



Building Legitimacy in Purpose-Driven Infrastructure Projects

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Because when projects
succeed, society benefits

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1. Executive summary

1.1 Project overview

Infrastructure projects are increasingly shaped by broader aims such as sustainability, equity, resilience and public value, which extend beyond technical delivery. In this report, these are referred to as purpose-driven infrastructure projects. As these projects become more strongly tied to broader social and environmental purposes, decisions about what matters and how competing expectations should be balanced become increasingly contested and visible. Project managers, a term used here broadly to cover practitioners involved in decision-making and justification across project roles, operate within these contested environments. In doing so, they contribute to the ongoing work through which the legitimacy of project decisions and directions is produced and sustained. As such, they play a central role in how legitimacy is built around the project.

This report examines how project managers engage in this legitimacy-building work in practice. Drawing on 17 interviews with project managers in the UK and Kenya, it develops a framework of three recurring moments through which project managers build legitimacy: grounding judgement, navigating context and relationships and communicating decisions. By articulating these moments, the report offers insights into how project managers work with multiple purposes while making decisions in contested environments.

1.2 Key findings

The findings show what each moment involves in practice.

Grounding judgement: Project managers form a sense of what should be done by drawing on personal grounds (e.g. positional context, experience, values) and social grounds (e.g. professional norms, societal expectations, competing political priorities). These judgements emerge from an interplay between personal conviction and anticipating how decisions will be seen by others.

Navigating context and relationships: Purpose has to be actively worked on throughout a project. Project managers work with and around formal structures (e.g. embedding commitments in contracts, using governance strategically) and through relationships and political dynamics (e.g. building trust, navigating power, mediating between competing perspectives). Experience teaches project managers when and how to lean on formal systems and relationships to carry purpose forward; however, these skills are typically developed with little explicit guidance. Client and sponsor tone-setting is pivotal in setting direction, but project managers also exercise agency in how different purpose claims are foregrounded or downplayed. Navigation is bounded by time scarcity, staff turnover and institutional conditions that limit how much purpose-driven work can be sustained. It also involves emotional and cognitive labour, as project managers balance competing expectations under uncertainty, often adjusting aspirations in response to practical constraints.

Communicating decisions: Legitimacy depends on how decisions are explained and made acceptable to others. Project managers use strategic framing, quantification and transparency to show their decisions are reasonable. However, communication carries ethical tensions. Quantification can narrow which purposes remain visible and strategic framing can drift towards selective disclosure. Project managers cope with this ethical ambiguity largely alone, with little explicit guidance. Over time, these communicative strategies may reshape how project managers themselves understand purpose, making communication not only a vehicle for legitimacy but a force shaping what purpose comes to mean.

Taken together, the findings have broader implications for how project management is understood in purpose-driven projects, and how project managers can learn to more effectively generate support for particular purposes. Power in such projects operates not only through formal authority but also through how judgements are formed, how constraints are navigated and how decisions are communicated. Project managers must react to the resulting pressures without fully controlling the outcomes. Leadership is iterative rather than episodic and distributed across actors, emerging through sustained interpretive, relational and narrative work rather than one-off vision-setting or top-down direction. Governance is best understood as a lived condition negotiated between compliance and discretion, rather than a fixed system to be followed.

1.3 Recommendations

For project managers: Legitimacy work is already part of the job, sitting alongside technical delivery, even when it is not identified as such. The skills it requires, as captured through the three moments in this report, deserve explicit recognition and processes for supporting reflection and development. Developing reflexive awareness of how one grounds judgements, navigates constraints and communicates decisions can strengthen professional confidence and effectiveness in contested environments.

For project-based organisations and sponsors: Professionals need space to navigate legitimacy tensions. Over-proceduralisation crowds out the judgement that purpose-driven projects demand. Governance systems should recognise professional discretion rather than implicitly deny it. This does not mean weakening accountability, but acknowledging that rules require interpretation in context. Sponsors play a crucial role in signalling which purposes are non-negotiable and in backing project managers when trade-offs generate resistance. Without such backing, project managers may have to absorb intensified competing pressures without sufficient authority to address them.

For professional education and development: Training does not explicitly acknowledge that project managers undertake legitimacy work, leaving practitioners underprepared. As a result, the relevant capabilities are developed primarily through experience. The three-moment framework can inform education, reflective practice, mentoring and continuing professional development (CPD), helping professionals develop these skills intentionally, with guided support and through insights from others. In doing so, the framework gives APM and its members a clearer basis for understanding the demands placed on contemporary project managers and the capabilities they need to meet them.

This report provides a language for challenges widely experienced but rarely identified, supporting professionals and organisations in navigating the complexities of purpose-driven infrastructure projects. It also contributes to project studies through new insights on power and politics, leadership and governance.

2. Introduction

Infrastructure projects are complex and contested undertakings. Project managers operate in environments characterised by uncertainty and pressure from multiple stakeholders with competing and often incompatible demands. They are also expected to deliver outcomes that satisfy technical, financial, political and social expectations simultaneously. Even when projects are delivered in line with formal requirements, they may still face resistance or criticism from stakeholders who question their broader impacts or priorities. Projects may be completed and legally compliant, yet still not be accepted as appropriate or desirable by different stakeholders.

These challenges are not new. Infrastructure projects have long been associated with broader aims such as sustainability, equity and public value that extend beyond immediate delivery outputs. What is changing, however, is the growing emphasis on ‘purpose-driven infrastructure projects’, which places these aims more centrally within how projects are framed and delivered, bringing new sources of ambiguity and conflict for project managers. While such projects are often intended to be more socially acceptable, building support for multiple and often competing purposes during project delivery can be difficult. Purpose-driven demands may increase costs and generate trade-offs by bringing different value claims into tension, for example, where equity considerations conflict with sustainability objectives. This is where legitimacy becomes central.

In this report, legitimacy is understood as the acceptability of a project and its associated purposes in the eyes of internal and external stakeholders that project managers must consider. Projects may meet formal or legal requirements and yet still struggle to achieve such acceptability. What is regarded as legitimate can vary across audiences and over time, and is often contested rather than fixed. In this context, project managers are increasingly required not only to deliver projects, but also to engage with difficult questions about which demands to respond to, to what extent, how and on what basis. Making decisions alone, however, is not sufficient. Project managers must also build support for those decisions, demonstrating to others that particular choices and priorities driving those decisions are appropriate within a given context.

This report examines how project managers build legitimacy in purpose-driven infrastructure projects. Project managers are, of course, not the only source of project legitimisation. Instead, project legitimacy – where it is achieved – should be understood as the outcome of many interacting processes. The focus of the report is not on whether projects are ultimately judged as legitimate, nor on defining what a project’s purposes ought to be. Instead, we examine how project managers experience and navigate conflicts around legitimacy, and how they seek to make and communicate acceptable decisions to others in practice in the presence of competing purposes. Throughout this report, we use ‘project manager’ as a shorthand for practitioners who engage in the decision-making and justificatory work through which project purposes are interpreted, shaped and communicated in practice, acknowledging that such responsibilities span multiple roles beyond those that formally hold this title.

Despite growing attention to project legitimacy and the recognition that contemporary infrastructure projects involve multiple and often conflicting demands, relatively little is known about how project managers themselves experience and respond to these tensions. This is particularly relevant for purpose-driven projects, which often require project managers to be more directly involved in adjudicating competing values. This raises critical questions: how do project managers orient themselves when societal expectations, organisational rules, professional norms, community needs and political realities pull in different directions? How do they make decisions under such conditions, and how do they explain and justify those decisions to diverse audiences? And how do they understand their own role within these contested environments?

