

# ***But what about the locals?***

Understanding Project Management in  
Local Government

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## Introduction

A lot of work has been done to understand Government project delivery, however, there are more questions than answers about local-level project delivery in the UK. Local governments play a significant role in projects, and the intention of this policy paper is to develop understanding of the barriers project practitioners face in these organisations.

At present, project success measures tend to look at national government for best practice, excluding the expertise of local authority project professionals from the conversation. This is a problem because this minimises appreciation for local project work and governmental best practices do not necessarily directly translate to local project contexts. Conversely, whilst the top-down approach can work for setting project standards, local project teams must make decisions based on their community context.

This report seeks to remedy the local project delivery knowledge gap by learning about these perspectives and developing contextual insights to help enhance local project outcomes. To do this, APM consulted project professionals with expertise in: County Councils; District Councils; Mayoral Combined Authorities; London Boroughs; Metropolitan Boroughs; Northern-Irish Local Authorities; Parish Councils; Scottish Local Authorities; Unitary Authorities; and Welsh Local Authorities.

The experts we consulted ranged from early career junior project professionals to highly advanced experts, through an anonymous survey and semi-structured interviews. The study revealed barriers to project delivery in local authorities, revealing common themes and trends, and actionable policy recommendations to enhance local project delivery.

### **About APM**

The Association for Project Management (APM) is the Chartered body for the project profession, with over 45,000 individual members and over 470 corporate partners. We aim for a world in which all projects succeed because, when they do, society benefits.

## Background

Local authorities, in their many varied forms, operate and deliver projects across the UK. Local government is a type of project-supported organisation, where projects deliver anything that is outside of business as usual (BAU). Tensions between BAU and project activities can lead to conflict over resource distribution.<sup>1</sup> Councils are consistently facing significant financial pressures and managing increasingly complicated projects with reduced resources.

In non-devolved areas in England, local authorities operate in a two-tier system or a single tier system. In the two-tier system, a County or Shire Council can operate in the upper tier, and a District, Borough, or City Council in the lower tier. In single tier authorities, Unitary Councils, Metropolitan Districts or other variations can operate.

Devolution, where 'devolved' areas are granted deals and more powers than traditional local authorities, is an ongoing process in the UK. At present, there are three national devolved administrations, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In England, the 2024 English Devolution White Paper proposed an end to the traditional two-tier councils and smaller unitary councils, to be replaced by unitary councils with 500,000 or more residents.<sup>2</sup> Currently, English devolved local authorities include twelve Mayoral Combined Authorities, and this number is expected to expand.

Mayoral Combined Authorities are regional governance bodies where two or more local authorities collaborate across boundaries, sitting between national government and local councils to coordinate efforts and manage strategic functions. Mayoral Combined Authorities were introduced in England following the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016. They do not replace existing local councils, but act as an extension of government and receive funding and decision-making powers from central government. Mayoral Combined Authorities tend to have more funding and flexibility than other local authority types because they are specifically created to attract more investment from central government.

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<sup>1</sup> Hagebakken, Olsen and Solstad. 2025. [The local government project: a matchmaker or a troublemaker?](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. 2024. [English Devolution White Paper.](#)

## What Do Local Authority Project Professionals Have to Say About Project Delivery?

Whilst each local authority has distinct ways of working, these organisations, and the project workers that work for them, are united by a common goal: serving local communities. These professionals are as diverse as the communities they serve, ranging from junior professionals to chartered practitioners with decades of experience.

These organisations attract highly skilled experts from project-leading industries: such as National Government, Defence or Technology. Often, these individuals said the incentive to 'give back' encouraged their industry swap, rather than financial motivation.

Local authority project professionals are united by their drive to achieve 'impactful' work. Many appreciate that they can witness the benefits of projects they helped to deliver in their local community.

