

Crossrail boss warns of tunnelling talent exodus



Tunnel vision: The Crossrail scheme is on track but its chief executive is warning of a future talent drain abroad Times
photographer, Ben Gurr

Robert Lea Industrial Editor
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Britain faces losing 3,500 highly skilled civil engineers and tunnelling specialists abroad if there is no new big infrastructure project ready to take over from the £14.8 billion Crossrail development from East to West London, the scheme's chief executive has warned.

The project stands poised to pass the halfway mark in the 26 miles of tunnels being dug out underneath the capital, but — with no final decisions on the proposed HS2 rail line from London to Birmingham and beyond, or the 16-mile Thames Tideway “supersewer”, or on Crossrail 2, a southwest-to-northeast trans-London rail route — workers on Crossrail are being wooed by projects abroad.

Favoured locations would be the huge construction projects in Qatar ahead of the 2022 football World Cup, elsewhere around the Gulf — especially Saudi Arabia — and in the emerging nations of South-East Asia.

According to Andrew Wolstenholme — the former army officer who joined Crossrail as chief executive two years ago after leading the construction of Heathrow's Terminal 5 — one of its biggest legacies should be the “economic value” it has created in training up 3,500 tunnelling specialists.

He said: “In terms of our consultant and contractor resources, we now have a UK capability. We have reacquired the skills to deliver major tunnelling programmes.”

“Terminal 5, [the re-generation of London's] King's Cross, the Olympics, Crossrail ... There is increasing confidence in the reputation of the UK for delivering mega-projects on time, on cost, to a world-class standard.”

However, “if there is a two-year discontinuity between major infrastructure projects, our tunnelling capability will go overseas and find projects elsewhere.

“The supply chains really need to go on to a Crossrail 2 or an HS2 or a Thames Tideway within the next two years.”

Mr Wolstenholme said that a failure to do so would undermine that economic value. “The history of getting these major infrastructure programmes to achieve political alignment, to achieve a funding model and to get them to the start line is something that we find quite difficult in this country.

“It is very important that central government understands the value in having [big infrastructure] programmes because it enables the industry to equip itself and allows the sector to move on to the next big programme.

“There are many lessons from the last four years of Crossrail that can be taken forward to the next generation of projects. If we were to provide a learning book to Crossrail 2 or HS2, it would be about the development of agreements, management and design, the procurement and clinical mobilisation of a huge supply chain.”

“Yet in the UK we almost instinctively want to start with a clean sheet of paper again.”

Mr Wolstenholme confirmed that Crossrail was on schedule and on budget for the full opening of the network from December 2018. Of the 42km of new tunnelling, 20km is complete. The excavations for the ten new big stations are 35 per cent finished.

The second half of the programme will be dominated by the fitting of the stations and the installation of the track and signalling systems. “The second half is the difficult time, but we are ... hitting our milestones.”

- The company that makes monitoring equipment for Crossrail has put itself up for sale for an estimated £30 million (Juliet Samuel writes).

Itmsoil has an £18.5 million contract with Crossrail to supply 32,000 sensors in 15 sites, ensuring that the tunnelling does not cause collapses or destabilise parts of London. It recently hired Cavendish Corporate Finance to manage a sale and has attracted interest from a long list of trade buyers, some from Germany.

Based on a standard industry multiple of the company’s profits, which were £4.2 million last year, the sale is likely to value it at about £30 million. The company declined to comment.

12 comments



 Michael Daventry

1 person listening

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MOF

October 01, 2013 11:14

This is just to influence the argument for HS2. I'm not convinced for HS2 so let them go elsewhere.

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RamRod

October 01, 2013 18:40

Wherever reliance is placed upon the Government the UK loses ability and talent - it happened in the Water Industry in the supply chain where UK's innovation once led the world - no more I am afraid the Government regulation led to stop start which led Engineers to look and move elsewhere during the periods there was no work - imagine telling a Doctor he would not be needed for two years - its the same equivalent - so if the UK wishes to lose its engineering talent and excellence just let the Governments carry on as they are at the moment and they will succeed.

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philipds

September 30, 2013 21:41

Well I'm a chartered civil engineer who left the UK to work overseas 30 years ago, and wild horses wouldn't persuade me to return.

A combination of increased responsibility at an early age, interesting projects, and tax-free remuneration packages that would make a city banker think about a change of career make working overseas a 'no-brainer' for me.

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MOF

October 01, 2013 11:15

@philipds So no loyalty for your old country then?

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RamRod

October 01, 2013 18:45

Perhaps the Country needs to understand that undervalued professionals who are told sorry, no work for a couple of years, will go overseas - carry on like tis and do not be surprised if there are no engineers to support your needs. Of course you can always import this ability - that is if you have anything to sell in return.....

It is a sad thing to say, but those who have shown loyalty to their country have ended up undervalued and a lot worse off than those who have left our shores.....

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Gilesebop

September 30, 2013 20:14

They are asking for the London North/South link or the Paddington to Victoria link that enables high speed links from Heathrow to Gatwick per chance? Admittedly these are useful projects.

HS2 I suppose is the prize they really want.

How about a tunnel from North Wales to Northern Ireland?

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christopher ledger

September 30, 2013 18:10

I do not see this special pleading as a reason to spend in excess of £70bn on a project which has no real merit!

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Tim Duckworth

September 30, 2013 17:26

Same story with shipbuilding and nuclear engineering skills. The sought after opportunities to provide continuity and thus contribute to economic robustness are what politically joined up thinking could achieve if the intent was really there.

However non engineering, non technical politicians continue to fiddle with their little irrelevancies.....

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RamRod

October 01, 2013 18:47

How true - stop an activity and you loose the skill and ability - Nuclear is a great example of this.

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Text

September 30, 2013 16:54

BR said the same when a "rolling programme" of electrification & resignalling wasn't likely to happen! The skilled workforce should definitely be redeployed from Crossrail to Crossrail 2, HS2, or other key rail projects requiring these capabilities!

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Dougie Black

September 30, 2013 16:39

Sounds like tunnel vision.

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RB

September 30, 2013 13:27

Boring article.

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