Drawing on interviews with project managers working in purpose-driven infrastructure projects in the UK and Kenya, this report develops an analytical framework that captures three recurring moments in how project managers build legitimacy around project purposes: grounding judgement, navigating context and relationships, and communicating decisions. These moments are not stages in a project lifecycle, nor do they represent a linear process. Rather, they provide a way of understanding how project managers orient themselves, act and account for decisions in contexts where purposes are contested and acceptability cannot be taken for granted.

By articulating these moments, the report sheds light on skills and forms of engagement that are often tacit, undervalued and learned through experience. Making these dynamics more explicit helps to better understand the challenges of working in purpose-driven infrastructure projects for project managers and opens up possibilities for more intentional professional development and support. Greater clarity about how legitimacy is built in practice can enable project managers to more successfully navigate contested demands and advocate for particular purposes within complex project environments. This report also offers new insights about power and politics, leadership and governance in purpose-driven projects.

3. Literature review

3.1 Infrastructure projects as contested undertakings

Infrastructure projects are increasingly recognised as sites of contestation rather than simply technical undertakings. While investment in infrastructure is often promoted as a means of delivering economic growth and public benefit, a growing body of critical scholarship highlights that the planning and delivery of infrastructure are deeply political processes. Decisions about what infrastructure is built, where, for whom and to what ends entail value judgements and the privileging of certain interests over others (Winner, 1980; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Larkin, 2013; Sovacool, 2021).

Recent work in project studies and related fields emphasises that infrastructure projects shape social and environmental outcomes in uneven and sometimes unintended ways, for example by producing lock-ins and exclusions, alongside anticipated benefits (Thacker et al., 2019; Lawhon et al., 2018; Çıdık et al., 2024). As a result, infrastructure projects are increasingly subject to scrutiny from a growing range of stakeholders, including communities, regulators, funders and civil society actors. Questions of justification, acceptance and managing difference therefore become central to how such projects unfold.

Within project management scholarship, there has been a growing recognition that projects are embedded in broader political and institutional environments. This scholarship highlights how competing mandates (rooted in value conflicts) and power relations shape infrastructure project trajectories in fundamental ways (e.g. Çıdık et al., 2024). Consequently, project studies increasingly emphasise that project work involves contestation and negotiation rather than neutral optimisation, as stakeholders have different interpretations of project purposes. Recent contributions further emphasise that project managers operate within politically charged contexts that require ongoing sense-making and positioning (Clegg et al., 2017; Morris and Gherardi, 2011; Clegg and Biygautane, 2025; Pinto et al., 2025). These developments have led scholars to call for greater attention to the micro-level dynamics through which project decisions are shaped, contested and justified in practice, particularly in large-scale and infrastructure settings, where competing pressures are acute and more pronounced. In this context, there is an increasing need to understand the legitimacy of infrastructure projects not as something that exists, but as something that is actively created.

3.2 Legitimacy in project studies

Legitimacy has been widely studied in organisational and management research as a concept for explaining why certain organisations or practices are regarded as acceptable or proper within a given social context (Suchman, 1995; Suddaby et al., 2017). In project studies, legitimacy has attracted growing attention, particularly in relation to large-scale and controversial projects. Existing research highlights that project legitimacy is dynamic, as it is contested and shaped by interactions among multiple stakeholders over time (Hetemi et al., 2021; van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019). Studies show how legitimacy challenges arise through community resistance, political opposition, regulatory scrutiny and shifting institutional expectations, often requiring adaptive responses by project actors. Scholars have also examined the strategies used by project organisations and sponsors to shape legitimacy, including framing, stakeholder engagement and symbolic or discursive practices (Aaltonen et al., 2008; Gil, 2010; Floricel & Brunet, 2023).

However, much of this literature treats legitimacy primarily as an organisational or project-level phenomenon, focusing on governance arrangements, stakeholder strategies or institutional alignment. While project managers are often acknowledged as important actors, their role is typically subsumed within organisational responses, leaving how legitimacy-related challenges are experienced and addressed by project managers in their day-to-day practice relatively unexplored.

Recent project studies have begun to challenge this limitation more explicitly. Konstantinou (2025), for example, draws attention to the politics of self in project work, showing how project managers continuously position themselves within competing institutional, professional and societal expectations. Similarly, Marnewick et al. (2025) highlight how project managers can become 'caught between a rock and a hard place', where competing demands emerge from authority structures, technical expertise and procedural rules, together leaving no straightforward basis for resolution. Alongside broader critiques from the emerging power and politics stream of project literature, these contributions underscore the need for more empirical attention to how competing pressures are navigated at the level of professional experience and judgement, and the impact of this on legitimacy.

3.3 Legitimacy of purpose-driven projects

These limitations become particularly salient in purpose-driven infrastructure projects, which are expected to be centred not only on functional outputs but also on broader societal outcomes such as sustainability, equity, resilience or public value. Research on sustainable and socially oriented projects highlights that they often involve contradictory objectives, increased ambiguity, and heightened exposure to public and political scrutiny (Aarseth et al., 2017; Sabini et al., 2019; Sabini & Alderman, 2021).

In these contexts, project managers navigate tensions between technical and economic efficiency, environmental performance and social inclusion, often without clear guidance on how competing purposes should be prioritised. Studies on sustainability transitions and grand challenges in project management emphasise that project managers operate within fragmented institutional environments, where there are multiple and shifting expectations that may also be incompatible (Ika & Munro, 2022; Winch, 2024).

Recent contributions reinforce the argument that purpose-driven projects intensify competing pressures. Pinto et al. (2025) show how project managers often become responsible for translating broad societal ambitions into actionable project decisions, even when such ambitions lack stable institutional support. Similarly, Marnewick et al. (2025) demonstrate how sustainability and social value objectives can place project managers in difficult positions when formal project metrics in contractual arrangements and stakeholder expectations pull in opposing directions. Together, these studies highlight how project managers play a central role in absorbing and resolving competing pressures, while signalling the professional struggles this entails.

However, despite these insights, existing research has tended to remain at the level of strategic and tactical concerns, such as governance mechanisms and competencies, rather than examining how these struggles are experienced and confronted by project managers in everyday practice; and crucially, how particular decisions and outcomes are legitimised. As a result, we still know relatively little about how project managers contribute to building legitimacy within purpose-driven projects.

3.4 Legitimacy as perception

To address these gaps, this study draws on the legitimacy-as-perception perspective developed in organisational and management research (Bitektine, 2011; Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Suddaby et al., 2017). This perspective conceptualises legitimacy as an evaluation-based phenomenon, defined by whether decisions or priorities are regarded as appropriate or acceptable by relevant audiences. Crucially, legitimacy is understood as externally conferred by audiences, rather than as an inherent property of projects or individuals.

The legitimacy-as-perception perspective shifts analytical attention away from legitimacy as a fixed outcome towards the processes through which legitimacy is built in the eyes of others. As a result, attention turns to how different actors anticipate and actively shape what comes to be seen as legitimate. While it foregrounds perception, it does not reduce legitimacy to individual belief or morality. Instead, it highlights how actors engage with the evaluative frameworks of others, such as expectations and norms, when seeking acceptance within complex social and institutional environments.

From this viewpoint, actors such as project managers cannot themselves confer legitimacy; rather, they engage in interactions and communicative practices that are oriented towards influencing, anticipating or responding to how their actions and priorities are perceived by others. As a result, research adopting this perspective tends to focus on how legitimacy is created and reshaped through decision-making and justification processes in practice.

