### Environmental Assessment – Innovation born of compressed programme.

Environmental impact assessment (EIA) practitioners from AECOM discuss the challenge presented by the need to deliver environmental assessment services in a compressed timescale, without impinging on robustness and quality, and ensuring effective outcomes.

When a proposal for undertaking a regrade of the fibre optic infrastructure on the M6 for 67km northwards of Junction 32 was first identified, it immediately presented a challenge in terms of the need for approval of the environmental assessment work, and the tight programme proposed.

The programme was dictated by the nature of the funding, which was fiscal stimulus money. It was clear from the outset that there would not be enough time to undertake a full EIA and publish an Environmental Statement within the proposed timescale. It was therefore necessary to think about alternative and possibly innovative approaches to getting the scheme approved by the HA, ensuring consultees requirements were addressed, whilst staying within the HA published guidelines and EIA regulations.

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<th>The approach taken included the following key elements:</th>
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<td>- Early identification of key environmental constraints, and focussing efforts on addressing these from the outset.</td>
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<td>- Adopting a truly iterative approach to screening – ensuring that any likely significant effects were designed out, or avoided via changes to working methods and, hence, avoiding the need for a formal EIA.</td>
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<td>- Early engagement with statutory consultees with responsibility for the key topics identified (Landscape and Visual and Ecology). This resulted in the avoidance of impacts on three protected species, which therefore required no further survey.</td>
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<td>- Early and ongoing engagement with the HA Environment Team to agree and update the approach as the scheme developed.</td>
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<td>- Early and ongoing involvement with the scheme designers and contractors to look for opportunities to design out potential effects, or adopt construction techniques that would remove the potential source of impacts.</td>
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<td>- Taking a risk based approach to ecological and landscape sensitivity and agreeing up front a strategy for dealing with the higher risk areas.</td>
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A critical element of the work was to identify a way to maximise the influence on the design of the cabinets and transmission stations, especially due to the sensitivity of some of the surrounding landscapes, whilst avoiding a lengthy series of design changes and consultations following preliminary design – this needed to be right first time.

Landscape and Visual Approach

The HA identified a requirement for a holistic approach to be taken for the assessment of the landscape and visual effects of roadside technology schemes along the M6, where it passes close to two National Park extension areas and an AONB. It was agreed with the HA that this could be achieved using an overarching landscape design statement.

The objective of the landscape design statement was to consider the innovative design options available to ensure that the infrastructure proposals were sympathetic to the landscape. The objectives for this approach were described as follows:

- To reduce/minimise the potential for the gradual urbanisation of the motorway corridor;
- To minimise potential landscape and visual effects on the setting of the motorway; and
- To ensure that the original design intention of the M6 was not diluted.

The approach taken to develop the landscape design statement included:

- Review of current design standards,
- Review of alternative approaches to infrastructure in the UK and overseas
- Consultation with the Highways Agency
- Internal design innovation workshop.
- Contact with suppliers.

The design statement took a three stage approach:

1. Enhancement of the existing situation – through rationalisation of existing technology infrastructure where possible;
2. Avoidance of the potential for adverse effects – through re-use of existing technology infrastructure where possible and measures such as micro-siting; and
3. Mitigation to minimise unavoidable impacts – through use of appropriate design measures (use of wooden fencing, natural stone facing etc) which responded to the setting of each site, assessed on an individual site by site basis, but with regard to an overall design language to provide a consistency of approach across the wider context.
The key consultees in the two adjacent national parks, Natural England and the AONB board signed up to the landscape design statement approach, allowing the design to proceed with a level of pre-approval.

This was not intended to completely replace the need for individual assessments; however it did provide a consistent framework within which to undertake individual assessments and to ensure that design responses were coherent. It also ensured that the preliminary designs were largely consistent.

The result was that the scheme designers had a clear framework within which to undertake the design work, and this resulted in the draft designs rapidly advancing to detailed design and construction. The HA were particularly pleased with the approach, which has since been used elsewhere in the UK.

This article was written as a contribution to the EIA Quality Mark’s commitment to improving EIA practice.

| Mark Welsby is a Principal Landscape Architect and Nigel Pilkington is a Regional Director, Environment at AECOM |

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