

# PROJECT CLOSURE AND OPERATIONAL READINESS



Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on 13th June 2018

Smart Motorways Programme Delivery Director Tony Turton asked a revealing question of delegates to the Major Projects Association's seminar on project closure and operational readiness.

*'How many of you,' he queried, 'are completer finishers (according to the [Belbin assessment of team roles](#))? Because if you want to get a project completely finished, you need some on the scheme. Otherwise the last 4% of the job is never done.'* Out of an audience of over 70 just three people said that was their skill. There, in a nub, was one of the core issues facing the major projects world when dealing with project closure and operational readiness.

In the late 1980s Jan Carlzon transformed SAS (Scandinavian Airlines) into the best in Europe from what had been 'the sickest of men'. He said, *'The first 15-second encounter between a passenger and the airline sets the tone of the entire company in the mind of the customer; it is the moment of truth.'*

All projects have a 'moment of truth'. The opening of Terminal 5 (T5) is a classic example – the well-executed project was overshadowed by problems with baggage handling. So much so that the BBC asked: *'What went wrong at Heathrow's T5?'*

This Major Projects Association event set out to explore the critical factors for achieving smooth transition between the building phase and the start of operations. Most project managers are by their nature keen on start-ups and driving a scheme forward. But by the time the job is winding up and preparing for handover, they are often off to the next role, leaving behind the dotting of i's, crossing of t's and gathering of all the relevant documents and sign-offs.

Yet a project's success is measured by the client, operator and public in how well it performs on the day it opens. However brilliantly construction may have gone, if a scheme falls flat on its face on opening day or is delayed at the last moment it will be remembered as a failure.

*'When should you plan for transition from construction project to operation? **FROM DAY ONE.** Implementing early operator involvement so the operator becomes part of the overall scheme will give better outcomes.'*  
[Neil Searle, Project Director, Mott MacDonald](#)

## PLAN FOR OPERATION FROM DAY ONE

There was agreement among the speakers that planning for operation should be carried out at the start of any project, including best practice for maintenance which impacts on operation. Yet there was recognition that most projects focus on risk management during delivery, almost forgetting that the end game is a successful, live project. The solution, it was agreed, was early involvement of operators in the delivery team, with plans for transition, operation and asset management considered at initiation.

*'You need the right people to drive the project and the right, probably different, people to complete it.'*  
[Noel Connolly, Head of Programme Management – Northern Programmes, Network Rail](#)

## PLAN FOR CLOSE-OUT FROM DAY ONE

This might include acceptance that at a certain stage the people delivering the project may need to be swapped with people skilled at completion. It certainly requires a transition stage or two in the overall plan. Network Rail, for example, set out an entry into service stage for the Ordsall Chord connection between Manchester's Victoria, Oxford Road and Piccadilly stations alongside seven construction phases. The entry into service stage set out mandatory deliverables for areas including engineering, testing and commissioning, maintenance and route publications, and driver training for the key stakeholders involved in each.

*'Open is not finished.'*  
[Tony Turton, Smart Motorways Programme Delivery Director, Highways England](#)

## ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS FROM DAY ONE

Stakeholders include the public, politicians, landowners, operators, delivery partners and the supply chain. Working with stakeholders from development through delivery to operation creates a united sense of purpose, to celebrate success and provide support when there are problems. Engaging stakeholders helps build understanding that projects are not stand-alone solutions, but solutions that provide benefits.

*'Everyone wants to be part of a success story. If you build relations with stakeholders they will want to work with you to help you overcome challenges.'*

Liz West, Head of Stakeholder Management and Consultation, WSP

## KEEP RECORDS UP TO DATE FROM DAY ONE

All projects should be able to hand over a building information model complete with all the as-built data, warranty information, testing frequency requirements and so on. So far that is not often the case. Keep records as you go along, rather than trying to gather them all at the end, the speakers advised. And agree IT formats between project team and operator or maintainer at the start of the job. If parties change during the process, make sure aligned information formats are part of any new deal.

*'We need robust processes and procedures but must not hide behind them.'*

Alex Cropper, Head of Projects, Transport for Greater Manchester

## LEARN LESSONS AND FEED BACK FROM DAY ONE

This applies to lessons learned during project delivery but also lessons from assets in operation. United Utilities, for example, is looking in detail at the life cycle of its assets and measuring their performance. Engineers, now newly deployed from a centralised office to bases out in the field, are expected to improve performance of these assets, and the innovations they introduce are communicated around the business and into development of new assets.

*'Apply all the learning. Write it down, pass it back, pass it on.'*

Vicki Ridge, Lead Asset Integration Engineer, United Utilities

## CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS AT PROJECT INCEPTION FOR OPERATIONAL READINESS

Peter Cushing was involved in the development of Manchester Metrolink for 25 years, most recently as Metrolink Director with responsibility for the day-to-day operation and delivery of the £1.8bn capital programme. He shared some extra success factors from a client point of view that make the difference between success and failure in the transition from project to operation.

- **Collaboration:** Between all work streams and with other sectors and industries involved.
- **One programme:** Integrate all the collaboration into one version of the truth that everyone supports.
- **One shared vision for the entire team:** Make sure everyone understands why you are building your project. For instance, the Metrolink extension to the airport was not at heart about connecting the city centre with the planes, but providing the 0.5m people on the route with access to jobs, leisure and to encourage social mobility and inclusion. The line is busy from 05.45am to midnight and the majority of tickets are sold to people making journeys within the route. The vision should not be about how the project works but what it does for people.

## POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- How can new technology such as artificial intelligence and neural networks improve asset management planning?
- Is there too much focus on process, not enough on people?
- How can we concentrate delivery on benefits as well as time/cost/quality?

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