At the same time, project research emphasises that actors' own sense-making and judgement play an important role in enabling such legitimacy-building action. Project managers must develop a sense of direction and a basis for justification as part of making decisions and communicating them to others under conditions of uncertainty and competing demands (Clegg & Biygautane, 2025; Konstantinou, 2025). These internal orientations form an important part of the broader process through which legitimacy is built.

By adopting this lens, the present study moves beyond organisational-level accounts to examine how project managers engage in building legitimacy in purpose-driven infrastructure projects. Rather than assessing whether projects are ultimately judged as legitimate, the analysis focuses on how project managers orient themselves under competing expectations, engage with the evaluative frameworks of relevant audiences, develop a basis for justification and act in ways that shape how their decisions and priorities are perceived. In doing so, it contributes empirical and theoretical insight into the often underexplored micro-level dynamics through which legitimacy is built in contemporary infrastructure projects.

The following section outlines the methodological approach adopted to examine these processes and describes the empirical contexts in which the study was conducted.

4. Methods and context

4.1 Research design

This research adopts an interpretive qualitative research design to examine how project managers engage in building legitimacy in purpose-driven infrastructure projects through their everyday practices. Rather than treating legitimacy as a fixed outcome to be achieved or measured, the study focuses on the judgements and actions through which project managers seek to build acceptance for project decisions.

The study is guided by this overarching research question: how do project managers in purpose-driven infrastructure projects build legitimacy for their decisions when navigating political complexities and competing stakeholder demands?

This question is supported by three subsidiary questions concerned with:

- How project managers perceive and position their roles in relation to conflicting interests and mandates.
- How decisions are made and communicated in the presence of competing demands.
- What implications these tensions have for project management, leadership and governance in infrastructure projects.

Consistent with the legitimacy-as-perception perspective, project managers are understood as one group of actors among many who contribute to project legitimacy-building processes. Legitimacy is shaped by the actions of multiple actors, as well as by wider institutional and societal forces. Within this broader setting, this research focuses on how project managers orient themselves, make decisions and communicate them to relevant audiences. The research design therefore seeks to understand how legitimacy is worked on in practice, as experienced by project managers responsible for navigating complex, purpose-laden project environments, rather than assessing whether legitimacy is ultimately achieved.

4.2 Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with project managers working in infrastructure projects in the UK and Kenya. As outlined in the introduction to this report, we use the term ‘project manager’ as a shorthand for practitioners involved in the kinds of decision-making and justificatory work through which project purposes are interpreted, shaped and communicated, recognising that such responsibilities span multiple roles beyond those who formally hold the title.

A total of 17 interviews were conducted, including 10 in the UK and seven in Kenya. (The full list of interviewees is presented in Table 1.) Participants were selected primarily through purposive sampling, targeting project managers and closely related project professionals (such as social impact managers) whose roles involved working on infrastructure projects with explicit societal aims and contested stakeholder environments. The study also drew on convenience sampling, reflecting practical constraints related to access and availability: initial participants were identified through professional networks and organisational contacts, with additional interviewees recruited through referrals. Rather than aiming for representativeness, the sampling strategy sought to ensure experience with infrastructure projects where ‘purposes’ beyond immediate project outputs were emphasised. Interviewees also brought varying levels of experience and worked at different points in the infrastructure lifecycle – from strategic decision-making within central government to commissioning roles in public client bodies, and design or delivery roles in consultancy and nonprofit organisations. This diversity is reflected in the organisation types in Table 1.

Table 1. List of interviewees

Id	Country	Organisation type
1	Kenya	Nonprofit – Non-governmental organisation (NGO)
2	Kenya	Nonprofit – NGO
3	Kenya	Consultancy
4	Kenya	Nonprofit – social enterprise
5	Kenya	Consultancy
6	Kenya	Intergovernmental body
7	Kenya	Intergovernmental body
8	UK	Consultancy
9	UK	Public client
10	UK	Consultancy
11	UK	Consultancy
12	UK	Central government
13	UK	Public client
14	UK	Consultancy
15	UK	Consultancy
16	UK	Nonprofit – housing association
17	UK	Consultancy

The interview protocol was informed by the study's research questions and designed to elicit participants' experiences rather than detailed accounts of single project lifecycles. Interview questions invited reflection on how complex and sometimes conflicting requirements were encountered in practice, how decisions were made under conditions of political and organisational constraint, and how those decisions were communicated and justified to others. Participants were also encouraged to reflect on their own roles and positioning within these processes, including the political dimensions of project work and the challenges associated with balancing competing mandates. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix 1 of this report.

This approach allowed interviewees to draw on experiences across multiple projects and contexts, highlighting recurring challenges and patterns rather than isolated events. The focus on general professional experience was particularly suited to exploring legitimacy-building in purpose-driven projects, where decisions are often shaped by broader institutional expectations and societal scrutiny rather than by project-specific technical considerations alone. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were audio-recorded with participants' consent and were transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured format ensured consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to probe issues raised by participants as particularly relevant in their own practice.

4.3 Data analysis

Interview data was analysed using thematic analysis, aligned with the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis was iterative and reflexive, involving repeated engagement with the data to identify recurring patterns and tensions in participants' accounts. An initial phase of open coding was undertaken to capture issues raised by interviewees in relation to working in purpose-driven infrastructure projects, including experiences of conflicting requirements, decision-making under constraint, communication with diverse stakeholders and reflections on professional roles and responsibilities. These initial codes were not structured around the research questions, but were developed inductively to remain close to participants' accounts.

Through subsequent rounds of analysis, patterns across the data were progressively refined. This process led to the identification of three recurring analytical moments that cut across the initial areas of enquiry: grounding judgement, navigating context and relationships, and communicating decisions. These moments provided a way of organising how project managers described their experiences of working with competing goals and expectations in purpose-driven projects without implying a linear sequence or a project lifecycle stage model.

Following the identification of these analytical moments, the data was revisited and inductively recoded under this analytical structure to examine how each moment was manifested. This iterative approach enabled the analysis to move beyond descriptive accounts of individual projects and towards a deeper conceptual understanding of the challenges, dilemmas and strategies experienced by project managers engaged in building legitimacy in purpose-driven infrastructure projects. The findings were then written up, organised around the three analytical moments with representative quotes. Quotes have been lightly edited for clarity and flow, ensuring the original meaning remains intact.

4.4 Empirical context: The UK and Kenya

The study draws on empirical material from the UK and Kenya to capture variation in the legitimacy environments within which purpose-driven infrastructure projects are delivered. These contexts differ in governance arrangements, institutional traditions, delivery models and societal expectations, shaping the conditions under which project managers engage with the three analytical moments explored in this study.

In the UK, interviewees predominantly drew on experience in large-scale infrastructure projects, particularly in sectors such as transport. These projects operate within highly institutionalised and regulated environments, where statutory procedures, policy alignment, expert justification and judicial defensibility play a central role in shaping project decision-making and communication. Legitimacy-related expectations are strongly mediated through formal requirements and compliance processes. While large projects often involve extensive public engagement and consultation, interviewees noted that such engagement frequently occurs after key strategic decisions have already been made. As a result, opportunities for substantive co-creation may be limited, even where formal engagement processes are well resourced. Smaller-scale or neighbourhood-level projects were described as offering greater scope for direct engagement, though still within a context where procedural compliance remains central.

Kenya presents a more plural and varied legitimacy environment. The 2010 constitution institutionalised public participation in development processes, but its implementation varies widely across projects and sectors. Interviewees described legitimacy-related practices ranging from symbolic consultation that often occurs in large, state-led infrastructure projects, to more substantive participatory and co-creation approaches, typically in NGO-led initiatives. The Kenyan sample primarily reflects experience in community-driven and NGO-led projects, where relationship-building and ongoing engagement for social purpose are central to project delivery. Interviewees also drew on experience in humanitarian projects requiring rapid response, such as refugee camp development, further illustrating the diversity of legitimacy conditions that project managers operate in.

