

Site welfare at Tideway

What are the issues?

There is a legal requirement for contractors and clients to provide adequate welfare facilities for workers on construction sites. This includes “... washing, toilet, rest and changing facilities, and somewhere clean to eat and drink during breaks”¹. For many people the stereotypical image of site welfare would be a portacabin or portaloo - reflecting the transitory nature of construction work.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the standard of site welfare in the UK has improved over the years – particularly on larger projects – and some clients and contractors have tried to challenge industry conventions by providing facilities that look and feel different to those normally found on construction sites². However, most still provide only the basic minimum welfare facilities required.

Arguably part of the reason for this is the lack of evidence about the costs and benefits of providing “better” welfare facilities – or, indeed, what constitutes “better” welfare facilities. There has been little or no research into workers’ perceptions of welfare facilities or the impact of different standards of welfare facilities on worker productivity, health, wellbeing or safety. However, research into other areas of the built environment illustrates the impact that peoples’

physical environment has on how they feel and behave.

Industry benefits and opportunities

- Providing better welfare facilities may help to improve the image of construction work and attract more women and younger people to the industry
- It may also help construction industry demonstrate that it values its workers in the same way that other industries do
- Studying site welfare at Tideway will help to create an evidence base about the costs and benefits of providing better welfare facilities and provide insights into which elements of ‘transformational’ welfare facilities work well or not as well

As part of its aspiration to be transformational, Tideway sought to provide welfare facilities that were better than those found on comparable major infrastructure projects – and more akin to the facilities found in other industries. The commitment that Tideway made to workers on the project was that *“Our canteens and toilets/washrooms are going to be better than anything you have ever seen – on or off a site!”*³

¹ <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg293.pdf>

² For instance, the welfare at Lendlease’s Elephant & Castle development, which we visited as part of our research.

³ Quotation taken from the senior management presentation at EPIC



What was done?

In 2015 Tideway and their main works contractors (MWCs) issued joint agreed minimum standards (JAMS) for site welfare. The JAMS set out 79 different requirements for welfare, many of which were beyond those legally required. Examples include *“high street standard promotion of healthy eating”* and *“WiFi and use of IT facilities for booking flights, trains etc.”*

Tideway subsequently defined three grades of welfare facility:

- Grade A - Tideway transformational
- Grade B – The joint agreed minimum standards
- Grade C – The construction industry norm

The welfare facilities at Tideway’s main drive sites have gone through three main phases, reflecting the different stages of mobilisation and site set up. Each phase has been a qualitative improvement on the previous phase.

The final (phase 3) welfare facilities at the main drive sites at East (Chambers Wharf) and Central (Kirtling Street) are to Grade B standard. The phase 3 welfare facilities at West (Carnwath Road) has been designed to Grade A standard. The comparative impact and benefits of Grade A and B welfare facilities are something that will be investigated as part of our longitudinal project-wide study funded by IOSH⁴.

What did we do?

Our review of the welfare facilities at Tideway is ongoing, reflecting the different phases of provision⁵. To date our review has involved:

- Visiting (and experiencing) the welfare facilities at each of the main drive sites (and some of the satellite sites) during the different stages of mobilisation
- Conducting focus groups with frontline workers at two of the main drive sites in the spring and summer of 2017
- Carrying out interviews with a wide variety of people working on Tideway, including senior managers
- Reviewing project documentation and worker feedback collected by or on behalf of the MWCs
- Attending and observing meetings where elements of welfare provision have been discussed.

What did we find?

The standard of welfare facilities was important to the frontline workers we spoke to – although when talking about what mattered to them, workers tended to focus on the ‘basics’ rather than more ‘transformational’ aspects of site welfare. For instance,

“It’s good. I think it’s alright... I mean I don’t think they could do actually much more. I mean we’ve got everything we need really”

In many cases, workers just wanted welfare facilities that were clean and warm.

The welfare facilities at Tideway were generally perceived (by frontline workers and office-based staff) to be ‘good’. Some people felt that the welfare facilities were better than they’d experienced elsewhere; others felt that they were to a similar standard. Such

⁴ The Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) and Tideway are supporting our longitudinal research to trace the effectiveness of health and safety interventions throughout the Tideway project

⁵ For example, phase 3 at Carnwath Road was opened at the end of 2017

differences were largely influenced by past experience – better welfare facilities being generally found on major projects

There was recognition that some of the more transformational commitments around site welfare had been difficult to achieve during the early stages of the project when sites were being set up and more constrained. One frontline worker commented

“I think it's hard to meet some of them, like the welfare for example. We've been in temporary welfare until they build the final one.”

However, other factors also came into play. For instance, the JAMS included the provision of ‘free breakfasts’ but this initiative has not been implemented due to a lack of agreement over funding.