Project professionals in local authorities have outlined that they want to make a difference and see their role fitting into the bigger picture of local delivery. As much as they are motivated by recognition of their role in delivery of local projects, they outline that there is not enough recognition from councils.

### Understanding Project Expertise

There is a growing trend towards the 'deprofessionalisation' of the project profession in local authorities, experienced in a multitude of ways, and often upheld by misconceptions about the profession. Project professionals in councils commented that senior management teams tended to minimise their work because it deviated from what they viewed as 'traditional' project management.

Project experts reported that colleagues were ignorant about what project skills were and what project work is. Nearly a third (32%) said that council staff did not understand what project management is.<sup>3</sup>

Local authority project professionals stated that a big part of their role is ensuring that people understand that project management is not admin, yet they still receive tasks that include admin requests. Project professionals have concerns that there is a preconceived idea that project managers are overqualified admin, and the role of a project professional is seen as one that can encompass other jobs that day to day teams do not have the capacity to deliver.

### The Experience of Mayoral Combined Authority Project Professionals

The experiences of individuals working at Mayoral Combined Authorities appears to be vastly different from those working at other types of local authorities. Project professionals in Mayoral Combined Authorities tend to have a more optimistic outlook on how their work is perceived. 80% agreed that other staff understood their profession.<sup>4</sup> Whilst those working in other type of local authority had more diverse opinions on how their work was viewed: 38% agreed that their colleagues understood it, 38% disagreed and one quarter expressed a neutral view.<sup>5</sup>

Correspondingly, other local authority professionals were also less likely to agree that senior management value project expertise (45% agreed) than Mayoral Combined Authority project professionals, where a striking 90% agreed.<sup>6</sup>

Mayoral Combined Authority project professionals were more likely to strongly agree (60%) that senior management valued them for the following reasons:

1. All high-profile projects and programmes have strong project management resource attached, and investment has been made in growing the resource.

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<sup>3</sup> APM. 2026. Local Authority and Project Delivery Survey

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

2. Senior management understand and accept that change does not happen instantaneously, it requires the support and direction of project managers. Because of the demonstrable success of the project team, senior management has included significant resource in the authority's budget for the work of the team.
3. Programme managers value project professional expertise and have encouraged the use of PM tools and techniques to deliver structured project delivery. They also highlight training available and encourage project professionals to look at further structured training, such as the Level 7 apprenticeship.
4. Senior management can rely on staff to carry out the monitoring and delivery of projects due to their experience and academic qualifications.
5. Senior Management are always seeking feedback from Project Managers.<sup>7</sup>

## Employing Project Professionals

The misconceptions surrounding project expertise can have a detrimental impact on councils as an employer, because they undermine internal ability to effectively judge what strong project expertise looks like. Some practitioners believe councils spend more on external project contractors, simply because they did not invest in the right talent from the start.

Employing competent project professionals and understanding their connection to improved project outcomes is essential. Effective practitioners need a broad skillset to deliver projects, and their skills are essential throughout the project lifecycle, particularly from the inception phase, to ensure projects are viable, effectively designed, and aligned with strategic objectives.

The ability to accurately judge project competence is particularly important when considering risk and project professionals should work within the boundaries of their own competence. More complex projects require more advanced project practitioners and effectively managed projects can make the public safer, whilst those that are poorly managed put people at risk.

In a day-to-day council context, poor expertise judgement can be observed through reduced demand for higher levels of project competence. Project professionals highlighted this in the following observations:

- The simplification of job descriptions over time.
- Reduced official responsibilities.
- The removal of 'project' from job titles.
- Reduced pay grades.
- Less demand for 'senior' expertise.

Project Professionals have noted that project teams were far larger than a decade previous, but in many cases with diminished experience of project management. Project Professionals stated that "people with less experience are coming into these roles and many experienced professionals have left", which they linked with poorer project outcomes.