Rather than offering a comparative analysis of the two countries, the study treats the UK and Kenya as providing analytically contrasting legitimacy environments. Differences in governance systems, project scale (for example, national versus neighbourhood-level projects) and delivery models (such as humanitarian versus development-oriented projects) shape the expectations and constraints faced by project managers. These contextual differences influence how project managers experience and engage in the task of building legitimacy in purpose-driven projects, without determining whether projects are ultimately judged as legitimate by external audiences.

Despite these differences, our data showed important similarities in terms of the process of building legitimacy. Across both contexts, we identified the same three analytical moments – grounding judgement, navigating context and relationships, and communicating decisions – evident in project managers' accounts. While these moments were experienced and enacted differently depending on institutional, political and delivery conditions, they provided a common organising lens for understanding how project managers build legitimacy around project purposes in diverse settings.

Given the differences in dominant project types and scales across the two contexts, the findings should be read as exploratory rather than comparative. The study does not claim causality between national context and observed practices. Instead, it highlights how different environments shape the conditions under which project managers engage in legitimacy-building work. This framework provides a foundation for future research and deeper comparative analysis.

5. Findings

This section examines how project managers working on purpose-driven infrastructure projects understand and build legitimacy in practice. Rather than treating legitimacy as a fixed attribute or outcome, the findings show how legitimacy is actively constructed through everyday professional engagement. Project managers are required to interpret what should matter, act within constraints, and refine, adapt and explain or defend decisions to others whose expectations may differ.

Analytically, these findings are organised around three interrelated moments of practice: grounding judgement, navigating context and relationships and communicating decisions. These moments are heuristically distinct but iterative and mutually shaping. They do not describe a linear process or sequence of stages; instead, they highlight different kinds of work that project managers undertake as projects unfold. The sections that follow examine each moment in turn, beginning with how project managers form judgements about what should be done.

5.1 Grounding judgement: What shapes project managers' sense of what should be done?

Purpose-driven infrastructure projects confront project managers with competing and often incompatible demands. Beyond delivering assets, they are expected to contribute to broader societal aims such as sustainability, equity, resilience or public value. In this context, deciding what should be done is not self-evident. It involves interpretive work: making sense of what the project is for, what would count as a good outcome and which considerations deserve priority when not everything can be achieved.

This section examines how project managers form such judgements. Rather than treating judgement as an individual or moral act, the findings show that it is shaped through an interplay of personal and social influences. Analytically, the focus here is on how project managers ground their judgement of project purpose and 'good outcomes'. This will be followed by an explanation of how these judgements are enacted in practice (examined in Section 4.2) and explained to others (examined in Section 4.3).

5.1.1 Personal grounds of judgement

A first set of influences shaping how project managers interpret what should be done relates to their personal orientation to the project. This includes how project managers are positioned within the project context, what they have learned through experience and how they understand themselves and their professional commitments. Such influences all shape how project purpose is interpreted and what counts as a good or acceptable outcome.

Positional context plays an important role in this process. A project manager's position within the project lifecycle shapes how open or settled their understanding of purpose feels. Those involved in early stages of projects often described purpose as provisional and uncertain, particularly in the context of long-lived infrastructure that was expected to serve future generations with unknown needs. As one practitioner reflected:

"We're making decisions now for something that will still be in use forty or fifty years from now. What feels like the right outcome today might not be what people need in the future, and you have to sit with that uncertainty."
(UK)

Rather than pointing to a lack of direction, this uncertainty shaped how project managers interpreted what it meant to act responsibly. Judgements about good outcomes were framed as necessarily tentative, informed by long time horizons rather than immediate optimisation.

Positional context also mattered in terms of proximity to affected communities. Project managers working closely with local users or beneficiaries described how lived experience reframed their understanding of what mattered. Immediate concerns such as access, safety, health or livelihoods became more salient than abstract or long-term objectives, influencing how project purpose was understood in context. As one practitioner noted:

“When you are actually there with people, the priorities look very different. What feels important in policy terms doesn’t always line up with what people are dealing with day to day.”
(Kenya)

Here, the point emphasised is that such proximity reshaped how project managers interpreted what a good outcome should look like in that setting.

Experiential knowledge further shaped project managers’ judgement. Experience mattered not only as an indicator of technical competence, but as an interpretive resource that changed how project managers made sense of ambiguity and trade-offs. With experience came a shift away from treating rules or inherited framings as sufficient guides to purpose, and towards a more reflective understanding of what judgement involves in complex projects. One practitioner described this shift as follows:

“With experience you stop thinking there’s a single right answer. You start asking what will actually make sense for this place and these people, even if it doesn’t look perfect on paper.”
(Kenya)

Rather than resolving uncertainty, experience increased project managers’ tolerance for it. It reshaped how they judged what was credible and responsible, and whether something was worth pursuing when interpreting project purpose, without yet speaking to how such judgements were acted on.

Finally, values and professional identity provided important anchors for judgement. When explaining why certain outcomes mattered more than others, project managers frequently referred to personal convictions such as sustainability, or their sense of what their professional role required of them, for instance, a responsibility to future users. These were not framed as abstract moral positions, but as ways of articulating where limits lay based on what they personally believed in and what they felt their role demanded of them. As one interviewee put it:

“There are projects I just wouldn’t take on anymore. It’s not about being political. It is about being clear on what kind of outcomes I don’t want to be associated with.”
(UK)

Such reflections illustrate how values and professional identity functioned as boundaries on acceptable purpose, helping project managers define what they could live with. These personal grounds did not dictate action, but shaped how project managers oriented themselves when judging what should be done.

5.1.2 Social grounds of judgement

Alongside personal orientations, project managers' judgements about what should be done were shaped by their views regarding social norms and expectations about what infrastructure projects ought to achieve and how they should be delivered. These social grounds did not prescribe specific actions, but framed what the project manager viewed as appropriate or defensible to others.

Professional norms were frequently described as baseline expectations that shaped judgement before any explicit trade-offs were considered, forming part of the background against which purpose was interpreted. As one practitioner explained:

"There are certain things you don't even question: safety, quality, duty of care. They shape what you consider acceptable before you even start thinking about trade-offs."
(UK)

Rather than determining priorities, these norms structured the space of judgement itself. They influenced how project managers understood the limits of acceptable outcomes and what it would mean to act responsibly within a given project context.

In addition to long-established professional norms, project managers also described shifts in what was increasingly seen as 'normal' or expected in infrastructure projects. In particular, sustainability was often described not as an optional add-on, but as a baseline consideration shaping how purpose was interpreted. As one interviewee observed:

"I think projects now are moving towards embedding sustainability as the normal way of doing things, rather than as something additional or optional."
(UK)

Here, sustainability functions less as a specific objective and more as a shared expectation about what a credible or appropriate project should take into account when defining good outcomes.

Project managers also described navigating tensions between different sets of expectations. Political pressures for visible or rapid results could conflict with professional commitments to due process, while short-term efficiency goals could clash with longer-term aspirations for resilience or environmental performance. One practitioner reflected on this tension as follows:

"What politicians want to show quickly and what feels responsible in the long term don't always line up, and you're constantly judging where to sit between those pressures."
(UK)

Such accounts illustrate how project managers' judgements were shaped by negotiating between competing normative logics rather than by simply following a single set of expectations. Importantly, these norms and expectations oriented project managers to how their judgements might be viewed by others, without yet requiring them to justify or explain those judgements. In this sense, social grounds of judgement framed anticipations about appropriateness, shaping how project managers made sense of project purpose, while leaving room for how these judgements would be worked through in practice.

