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The Impact of Politics on Project Success in Multi-Agent Projects

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February 2026

Because when projects
succeed, society benefits

Acknowledgements

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1. Executive summary

1.1 Project overview

This study investigates the impact of politics on the success and failure of multi-agent projects in the UK public sector. These projects often involve multiple government departments, private firms and third sector organisations, creating complex networks of stakeholders. Despite their strategic importance, government projects have a much higher failure rate compared with private sector initiatives. Using a qualitative approach and the critical incident technique (CIT), the researchers interviewed ten senior civil servants and parliamentarians. Responses were analysed to identify key challenges and success factors.

1.2 Key findings

1.2.1 Why government projects fail

- **Power dynamics:** Political adversarialism as a consequence of the political system, fragmented stakeholder interests, mixed perceptions of success, the allocation of project funding, shifting priorities undermining project stability and ineffective leadership.
- **Public service challenges:** Frequent role changes, lack of incentives and uneven expertise within the civil service create instability and skill gaps.
- **Project management deficiencies:** Poor planning, unclear objectives and limited access to training exacerbate risks.

1.2.2 Why government projects succeed

- **Strong leadership:** Understanding political complexities, implementing effective and coordinated processes, fostering collaboration, communicating effectively and using authentic authority to resolve conflicts and maintain alignment.
- **Creating communities:** Creation of cohesive; cross-departmental communities with shared goals.
- **Effective application of power:** Political consensus and depoliticised delivery environments.

1.2.3 What would improve performance

- **Political consensus:** Reduce adversarialism by promoting cross-party collaboration and bipartisan commitment to project goals.
- **People:** Improve civil service engagement through better incentives, career structures and leadership continuity.
- **Project management training:** Provide structured training for civil servants and parliamentarians covering fundamentals, leadership and governance in multi-agent contexts.

1.3 Recommendations

1.3.1 Strengthen leadership and accountability

- Define roles clearly, establish governance bodies and ensure continuity in leadership.
- Empower leaders to exercise legitimate authority and resolve conflicts early.

1.3.2 Build collaborative communities

- Embed stakeholders in integrated teams, foster shared identity and hold regular forums for problem solving.

1.3.3 Improve communication and strategic clarity

- Develop clear roadmaps; maintain transparency, and manage public and media perceptions proactively.

1.3.4 Enhance project management capability

- Provide structured training for civil servants and leaders, adopt standardised methodologies (e.g. APM, PRINCE2, agile) and embed continuous learning practices.

1.3.5 Depoliticise project delivery

- Promote cross-party collaboration, introduce neutral mediation and ring-fence delivery teams from electioneering pressures.

1.3.6 Reform budget allocation

- Centralise funding to projects, adopt phased funding tied to milestones and adjust resources based on risk.

2. Introduction

The public sector exists to address the needs of society, and in most countries that includes agencies such as education, housing and health. In democratic states, the public sector is managed and led by elected government, at local, regional and national levels, and these are tasked with developing public services and engaging in initiatives designed to address societal problems (Baa & Chattoraj, 2022). Implementing these is the job of the government support services – largely the civil service – working alongside other non-governmental public or charity organisations and the private sector. As such, many government initiatives are implemented by projects. These can cross administrative and functional boundaries of multiple organisations (Waldorff et al., 2014), and indeed, major changes in society are often organised through strategic projects that bring together these private and public organisations (Daniel, 2024; Haniff & Galloway, 2022). Yet, despite their importance in terms of delivery, and despite the specific scrutiny and levels of transparency government projects must have (since they are always at least partly funded by tax) they are identified as more likely to fail than projects in other sectors (PwC, 2017). The reasons for this are opaque, and there has been little research engagement to date. This is largely because of the sensitivity of much of the information associated with (particularly large-scale) government projects, and a culture of secrecy often mandated by requirements for confidentiality. The people involved in leading, managing and contributing to public sector projects are often, necessarily, unable to discuss details of specific initiatives or experiences of key failure or success factors. In some cases, this is because of informal and formal concerns about confidentiality; in others, confidentiality is a legislated requirement. As such, accessing meaningful data about how government projects operate can be challenging.

This report presents evidence and analysis from a study of experiences of government projects in the UK that goes some way to addressing this gap. To enable a depth of enquiry, a qualitative methodology that included the use of the critical incident technique (CIT) was applied to the research; it took specific note of the sensitivity of much of the data. Ten participants who were either elected parliamentarians or senior civil servants were recruited for the study. As detailed in section 5, various measures were taken to protect identities and maintain confidentiality.

3. Research aim

The aim of this study is to explore the impact of politics on the success and failure of multi-agent projects, as perceived by those who have experienced them in the government sector. Drawing on lessons learned from these experiences, opportunities will be identified to optimise the outcomes of such projects in the future.

Although the study is UK-specific, the data and implications of the research are of potential interest to any country with a democratically elected government. In this sense, this research goes some way to addressing the current gap in knowledge about experiences of multi-agent public sector projects in democratic states more generally.

4. Multi-agent projects and the public sector

Multi-agent projects are commonly implemented through a project network (Haniff & Galloway, 2022), comprising private and public sector organisations with overlapping inputs, activities and specialisms. Typically, they involve complex supply chains, procurement processes and contractual arrangements for the effective implementation of public sector projects.

In the public sector, strategic initiatives can both be cross-departmental and involve multiple external partnerships. Alongside this, while commercial objectives are prioritised in the private sector, public projects can have multiple social, economic and developmental objectives; and accountability and measurement include, but also go well beyond, budgetary requirements. Thus, the public sector multi-agent environment requires that a range of stakeholders make representation. However, in the context of projects, numerous organisations simultaneously seek to ensure that their broad organisational investments and aspirations are realised (Haniff, 2017). For some, the often-substantial financial value of participating in projects is key; for others, reputational or social value may be prioritised. As such, public sector-based projects involve complex negotiations between different government agencies, private firms and other consortia, and shifting levels of power throughout project terms (Çıdık et al., 2024). In such complex work environments, there are varying levels of power; and as such, public sector projects are inherently political (Martinsuo et al., 2022).

