

Respond, Reinvent, Reform.

APM's asks for the next UK Government

Author information: Andrew Baldwin, Head of Policy and Public Affairs,
and Tessa Neal, Policy and Public Affairs Advisor
Date: 11 June 2024



Respond, Reinvent, Reform.

APM's asks for the next UK Government

Projects matter. Project management matters. There are 2.32 million project professionals in the UK who contribute £186.8 million to the economy¹ and have skills expected to be among the most in demand by employers by 2035².

Project professionals are central to driving economic growth, fiscal stability and delivering the next Government's manifesto commitments³.

To deliver those commitments, the Government must respond to the uncertainty that is plaguing project delivery, reinvent attitudes to projects, and reform approaches to project delivery.

1. Respond to the uncertainty that is plaguing project delivery.

The ever-changing world landscape has presented unforeseen challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which makes project delivery less certain. Factors which are usually predictable, such as supply chains and inflation are fluctuating, this disrupts projects and makes it harder for them to meet established budgets, timeframes, and outcomes⁴, and unexpected policy reversals, such as the Net Zero U-turn, have exacerbated the situation. Uncertainty reduces confidence in project delivery, as we saw with the decision to cancel the northern leg of the HS2 programme.

Reduced confidence is dangerous in two ways – it limits financial investment in projects as investors get nervous. But it also impacts upon educational investment in the skills we need to deliver for the UK. This is especially true in previously dormant sectors, like nuclear and high-speed rail, where start-up costs were higher due to the need to rebuild workforces from scratch. Those with knowledge of how to build both had retired or they have moved on.

We need to invest in these sectors and ensure the skills gap doesn't deter the UK from taking advantage of the opportunities of emerging sectors, innovation, and growth. We must move away from policy U-turns, which undermine planning and investment. Government must create the right conditions to challenge business hesitancy and encourage investment in projects and skills, by tackling uncertainty head on.

To do that, we call on the next Government to develop a cohesive industrial strategy, which outlines the sectors it will invest in, with key milestones, timelines, and budgets. This strategy should be a project in and of itself, with assumptions made about benefit and value, and with mandated external risk factors considered as central, to ensure that scopes are realistic⁵, to aid project delivery.

Moreover, the plan must include new fiscal measures to grow and stabilise the economy, and unlike previous attempts, the industrial strategy must be embedded into Government infrastructure to withstand political cycles. This will build confidence in projects, enhance delivery, and lead to growth.

2. Reinvent attitudes to projects by focusing on the huge benefit they bring to society in the long run.

The narrow way we view projects fails to account for their full benefit to society. Projects are about more than instant success or failure. We need to redefine 'success' and go beyond time, cost, and scope.

Success should be determined by the long-term value a project provides to society. The Crossrail project, now the Elizabeth Line, was criticised as a failure at opening, yet has rapidly become a major success story, transporting around 800,000 people per day⁶.

Crossrail is only the latest in a long line of projects that were originally branded as failures, but which wouldn't be called that now. The Suez Canal was 1,900% over budget but is now a vital component of our international trade structure – the Ever Given container ship incident in 2021 reinforced just how vital it is. Sydney Opera House, one of the most recognisable buildings in the world, was 1,400% over budget, while the Channel Tunnel was 80% over budget. Would we really consider these iconic projects to be failures?

It is clear that we can change attitudes to success by evaluating projects over longer time scales, as benefits and value accrue over time. Moreover, our projects must acknowledge social benefit potential and demonstrate this. Less than one-third of project professionals said social benefit is always included in their original project plans⁷, if we are to deliver more social value, we need to increase this number. Finally, we need to prove this social value by evidencing the long-term benefits to the public to promote community support, tolerance, and appreciation for projects.

Continuing with the reinvention of attitudes, we want to see more appreciation of the achievements of the Infrastructure and Project Authority (IPA). Rather than reducing budgets, as we saw in the 2024 Spring Budget, the Government should invest in this success story. As part of that, we want to see more professionalisation of project management. Some multi-million-pound Government projects still are not delivered by members of a professional body, or by Chartered project professionals. Chartered offers a defined level of technical knowledge, professional practice, and ethical behaviour. To ensure value for money, we want Chartered, or working towards Chartered, to be mandated in major Govt projects over a certain financial threshold.

3. Reform our approach to how projects are delivered by joining up thinking across government.

The Maude Review of Civil Service Governance and Accountability suggested a number of recommendations for reforming Government. If it is to deliver for the UK, the next Government should reassess the recent dismissal of the main recommendations of this report.

The report expressed concern that the Treasury lacked clear systemic prioritisation for infrastructure projects. At the same time, the IPA has warned that it is supporting more projects than it has the capacity to deliver effectively⁸. Clearly, the process here can be improved, and the IPA has a key role in improving this – the Government must back it to succeed.

The review raised issues around confusion, duplication of workflows, inefficiency, and over-complication. We want the Government to encourage joined-up thinking, that streamlines processes, projects, and plans across departments and throughout project delivery⁹. Lessons learned in one department should be applied to other departments. We do not want to see National Audit Office reports raising the same failures in different departments.

Reforms must mandate transparent accountability: we want the Government to publish data to help officials allocate funds more efficiently, to get better value for money in projects¹⁰. Limited transparency undermines officials' ability to engage in effective decisions, achieve value for money, and maintain confidence or trust¹¹. This all plays into a culture of unfairness in projects that negatively influences individuals, projects, and organisations¹². The Government must create the right culture for projects to succeed, focusing on the dynamic conditions for project success (e.g. interpersonal skills; training and qualifications; team ethos)¹³.

We also call for the publication of the evidence and data behind policies¹⁴ and the involvement of project professionals in policy development from the start, to better determine whether projects are achievable, and decrease the likelihood of project decisions being blinded by optimism bias and other negative factors.

Reforms must be designed to create the right conditions for project success¹⁵. The next Government will have finite financial resources, so it is essential to further improve project standards to maximise potential. The vast expertise of APM project professionals can be used to improve project delivery within the Government, because when projects succeed, society benefits.

-
- 1 [APM. 2024. The Golden Thread: A Study of the Contribution of the Project Profession to the UK's Economy.](#)
 - 2 [NFER. 2022. The Skills Imperative 2035: what does the literature tell us about essential skills most needed for work?](#)
 - 3 [IPA. 2023. Annual report on Major Projects 2022-23.](#)
 - 4 [APM. 2018. Project Risk Analysis and Management.](#)
 - 5 [Winch, G. M., Brunet, M. and Cao, D. \(eds.\) \(2023\) Research Handbook on Complex Project Organizing.](#)
 - 6 [Evening Standard. 2024. Elizabeth line's 'staggering achievement' with 300m journeys made since opening.](#)
 - 7 Censuswide and APM. 2023. Survey of 902 Project Managers conducted in June 2023.
 - 8 [House of Lords Built Environment Committee. 2023. Infrastructure Policy Making and Implementation in government.](#)
 - 9 [House of Lords Built Environment Committee. 2023. Infrastructure Policy Making and Implementation in government.](#)
 - 10 [IFG. 2024. The benefits of transparency: why being more open is good for government.](#)
 - 11 [Gov.uk. 2023. Independent Review of Governance and Accountability in the Civil Service: The Rt Hon Lord Maude of Horsham.](#)
 - 12 [APM. 2022. Fairness and Unfairness in Projects.](#)
 - 13 [APM. 2021. Dynamic conditions for project success](#)
 - 14 [Gov.uk. 2023. Independent Review of Governance and Accountability in the Civil Service: The Rt Hon Lord Maude of Horsham.](#)
 - 15 [APM. 2015. Conditions for Project Success.](#)