5.2 Navigating: How project managers work with purpose in practice

Judgements by a project manager about what should matter do not translate straightforwardly into action. Even when project managers have a clear sense of project purpose and what would count as a good outcome, they work within environments shaped by budgets, timelines, governance arrangements and organisational systems. In this context, purpose does not implement itself. It must be worked with through practical and often imperfect means.

This section examines how project managers navigate these constraints in practice. Rather than focusing on whether judgements are right or wrong, the emphasis here is on how project managers try to enact purpose within the realities of project delivery. Navigation involves finding ways to carry forward elements of purpose without assuming that all aspirations can be fully realised. The focus is therefore on enactment under constraint, distinct from the interpretive work of judgement formation examined in Section 4.1 and from the communicative work of explanation and justification examined in Section 4.3.

5.2.1 Working with and around formal structures

A central part of navigating purpose in practice involves working with formal structures such as contracts, procurement processes, governance arrangements and reporting systems. These structures can constrain what is possible, but they can also be used strategically to stabilise and protect aspects of project purpose. Project managers described formal processes as shaping which considerations gain traction in decision-making. Requirements for cost justification, risk management and compliance often meant that broader aspirations such as sustainability or social benefit had to be translated into forms that aligned with existing systems. Rather than redefining purpose, this work involved finding ways to make elements of purpose workable within formal project architectures.

One common strategy involved embedding purpose-related commitments early, at points where they could influence subsequent decisions. As one practitioner explained:

“You put it [sustainable objectives] in your benefits statement at the beginning of the project, so that all of the project team, the sponsor, and everyone is held to what you’ve written there.”
(UK)

Here, formal documentation functions as a stabilising mechanism, allowing project managers to carry forward aspects of purpose by making them visible and difficult to ignore as projects progress. This does not guarantee delivery, but it shapes the conditions under which decisions are made.

Experience played an important role in enabling project managers to navigate these structures effectively. Over time, project managers learned how and when formal systems could be used to support purpose, and when they would limit what could be achieved. Reflecting on this, one interviewee noted:

“Early in my career, I probably wouldn’t challenge or push. You get to work on a project and you kind of do as you’re told... With time, you gain the knowledge and the maturity to recognise the situations where you know what the right thing is. Now I have the tools to push.”
(UK)

In this context, experience does not change what project managers believe the project should achieve, but it expands their capacity to work within formal systems to influence how those beliefs are reflected in decisions.

At the same time, formal structures impose real limits. Governance arrangements, funding models and contractual obligations can narrow the range of options available, sometimes forcing trade-offs between different views of what the project is primarily trying to achieve. Navigation therefore also involves recognising when individual judgements about what should be done may need to give way, whether temporarily deferred, reframed to fit what is possible, or relinquished for a given matter.

How effectively formal structures served to protect purpose depended significantly on client and sponsor behaviour. Project managers consistently described the client/sponsor stance as ‘shaping’ whether purpose-driven commitments were treated as non-negotiable or discretionary across the supply chain. As one practitioner put it:

“If the client sets the right tone, the contractors behave the same way.”
(UK)

Conversely, where client/sponsor leadership regarding purpose was weak, contractors were said to have defaulted to minimising cost and scope:

“In the current context... if the contractor pushes back – ‘not in our budget, not in our scope’ – it’s unlikely to go ahead unless there’s an extremely good opportunity.”
(UK)

Formal structures, in other words, are more effective in stabilising purpose when backed by consistent signals from those with authority in project governance.

5.2.2 Working through relationships and politics

Beyond formal structures, project managers described navigating purpose through relationships and political dynamics that shaped how decisions were made in practice. This involved working across organisational boundaries and managing competing interests among actors who held different priorities or interpretations of project purpose. In these contexts, navigating purpose was less about enforcing commitments and more about maintaining relationships that made continued progress possible.

Project managers emphasised the importance of trust and relational credibility in enabling them to carry forward aspects of purpose. Long-term relationships with stakeholders were described as creating space to raise concerns or revisit assumptions about project aims. As one practitioner explained:

“If people trust you, you can have more honest conversations about what’s really possible and what might need to change. Without that, it’s very hard to keep anything beyond the basics on the table.”
(Kenya)

Here, trust functions as a relational resource that allows project managers to keep particular purpose-related considerations in play, even when they are not formally prioritised.

Project managers also described navigating political environments in which purpose claims were contested or unstable. Politicians, funders or senior sponsors often brought priorities shaped by electoral cycles, visibility concerns or shifting policy agendas. Navigating these dynamics required project managers to be attuned to timing and the relative power of different actors. One interviewee reflected:

“You can have a clear sense of what the project is meant to achieve, but political priorities change. Part of the job is knowing when to push and when to step back so you don’t lose everything.”
(UK)

This work did not involve redefining project purpose from scratch, but rather managing how different purpose claims were foregrounded or downplayed in response to changing political dynamics.

In many accounts, project managers described acting as intermediaries between actors with competing expectations. This meant finding ways to maintain alignment without assuming consensus which involved translating between different perspectives, such as technical, political and community ones. One practitioner described this balancing act as follows:

“You’re constantly in the middle, trying to make sure no one feels completely ignored. If one group feels shut out, the whole project can stall.”
(Kenya)

Such accounts highlight how navigating purpose through relationships involves ongoing negotiation and compromise. Project managers rarely had the authority to resolve conflicts between competing purposes outright. Instead, they worked to sustain workable relationships that allowed projects to continue while keeping multiple expectations in view.

Overall, navigating through relationships and politics was active and ongoing work, and it was essential to maintaining purposes, even when formal structures or stated objectives offered limited guidance on how to proceed.

5.2.3 Limits of navigation

While project managers described a range of ways to navigate purpose within formal structures and relationships, they were also clear about the limits of what such navigation could achieve. Time pressures, resource constraints, organisational arrangements and external shocks often curtailed project managers' ability to carry forward all aspects of project purpose, regardless of intent or skill.

Several project managers highlighted the impact of limited capacity on their ability to engage meaningfully with purpose-driven aims. They talked about high and highly diversified workloads combined with high staff turnover which significantly reduced the time available to reflect and revisit earlier commitments. As one interviewee noted:

"You can have the right intentions, but if the team is stretched and people are changing all the time, there's only so much you can realistically hold on to."
(Kenya)

Here, limits arise not from a lack of commitment, but from the practical realities of project delivery that constrain how much purpose-related work can be sustained.

Structural constraints were also emphasised. Funding models, procurement timelines and contractual arrangements often locked projects into particular pathways that were difficult to reverse. Even where project managers recognised tensions between stated purposes and emerging realities, they were not always able to adjust course. One practitioner described this as follows:

"Once certain decisions are locked in, the room to manoeuvre becomes very small. You're managing within a system that wasn't designed to be flexible."
(UK)

Such constraints shaped which aspects of purpose could be pursued and which had to be deprioritised or deferred. Rather than indicating failure, these limits reflect the institutional conditions under which infrastructure projects are delivered.

Project managers also noted that navigating purpose involved emotional and cognitive labour. Constantly balancing competing expectations under uncertainty and accepting partial outcomes took a toll, particularly in long-running projects. Over time, this could lead to pragmatic compromises that tempered earlier aspirations.

Recognising these limits was an important part of navigation work itself. Project managers described learning when to persist, when to adapt and when to accept that certain purpose claims could not be fully realised within existing constraints. In this sense, navigation involved not only skill and experience, but also an ongoing assessment of what was feasible in practice.