The focus groups with frontline workers identified some specific aspects of site welfare that really mattered to them:

- The provision of plentiful and easily accessible drinking water on site. A lack of drinking water created difficulties on the three main sites in the summer of 2017, suggesting a failure to plan ahead. Bottled drinking water was seen by workers to be the most convenient option, but this can create excessive amounts of plastic waste that are damaging to the environment.
- The cost of food and portion sizes in the canteen – some workers felt that it was cheaper to bring their own food to site. Healthy eating options were also seen to be important and more readily available in the canteens.
- Workers appreciate the free laundry service provided to them at Tideway, but there was a preference for the laundry to be on-site – this is now the case but it

wasn't feasible to provide on-site laundry facilities earlier in the project when the sites were being mobilised.

- The provision of a sufficient number of lockers, the lack of which has been a problem on the main drive sites. Workers have also reported difficulties with getting wet clothes dry, meaning that they have had to put them away in lockers whilst still wet.
- The separation of clean and dirty areas in changing rooms. However, attempts at achieving this separation haven't always worked out in practice.



These are our initial insights from across the three main drives sites at Tideway – the welfare facilities on some of the sites has changed since the focus groups were conducted. We will therefore continue to study site welfare as part of our longitudinal research and further insights will be published in due course.

What have we learnt?

Site welfare is an excellent and highly visible example of Tideway's efforts to challenge established practices and do something that is 'transformational' by construction industry standards. It also provides a number of

important lessons for the construction industry and OSH practitioners in other sectors, namely that:

- Welfare facilities do matter to construction workers, although many workers arguably still have low expectations about the standard of welfare they will be provided with on site. Workers' expectations are influenced (partly) by what they have experienced previously, so the provision of better welfare on Tideway and other major projects may help to raise expectations and standards across the industry. It may also help to improve the image of construction work and attract people to the industry.



- There was recognition amongst workers that site welfare in the construction industry has improved over time – particularly on major, high-profile projects. Some changes are probably more reflective of broader societal changes – for instance, the desire for and provision of better quality, fresher and healthier food in canteens, or the provision of suitable facilities for female workers.
- Creating transformational welfare facilities involves thinking differently about the needs of construction workers. For

instance, 'Grade A' welfare facilities may involve creating informal social spaces for use by front-line workers who are living in lodgings. Such spaces may also help to create more of a community on site.



- Providing more 'transformational' welfare facilities will inevitably be more difficult during the early stages of projects, when sites are being mobilised and set up, and there is a greater reliance on temporary facilities. The smaller numbers of workers and the lack of space on site can mean that some facilities or services aren't feasible. Managing workers' expectations during the early stages of projects is therefore critical.
- Smaller sites are problematic as it may not be cost effective to provide the same levels of 'transformational' welfare remote from the main work sites. This is partly due to a lack of space but also because the site has fewer people working on it and may be in operation for a shorter period of time. Again, it will be important to manage workers' expectations in such situations, so that they don't feel like 'second class citizens' – particularly as some workers may experience different standards of welfare across multiple sites.

- Providing better site welfare inevitably costs more money. However, there remains a lack of evidence to underpin decision-making and justify additional investment in better welfare. Further research is required into the impact that different standards of site welfare have on worker productivity, health, wellbeing and safety.



- It's important to consult with front-line workers when designing and planning site welfare. In some cases procurement practices and the project programme may preclude this, but early engagement with workers should ensure that the right facilities and services are provided from the outset, and mean that costly changes won't need to be implemented further down the line.
- Aspirations around the standard of welfare provision need to be given careful consideration during the early stages of a project, ideally before the contract is tendered and let. Changing strategy around site welfare later in a project can

be disruptive, costly and more difficult to implement.

- Co-location of office staff and frontline workers can be a good way of breaking down barriers, encouraging a more open and collaborative culture on site and showing that frontline workers their facilities aren't an afterthought. However, it's important to be mindful of any unintended consequences that can arise from this, for instance in terms of a perceived lack of privacy amongst frontline workers.
- Attempts at providing transformational site welfare may be constrained by the suppliers of welfare facilities, who may be reluctant or unable to supply better welfare facilities because they can't see beyond the industry norm that is provided on other projects.
- As well providing the right welfare facilities for workers, it's necessary to ensure that the facilities are managed and operated to the same standards. Examples include the standard and regularity of cleaning, or the quality, range and availability of hot food. Such services can have a significant impact on how workers perceive and experience site welfare.
- Applying ideas from others sectors can be useful, but they need to be relevant to the context of the construction and civil engineering industry. For instance, the film industry was cited as an example for Tideway of how it could provide welfare, but wasn't necessarily analogous to context of construction. Similarly, some of the ideas and practices being used on Tideway's site welfare may be applicable on smaller construction projects, but others may not be.

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