

How to improve National Infrastructure Projects

Building the workforce

The UK has 2.32 million project managers¹ who will be key to achieving the Government's national infrastructure objectives. Their skills are set to be amongst the most in-demand by employers in 2035².

However, there are challenges in accessing project expertise. The Project Management Institute believes the global economy needs 25 million new project professionals by 2030, with 2.3 million annually just to keep up with demand. At the same time, higher wages abroad, particularly in the Middle East, are convincing UK project professionals to leave the UK workforce.

Well-placed skilled professionals across the country are essential for delivering infrastructure projects. Yet, more than half of organisations report difficulty in recruiting individuals with the required skills³. The 2022 Local Government Workforce Survey found capability (43%) and capacity (46%) gaps in project management⁴.

APM recommends:

- Commit to the profession through the 10-year infrastructure strategy and Skills England.
- Ensure major capital projects are overseen by Chartered project professionals.

Building public support

Quick judgements on project success or failure do little to help understanding of the complexity of projects. We talk about the direct benefits of a project but often neglect to communicate the significant indirect benefits that infrastructure projects can offer, such as economic development and societal welfare. The recent Westminster Hall debate on the Elizabeth Line showed the wealth of benefits a supposed failed project can deliver.

We need to engage the public and sell the 'vision' of the project as a national investment, demonstrating why it should happen by communicating all the benefits it will deliver. We should not shy away from negatives as well – some communities will benefit more than others. That is unavoidable. But gaining public support requires an honest and consistent narrative on the challenges of projects and how they will affect citizens.

APM recommends:

- A renewed focus on stakeholder engagement, outlining the challenges and benefits of projects.
- Regular communications about key project decisions to inform and develop trust and support.

Building the ability to succeed

The great work done by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority to improve project understating within Government should be commended. But it needs to be built upon. The Government must focus on strengthening the project function within the civil service, supporting them to make strategic project decisions.

We should also focus more on accountability, assurance, and governance. This requires a coordinated cross-government approach with a heightened focus on transparency,⁵ for example with spending decisions, the level of detail in project business cases, and effort to produce evidenced cost-benefit analyses.

Major infrastructure projects may take more than one Parliament to complete. We must not be afraid to adapt our projects in line with the ever-changing environment around us. Politically, we must be prepared to amend or cancel projects before they become too big to fail.

APM recommends:

- Enhance focus on objectivity in project decisions and vetting all major decisions in Parliament.
- Apply lessons from previous projects to our future endeavours and conduct pilots.

¹ APM. 2024. The Golden Thread: A Study of the Contribution of the Project Profession to the UK

² NFER. 2022. The Skills Imperative 2035: what does the literature tell us about essential skills most needed for work?

³ APM. 2024. The Golden Thread: A Study of the Contribution of the Project Profession to the UK

⁴ Local Government Association. 2022. Local Government Workforce Survey.

⁵ Lord Maude of Horsham, 2023. Independent Review of Governance and Accountability in the Civil Service.