While there is a robust body of knowledge on projects, including work on optimising operations, efficiencies and outcomes, and on the strategic importance of projects to organisations, much of this research is based on single organisations (Turner & Muller, 2003; Derakhshan et al., 2019), with little distinction between public and private sector contexts. Although it is limited, research about how multi-agent projects are managed is beginning to emerge.

In the context of construction, Haniff & Galloway (2022) report competing priorities, inconsistent quality of communications leading to ambiguity, and the evolving nature of projects themselves and of the objectives of each participating organisation to be key risk factors for strategic project alignment. Similarly, in their meta-analysis of various studies, Martinsuo et al. (2022) summarise that conflicting organisational strategies, knowledge-transfer inefficiencies, weak governance and power asymmetries all put project success at risk.

In the context of public sector projects, studies are fewer again, and they tend to include single-case analyses of specific projects. For example, Kromidha et al. (2017) explore multi-agency ICT projects in the public sector in Albania, finding that power struggles, among other things, require careful management. Matinheikki et al. (2019) find similar in their case study of the Lakeland Tunnel project in Finland.

Beyond these instances, though, the literature on multi-agent projects is sparse, and it is especially rare for studies to include public sector projects. Yet, from public building works to social policy implementation, stakeholders can include investors, public organisations, other public bodies, private companies and also clients and end users (Thomson, 2011; Young et al., 2012).

Our lack of knowledge about why government projects have a higher failure rate than similarly complex projects in the private sector is a significant gap, given the extent to which strategic initiatives in the government sector mandate participation from multiple actors. As such, this report presents findings from a scoping study that solicits opinions and testimony of experiences from key informants in the government field. Specific questions that are addressed in this research are:

6.1   Why do government projects fail?

6.2   Why do government projects succeed?

6.3   What would improve project performance?

5. Research method

A list of over 30 potential participants was initially compiled by the researchers, chosen on the basis that they had experience of seniority in national-level government projects. Each was either an elected member of a parliament or a civil servant in a senior (director-level) role working for either a Scottish or UK (Westminster) government department. Local government-level participants were excluded from this research to afford some homogeneity to the context of the projects in terms of value and scale. Each identified individual was contacted in person, by telephone or by email by a member of the research team and asked to take part. Due to the sensitivity of the information sought, and as a consequence of the culture, and indeed requirement, of confidentiality in the sector, some participants required several approaches and reassurances. Ultimately, 10 of these purposely selected experts agreed to participate (see Table 1 for summary information). Each was interviewed confidentially and anonymised.

Table 1: Participant summary information

Participant	Parliament (P) / Civil service (C)	Age	Gender	Total years in service
P1	P	30s	F	9
P2	C	50s	M	22
P3	C	40s	M	21
P4	C	30s	F	11
P5	C	50s	F	22
P6	C	60s	F	9
P7	P	50s	F	3
P8	C	30s	M	14
P9	C	30s	M	8
P10	C	40s	F	20

Interviews deployed the critical incident technique (CIT) (Lahm et al., 2001) as a means of affording detailed testimony about experiences of multi-agent projects. The CIT is a qualitative research method that explores the process of learning in contexts. Accordingly, it has been applied to research in a variety of areas to identify job requirements and recommendations for practice and for development. Introduced by Flanagan (1954) to encourage reflection and development in the aviation industry, it has since been applied as a methodology in studies of various contexts, including education (Wright et al., 1994; Christie, 1998) and marketing (Bitner et al., 1990). The CIT requires that informants:

- describe incident(s)
- reflect on what was effective or ineffective
- reflect on the outcome(s)
- reflect on why outcomes occurred, and what alternative actions might have been useful
- reflect on the ways in which the experience(s) might inform future practice

In line with this, each participant was asked to discuss a project that had failed and one that had succeeded, and reflect on the experiences of both. While this necessarily led to confidential testimony, participants were assured that details about any projects would not be recorded. Testimony was gathered by one researcher, who transcribed each interview and redacted sensitive and identifying information, and then destroyed the recordings. The redacted transcripts were then analysed by two other experienced researchers, initially without even summary information of each participant, which was reintroduced post-analysis. Consequently, each participant and each critical incident became unidentifiable, and only the processes and opinions, as recalled by participants, were observable.

Analysis was conducted using a thematic approach resonant of that used in Braun & Clarke (2019), whereby initial themes were identified by each researcher. For the interviewer, this thematic analysis was informed by knowledge of the individual participants and the projects they referenced in their critical incident testimonies; for the other two researchers, the analysis was not informed by this knowledge. An initial list of over 100 coded responses was generated by the three researchers. Following collaboration and analysis of the interviews, 9 key themes and 11 sub-themes evolved. These are reported in section 6.

6. Findings

All of the participants in this research were able to reflect on experiences as senior figures in multi-agent projects that had been considered successful, and all reported that they had been witness to perceived failures too. All provided national-level examples of projects in areas including legislation, procurement, infrastructure, and international, national and social policy. Six of the 10 participants had experience outside of the public sector prior to joining their service or being elected to parliament, but all acknowledged the uniqueness of the public sector as a delivery organisation. As P7 notes:

> "There is a difference between projects funded by taxpayers' money and projects funded privately because from a project management perspective there is that huge impetus on government-funded projects, tax-funded projects, to get it right, because you have to answer to the electorate. And that's very different from private projects." (P7, parliamentarian)

6.1 Why do government projects fail?

When relating critical incidents, participants gave examples of a variety of often interrelated reasons why projects fail. These are categorised below into the three main headings of 'Power', 'Public service' and 'Project management deficiency'.

6.1.1 Power

Given that multi-agent initiatives engage personnel from public services alongside collaborators from the third and private sectors, and that each agent is fundamentally constituted by individuals serving as the primary interface, issues pertaining to power relations and inter-organisational dynamics emerged as recurrent themes throughout the testimonies. These concerns permeated all strata of project activity, ranging from macro-level political deliberations in parliamentary contexts to micro-level interactions among operational staff. These are explored under the following themes:

The UK political system

One of the most commonly mentioned issues related to the inherent nature of the UK political system, directly referenced by six of the 10 participants, including the two parliamentarians. As with many other democracies, the UK has a political and electoral system, in which "every party is looking to highlight weaknesses and mistakes that the government has made because they're all campaigning to win the next election" (P3, civil servant).