It is important to acknowledge that although some project roles have been simplified on paper, it does not mean that there are not competent professionals at local authorities, but in these cases, there is less 'official' organisational demand and value for this expertise, at the expense of both the project practitioners and the projects. Many professionals reported heightened tensions between those who want to follow official project management processes and maintain high standards, and those who simply want 'to get the job done' and skip key aspects of project management.

Lower pay may also negatively impact a council's ability to hire the right talent for the job. Whilst Mayoral Combined Authorities are more likely to be viewed as organisations which pay professionals well (80% of Mayoral Combined Authority professionals said project work was fairly paid), those

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<sup>7</sup> APM. 2026. Local Authority and Project Delivery Survey

working in other Local authority types were less likely to hold such a favourable opinion with only one quarter viewing their work as fairly paid, whilst nearly half (46%) disagreed.<sup>8</sup>

## Investment in Training Opportunities

Senior Project Professionals at local authorities say that poor staff comprehension of the value of project management was the explanation for reduced project expertise. A frequently observed consequence is a reduced appreciation for project-related training demonstrated by less investment or spending on unsuitable training.

There is a lack of awareness within local authorities of qualifications and training at the highest level of the project profession. Project professionals who undertook the Chartered Project Professional (ChPP) standard, classified as the highest level of project competence, noted that there is little recognition of the chartered qualification. Project professionals also noted that there is organisational pressure on staff to expand their project skillset, with little incentive, because it is “extremely difficult” for professionals to ascend to another pay scale in councils, they concluded that “individuals are not rewarded for their work”.

Effective project skills investment is associated with increased profit, project optimisation, and an overall positive impact on organisations<sup>9(10)</sup>. In Mayoral Combined Authorities, which generally receive more investment and have greater financial flexibility, professionals unanimously agreed that they had sufficient skills development opportunities, with 40% of this group strongly in agreement.

Only a quarter of project professionals working for other council types agreed they had adequate access to training opportunities, whilst nearly 60% disagreed. A trend we note is a lack of consistent, routine training for project management across local authorities. Standards of training, when they are provided, appear to vary greatly with project professionals noting that new employee training is not mandated and when staff training is provided, it is not invested in properly.

Senior project professionals stated that the pressure to uphold project management standards in their team, meant that they felt accountable for enforcing project standards and felt compelled to provide training themselves. It is evident that the amount of project related training delivered at a council with limited funding will depend on the capacity and goodwill of the more experienced project professionals.

Finally, project professionals' development is further undermined by inconsistent access to project management training resources. Project professionals at local authorities are without complete access to the Government's PM resources, which makes their work significantly more difficult. Some councils benefit from internally designed training resources, once again, at the goodwill of the more experienced practitioners.

## Politician vs Project Manager in Project Decisions

Local authorities have multiple goals, and a wide variety of actors with competing and often contradictory aims. Therefore, even a very well-defined project can be undermined by an external council actor or cannot be given the priority it needs, because a council professional has a competing priority. Changing political leadership and ambitions entail political actors to be driven at times, by their reputation and voting.<sup>10</sup> Tensions can arise due to disagreement over project decisions, for example, a decision which benefits a project may contradict the political goals of elected representatives in a local authority.

Many project professionals say they experience setbacks due to senior leaders' political agendas. Problems can arise here when the advice of the project expert is ignored in favour of a 'quick win'. In essence, this short termism-driven behaviour undermines project delivery. Local authority project

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<sup>8</sup> APM. 2026. Local Authority and Project Delivery Survey

<sup>9</sup> Lappe, M. and Spang, K. (2014) [Investments in project management are profitable: A case study-based analysis of the relationship between the costs and benefits of Project Management](#), International Journal of Project Management.

<sup>10</sup> Fred & Hall. 2017. [A projectified public administration how projects in Swedish local governments become instruments for political and managerial concerns.](#)

delivery barriers appear to parallel with National Government: commonly, we see decisions that are rushed, based on political whims and political cycles, or boldly made with very little forethought (e.g. policy and project U-turns). Project professionals noted how the internal focus on retaining a council members position can lead to delivering something at the expense of a project.