5.3 Communicating: Making purpose and decisions acceptable

Interpreting project purpose and navigating constraints do not, on their own, secure legitimacy. Because this work is largely invisible to others, communication serves not only to inform but also to actively frame decisions and outcomes. In this sense, communication is not simply about information-sharing, but about making decisions intelligible and acceptable within a wider landscape of scrutiny.

This section examines how project managers communicate about purpose and decision-making in practice. It focuses on how trade-offs are explained and how project managers respond to ethical challenges and disagreements that can arise. Analytically, the emphasis is on communication as a crucial component of legitimacy work: the ongoing effort to account for decisions in ways that align with multiple expectations. As with the previous sections, communication is not a linear stage in a project lifecycle, but a recurring form of work.

5.3.1 Communicative strategies

Project managers described communication as a central component of legitimacy-building in purpose-driven infrastructure projects. Even where judgements had been reflectively formed and decisions navigated within constraints, legitimacy depended on how those decisions were explained and rendered acceptable to others. Communicative strategies were therefore directed not merely at securing agreement, but at demonstrating that decisions were reasonable and responsible in the context of relevant purposes.

A core strategy involved framing decisions and trade-offs in ways that made their rationale visible. Project managers emphasised the importance of explaining why particular options were pursued while others were constrained or deferred. Rather than presenting outcomes as optimal, they sought to show that decisions reflected a considered balancing of competing purposes and constraints. As one practitioner explained:

“You have to explain why you’ve landed where you have. People don’t expect perfection, but they do expect to see that you’ve thought through the options and the consequences.”
(UK)

Here, legitimacy is sought through reasonableness rather than outcomes, with acceptance depending on whether others recognise that decisions were made thoughtfully and with due regard to consequences.

Closely linked to this was the use of storytelling and narrative coherence. Project managers frequently referred to the need to ‘tell the story’ of the pursuit in ways that helped others understand how decisions, constraints and purposes fitted together over time. Storytelling was used to connect past commitments to present realities and to integrate multiple and sometimes competing purposes into a coherent account, while maintaining confidence in the project’s direction. As one practitioner noted:

“If you can’t tell a coherent story about the project, people lose confidence. They need to understand how today’s decisions connect to what was promised earlier.”
(Kenya)

In this sense, storytelling was not only about persuasion or embellishment, but also about making complex trajectories intelligible and credible to different audiences.

A further strategy centred on evidencing decisions through quantification and formal measures. Metrics and indicators were widely used to translate broad aspirations, such as sustainability or social value, into formats recognised by sponsors and oversight bodies. Quantification provided a shared language through which project managers could demonstrate responsibility and rigour. As one interviewee put it:

“Numbers give you something solid to point to. They don’t tell the whole story, but without them it’s very hard to show that you’ve acted responsibly.”
(UK)

Across these strategies, transparency emerged as an important communicative principle. Project managers described efforts to be open about constraints, uncertainties and trade-offs, particularly in situations where outcomes fell short of stated purposes. Transparency was not framed as full disclosure of all deliberations, but as providing sufficient clarity to sustain credibility and trust. As one practitioner explained:

“Being upfront about constraints matters. You can’t share everything, but people need to see that you’re not hiding the difficult parts.”
(Kenya)

Taken together, these strategies illustrate how project managers actively work to make decisions acceptable within a landscape of scrutiny and competing expectations. Legitimacy was built not through claims of success, but through reasoned framing of trade-offs, coherent storytelling, evidencing of responsibility and transparent acknowledgement of limits.

5.3.2 Communicative challenges

While communicative strategies played an important role in building legitimacy, project managers also described significant challenges associated with this work. Efforts to explain and evidence decisions were often shaped and constrained by the formats and expectations through which legitimacy was assessed. As a result, communication could itself become a source of tension and discomfort.

A central challenge concerned the double-edged nature of quantification. While metrics and indicators enabled project managers to demonstrate responsibility and alignment with recognised standards, they also risked narrowing the range of purposes that could be meaningfully communicated. Project managers described how attention gravitated towards what could be measured, sometimes at the expense of less tangible but still important concerns. As one interviewee reflected:

“Once you start measuring certain things, those are the things everyone focuses on. The harder-to-measure impacts still matter, but they slip out of the conversation.”
(UK)

In this way, the very tools used to secure legitimacy could reshape which purposes were foregrounded and which were sidelined.

Project managers also described ethical ambiguity and discomfort associated with communicative work. Communicating decisions required simplifying complex realities and presenting partial accounts, which sometimes sat uneasily with project managers’ own understanding of the trade-offs involved. As one practitioner noted:

“You end up simplifying things to make them understandable, but sometimes that doesn’t sit comfortably because you know the reality is more complicated.”
(Kenya)

In some cases, this discomfort was more acute. One practitioner reflected candidly on the strategic calculations involved:

“It would be an interesting experiment to take the same people and tell them the truth and then tell them a lie and see to which they react better.”
(Kenya)

The remark was not an endorsement of dishonesty, but an acknowledgement of how far communicative practice can drift from transparent dialogue when persuasion becomes paramount. Notably, project managers rarely referred to any organisational guidance on where these boundaries lay, leaving individuals to navigate the associated ethical ambiguity largely alone. This discomfort manifested as lived practical tensions arising from the need to make decisions legible without misrepresenting their complexity.

Communication, however well-executed, did not guarantee acceptance. Project managers recognised that even clear explanations, supported by evidence and coherent narratives, would not always lead to agreement. Political sensitivities, entrenched interests or fundamentally different priorities could result in continued contestation. As one interviewee explained:

“Even when you explain yourself properly, some people will still disagree. At that point, it’s about showing you’ve acted responsibly, not about convincing everyone.”
(UK)

Such accounts highlight the fragility of communication. Acceptance could be partial, provisional or withheld altogether, underscoring that legitimacy is ultimately conferred by others depending on the interests and priorities they bring to the communication.

A further implication of these communicative challenges was that the strategies project managers develop to make decisions acceptable may, over time, reshape how they understand purpose itself. When sustainability is repeatedly framed as cost savings to gain approval, or when quantifiable metrics consistently dominate what is communicated, these rhetorical adaptations can gradually narrow the interpretive frame within which project managers judge what matters. In this sense, the three moments are not only mutually shaping but iterative: how purpose is communicated influences what purpose comes to mean both for external audiences and for project managers themselves.

Taken together, the findings show that legitimacy is built through ongoing reflection and negotiation, as project managers judge what should matter, navigate constraints in enacting those judgements, and communicate decisions in ways that make them intelligible and acceptable to others. These three moments – grounding judgement, navigating context and relationships and communicating decisions – are analytically distinct but mutually shaping, and recur across different projects and contexts. Section 5 builds on these findings to consider their implications for theory and practice.

6. Discussions

6.1 Power, politics and legitimacy in purpose-driven infrastructure projects

Infrastructure projects are inherently political undertakings. Decisions about what to build, for whom and with what consequences reflect and privilege particular values (Winner, 1980; Flyvbjerg, 1998). In purpose-driven infrastructure projects, this political character is more explicit, as projects are expected to advance broader aims such as sustainability, equity, resilience or public value. Legitimacy therefore becomes a central concern, shaping debates about which purposes are prioritised and which trade-offs are accepted.