At this highest level, projects could be substantially impacted by the political system. In some cases, it is the root of failure, including entirely avoidable failure. This is illustrated by the following testimony:

> "The biggest issue is that so many infrastructure projects have big money figures and it serves a politician's purposes to criticise those who are entrusted with it, the current government, to criticise what they're doing as opposed to getting on board. … At the end of the day, we have to understand politicians. … And too often a project becomes a political football and that is a great detriment to the projects and the delivery of the project and indeed the desire of people working on the project." (P7, parliamentarian)

The cycle of leadership at a political level also impacts projects, by creating working environments where precarity and change are commonplace. As P1 notes:

> "In government, particularly in the UK, things have been very turbulent, there have been a lot of changes. And it doesn't give people time to show political leadership." (P1, parliamentarian)

Project stakeholders

Beyond the politicians as the principal executors of government initiatives, participants testified to multiplexities of stakeholders involved in national-level public projects. The wide range of project actors was acknowledged as particularly complex, and this complexity involved inter-departmental challenges; while government engages with public and third-sector organisations to implement policies and deliver services, they may nevertheless have competing agendas, aspirations and expectations of the same project. As P2 and P3 note, this can apply even within the greater government sector:

> "There's a kind of tension. Even different goals within an agency sometimes plays out as a sort of power dynamic either between officials or between politicians, even within government." (P2, civil servant)

> "Because it's not in the control of one individual service provider. You need the local authorities or the NHS also pulling in the same direction, the education system, other third sector providers, all moving in the same direction. … So, there are a significant number of competing interests which are at play in a project like this." (P3, civil servant)

> "If someone chooses to actively fight what you are doing or just doesn't bother doing it, your ability to change that is incredibly limited. Because of the complexity of the system, you're operating in." (P3, civil servant)

This complexity is increased further when the multi-agent project involves participation from private sector organisations, as the testimonies below illustrate:

> "It's about… the extent to which they are supposed to be fighting for the organisation they are employed by." (P1, parliamentarian)

> "We treat them as if they were a public sector partner and that they want to do what's in the best interests of the country. But actually, what they want to do is in the best interests of the company. And those are not necessarily the same thing." (P2, civil servant)

> "Everyone is coming to it with different preferred outcomes, they want to achieve different things from it. And that's a really big problem in a project." (P7, parliamentarian)

> "When we were needing people [civil servants] to buy into it, they just weren't. And when the message came out that we were using an existing [private] provider it went down like a lead balloon, because nobody had any confidence the project was going to do what it was needing to because they'd had bad experience with the provider previously." (P9, civil servant)

The buy-in from stakeholders, particularly among the government department staff, that P9 mentions relates to engagement and understanding among all partners involved in the project, and the relations between them. This is discussed next.

Stakeholder relationships

Critical to working together in multi-agent projects are the relationships among stakeholders, within and between government departments, and with external private or third sector organisations. All participants noted that the nature of these relationships was central to the outcomes of their projects, as the following illustrate:

> "You've got a variety of people of different levels of competence and quality. And you've got people who fight with each other, you know, such-and-such doesn't talk to such-and-such because of something that happened 20 years ago. These people all know each other. So you've got relationships that are either strong or weak, which I think impact on delivery." (P3, civil servant)

> "… the other relationship I would say is really important is the relationship with ministers and the sort of innate need to actually curry favour with your ministers. And it shouldn't be the case that ministers can fire civil servants or have them moved on, but the reality is that it does happen… Ministers can make or break careers of civil servants when they get to a certain level, probably director and above mainly. And that will also feed into the whole thing of not wanting to raise difficult things to them." (P4, civil servant)

> "Sometimes very senior people just don't like each other and they just don't work together." (P8, civil servant)

Perceptions of success

As implied throughout the above, a key point of departure in terms of the interests of different partners in multi-agent projects relates to different expectations of the outcomes and different perceptions of success. P3 notes how measurements of intended impacts can be impossible to quantify:

> "It's the causative link that's hard to establish. … I can hypothesise that our intervention made a difference based on comparators of what's happening in another country. But what I can't do in real time is say this change is happening because of what I'm doing. … For example, in [COUNTRY], they had a programme 25 years ago and the longitudinal study of that only came out last week." (P3, civil servant)

Elsewhere, expectations from projects can vary by stakeholder, as illustrated below:

"My outcome that I'm looking for is [XXX] as a result of a kinder, safer, supportive system that enables them to thrive. … We cannot always do things that are commercial or expedient. There are consequences for the messaging for ministers to be factored in. So some options may be easier to take but you can't take them because it would be a negative story for the minister." (P3, civil servant)

"The measures by which the public recognise performance are really traditional. And this is an unending tension. You are judged by how fast you can get [XXX] but our objective was actually a more effective [XXX]." (P5, civil servant)

Public perceptions of success are inevitably influenced by the media, and therefore the media has become a significant stakeholder in many government projects, as P1 notes:

"All it takes is one really bad joke or whatever to go viral… For every project, you will rarely find an agency engaged in a project that does not have a public relations service being used. … Look at [failed project]; budget-wise it was a drop in the ocean while [other failed project] went hugely over budget and then was never used. I think if better engagement and PR had been done it might not have become such an issue." (P1, parliamentarian)

Funding and risk

Consistent among all stakeholders, whether the project partner or the recipient public, is the need for economic value. But the nature of this is nuanced depending on position. Private companies will seek to make commercial gain and profit. Conversely, public and third sector organisations will seek to deliver within budget, while the public will require demonstration of value for money. As implied in the testimonies above, often the most challenging power issues are between departments within the government services. P2 explains this:

"If you procure a private sector provider to deliver a project, it's much more a contractual legal relationship. And while the power dynamic and the politics matter, at the end of the day you have a contractual relationship which says, we now have to do this for this cost and by this date. And while it's still a partnership, it's very formal, very contractual. At the other end, you've got something that's less legally binding or less formal, and the power dynamic matters more there." (P2, civil servant)

