the story including the need; the sectors that require investment; the benefit to the country and benefit to where they live and work,” says McCrink.

“This leads to an investment-benefit disconnect that can result in people feeling that individual projects happen ‘to them’ rather than ‘for them’,” he adds.

Davies also believes more and earlier public involvement would help schemes gain acceptance and head off expensive opposition later in the

planning is unlikely to be the best way to get the population behind the commission’s ambition.

The commission itself is conscious of the need to bring the public with it in its deliberations.

As Armitt said at the ICE last September: “Across the sector, we all need to do more to consult and listen to a wide range of views to ensure we identify where the needs are, and to secure the support of the public as one of the country’s biggest infrastructure investors.”

The big problem appears to be when and how that consultation takes place. Does it need to be much, much earlier and more open and with more active engagement?

“The processes through which major infrastructure projects in the UK gain planning permission can contribute to local feelings of antagonism and unfairness which leads to opposition,” says think tank Institute for Government’s infrastructure lead Nick Davies.

National Policy Statements, against which all schemes considered to be Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects are judged, do go out for consultation but are necessarily vague, he says, and more for the professional organisations that

WHAT IS CUSTOMER FIRST?

Being customer-first means making decisions based on who your customers are as human beings, not just data points, says Carlos Dominguez, president of social media management company Sprinklr.

There are now companies that will offer a “Putting the Customer First” accreditation mark, and that too is gaining popularity with organisations such as Mersey Rail and Capita among those seeking and receiving the plaudit.

But can the concept be genuinely applied to infrastructure planning?

Turner & Townsend head of infrastructure south & national commercial services David Whysall

believes it can.

“Regulators and clients need to set up new programmes in a way that prioritises the end user, firmly embedding customer outcomes into operating models,” he says.

“For example, water regulator Ofwat demands that operators orientate their entire business plans around customer-focused objectives: service, price, resilience and innovation.”

But more must be done to communicate in clear language, he says.

“Put simply, our sector can do more to educate customers about the benefits of infrastructure investment.

“We need to translate the technical work into meaningful messages to customers,” he says.

“What we did to Twyford Down was outrageous. It is the worst piece of civil engineering I have ever seen in my life”

process.

“The government has tried to streamline the consultation process with the result that it often builds up trouble,” he observes.

“Local input often comes too late in the process to be part of a constructive dialogue about available options and if people feel it is unfair and their voices are not heard they will seek other ways to get their opinions noticed.”

Certainly the promoter of another of the UK major road projects, the Lower Thames Crossing, would argue that public involvement is happening early – and that such early engagement must go broader than local communities.

Highways England project director Tim Jones describes how a 2016 route consultation attracted more than 47,000 responses (*see feature p44*).

To Jones, local people and road users must have their voices heard: “You have to ask their [road users’] views as well. They are as much part of a public consultation as the local people,” he says. “Listen to them, and find a way of actually talking to them about what is in it for them. Why is it important?”

By engaging early with both groups Jones is determined that his scheme avoids the pitfalls of earlier highways schemes such as the Newbury bypass and Twyford Down. Both projects provoked mass protests. Twyford remains indefensible, he says.

“I think what we did to Twyford Down was absolutely outrageous. It is the worst piece of civil engineering I think I have ever seen in my life”, says Jones.

In 1991, protesters camped out on site and chained themselves to plant in an attempt to stop an extension of the M3 at historic Twyford Down in



Hampshire, which has links to pre-Roman settlements.

Although the road was eventually completed in 1994, it became a symbol of destructive engineering and was described in Parliament in 1994 as “the most controversial British motorway project ever to start construction.”

So how do Jones and the rest of the infrastructure sector avoid judicial reviews or, in the worst case, a repeat of the industry-reputation damaging Twyford Down battles?

The Institute for Government (IFG) thinks the UK should look to France for a better system of public engagement.

In its report *How to transform infrastructure decision making in the UK* it advocates the creation of a Commission for Public Engagement based in part on the success of France’s Commission Nationale du Débat Public (CNDP).

“The CNDP was established in the late 1980s in a similar context to that facing the UK now: declining central state power and well-organised opposition to strategically important [in France, particularly rail] projects,” IFG explains. “In response, the French government set up the CNDP to ensure ‘public participation in the

Stonehenge: Avoiding another Twyford Down?

decision making processes of major infrastructure projects of national interest’.

The CNDP hosts local public debates on contentious major projects in all sectors, not just rail, as early as possible in their development. All participants, for or against a project, are given equal resources to make their cases. The CNDP then summarises these views in a report to which project sponsors must respond.

The CNDP is neutral and trusted. It has no ability to enforce recommendations but most project sponsors act on them. “Of the 61 projects on which the CNDP facilitated debates between 2002 and 2012, 38 made modifications, including 25 that changed their plans based on options that emerged

“Giving the public a real say in policy and planning can be extremely effective”

from the public debate,” IFG says. Some schemes have been cancelled altogether. Those that go forward do so with public support.