While prior research has established that legitimacy in projects is dynamic and contested (Suchman, 1995; Clegg et al., 2017), less attention has been paid to how project managers themselves engage in building it as part of their everyday practice. The findings of this research bring this individual-level dimension into focus, responding to calls for closer empirical attention to the micro-level power and political dynamics of project work (Konstantinou, 2025; Marnewick et al., 2025). They show that project managers actively contribute to building legitimacy as they ground their judgement, navigate constraints and communicate decisions in practice. Thus, the three moments highlighted in this research help locate where and how power operates in purpose-driven projects, revealing often subtle and invisible circuits of power in everyday practice. Hence, these findings extend the power and politics stream in project research from organisational and institutional level analyses towards the lived dynamics of professional practice.

Grounding judgement shows that power operates through shaping the grounds on which judgement is formed. Influence over these grounds is a form of power exercised before any particular decision is taken. Navigating shows that power operates simultaneously through formal structures and through the capacity to work within and around them. Setting governance arrangements and contracts is clearly an exercise of power. But so too is the more informal and less visible capacity to make those structures work for particular purposes, and even stretch them, through experience and relational mastery. Communicating shows that power operates through both the message and the medium. Strategic framing and storytelling are powerful in securing acceptance, while decisions about what counts as credible communication, such as the dominance of metrics and quantification, shape which aspects of purpose are foregrounded and which are quietly dropped. Over time, these communicative choices have the power to reshape what purpose itself comes to mean.

Taken together, these moments show that power in purpose-driven projects cannot be understood only as formal authority or control over governance structures. Power operates through the capacity to shape: i) the grounds on which judgements are formed, ii) the constraints within which navigation occurs, and iii) the forms in which decisions are communicated, making each of these a political arena in its own right. By locating these dynamics at the level of professional practice, the study extends the examination of power and politics in project research, connecting organisational-level analyses of legitimacy with the lived realities of those tasked with enacting contested purposes.

6.2 Implications for leadership in purpose-driven projects

If legitimacy in purpose-driven projects is built through grounding judgement, navigating context and relationships, and communicating decisions, then leadership in such projects must be understood differently. The findings suggest that leadership is less about one-off vision-setting or charismatic individuals, and more about sustained interpretive, relational and narrative work. They also suggest that this work is carried out by project managers in their everyday practice and enabled or constrained by the actions of sponsors, clients, governance bodies and others around them. This makes leadership inherently relational and distributed across multiple actors in the project ecosystem rather than concentrated in any single role.

First, grounding judgement highlights a form of interpretive leadership. Interpretive leadership can be understood as facilitating collective meaning-making under conditions of ambiguity and contestation. Leadership here lies in helping the project develop and sustain a coherent sense of purpose under ambiguous and conflicting goals. In purpose-driven projects this has two facets. It involves shaping the social grounds on which judgement is built, for example, professional capability frameworks and procurement policies, so that they actively enable broader social and environmental purposes rather than allowing established purposes such as cost efficiency or technical familiarity to set the terms by default. At the personal level, it involves project managers and others engaging reflectively with their own personal grounds, which the findings show are shaped by positional context, experience, values and professional identity. These personal grounds will be different across individuals and should not be flattened, but each individual carries a responsibility to remain reflective of their own grounds, keep current and engage inclusively with how others ground their own views. Together, these two facets create the conditions in which competing purposes can be worked with productively and equitably rather than collapsed or left to dominant defaults.

Second, navigating context and relationships reflects relational leadership. Purpose-driven commitments are rarely secured through authority alone. They depend on working within governance systems, reading political conditions, building trust and sustaining alignment across actors with different priorities. The findings suggest a form of leadership that is distributed and ongoing, exercised through influence, coalition-building and the relationships that keep particular purposes alive when formal processes fall short in protecting them. In this sense, leadership is embedded in everyday interactions rather than confined to formal leadership roles. It is also carried by different actors in different ways. Project managers engage with contesting purposes in search of a workable balance and bring the proficiency to navigate competing demands on the ground. Sponsors and clients signal consistently which purposes are non-negotiable. Governance arrangements allow purpose to be revisited rather than locked in too early.

Third, communicating decisions emphasises narrative leadership. Project managers must justify choices and render decisions intelligible across diverse audiences in ways that different stakeholders feel included and heard, even when they do not agree. The way decisions are explained (for example, through stories and metrics) shapes whether they are regarded as reasonable and acceptable. Communication is therefore a key function of leadership. Importantly, this work happens both in formal project communications and in the everyday conversations through which project managers communicate decisions to different stakeholders, with these two sometimes diverging, highlighting again the distributed and relational character of narrative leadership. At the same time, this narrative work carries ethical tension, as simplification and persuasion must be balanced against transparency and integrity.

Taken together, the three moments suggest that leadership in purpose-driven projects is iterative rather than episodic. It does not occur only at moments of major decision or crisis, but recurs throughout the life of a project as judgements are formed, constraints navigated and decisions communicated. Theoretically, this perspective challenges heroic models of project leadership that emphasise single charismatic individuals or top-down direction – models that have already been widely critiqued within project management scholarship. It aligns more closely with relational and distributed perspectives on leadership, which view leadership as emerging through interaction and meaning-making. The primary contribution here is the empirical depth that shows how legitimacy-building occurs through grounding, navigating and communicating, giving project managers and those around them three arenas where leadership in purpose-driven projects can be developed and exercised.

Practically, this framing helps explain why project managers in purpose-driven projects report feeling exposed, conflicted and personally invested in decisions. When leadership involves judgement under scrutiny, negotiation under constraint and communication under contestation, emotional and ethical pressures are inevitable. Making these dynamics explicit validates experiences that many project managers recognise but struggle to articulate. It also implies that these pressures should not fall on project managers alone, since the leadership that enables legitimacy-building is distributed across the project ecosystem, just as the power dynamics that shape it are. Finally, it clarifies why technical competence alone is insufficient for leading purpose-driven projects.

6.3 Between compliance and discretion: Project governance in purpose-driven projects

The findings of this study also invite a reframing of project governance. Governance is often discussed in terms of formal structures and compliance mechanisms. While these elements do matter, the three moments highlighted in this study show that governance is not experienced by project managers simply as a fixed design that they cannot escape. It is rather encountered as a situational condition: something to be interpreted, negotiated and enacted under ambiguity and pressure.

First, across both empirical contexts, governance shaped what was possible, but not in identical ways. Interviewees in the UK described a context characterised by formalised approval pathways and layered legal accountability, where significant decisions typically required navigation through multiple committees and assurance gates. Interviewees in Kenya described governance environments that were more plural and relational, with authority dispersed across formal institutions, community actors and political networks, where progress often depended as much on standing relationships as on formal approvals. These differences did not determine whether projects were legitimate, but they shaped how legitimacy had to be built. In more procedural settings, the challenge lies rather in working within rigid systems without crowding out purpose. In more relational settings, it lies rather in navigating multiple accountabilities and maintaining trust across shifting coalitions.

Second, in both contexts, governance was not simply followed; it was worked with. Project managers described interpreting rules, embedding commitments early in formal documentation, reading where discretion was possible and negotiating where formal requirements collided with purpose-driven ambitions. Governance frameworks could protect purpose when commitments were written into contracts or mandates. At other times, they constrained it, particularly when cost or performance metrics narrowed what counted as legitimate success. This required project managers to exercise judgement about when to rely on formal authority and when to build relational support.

The findings therefore highlight a persistent tension between compliance and discretion. Compliance remains essential in infrastructure projects, particularly where public funds, safety and accountability are at stake. Yet purpose-driven projects frequently demand evaluation beyond rule-following. Project managers must decide how to apply rules in context, how to reconcile conflicting requirements and how to justify departures or adaptations when strict adherence would undermine broader aims. Governance, in this sense, is not only a system of control; it is a field within which professional discretion is exercised.