Project professionals often reported that their well evidenced opinions were not valued and they experienced “consistent challenging of specialist advice” in addition to “a lack of respect for those managing the project or delivering it on the ground”, which could seriously undermine projects.

Concerns over reputational risk led to project professionals being actively discouraged from communicating transparently in project reports. They noted that officials sometimes asked for the removal, or reduction of certain topics in project reports “against legal and project advice”, and others said their evidence-informed project reports were “doctored to what the leaders wanted it to be, not what the experts recommended”.

Project professionals consistently emphasised the “risk is bad” culture, where even the acknowledgement of risk is treated as “failure” in councils. Examples included risk departments not holding people to account for not following procedure and limited repercussions. Senior professionals maintained that the open recognition of risk and mitigations is beneficial, because it leads to preparedness for the risk when it arises.

## Poor Project Management in Practice: The Impact

Not assembling an effective project team with the right standard of competence to deliver projects, can lead to drastic outcomes. Projects may be sidelined due to insufficient accountability in decision-making, limited team capacity in terms of knowledge and resources, a lack of trust resulting from poor stakeholder engagement, or competing public and private priorities.<sup>11</sup> Crucially, poor or limited project management expertise undermines projects.

Project professionals frequently emphasised the inconsistent application of rudimentary project management approaches, demonstrated by the absence of decision-making on critical initial parts of project planning, such as scope definition, plans and designs.

Senior project professionals highlighted that their well-informed opinion and work was often ignored or overruled, and in some cases contractors and delivery teams “took advantage” of weaker project teams and try to cut corners.

Overruling project professionalism has financial consequences; it leads to wasting large amounts of council budgets and taxpayers’ money. Project professionals outlined how this can happen in practice:

- A project worth £2m was not effectively managed. The project manager did not give it the priority it needed, and the project team involved were prioritising their routine tasks. The procurement manager changed the leader of the project which led to further confusion and financial waste.
- A project worth £250m ended because finances ran out, however, the team was aware the processes were not working long before this happened.
- A project where £9.2m was spent on consultancy fees and unrealistic targets for a project, that were not met.

At a moment in time where local authorities are struggling financially, many are having to make cuts to budgets. Councils must understand that cutting expenditure on project expertise will lead to project mismanagement and waste taxpayers’ money.

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<sup>11</sup> Di Maddaloni, F., Mosca, L., Castro, A., Glass, J., Vecchiato, R. (2025). [Twenty Steps to Better Collaboration: Bridging Project Organisations and Local Authorities in Major Infrastructure Projects.](#)

## **Conclusion: Undervalued Project Professionalism Sabotages Project Delivery**

Project professionals say that many local government projects summarise the overall problems facing the project management profession: “If a project is not followed through with effective systems and governance, it’s so easy for it to go wrong. The same mistakes are made, multiple times, on multiple projects”.

Local authority project professionals face similar battles across the UK. They encounter challenges such as a lack of training and skills provision, local politics hampering the development of projects, and the mishandling of local budgets. Alongside these challenges, their expertise is misunderstood, meaning that poorly developed project teams are undermining project outcomes.

Local councils must start to value the project profession and understand that investment in project professionals will lead to successful projects that deliver long-term benefits for communities.

## Recommendations

### Councils must value, invest in, and trust senior project competence

A local authority could invest heavily in project management team expertise, but if it acts in direct contradiction to this team's advice, project outcomes cannot be expected to improve. Facilitating better project outcomes requires local authorities to appreciate the value of both investing in *and* following the advice of advanced project practitioners.