“French project sponsors have come to view the CNDP process as a valuable exercise in public engagement and data collection rather than a burden or a threat,” says IFG.

Systra director of consulting Boris Rowenczyn has experience of the impact of the CNDP process.

“Projects are debated before the options are decided or during development.

“The public debate can help choose between options even between whether a rail route should be high speed or conventional rail, for example. And project sponsors will listen to the public and make changes.”

Recent debates have covered plans for a £1.8bn to £2.8bn high speed suburban rail line in Lille.

The discussion has resulted in a separate study to see if improving Lille Flandres Station would be an alternative.

And in Paris, debate on proposals for a Bus Rapid Transit scheme in the suburbs demonstrated that the route was not the best for the public and significant changes were made.

People understand the need for infrastructure and the early debates allow those in favour as well as those opposing a scheme to have their voices heard. IFG would like a Commission for Public Engagement to conduct the public conversations with communities affected as early as publication of the NIC strategy and through the subsequent National Policy Statements.

“Giving the public a real say in policy and planning can be extremely effective,” says Davies.

“It can build consensus and constructive dialogue around controversial subjects – giving a voice to supporters as well as opponents and linking local discussions about impacts to national discussions about needs.

“But to be effective, public engagement must happen early, consistently and provide communities with a genuine opportunity to influence decisions.” **N**

DESIGN PANELS

“We are there to help projects achieve their maximum potential”

In the absence of a Commission for Public Engagement or similar, design review panels have been set up to give the public confidence in major infrastructure.

The highest profile design panel right now is unquestionably the one overseeing the High Speed 2 (HS2) project.

Led by dRMM Architects founder Sadie Morgan, its role is to oversee the design of the high speed line, helping to ensure that through great design it delivers real economic, social and environmental benefits for the whole country. Most recently it has put out indicative designs for the Colne Valley viaduct, which set a high aesthetic standard for the contracting JV to deliver to.

But it is not the first.

“The panels are often the forum where technology and the public overlap,” says Knight Architects director Martin Knight.

“Where questions like who a piece of infrastructure is for and how it impacts them are more important even than what the structural design is and how it is built.”

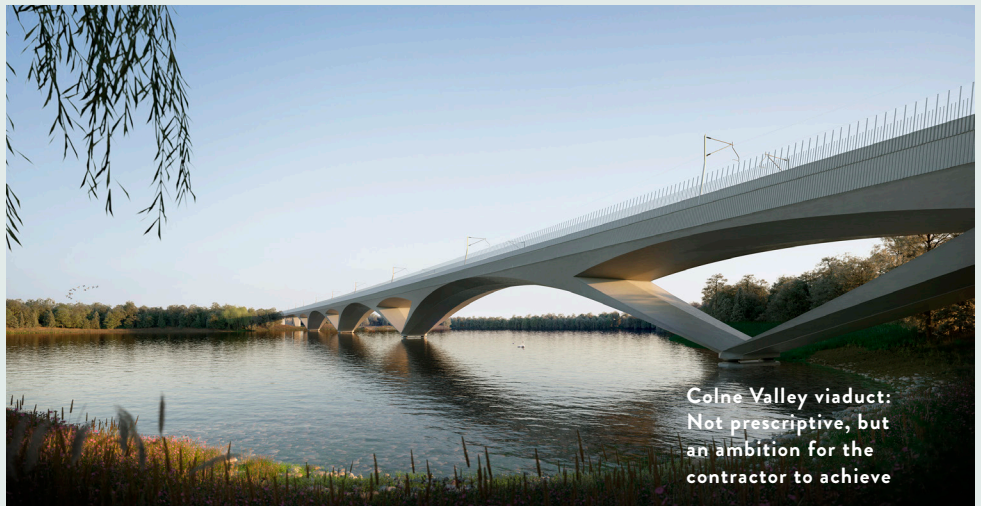
Knight has sat on the Design Commission for Wales for 11 years and has seen how beneficial a panel can be. “They are a very positive thing; we

are there to help projects achieve their maximum potential and beneficially influence design at the beginning, before planning permission, when changes add value at the least cost. The best time for projects to go to a panel is when the need is established and a business case is understood, but when the approach to design is still being formed.”

He is currently “benched” from the HS2 design panel because his practice was commissioned to work with Atkins on that Colne Valley Viaduct specimen design. The design was developed around criteria that include whether it fits the landscape, maintains views and landscape flow as well as being well proportioned and elegant.

He stresses the design is not prescriptive but sets the ambition for the contractor to achieve. He also acknowledges that there will have to be refinement during the contractors’ detailed design. “Ideally the viaduct wouldn’t have bearings in the wet zone and other options should be explored, but the specimen wasn’t prepared in the absence of technical issues,” he insists.

“The braking loads of high speed trains have been highly influential, for example. But you have to start with who the design is for; creating something our descendants 100 years from now will be happy with.”



Colne Valley viaduct:
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