

Greater efforts needed to attract the next generation

UK Bridges Board Chair Liz Kirkham says construction must ensure its values are aligned with those of younger people and this means addressing the climate challenge. Justin Ward reports.

Liz Kirkham steps down as Chair of the UK Bridges Board at a time of immense change for the construction sector. Adapting to the UK's departure from the European Union was an early challenge this year, followed by managing new ways of working during Covid and now looking forward to how the sector will support the COP26 agenda.

However, Liz argues that an ever bigger challenge ahead is attracting the next generation of talent into the sector.



↑ Liz Kirkham

Following the UK's departure from the EU, access to the labour market could be an issue for the construction industry, Liz explains. "Eight percent of the UK construction workforce comes from the EU, in London that figure is 37%. If Brexit makes it less attractive for people from the EU to come and work in this sector, this could create an immediate problem."

Another issue could be an increase in the price of products. Liz works as a network manager at Gloucestershire County Council which receives materials from across the EU including precast



↑ Tackling the changing climate is a key issue for the construction sector and bridge professionals

concrete from Ireland and street lighting materials from Italy. If tariffs are applied, they will have an impact on prices.

To address both the challenges of a squeeze on the supply of labour and materials, Liz argues there will be a need for really good communication throughout the supply chain to manage uncertainties.

However the core message from Liz is that the whole industry needs to be working harder to attract the next generation. But data suggests this is not happening. "The percentage of under 30s in the construction industry dropped over the past five years and that's a disaster."

Millennials and those from Generation Z that followed tend to be very politically and socially aware, demonstrated by support for the Black Lives Matter campaign. Their core values are central to their choices about how to live and work.

Building on this Liz says the younger generations will make much more positive choices in terms of being attracted to work that delivers on sustainability. "We need to show that construction and the structures industry are areas where they can make a difference and actually encourage them to make these career choices," Liz says.

The question is how to do this. Measures require a reach that has both depth and breadth to attract people to the industry, which means showcasing all of the great opportunities of working in the construction sector to students in primary, secondary and tertiary education.

This will hopefully support an uptake in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths) and encourage people to apply for jobs in the industry, with ambassadors helping to ignite interest and imagination among the next

↓ Doing more to engage young people is an aim



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generation to pursue a career in highways and transportation.

Liz says this is about reaching out, talking to people and making these engagements interactive and appealing through playing games, giving presentations and running competitions.

There is a real need to not just go to the familiar and traditional areas, she adds, but to “places where people are struggling to access work or into non traditional areas, for example all girls schools – as was my experience,” she adds.

The percentage of women working in engineering is still low (around 10%) and Liz reflects on her early introduction to the sector at an all girls school to being involved at a senior leadership level in the industry. At school, it was only when her physics teacher suggested she enrol on an access course into engineering that she started to move into the industry.

Later on in her career she noted that groups such as the UKRLG which help to shape the sector are still dominated by white middle aged males. The diversity of this, and many other groups, needs to be improved, says Liz.

“If we are serious about attracting Millennials and those from Generation Z into the sector then we need to be more inclusive ourselves. This is not about bringing in women for the sake of it, but asking serious questions around why there is not a wider diversity of people taking these roles [at a senior level].”

Alongside shaping and creating a more inclusive and diverse sector, it also needs to be more embracing of technology and innovation, she adds. This too could help attract people to the industry.

There is a lot still to modernise within the construction industry, with a need for greater off site construction and on site assembly to be more akin to modern manufacturing processes. “If we do that, then it actually becomes a more attractive place for everybody to work,” Liz says.

This then moves the industry on from one that is often associated with getting cold, wet



↑ Maintenance activity carried out recently to the Iron Bridge in Shropshire

and dirty on site to one with a greater degree of work supported by construction undertaken in a factory, in a more controlled environment.

If this is combined with more digital technology, artificial intelligence, sensors for monitoring structures and BIM, you are creating the opportunities to bring more people into the industry with new skills, Liz explains.

“If we bring in people with those skills then we will become a more attractive environment for people, as we will be at the forefront of grasping digital technology.”

Covid may not have disrupted construction as much as other sectors, but it has made those working within it evaluate how they operate. This may have increased our awareness that there can be a different way of working and approaching things. Liz thinks this provides the industry with the chance to look at construction in a different way.

One major challenge ahead is how we can reduce carbon, and Millennials and Generation Z individuals are focused on addressing the climate crisis. This represents a major challenge

for construction, particularly in reaching zero carbon emissions.

The industry uses great quantities of steel and concrete which, in terms of global emissions, require very carbon hungry processes. This is starting to be addressed by an increased use of recycled steel, however finding alternatives to cement in concrete is where a big challenge lies.

Liz goes on to say that she has always seen bridges as connectors. “They are how people access services, they help people get to school, they are how people access education and hospitals: they bring communities together.

“If they are built properly they will support active travel and therefore help us to meet our carbon agenda.” For her, bridges can deliver a huge positive benefit for people and society while addressing the climate challenge; a really important message to convey to the Millennials and those from the following generations.

As Liz puts it, “you can help us to deliver your agenda if you can come and work with us”.

Quick fire questions for the former Bridges Chair

What is the most pressing issue facing bridge owners right now?

Limited finances, with no certainty of long term funding and a backlog of maintenance.

How does the bridge sector compare to five or 10 years ago?

I think we have better data and systems, but are frustrated by a lack of resource for bridge owners, particularly local authorities.

What are you most proud of during your time as Chair?

The collaborative projects, bringing together the different bridge owners.

Which is your favourite bridge in the UK and why?

Difficult to pick one, but I think Waterloo Bridge over the Thames in London, which was built mainly by women during World War II.



↑ Waterloo Bridge in London KRISTI.BLOKHIN - SHUTTERSTOCK