This reframing contributes to ongoing debates about governance in project management. Rather than viewing governance as something that is designed at organisational level and then implemented, the study shows how governance is enacted in practice, often under tension. It is shaped by how rules are followed and how discretion is exercised under competing goals and expectations. The contribution here is to position governance not as a backdrop against which projects unfold but as work-always-in-progress continuously shaped through the negotiation of multiple purposes, particularly when they compete. This offers practitioners and governance scholars a bottom-up lens on how formal structures and lived experience interact in contemporary infrastructure delivery.

6.4 Practical implications for project managers, organisations and the profession

This study's findings have direct implications for project managers, project-based organisations and sponsors, and the profession more broadly. If legitimacy-building is integral to project work, then it should be recognised and more intentionally developed and supported.

6.4.1 For project managers

First, legitimacy work is already part of the job even when it is not identified as such. Project managers in purpose-driven projects are not only delivering scope, time and cost objectives; they are also evaluating competing demands, navigating tensions between stakeholders and justifying trade-offs under scrutiny. Recognising this as essential and necessary work can help reframe the role beyond purely technical delivery.

Second, the skills required extend beyond technical competence. Effective practice involves sound judgement in ambiguous situations, the ability to work relationally across boundaries and the capacity to communicate decisions in ways that are both defensible and understandable. Developing reflexive awareness of how one grounds judgements, navigates constraints and communicates decisions can strengthen professional confidence and effectiveness in contested environments.

6.4.2 For project-based organisations and sponsors

For project-based organisations and sponsors, the findings suggest that purpose-driven projects cannot be sustained by policy statements or governance frameworks alone. Project managers require space and support to navigate legitimacy tensions in practice. Excessive proceduralisation, while often introduced to manage risk, can crowd out the judgement and discretion that purpose-driven projects demand. Governance systems should therefore recognise professional discretion rather

than implicitly deny it. This does not mean weakening accountability, but acknowledging that rules require interpretation in context. Sponsors play a crucial role in signalling which purposes are non-negotiable and in backing project managers when trade-offs generate resistance. Without such support, the broader social and environmental purposes these projects are asked to advance can be sidelined, and project managers may have to absorb intensified competing pressures without sufficient authority to address them.

6.4.3 For professional education and development

Finally, the findings have implications for education and professional development. Project management education often under-prepares practitioners for the political and legitimacy-related dimensions of the role. As recent scholarship has noted (e.g. Pinto et al., 2025), many of the interpretive and relational skills required in purpose-driven projects are learned informally and often late in professional careers. The three moments identified in this study – grounding judgement, navigating context and relationships, and communicating decisions – provide a practical framework that can inform training, reflective practice, mentoring and CPD. Making these dynamics explicit allows them to be developed more intentionally, rather than being left to experiential trial and error.

By articulating legitimacy-building as a core dimension of project work, this report offers APM and its members a clearer language for understanding the demands placed on contemporary project managers. Supporting professionals in developing these capabilities, and supporting the conditions in which they work, is essential if purpose-driven infrastructure projects are to deliver on the broader societal and environmental aims they are increasingly asked to advance.

7. Conclusions

Infrastructure projects are increasingly expected to deliver outcomes that go beyond technical performance, addressing broader societal purposes such as sustainability, equity and public value. At the same time, these projects operate in complex political and institutional environments, where decisions are subject to scrutiny and contestation by multiple stakeholders. This report examines how project managers participate in building legitimacy under these circumstances by focusing on how they judge and enact the competing goals of purpose-driven infrastructure projects.

Drawing on interviews with project managers working in the UK and Kenya, the study shows that legitimacy is not secured through a single decision or formal approval, but through ongoing professional engagement throughout the life of a project. Project managers continually orient themselves towards what should matter, navigate constraints in enacting those judgements, and communicate decisions in ways that make them intelligible and acceptable to others. These three analytical moments – grounding judgement, navigating context and relationships, and communicating decisions – are distinct yet mutually shaping, and recur across different project contexts.

A key insight of this study is that legitimacy is inherently fragile and provisional. It is externally conferred, shaped by how decisions and priorities are evaluated by others, and subject to revision as project conditions and expectations change. Project managers do not fully control legitimacy outcomes of the purposes they work towards, but they play an important role in shaping the conditions under which legitimacy can be created. The report shows that the power dynamics involved often operate in subtle and less visible ways, that the leadership required is distributed and enabling rather than directive, and that the governance environments within which this work happens demand both compliance and professional discretion. By making visible the often tacit interpretive, relational and communicative engagements through which legitimacy is built in practice, this report contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the political and social dimensions of project work.

The findings also highlight the limits of viewing legitimacy as a procedural or governance problem alone. While rules and formal processes do matter, they do not themselves create legitimacy; nor do they override the importance of professional judgement and explanation. Particularly in purpose-driven projects, project managers are frequently required to work with ambiguity, negotiate competing expectations and justify trade-offs in contexts where clear guidance is lacking. Recognising this reality has important implications for how project roles are supported and developed.

This study has several limitations. It draws on qualitative interview data, and reflects the perspectives of project managers rather than those of other stakeholders who ultimately confer legitimacy to the project. The focus on two national contexts, and on particular types of infrastructure projects within them, also means that the findings should be read as exploratory rather than comparative or fully representative. Future research could extend this work by incorporating stakeholder perspectives, examining legitimacy-building longitudinally across project phases, or exploring how different governance arrangements shape the scope for professional judgement and engagement.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a practical and conceptual contribution for project managers, project-based organisations, project sponsors and the profession more broadly. By articulating how legitimacy is built by project managers in practice, it offers a framework for understanding and developing professional capability in contemporary infrastructure projects. For APM and its members, this means recognising legitimacy-building as a core dimension of contemporary project work and developing the capabilities that allow it to be done, particularly in projects asked to deliver on broader societal and environmental aims.

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Appendix – Interview protocol

1. Background and warm-up

- Can you tell me a bit about your background in infrastructure project management?
- What kinds of projects have you worked on – especially those with strong societal aims (environmental, social, public equity)?
- In your experience, how are these societal aims typically decided, positioned and prioritised?

2. Challenges and pressures

- What kinds of competing demands or pressures typically arise in these projects?
- Can you describe a situation where you had to balance or trade off between competing goals?
- What made that situation challenging? How did you go about making the decision? Why?

3. Explaining decisions

- Can you walk me through a time when you had to explain a difficult decision to others (internal or external stakeholders)?
- What made the explanation challenging?
- Did you ever have to adapt how you framed the decision for different audiences?
- Have you ever had to recover support or credibility after a decision went wrong?

4. Your role and how you see it

- Do you see your job as delivering the project for the client, or delivering value to society, or both?
- Do you personally see infrastructure primarily as a technical solution or a societal intervention? Why? Does this framing apply to your professional attitude? How?
- Do you see part of your job as helping others see the project as credible or worthwhile?
- Have you ever stepped into a role you weren't expecting?
- Have you ever felt tension between what you think is legitimate and what others expect?
- Is legitimacy more about process or outcome?

5. Reflections

- What do you think is often misunderstood about the role of project managers in these kinds of projects?
- What advice would you give to someone managing a socially ambitious infrastructure project for the first time?
- When you make decisions, which of these influences you most often? Please rank them:
 1. Moral – because it's ethically right.
 2. Regulatory – because it's legally required.
 3. Normative – because it's socially expected.
 4. Cultural-cognitive – because it's 'just how things are done'.
- Do you find most of your time and effort go into:
 - initially gaining support
 - maintaining it
 - responding to unexpected challenges
 - innovating new ways of gaining acceptance?
- Is there anything else that you think might be relevant to our interview today but we did not talk about?



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