#### 1. Foster organisational-wide project management comprehension

Poor understanding of project management principles is a barrier to project delivery and leads to pushback against expertise. Enhancing understanding of the value of project management across organisations is essential to long-term project delivery. This can be achieved through:

- **Capacity building:** Embrace innovation and strengthen capacity by recognising the diversity, capabilities and pressure points of each local authority, as these differences necessitate a tailored project management approach.
- **Mandatory project management training for all staff:** Facilitating better understanding of how project management works, in addition to why it is essential to communicate transparently about projects with stakeholders about projects. APM strongly recommends project management training prioritises the fundamental knowledge of project management and the importance of risk management.
- **Senior management team recognition of project expertise:** Senior management should have a recognised project qualification, so they understand the basic principles and values of PM, including project sponsorship. Of even more importance, senior management must favour project competence over organisational hierarchy in project decisions. We recommend that senior management consults the highest qualified project professionals, educated to ChPP (Chartered Project Professional) level or the equivalent in project decisions.

#### 2. Maintain consistent project competence standards within project teams

Projects cannot be effectively delivered without consistent and strong project teams. Local authorities need to ensure that new hires are adequately vetted, that all project staff are given consistent training and the necessary resource.

- **Focus on employment standards:** Develop consistent standards for hiring project professionals, requiring a certain level of competence (through qualifications or practical experience) in project teams. These standards need to be agreed upon throughout the organisation and understood. The UK Government's project delivery capability framework is a useful resource for organisations to use when they contemplate how they can evaluate project competence through skills, knowledge, experience and behaviours and design project career pathways.<sup>12</sup>
- **All project team hires need advanced onboarding:** Those new to the profession must be given project management training and be provided with an advanced project practitioner mentor.
- **Existing project team skills must be evaluated and strengthened:** Individuals should follow consistent project training programmes and engage with other councils to learn from each other. Alike National Government major projects, Chartered Project Professionals (or the equivalent) should be involved in larger project decision making.
- **Sharing of project management training resources:** Training resources should be made accessible to all local authorities, including a consistent, user-friendly, nationwide learning

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<sup>12</sup> Government Projects Academy. 2025. [Project delivery capability framework](#).

package for local authorities, that incorporates National Government's internal project management resources.

### 3. Trust the Process: structure project management methods and learn from each other

Stronger recognition of project competence and project teams as outlined above will facilitate better adherence to project management processes. Effective practice across councils will improve project outcomes, leading to stronger team efficiency, achieving better value for money and enhancing an organisation's delivery reputation.

- **Learn and share best practices:** In addition to sharing resources, we want organisations to meet often to discuss and challenge each other's approaches to project management techniques, budgets, and teams, learning from each other about what works in practice. Organisations such as the Local Government Association and Mayoral Combined Authorities should take an instrumental role in helping to develop best practices across all local authority types.
- **Expertise retention:** Councils should act to ensure knowledge is retained and continued to mitigate disruptions from staff turnover. This can be achieved through the appointment of a dedicated project professional, accountable for the project, to enhance continuity and ensure long term project views are not influenced by short term views, such as political cycles.
- **Independent audits of projects:** Councils should independently review each other's project processes. Project professionals from different and unconnected councils (based in diverse regions) should audit other council projects. In practice, this could look like an individual in a similar role in one council conducting a gateway review for another. This solution makes use of the existing talent pool in local authorities, rather than paying for expensive external audits later and encourages learning.
- **Transparent communication in projects:** Open communication of expert project opinions is essential to understanding projects and ensuring decisions are grounded in evidence. Without this, project management processes are undermined, which can seriously destabilise project delivery, reputation and public trust. To action this, projects must be openly discussed, and reports must disclose project details.
- **Vetting project decisions:** Major project decisions must be carefully evaluated by senior project practitioners, adequately balancing political vs project concerns. Decisions may need to be made which prioritise the council over the project, but it is essential to evaluate decisions based on long-term value for public money over short-term gains, such as keeping election related promises. Senior management must, as outlined in recommendation 1, defer to project seniority in project decisions, trusting evidenced-informed project views.