Within government, the allocation of funds for projects could pose challenges, as per the comments of P4 and P8:

"If you are five percent of a major project and that five percent may be essential to the entire project, but you've not got the funding for it, if the department doesn't have it then it's not happening. And Treasury sort of pits departments against each other like that and it can lead to negative spirals of buck passing to the point of delay being inevitable." (P4, civil servant)

> "So the money comes to this department, to that department, to this department, and they all have a different pot of money and different objectives. … The 50 percent one thinks they have a bigger seat at the table, right? It's just an unfortunate power dynamic. And in many ways that's right, because they have more risk. They are first, they spent more money and got more risk. But it often doesn't work like that." (P8, civil servant)

Risk, and in particular risk appetite, was also noted by participants to affect the distribution of power. As P2 notes:

> "It's about different people's risk appetites. Different parties around the table have a different sense of how much risk they want to take, how much time they want to commit. It depends on the project. If you're building a hospital you know you're going to build it. If you're trying to attract inward investment it doesn't always work out. So that's the kind of power dynamics about risk and commitment." (P2, civil servant)

When projects are at scale, as is the case at national level, the issue of risk is amplified. P4 elaborates:

> "I think that another reason government projects can overspend and get it wrong, because margins of error are huge. It's better with smaller budgets because you are looking after the pennies and the pounds more, but when your budget is in millions or billions, its almost like, well…" (P4, civil servant)

In addition, P8 refers to how size of budget or financial value can affect the distribution of power within a multi-agent project. Several participants noted this, and P6 articulates it thus:

> "It depends what kind of power and influence the practitioner has, and some, quite rightly, have a great deal of power and influence because they have to get the service done and do whatever is required to deliver. … The top will watch as the process unravels and then decide if they're going to say to the key partner [the most invested/highest paid], 'No, you need to comply'." (P6, civil servant)

P6 also illustrates how power dynamics among stakeholders can play out in other ways:

> "Local councillors have a lot of power in [national-level] projects and can give the red or green light to them. … I've seen how licensing committees and planning committees work and they have a lot of power, and they can say no to projects simply because they don't understand the wider importance of saying yes." (P6, civil servant)

Public sector project dynamics

Power and politics fundamentally concern the dynamics between individuals working together on a project. However, the balance of power between actors will vary throughout a project's life cycle. This is an unavoidable element of large or long-term projects; as socio-economic life develops, so too do projects that are tasked with delivering for socio-economic value. The complexity and dynamism add a layer of complication to government projects, and all participants considered this peculiar to the public sector; as P3 articulates: "In government policy it's always the case there are unpredictable elements".

At times, this dynamism is created by the inconsistency between varied stakeholder expectations. P7 discusses this at the parliamentary level:

"Because some projects are so long term, you are going to have different personalities around the table at different times. And sometimes that can create issues and may define why it's more difficult to get success. It may be that a project was started by a previous government but requires to be finished within your government term. … And I think that's where there can be difficulties in government projects as opposed to private projects because you're finishing somebody else's work… Your priorities might be different." (P7, parliamentarian)

The inherent need for projects to be dynamic and react to a changing environment is part of the general experience of project managers. However, several participants noted that particular avoidable elements added to the complexity and caused problems. P9 refers to a lack of clear goals at the outset of a project they were involved in:

"Often with projects… the roadmap's not been clear. People know that we're going on a journey but they don't know where the bus is going. … The goals kind of kept shifting, you know. Someone came in that really wanted [ASPECT], so suddenly that became something we had to do, which wasn't in the original scope of the project. Each new leader that came in added their own requirements and it was harder to remove them than it was to add them. Which added layers and layers of complication." (P9, civil servant)

As P9's testimony attests, key to much of the internal complexity and dynamism is leadership, and this is explored next.

Ineffective leadership

Various key issues emerged in relation to leadership being a key element of project failure, including accountability and clear goals.

"When a project is across departments… two or three or four departments working on something. Where it's not clear who is accountable and which department should be alerting its minister… it's a failure. … When you have poor very senior leadership, so at director general level and above, and you don't have a clear set of objectives, goals and outcomes, from where the people in the civil service will take their lead." (P4, civil servant)

"A really important part of any project is the narrative of it, the communication, being communicated in a way that everyone can be part of it. But there were times when people felt they aren't seeing the full picture, where they don't know all the intricacies. … If that resistance remains so intransigent, then you have to do something a bit more fundamental in terms of leadership changing." (P10, civil servant)

Changes in leadership and continuity seemed common in the government projects discussed and, again as reported by participants, this could cause complexity and challenge.

> "There were so many changes of leadership in that project. ... The CEO changed multiple times within the project team and each new one had to learn what had happened, put their own spin on it, and then left. They all had different approaches. And people were getting moved around, roles were changing, project managers were coming in and then leaving. ... And so after several years, I think about the third or fourth CEO to be involved in the project said we were going to shut this down and start it again. But that meant all that work was basically wasted. And the project did relaunch and ultimately kind of started to go into that same cycle situation with people being moved, teams moved roles, organisations restructured continuously... So there wasn't that sort of continued project management that maybe could have been really beneficial to a project of that scale." (P9, civil servant)

A lack of execution of power was also identified by several participants as a cause of project failure. Having and exercising power are not the same, and leadership that did not maintain control and relinquished power was seen as weak, as in the example below:

> "My view was that if the government had been more forceful about where they wanted this to go, then the main players within this would have tried a bit harder about not meeting their agenda rather than the government agenda. The government agenda should have been the one that everybody wants to work and it just didn't work out that way. ... People and other organisations' agendas got in the way and consequently it did fail." (P6, civil servant)

6.1.2 Public service structures

As the implementer of policies, the civil service is wide ranging and departmentalised. The structures of government are well established and inhabit an overarching public service culture. At the same time, though, each department will have its own organisational culture, and as noted in section 4, these can contribute to some of the relationship-based challenges reported. Particular issues associated with public service structures related to two further themes: 'Roles' and 'Expertise'. These are discussed below.

