

LADY OF THE SEAS

Capacity's Natalie Bannerman speaks to **Dr Lorraine Gray**, the newest addition to the Pioneer Consulting team, on her plans for the new role and industry as a whole



December saw telecoms infrastructure development and subsea expert, Pioneer Consulting add a new name to its management team — Dr Lorraine Gray, the new director of permitting.

Having been contracted to work with Pioneer on the Cross-Channel Fibre project — a 550km cable and the first subsea cable to be built across the English Channel in nearly 20 years — Gray will continue to lead on the permitting work of this new project, due to go live in Autumn 2021.

“I’ll be continuing where we work with cross-channel fibre but will also be responsible for bringing in new work, so I hope to be able to attract new business. Whether this is transatlantic subsea cables or even just fibre provision to other industries, like oil and gas renewables — they all need fibre,” she explains.

Joining Pioneer while the world reckons with the impact of Covid-19 and subsequent global lockdowns poses its own challenges but for Gray in her new role it has also caused an awakening as far as the importance of communications infrastructure.

“I think people have become acutely aware of how important good broadband connections are and people’s working behaviours have changed as well, so the rationale for a project is a welcome one for everyone, so that’s good in terms of permitting,” she says.

Although the world of permitting hasn’t been directly affected, it’s the cable installation side of things that has felt the effects.

“I do work on another project now with Southern Cross and that’s a trans-Pacific cable at planning stage, and Covid-19 is having a massive impact on any cable installations at the moment because of the potential restrictions at port. More than 300,000 engineers have

been stuck on board their vessels this past year and some of them have been on for about 18 months. So, the health and welfare issue of these people is just one of the problems we have to deal with.”

Speaking on the impact of regulatory support and how best to make the world of subsea permitting as efficient as possible, Gray says that it’s the coordination with other users and fishermen that probably needs the most work.

“I’ve worked with fishermen throughout my career and they have every right to the seabed, as we do, it’s just one of those obstacles that we’ve never managed to get right,” she says.

“I think that we need to do our best to make them aware of our activities, but there is always some conflict and I think it’s because fishermen are being pushed out of their traditional fishing grounds because of wind farms and nature conservation areas. So, managing those relationships can be quite sensitive.”

On the trend of subsea cables bypassing the cable landing station, there are also some considerations to be made from a permitting perspective, according to Gray.

“I think more planning should go into the locating of these data centres so that you have a clear run-up to site selection considerations,” she says.

“Look at the site selection of cables that see and try to tie that in with the planning of data centres — on the whole a holistic approach is needed.”

An ageing and retiring workforce in the subsea space has left a large knowledge gap that increased diversity and inclusion is trying to fill. Gray has done a lot of work in this space, but it demands her continued attention.

“I would like to at some point in my career be a mentor to somebody younger. I’ve done it through academia, but I would like to do it on the job as well,

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Dr Lorraine Gray, director of permitting, Pioneer Consulting

and especially for bridging that gender gap,” she says.

“It is also our responsibility to kind of get the word out as well — that’s our job. But you also have to try and make it engaging as well.”

As so much of her work is based in the sustainability space, I was curious to know if it is difficult to balance those needs with the commercial aspect of subsea projects.

“So, most of the reasons are all now within legislation. So long as you’re armed with the legislation, then you’ve got the justification for it. More seasoned developers will know that cutting corners will only lead to bigger pay-outs later on.”

As we kick off the new year, Gray has her sights set on the Cross-Channel Fibre project as her main focus in the immediate future.

“We’re hoping to install in September, so the permits have to be submitted by mid-January, so it’s all about that,” she explains.

In addition to this, Gray is overseeing a team of consultants writing the impact assessments and she has deadlines to meet — but more importantly, an industry to influence and change. **G**