**Pre-scoping – seeking very early engagement on the scope of the EIA for London’s Garden Bridge**

The Garden Bridge is one of the most unique projects that London has seen of late. The proposed 366-metre bridge will not only improve links between the north and south sides of the River Thames, but it aims to create a public garden, which will be home to an abundance of plant and tree species.

As well as undertaking the engineering design for the bridge, Arup performed a number of key services to support the planning application including the environmental, health and equalities impact assessments. In this article I will focus on the EIA, specifically looking at the work we did leading up to receiving scoping opinions from the local authorities. As with the bridge itself, the approach we took was innovative, unique and challenging.

Like all consultants when faced with a new project, the first question we asked ourselves when faced with the Garden Bridge was “what do we need to cover in the EIA?” The Garden Bridge sits in a location that is sensitive for a number of reasons – there are protected views, valuable heritage assets and a big river with its ecological and hydrological complexities. But on the other hand, this pedestrian bridge would be designed to sit sensitively in this environment.

We were also keen as ever to deliver a concise, proportionate, cost-effective Environmental Statement, and avoid producing a lengthy assessment that said very little.

As a means of better tailoring the process and rather than taking the usual line of considering what topics should be scoped out, we asked the specialists to convince us why their topic should be scoped in. We provided the specialists with scheme information and then held short bespoke meetings with each of them to go through this.

This really challenged the specialists to enter a very project-specific, site-specific mind set from the start and ended any assumptions that their topic was scoped in and going through the usual motions.

Once we had come to our own internal view of the scope of the EIA, we started a period of direct engagement with stakeholders. In a typical scoping process there is little direct contact with stakeholders, as it is the local planning authority that handles this. Instead, we sought to take the initiative and have productive dialogue with stakeholders prior to going through the formal scoping process. We prepared and issued ‘pre-scoping papers’ tailored for specific stakeholders or groups of stakeholders with common interests. These papers set out our proposed scope and methodology and asked questions of the stakeholders including, most pertinently, whether they agreed with the scope. Our follow up correspondence, and in some cases meetings, allowed us to constructively resolve any differences of opinion with the stakeholders.

Having established a good understanding of the views of the stakeholders, we then proceeded to request formal scoping opinions. We had to request scoping opinions from Westminster City Council and the London Borough of Lambeth as the project spanned two local authority areas. We prepared a Scoping Report which brought together and updated the earlier pre-scoping papers and submitted this to the authorities. Approximately five weeks later we received two scoping opinions.
Looking back over the process what did we learn? The challenge to the specialists regarding their scope was very valuable in forcing them to adopt a very project-specific, site-specific mind set from the outset and consequently focussing on the environmental aspects that are really important to the project context. We now do this as standard on our EIA projects.

Taking the initiative to engage early with the stakeholders also yielded benefits. As well as leading to constructive dialogue that continued through the project, it allowed us to resolve a number of design and EIA issues at an early stage. The result of this was that we had very few surprises when the scoping opinions were received, further streamlining the process. However, in some cases we faced some resistance from stakeholders to the idea of scoping topics out of the EIA. In some cases, and this was perhaps to be expected considering the number of stakeholders involved, we were requested to reinstate certain topics in order to deal with the potential perceptions of stakeholders and as a result we were not quite as successful at reducing the scope of the EIA as originally envisioned.

With some other stakeholders we faced different issues. In today’s resource-constrained environment, some stakeholders simply cannot support this level of engagement.

Would we do this again? I certainly think this approach, if executed successfully, adds value for high profile and complex projects.

Furthermore, whilst the approach above does involve additional resource (although it’s perhaps not as much as one would expect), once it’s counter balanced against the typical work required for the scoping and assessment stages of a project and the potential savings to be had from scoping out more EIA topics, the benefits of this approach certainly outweigh the negatives.

The bridge will become home to an abundance of wildlife-friendly tree and plant species

Brendan Cuddihy, Environmental Consultant, Arup, October 2015.

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