Roles

The means by which people advance in the civil service is through development of skills and experience, as in other sectors. In the civil service, though, there can be lateral moves between departments throughout this process, and participants noted that this change in roles was common. For projects, and especially longer-term scaled ones, this can be problematic, as P9 notes:

> "Having as many changes as it did wasn't good for the project and there should have been better handover, better consistency. ... In the civil service, your job's not performance-based. ... So, there's a kind of sense of resentment and unhappiness within the project team, that they work hard but are not getting promotion, so what's the point almost?" (P9, civil servant)

P8 also notes the precarity of the sector:

> "You have those periods where there are lots of political priorities to reduce the size of the civil service, so it lets people go. And suddenly you've got a really small, underpaid and threatened civil service. And the best people leave. … I think the civil service becomes a tool in the game of politics." (P8, civil servant)

P4 refers to types of people who work in the civil service, and notes how different incentivised ways of approaching work affect performance. P8 relates similar thoughts:

> "Civil servants don't get pay rises very much. You don't get bonuses, so your pay is your pay. … My view is there's two kinds of civil servant: people who hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil, and then people who see a problem, expose a problem, try to fix a problem. And the former type go further generally than the latter. … Exposing problems and trying to fix those problems is a risk…. So the only way in the civil service to earn more money is to be promoted. So you end up with a lot of over-promoted, mediocre people in middle and senior roles. … And when you try to get rid of civil servants because of cuts in budgets, the good ones will find work anywhere and you'll be left with the other ones." (P8 civil servant)

Expertise

Related to the retention of valuable skills is the varied expertise within government. The civil service employs people with a range of skills and expertise, some in highly specialised roles, others in more general ones. In all cases, the quality and application of skills can be diverse, as P3 and P10 note:

> "Some people are really great. Some aren't. But we are highly reliant on the good people catching things and making sure everything's OK. … The quality of people in the civil service is generally fantastic, I would say higher than our [external] stakeholders, a lot higher. But the breadth of things that our people are dealing with is unbelievable. That project, I think one of the reasons it failed was that one individual was left with more responsibility than they could deal with." (P3, civil servant)

> "I was concerned at times because some of our partners work in really detailed, specific areas. … And most people who work in government are more generalist and are working in specific functions. And they move around so they're never going to have that depth of knowledge." (P10, civil servant)

The issue of expertise is not restricted to civil servants, of course. Parliamentarians were also discussed as an often-fundamental part of the challenges for projects.

> "You're in a project with people around the table who don't understand what it is they're meant to be doing. That's a problem and probably the greatest extent from parliamentarians or local councillors who don't know about stuff because it has not been their bread and butter in life. They're there by virtue of being a parliamentarian being elected by the people, not because they understand about projects or business or management. … The person doesn't have the qualifications to be a project manager or be around the table in project management. … The lack of knowledge across our parliament you see is worrying because it's clear to me that there is a lack of talent." (P7, parliamentarian)

6.1.3 Deficiency in project management

The issue of how projects are led was supported by testimony about deficiencies in project management capabilities and experience throughout public service generally. Two key areas were reported by participants: absence of planning and other project management competencies, and lack of personal development available for developing these.

Project management competencies

Project management capabilities were most commonly reported as deficient within government and the civil service. A lack of fundamental project management competencies, such as goal setting, was noted by P1 and P9, for example:

> "If they had actually sat down at the beginning and got some of the basics right together, you can't help wondering if things would have been different. And that comes down to project management. Things will always go wrong, right? Of course they will. But you can't help wondering, 'How is it possible to get this stuff so badly wrong?' And then it costs so much and it just becomes an embarrassment. An expensive embarrassment. … You can't help wondering how much of this could have been avoided if the scope of works had been done properly and there was better multi-agency working. But just how it ended up in such a terrible mess, and there was no backup plan. … You need a clear objective, clear directives, clear objectives of your project timeline, have your planning and then you're going forward." (P1, parliamentarian)

Typically, the boundaries of projects are exceeded, with the inevitable consequences of budget and schedule overruns.

> "Defining the scope could have been a lot better. I think there was so much scope creep within the project and trying to do everything at once to get this all-singing, all-dancing [XXX]. The approach in that sense hadn't been done very well." (P9, civil servant)

Capability development

Several participants recommended professional development for civil servants in project management. P9 notes that this is available but that there are barriers to accessing it:

> "I've looked into getting project management training, but your role had to involve project management to get the training to be a project manager. So you think 'How am I going to ever become a project manager if I can't get the training because I'm not already doing that?' So you were kind of stuck and I think that approach didn't really help." (P9, civil servant)

Expertise among stakeholders, and particularly competence in project management and in working within project teams, recurred as an issue in terms of failure. We will return to the issues of skills and training for public sector project workers and leaders in section 6.3. Indeed, these issues also featured in some of the testimonies that were related to critical incident reflections of projects that had been successful. It is to the data on why projects are successful that we turn next.

6.2 Why do government projects succeed?

While section 6.1 presents detailed reasons why participants felt projects had failed, they were all also able to relate critical incidents that exemplified success in government projects. For the most part, these tended to sit in opposition to the issues they had identified as key reasons for project failure. For example, supporting the charge in section 6.1.1 that the adversarial nature of the UK political system is a serious impediment to projects, participants were also able to identify experiences of successful outcomes where political divides were set aside, as P7's testimony illustrates:

> "In the delivery of softer projects, shall we say, maybe around homelessness or refugees… it would be inhumane or considered immoral to use your politics to advance yourself or your party cause within that. And so, unsurprisingly, these projects are very successful because people get together and they're behind the main aim. … When parliamentarians work together they do work very well together and that's a good thing." (P7, parliamentarian)

Other evidence about project successes related to the key themes of budget distribution and management, the creation of project teams as communities, leadership and the use of power. These are explored in the sections 6.2.1 to 6.2.3.

6.2.1 Strong leadership

Strong and effective leadership was mentioned by every participant when they related their critical incident testimonies of successful projects. Successful leaders understood the political complexities, as the testimonies below exemplify:

> "The government departments were behaving in a uniform way… And that was a success. … [leader] provided a coordinated way, a coordinated process that they needed and that made a big difference and it saved a lot of money. … Consequently, we went to market in a coordinated and coherent way, with good specifications and a very good idea of what would work. And we ended up with a suite of suppliers, large and small, that government departments and other non-government departments could access, and that was a big success." (P6, civil servant)

> "We had someone who could kind of communicate and collaborate more effectively, and you know that made such a difference in the project. We saw the sort of team set-up where we'd meet regularly with a lot of the third parties and get their feedback and make sure they saw any plans before anything was put into action. You know, just kind of show they were trusted parties. And that really reduced the resistance. … [leader] was more aware of the needs of these other stakeholders. And they could kind of play the politics a bit with the third parties and say 'look, we know that you don't want to change what you're doing, but…'." (P9, civil servant)

6.2.2 Creating communities

The way budgets are distributed among departments to deliver projects was reported as problematic, as described under 'Funding and risk' in section 6.1.1. The distribution of funds via departments creates a situation where departments become part of the multi-agency complexity. Conversely, where the project budget was managed centrally, several participants reported a sense of independence or separate project community. P8's testimony elaborates on this:

> "The governance of the work – it was clearly owned by the centre. But we had a lot of people who worked from the departments who were our stakeholders embedded in our teams. … And so we were a kind of virtual team of people in the centre and departments. So it was a good way of working. The centre did really well. It created a community. I think this is really useful for longer-term successful multi-agency work in that you try to create a community where people felt like they were part of something that existed across departments. And it was centrally funded, with centrally funded resources." (P8, civil servant)

Almost all the participants who referenced successful projects mentioned the extent to which teams were facilitated as a key criterion. The creation of a sense of community among project teams from the different partner and departmental organisations seemed to be particularly useful, as the following illustrates:

> "One of the things that I have learned is the importance of bringing partners together. So in that case, it was people from local authorities and the third sector and all that – bringing them together; always physically together in a room to talk problems through and to have a sort of expectation that everyone was contributing." (P5, civil servant)

6.2.3 Effective application of power

While generating community and team cohesion within a project is of course a key element of good project leadership, so too is directing activities appropriately. In multi-agent projects, as noted in section 6.1.1 , the balance of power was often contingent on who had the greatest share of budget, who had the best understanding of the specialisms, who had taken the greatest risk and so on. These issues were also reported as fluid throughout the lifespan of a project. In relating to successful projects, one of the recurrent themes emerging among participants was where leaders had used power attributed to them legitimately as leaders, to manage the interests and balance of power within the project.

> "A very strong senior leader who is not afraid of getting into arguments and fighting over policy is useful. Because in the public sector hierarchies very much exist. And the winner of an argument is that kind of most senior civil servant who is not afraid to lose." (P8, civil servant)

> "I think you have to do some sort of confrontation, particularly through the initiation and setting the goals phase and being clear about what it will take to achieve. There will be the need to have difficult and challenging conversations in a professional context. But it's so much better to have those than to hope that through osmosis or something that people will just change their mind, because they don't." (P10, civil servant)

6.3 What would improve project performance?

Throughout interviews, participants suggested how things might be improved in projects. In many cases, these were related in terms of the critical incidents they described, most often those that had failed. Participants also spoke about how projects could be better run in public service more generally, as a consequence of their reflections on experiences throughout their careers in the government sector. We group these into three main themes: politics, people and training.

6.3.1 Political consensus

As noted in section 6.1.1, political adversarialism was reported as being at a high level, and as an antecedent problem to projects throughout government projects. Unsurprisingly, therefore, it emerged as a key recommendation from participants in terms of improving the performance of projects. As P7 puts it:

> "From a project perspective you have to have buy-in of cross-party parliamentarians… Whatever it is, parliamentarians need to work together to deliver it…. If parliamentarians cast aside party political views and point scoring and buy into the project and all it entails, all its problems and all of the things that can be celebrated… it needs to feel like a team game. And the politics needs to be taken out of it for the bigger picture. … Whichever political party's idea it was, you have to get on board with the project to deliver it for the people. I think that's one of the things we need to fix." (P7, parliamentarian)

6.3.2 People

Several participants noted how important it is to have engaged people in project teams. Consequently, there was a suggestion that improving how the civil service is rewarded and structured would help with performance of projects. P8 advocates facilitating this through discrete project budgets:

> "I would fix the way money and spending is allocated, not to departments, but to teams of people to deliver projects. … I think there's things we could do to manage projects better. … It might be better to invest small bits of the project, then let's give you the next bit of money for the next development." (P8, civil servant)

More generally, P4's testimony refers to creating better performance from civil servants by managing and incentivising careers better:

> "I think that civil servants should have proper financial incentives for goals and delivery outcomes. … Fair and equal pay is really important." (P4, civil servant)

Linked to this, in sections 6.1 and 6.2 on why projects fail and why they succeed, leadership recurred as a theme. Unsurprisingly, participants tended to refer to improving leadership also as key to improving the operationalisation of projects. P2 crystallises how improving project leadership is one of the key remedial measures that would improve performance.

> "I would say more broadly in the roles I've done, they need an honest broker in trying to resolve those power dynamics and get people to deliver something." (P2, civil servant)

6.3.3 Project management training

By far the most commonly reported measure participants felt would benefit the quality of projects in the government sector related to training in project management. As noted in section 6.1.3, lack of skills and lack of available training were commonly referenced as key factors in project failure. In some cases, participants referred to training for those at the highest strategic level of projects, the politicians, as P7's testimony below illustrates:

> "We need better project management that involves parliamentarians that are all-rounders. They need to understand about life, they need to understand about the private sector and public sector. They need to understand the need for keeping costs down but maximising delivery. They need to understand about leadership on the project and the people engaged in the project and invested in the project, whether it's financially or emotionally, I think to guarantee success. … They need to be taught about how to do it. Because I don't think by osmosis you just know, and you can't afford to learn on the job because it's taxpayer's money in the equation." (P7, parliamentarian)

Other participants made specific reference to project management training, for those people who are tasked with leading projects and for those who work in them. P5 reported that she had been given training, albeit after she started working in projects. She noted how useful it had been:

> "I'm very fortunate. I got onto a development course run by the civil service throughout the UK, which ran over a couple of years, and we did various leading activities and all sorts of stuff. But one activity in particular really struck me, where we were invited to do a pre-mortem, which is when you sit down and before you've begun the work, in the early stages, you work out what would kill your project. … But I think there would have been an awful lot to be gained from the team at the beginning or near the beginning. … I wish I'd been on that development opportunity before I'd taken on such a big project basically." (P5, civil servant)

More commonly, however, participants reported that they had not received specific project training, though all claimed it would be helpful, as per P9's comments:

> "Once [civil servants] have been trained up [in project management] and they are able to join these teams, you'd see the benefits because you'd be going from having people just having to do the project and learn at the same time, to bringing in people who know what they're doing, … And you could be a bit more specific about who you brought in from external, which also meets the need to keep the budget down. So I feel like better training would have so many kinds of benefits." (P9, civil servant)

7. Summary of findings

The findings of this study reveal the multifaceted and complex challenges that affect the success of multi-agent projects in the public sector. Drawing on the experiences of senior civil servants and parliamentarians, the research highlights that project outcomes are shaped not only by technical and managerial factors but also by the broader political, organisational and interpersonal dynamics that define public sector environments. Table 2 collates the findings into summary headings.

Table 2: Summary findings

6.1 Why do government projects fail?	6.1.1 Power	• The UK political system • Project stakeholders • Stakeholder relationships • Perceptions of success • Funding and risk • Public sector project dynamics • Ineffective leadership
	6.1.2 Public service structures	• Roles • Expertise
	6.1.3 Deficiency in project management	• Project management competencies • Capability development
6.2 Why do government projects succeed?	6.2.1 Strong leadership	
	6.2.2 Creating communities	
	6.2.3 Effective application of power	
6.2 What would improve project performance?	6.3.1 Political consensus	
	6.3.2 People	
	6.3.3 Project management training	

Three overarching themes emerged as central to understanding project failure: power dynamics, public service structures and project management capability. Political adversarialism, fragmented stakeholder interests, and a lack of visible and consistent leadership were repeatedly cited as barriers to effective delivery. At the same time, issues within the civil service itself, such as instability of roles, lack of incentives and uneven expertise, further compound project complexity in the public sector. Deficiencies in project management skills and training were also identified as critical gaps.

Conversely, successful projects were characterised by strong leadership, cohesive team structures and the effective use of power to navigate stakeholder relationships and political landscapes. Where political consensus was achieved and communities of practice were fostered, projects were more likely to meet their objectives.

These insights underscore the need for systemic reform in how public sector projects are conceived, led and supported. The following recommendations aim to address these challenges and offer practical strategies for improving project performance and outcomes across government initiatives.

8. Recommendations

Drawing on the testimonies and thematic analysis of senior civil servants and parliamentarians, this report identifies several actionable recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness and long-term success of multi-agent projects. Although the study specifically draws on the context of government projects, these recommendations are relevant to all projects in the public sector.

8.1 Strengthen leadership and accountability

A consistent theme throughout the study was the need to strengthen the leadership of government projects. Multi-agent public sector projects often span government departments and external stakeholders, creating ambiguity around accountability and decision-making. To address this, leadership and governance structures should be formalised and clearly communicated at the outset of the project. This includes taking the following measures.

8.1.1 Establish clear leadership structures

- **Defining roles and responsibilities:** Assign explicit accountability for project outcomes to senior leaders, ensuring clarity on who reports to whom and which department owns each deliverable.
- **Creating a central governance body:** Establish a cross-departmental steering committee or project boards with the authority to resolve conflicts, make decisions on escalated issues and approve changes to maintain alignment with project strategic objectives.
- **Appointing visible project sponsors:** Designate a senior leader at director general level or above, or appoint a parliamentarian as a project sponsor to champion the initiative and ensure strategic direction is maintained.

8.1.2 Promote continuity in leadership

- **Succession planning:** Develop clear protocols for leadership transitions, including detailed handover processes and documentation of decisions, rationale and change logs.
- **Identifying key role risks:** Loss of key roles at critical phases in the project should be identified in the project risk register, along with contingency planning.
- **Stability in key roles:** Where possible, limit unnecessary rotations of senior leaders and project managers during critical phases of delivery, to avoid project disruption.
- **Cross-departmental continuity agreements:** Formalise agreements between departments, to maintain alignment of leadership during political or organisational restructuring.

8.1.3 Encourage legitimate and transparent authority

- **Empowering leaders:** Provide leaders with the mandate and resources to exercise legitimate authority and power effectively. Promote assertive and strategic use of legitimate power to manage stakeholder interests and maintain project direction.
- **Assertive decision-making:** Encourage leaders to address conflicts and issues early and prevent scope creep through clear directives and escalation processes.
- **Stakeholder alignment:** Ensure all relevant stakeholders understand priorities and agree on success measures. Seek to identify, understand and manage conflicting stakeholder objectives.

8.1.4 Integrate sponsorship and governance

- **Sponsor engagement:** Enable sponsors to actively monitor progress, intervene when necessary and advocate for the project at the political and organisational levels.
- **Governance reviews:** Schedule regular governance meetings to review milestones, risks and stakeholders' concerns, thereby ensuring accountability and transparency.

8.2 Build collaborative communities

Multi-agent projects in the public sector often involve diverse stakeholders from multiple government departments and third sector and private sector organisations. This complexity can lead to siloed working, misaligned priorities, tensions and weak communication. Building collaborative communities is essential to overcome these challenges and foster a shared sense of purpose. This can be achieved through the following courses of action.

8.2.1 Create integrated project teams

- **Embedding stakeholders:** Seek to reduce silos by embedding representatives from relevant agencies and organisations into central project teams.
- **Virtual and physical cohesion:** Establish both virtual collaboration platforms and regular in-person meetings to strengthen relationships and trust.

8.2.2 Foster shared identity

- **Community culture:** Develop a project culture that emphasises collective ownership of project outcomes and benefits, rather than departmental or political interests.
- **Shared goals:** Communicate clear, unified project objectives to all stakeholders to reduce resistance and ensure alignment.

8.2.3 Enable collaboration

- **Regular forums:** Hold structured problem-solving and risk management workshops where all project participants are encouraged to contribute and address challenges collaboratively.
- **Kick-off meeting:** Hold a meaningful kick-off meeting at the start of the project to understand stakeholder expectations, consider requirements strategies and develop a project strategy.

8.2.4 Provide senior leadership support

- **Facilitating collaboration:** Senior leaders (director general level and above) should actively promote cross-agency and cross-department corporation. Collaborative behaviours should be modelled and shared.
- **Conflict resolution:** Use governance structures to mediate tensions and disputes between project participants.

8.3 Improve communication and strategic clarity

Clear and consistent communication is critical for aligning diverse stakeholders and ensuring that multi-agent projects remain focused on shared objectives. Public sector projects often suffer from fragmented messaging, unclear goals and inconsistent narratives, which lead to confusion, resistance and scope creep. To address these issues, the following steps should be taken.

8.3.1 Define and communicate project objectives early

- **Communicating the roadmap:** Establish a clear roadmap at the outset, including objectives, success measures and timelines.
- **Sharing understanding:** Ensure all stakeholders understand the strategic rationale behind the project and how their contributions fit into the bigger picture.

8.3.2 Maintain transparency throughout the project

- **Transparency:** Share progress updates and decisions openly across departments and representative organisations, to confirm project status and mitigate misunderstandings.
- **Communication:** Use structured and accessible communication channels among all project representatives, to ensure everyone is informed.

8.3.3 Manage public and political perceptions

- **Communication strategy:** Develop a proactive communication strategy to address media narratives and public expectations.
- **Public relations:** Include dedicated public relations support to mitigate negative coverage and maintain confidence in project delivery.

8.3.4 Encourage two-way communication

- **Feedback forums:** Create forums for stakeholder feedback and problem solving, to build trust and reduce resistance.
- **Two-way communication:** Ensure that communication is not only top-down but also inclusive of operational insights from project teams.

8.4 Enhance project management capabilities

Effective project management is critical to the success of multi-agent public sector projects, yet the research highlights significant gaps in project management capability, skills, planning and training. To address these challenges, the following steps are needed.

8.4.1 Strengthen project management competencies

- **Project management expertise:** Ensure project teams have expertise in essential areas of project management such as scope management, scheduling, risk management and project planning.
- **Project management methodologies:** Manage projects through standardised frameworks and methodologies (e.g. APM, PRINCE2, agile) to ensure consistency of practice.

8.4.2 Build project management capability

- **Project management training:** Provide fundamental project management training (e.g. APM Project Fundamentals Qualification) to all civil servants involved in public sector projects.
- **Access to training:** Remove barriers that prevent staff from accessing project management training unless already in project roles, creating clear pathways for capability development.
- **Leadership training:** Develop a structured training programme for senior leaders, civil servants and parliamentarians, covering project sponsorship, governance and leadership in multi-agent contexts.

8.4.3 Embed continuous learning

- **Lessons learned:** Encourage knowledge-sharing across departments through communities of practice and lessons-learned reviews.

8.5 Depoliticise project delivery

Political adversarialism emerged as one of the most significant barriers to successful public sector projects. When projects become 'political footballs', they are vulnerable to delays, scope changes and benefits not being realised. The following measures will reduce these risks and ensure continuity.

8.5.1 Promote cross-party collaboration

- **Mutual agreements:** Establish protocols or agreements for essential social impact projects that encourage parliamentarians to set aside party politics during delivery.
- **Committees and working groups:** Create bipartisan project committees for initiatives with long-term societal impact, ensuring stability across electoral cycles.

8.5.2 Introduce neutral arbitration and mediation

- **Interventions:** Where necessary, appoint independent mediators or arbitration panels to resolve political disputes that threaten project progress.
- **Mediation:** Provide independent senior stakeholders with training in diplomacy and conflict resolution, to manage emerging tensions constructively.

8.5.3 Separate delivery from electioneering

- **Ring-fencing:** Develop governance frameworks that insulate project delivery teams from political campaigning pressures.
- **Benefits:** Communicate project objectives as public service benefits and priorities rather than partisan achievements, to maintain trust and credibility.

8.6 Reform budget allocation practices

Budget allocation in multi-agent public sector projects is often fragmented across departments, creating competition, misalignment and delays. To improve efficiency and accountability, reforms should focus on the following.

8.6.1 Centralised project funding

- **Funding allocation:** Allocate budgets directly to projects rather than departments, to reduce inter-departmental competition and siloed decision-making, and to encourage shared ownership.

8.6.2 Flexible and phased funding models

- **Phased funding:** Consider moving away from rigid, up-front allocations towards phased funding tied to milestones and performance indicators.
- **Flexibility:** Where possible, enable adaptive budgeting to accommodate evolving project requirements without lengthy approval delays.

8.6.3 Risk-adjusted resource distribution

- **Risk:** Consider risk appetite and project scale when allocating resources, to avoid bottlenecks and ensure that high-risk components receive adequate support.
- **Contingency:** Review contingency funds for unforeseen challenges, reducing the likelihood of costly overruns.

9. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the success of multi-agent projects in the public sector depends not only on technical and managerial competence but also on navigating political dynamics, fostering collaboration and ensuring strong leadership. Persistent challenges, such as adversarial politics, fragmented stakeholder interests and gaps in project management capability, hinder effective delivery. Conversely, projects thrive when leadership is robust, communities are cohesive and political consensus is achieved. As stated by one participant:

> "So much of what the government does centres around the delivery of some project or another in some manner or another, and therefore I think we need to factor in a need to train people as to what they should be looking for... So yeah, we need to upskill. We need to upskill." (P7, parliamentarian)

This sentiment underscores the critical need for systemic investment in skills development and project management training. By prioritising capability building and depoliticising delivery, government projects can achieve greater efficiency, accountability and long-term success.

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